

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the ceremony to award the insignia
of *Officier* in the *Ordre national de la Légion d'Honneur*
to Sir Paul Smith
27 January 2015

Sir Paul,

We're gathered this evening in the presence of your family, friends and colleagues, to celebrate the ties uniting you to France and my country's place in your exceptional career.

First of all, a few words to retrace your journey from Nottingham to the fashion world's major capitals. You were self-taught, beginning your professional life very young as an errand boy for a clothing warehouse.

Your passion then was cycling, and your ambition was to become a professional racing cyclist. A bicycle accident prevented you from doing so, but you remained a two-wheel devotee. That may be behind your love of France: you're a walking encyclopedia about the Tour de France, and you know the major passes in the Alps and Pyrenees better than anyone. Your idol as a young man was Jacques Anquetil, perhaps the most elegant of all the great champions. His flair and style influenced your vision of fashion, as did your discovery of the French New Wave aesthetic in the same period.

Your meeting with Pauline Denyer, a recent design and fashion graduate of the Royal College of Art, was a watershed. Pauline became your life-long companion. Together, you opened

your first shop in Byard Lane, Nottingham, in nineteen-seventy. It was what we'd now call a pop-up store, and it was named – in French – “Paul Smith Vêtements pour Hommes” – yet another milestone on your road to France!

Your style then took shape, blending the classical and the whimsical. It was the famous “classic with a twist” – almost a cliché today but a genuine revolution at the time. For those who had known only the rigid suits of Savile Row, your range was liberating, just as Mary Quant's was for women. Before you, men had only one choice: classicism or eccentricity. By offering them that “twist”, you changed men's fashion forever – and, from nineteen-ninety-four onwards, women's fashion too.

You're aware of French people's passion for revolutions. So it was understandable that you launched yours in Paris, organizing your first men's fashion show in nineteen-seventy-six, in a flat lent to you by friends in the Boulevard de Vaugirard. And you've presented each of your new collections in Paris. You now have five shops there – after the latest one opened in Rue de Grenelle – and you've set up your French headquarters there, in a town house in Rue des Archives in the Marais district.

Paul Smith France is today the keystone of your commercial strategy in Europe. Your idea of a business is the opposite of the strategy adopted by most of your competitors. Independent of the big groups, surrounded by a team of loyal colleagues, you are present at every stage of the process, from the design to the marketing. As you like to recall, everything starts with fabric selection. A natural nonconformist, you reject any idea of standardization. “Always ask what is the alternative” is one of your watchwords, which, incidentally, was jotted down on one of the post-it notes at the Design Museum's “Hello, my name is Paul Smith” exhibition.

This exhibition, *cher* Paul Smith, illustrated your distinctive eclecticism. That of the inveterate collector, who receives at least half a dozen rabbit figurines every week at his Kean Street base from admirers all over the world. And above all, that of the art lover you have always been: photography – which your father introduced you to very early on –, film, music and poetry continue to inspire you daily. All the creative professionals here this evening are testimony to the friendships and links you have forged.

It's this role as a facilitator, as an ambassador of British fashion and culture, that we honour this evening. It has led you to forge especially close relations with France. These relations are an integral part of your career, and have only grown stronger over the past forty years.

Your knowledge of the two cultures, combined with your passion for sport, has earned you a place as a regular contributor to the newspaper *Le Monde* – in the sport section! In it, you provide keys to understanding our two societies, along with a few wise words – on Paris's Olympic Games bid, for example, where you argue the case for a modest bid which gives the Games back the sense of normality they have lost.

Talent, loyalty and modesty: these are the recurrent themes which stand out for me as I finish talking about a career which brought you from Nottingham to Notting Hill, just round the corner from here, where you set up a magnificent “shop in a house”. They are a credit to you and have earned you a distinction from the French Republic.

Paul Smith, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Officier dans l'Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur.