



Making it big: With Emme leading the charge--and the fashion world in hot pursuit--plus-size models redefine what it means to be beautiful.

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Kate Dillon (7/2/01)

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Model Emme Aronson vividly remembers her first assignment, in 1990, with a big-name fashion photographer. "I was getting made up," she recalls, "I was all excited"--until she overheard the photographer complaining. "He said that he didn't want to shoot a quote-unquote 'fatty,'" says the 5'11", 190-lb. Aronson. "The ad agency had to talk him through it. He was nasty."

A decade later Emme--as she is known, a la Cindy, Naomi and Gisele--is getting her revenge. With more than 20 magazine covers, a six-figure Revlon contract, a well-received autobiography, her own clothing line and four seasons of the E! Entertainment Television show *Fashion Emergency* on her resume, Emme, 38, has proved plus-size can pay off.

The lesson hasn't been lost on the fashion world. In the '90s, top agencies like Click and Wilhelmina have created divisions devoted to models size 10 and up. Designers such as Tommy Hilfiger and Liz Claiborne have launched lines tailored to bigger builds. Fuller figures are even snagging plum assignments outside the plus-size sector: Curvy British model Sophie Dahl, 24, has appeared in print ads for Yves Saint Laurent and Versace, and 5'11", 170-lb. Kate Dillon, 27, is a Gucci girl. And traditional fashion glossies, from *Marie Claire* to *Seventeen*, are rounding out their pages by putting plus-size models alongside the more typical size 4's.

"The industry has to expand to keep the concerns of the consumer in mind," says LaVelle Olexa, senior vice president of fashion merchandising at Lord & Taylor department stores. "They have to take [the plus-size market] seriously. There's potential for massive growth."

Granted, even most plus-size models are on the slim side compared to the 50 percent of U.S. women size 14 and above. (The national average is 5'4" and 152 lbs.) But their success is applauded by those who believe the fashion industry has held women to unhealthily thin standards for far too long. "Can we have voluptuous, full-figured women again as our sex symbols? Yes we can!" says Dr. John Mead, codirector of the eating disorders program at Chicago's Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Medical Center. "Big can be beautiful--and healthy."

Emme has long been proof of that, but these days she is joined by up-and-coming beauties like Mia Tyler, Tami Fitzhugh-Thompson, Audra Marie Perkins and Allegra Doherty. Instead of trying to diet down to the single-digit sizes required for the cutthroat fashion demimonde of Paris, Milan and Vogue, they are earning from \$1,500 to \$15,000 a day in the plus-size world. "Every day I wake up, I am amazed at my life," says Fitzhugh-Thompson, 27. The Ford model--who is married to hairstylist Marcus, 28, and has a 10-year-old daughter, Victoria--went from working in customer service at Montgomery Ward in Chicago to modeling lingerie for the department store in 1998. Now she has a six-figure contract with Lane Bryant.

For those who have flirted with mainstream modeling, the main benefits of working in the plus-size field are emotional rather than financial. "It was such a negative experience," Dillon says of the teen years she spent starving herself as a size-4 model. "Now, I love it that I'm presenting an alternative image of what beauty is."

Another novelty for Dillon: In this part of the industry, eating is actually encouraged. "If a model lost too much weight, I'd have to let her go," says Chris Hansen, an executive vice president at Lane Bryant, which hires only models size 14 and larger. "Really, there have been times when I've said to a girl, 'Come on, have a few milk shakes!'"

That's a comfortable environment most would be loath to leave. Says the 6'1", 200-lb. Doherty, 21, who posed with three mainstream models for the May cover of Italian GQ: "I've had makeup artists say to me, 'You could totally do straight modeling.' And I'm like, 'I could, but I don't want to.'"

But plus-size fashion didn't always have that appeal. "In the past, the clothes were made more to cover than to celebrate a woman's curves," says Lane Bryant's Hansen. "It was fashion two seasons after the people selling regular-size clothing had fashion." And donning those dowdy togs for catalog shoots didn't hold much glamor. "At first I didn't know what the heck full-figured modeling was," says Emme, who had a career in marketing before deciding to try her luck at a New York City agency in 1989. Working in the not-yet-flourishing field meant keeping her day job at a real-estate company. "I'd jump into a cab, take out my makeup bag, put on thick studio makeup for the shoot," says the model, who is expecting her first

child with husband Phillip Aronson, 38, her manager, in July. "When the shoot was done, I'd jump back into the cab and put on my natural makeup for my marketing job."

Then, in the late 1980s, the plus-size fashion industry began to blossom. Since then, annual sales have risen steadily, reaching \$19.7 billion last year. Linda Larsen German, an industry consultant for the Emme collection, who helped launch the Elisabeth line for Liz Claiborne in 1988, recalls that "women would grab me on the sales floor and hug me and kiss me and tell me, 'Thank God for you.'" With the boom in sales came a boom in opportunities for women like Emme, who by 1990 was supporting herself exclusively by modeling. In 1998 she signed a one-year deal with Revlon, becoming the first plus-size spokeswoman under contract to a cosmetics company. "Now," she says, "full-figured modeling is huge, huge business."

So huge, in fact, that it has even become a launching pad to Hollywood. Mia Tyler, 22, daughter of Aerosmith lead singer Steven Tyler, 53, and half sister of actress Liv, 24, first tried modeling in 1998 and quickly landed spreads in Teen and Seventeen magazines. The success brought the 5'8", size-12 Tyler a fame independent of her illustrious family's. The Elisabeth line "just called for her and we explained that she couldn't show up because she was on tour with her dad," says Susan Georget, director of Wilhelmina's division for sizes 10 to 20. "They said, 'Who's her dad?'"

The exposure also helped Tyler win small parts on TV shows, and she just finished her first lead role, in the movie *A Little Bit of Lipstick*, due out in January. "It's a love story that shows you don't have to be a size 2 to be a leading lady," says Tyler, who lives alone in Manhattan. "When you read a script, it shouldn't have to be 'Jennifer, size 6.' It should be about who can play the part right. The same for modeling."

High-fashion model Sophie Dahl has brushed aside such typecasting. The granddaughter of children's-book author Roald Dahl and actress Patricia Neal, she was signed in 1997 by Storm, the London modeling agency that also represents Kate Moss. Though at size 12 she was curvier than the norm, she quickly became a mainstay on the top runways as well as in the gossip columns. (She recently dated actor Griffin Dunne and has been linked with Mick Jagger.) "She is voluptuous and not a typical skinny-jeans advertising model," designer Donatella Versace, who signed Dahl to replace Gisele Bündchen in her company's ad campaign last year, told Britain's Sunday Times. When Yves Saint Laurent creative director Tom Ford tapped her for an Opium perfume ad in which she wears nothing but baubles and stilettos, he told *Women's Wear Daily*, "I wanted someone who looks like she's had too much of everything: too much food, too much sex, too much love. I mean, this is a woman who does not deny herself anything."

Now based in New York, where she is filming a movie with Al Pacino, Dahl--who recently dropped two dress sizes--shies away from carrying the plus-size banner. "It's a cause I never asked to belong to," she

told the Sunday Times. "I find it incredibly wearing the way people are so interested in my body. Actually, it drives me mad."

Others, though, proudly call themselves plus-size. "I would never be embarrassed about being a full-figured model," says Kate Dillon, who lives in a bachelorette pad in Manhattan. "I want people to know there is freedom that comes with liking yourself and your individuality. Being a plus-size model is inspirational to me. And I want to be an inspiration to others."

Body-image experts say that's exactly what these models are. "I keep Mode magazine in the waiting room," says Page Love, an Atlanta nutritionist who works for the Renfrew Center, which treats eating disorders. The fashion-and-beauty magazine, devoted to plus-size women, has "a wonderful impact on girls," says Love. "They tell me that when they look at the plus-size models, they feel so much better."

The founders of Mode were aiming for just that. At the first shoot, which director of photography Bill Swan oversaw for the magazine in 1997, "there were tears of joy," he says. "We felt we were doing something historic. We just wanted to make a place for everybody."

In four years, the magazine has cultivated a loyal readership of 3.5 million and prompted some mainstream magazines to move in the same direction. When Patrice Adcroft became editor-in-chief of Seventeen in 1999, she says, "we began imposing the rule that, in every story, we try to include one, if not two, larger-size models." Though readers immediately noticed the new mix and wrote letters overwhelmingly supporting it, enforcing the rule wasn't always easy. "There was a lot of resistance by everybody from photographers to stylists to makeup artists to other models," Adcroft says, adding that some contributors ended up parting ways with Seventeen. "I told them, 'Look, work your magic! A bigger girl can look beautiful too, not just the coat-hanger girls.' And I showed them the letters from the girls."

Girls not unlike Georgia native Audra Marie Perkins, 18. "I used to think, 'How in the world am I going to model, being the size that I am? I can't be a size 2,'" says Perkins, a 6-ft. softball player who was discovered at age 15 in a local modeling contest. Since then, Perkins, who just finished high school and lives with her parents in Swainsboro, Ga., has commanded \$4,000 a day. As a size 12, she's on the slim side in her field. But she's comfortable as a plus size and sees no reason to try to be anything else. "It's not like you're missing out on anything just because it's another category," she says. "You don't have to be skin and bones to be thought of as pretty."

That's the mantra that helped Natalie Laughlin, 37, get her first break--and it's one she still preaches to the hundreds of young girls who send e-mails to the Web site she cofounded, OnlyReal.com. A struggling

model in 1995, Laughlin was so outraged when she saw uberwaif Kate Moss on the cover of Vogue yet again that she wrote a letter to six fashion magazines to complain. "I said they need a wider representation of women on their pages," says the 5'9", 180-lb. native of Trinidad. "I said that I suffered from eating disorders when I was young and so do so many women." In response, Glamour asked the single Manhattanite to write a first-person article and appear in a four-page photo spread. It was the first time a mainstream fashion magazine had featured a plus-size model.

Laughlin and her sisters in size have come a long way since then. But she has an even greater goal in mind--a day when models won't be categorized by weight at all. "They'll just be models," she says. "In different sizes. You'll open a magazine and see somebody like Kate Moss on one page and me on another."

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