

A photograph of Ralph Lauren, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark blue double-breasted coat with gold buttons over a black turtleneck. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred red carpet event with people clapping.

IN VOGUE

As one of America's most famous exports, 80-year-old Ralph Lauren has built an elite fashion and lifestyle empire from scratch over the course of five decades. The immigrant's son has cemented a place at the pinnacle of an ultra-competitive industry thanks to his eye for style and razor-sharp business mind. RL is truly one of a kind.

RALPH LAUREN / FOUNDER Ralph Lauren Corp

Fashion trends ebb and flow with every new season. Fresh styles burst onto the scene replacing outdated patterns and cuts, before the tables turn and the old elbows out the new. This sequence may repeat with unerring regularity but one of the world's most recognisable faces in fashion refuses to be so fickle. Octogenarian and industry giant Ralph Lauren has stuck true to his original concept throughout his career – his company doesn't simply peddle clothes, it sells an elite American lifestyle. Thanks to this philosophy the silver-haired American's coffers are on the brink of bursting; Ralph is sitting pretty on an estimated net worth of \$6.3 billion. The boy from the Bronx has done good and he's showing no signs of fading into retirement, despite the fact his legacy is sealed. Look beyond Ralph's iconic polo shirts and chinos, and there's an intelligent trend-setter who is just as relevant today as he was when he launched his first Polo menswear line in 1968.

Timeless style

Born on October 14, 1939 into a middle-class Jewish household, Ralph has never been a slouch when it comes to clothes. The youngest of four boys, he found part-time jobs in his teens to finance his wardrobe and it was only a matter of time before he found a way to monetise his love of fine threads. He enrolled in the Baruch College at the City University of New York (CUNY) where he studied business, and despite ducking out two years later without receiving his degree, Ralph had no doubts about what he was going to do: create timeless clothes. So, he set about forging his career as a fashion designer (without any formal training), philanthropist, and one of America's finest exports.

But before he started crafting a new notion of style, Ralph first did a stint in the US Army from 1962-4. The discipline that was instilled in him during this time helped the budding designer to launch the Ralph Lauren Corporation in 1967 at the tender age of 28, when he released his own ties under the Polo brand. From a tiny draw in a showroom in the Empire State Building he personally delivered his unique creations to stores and made \$50,000 in his first year of business, selling ties to the likes of Neiman Marcus, Paul Stewart, and Bloomingdale's.

The New Yorker is a huge admirer of the style evoked by England's aristocracy – his early designs were heavily influenced by the “classic



Looking sharp: Ralph dressed Robert Redford for the 1974 film adaptation of The Great Gatsby

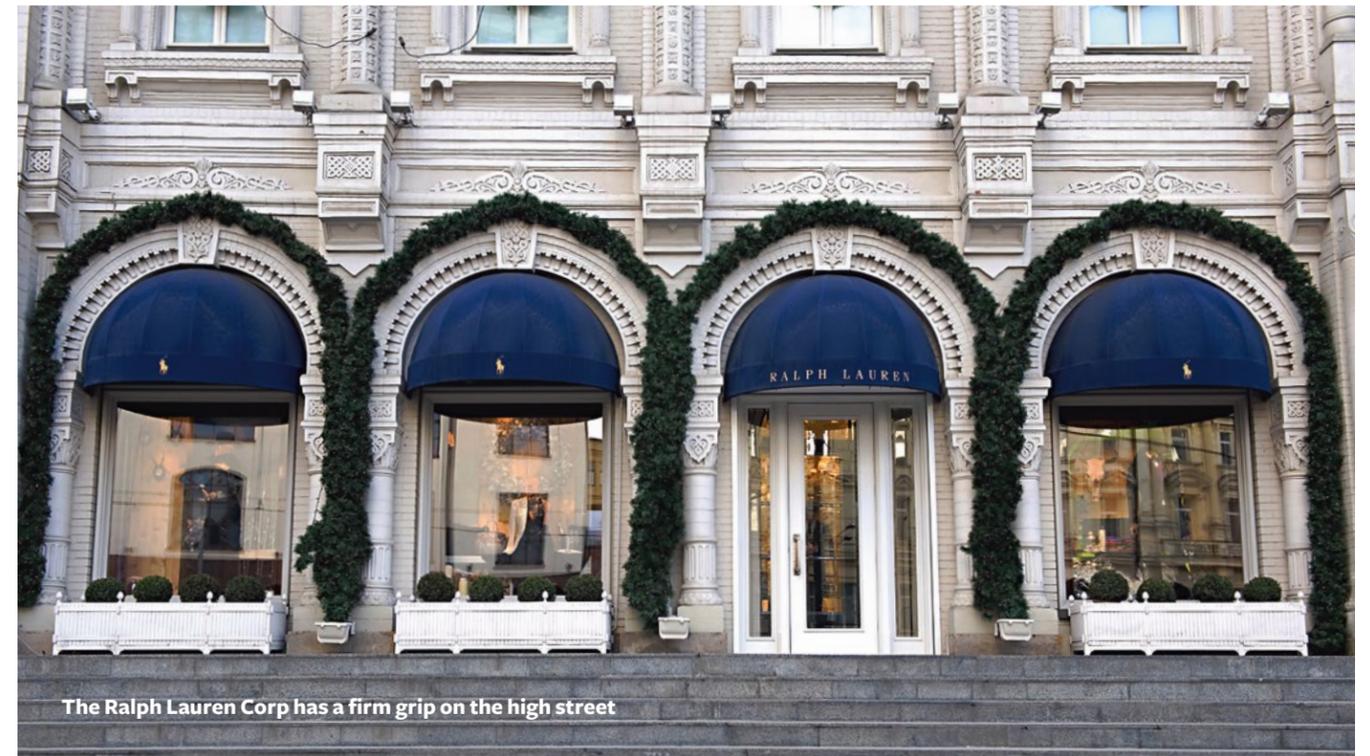
gentleman” and which were initially worn by the sporty American East Coast elite. Tweed featured heavily in his inaugural menswear line: “England has always inspired my style and designs, and my respect for things that have a quality the more they are worn,” he said. “The British have a real appreciation for heritage and

“ I don't design clothes, I design dreams ”

tradition. In America, if you discover a hole in a sweater, you throw it out. In England you put a patch on it and pass it on to your son. This has always inspired me as I design, as I'm about things that you own and keep, that you cherish. I also like the diversity of wearing different things.”

He married his photographer wife Ricky in 1964 and they have three children together, including entrepreneur Dylan and David, who is the chief innovation officer at the Ralph Lauren Corp.

It wasn't long before the rising fashionista offered the world his own take on style for the



The Ralph Lauren Corp has a firm grip on the high street

opposite sex with the release of his first womenswear line in 1971, which also featured classic tailoring and strong nods to Blighty. Then, one year later, he made serious waves by debuting what would become his signature: the short-sleeved sports shirt, available in several bold colours and emblazoned with Ralph's trademark emblem – the regal polo player. The polo shirt was born. But as he said, fashion is about more than aesthetics: ““Fashion is not necessarily about labels. It's not about brands. It's about something else that comes from within you.”

The big time

The Ralph Lauren Corp's meteoric rise showed no signs of slowing down and in 1974 its trajectory steepened thanks to the 1974 cinematic portrayal of F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The actors, including Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, were fitted in suits and fine clothes by Ralph himself, exposing his timeless designs to millions of viewers worldwide. But his foray into cinema didn't end there and he was soon tasked with dressing Diane Keaton and Woody Allen in the film *Annie Hall* (1977). “Style is very personal. It has nothing to do

“ My goal is to constantly move in fashion and move in style without giving up what I am ”

with fashion. Fashion is over quickly. Style is forever,” the designer said, and this thinking is etched onto every item of clothing bearing the Ralph Lauren logo.

Money, deals, and fame came flooding in, but the recognition didn't dilute his desire to continue redefining style – if anything, it fuelled his creativity further. “I'm not looking like Armani today and somebody else tomorrow,” he exclaimed. “I look like Ralph Laurant and my goal is to constantly move in fashion and move in style without giving up what I am.”

In 2015 he stepped down as CEO and took up

the double role of executive chairman and chief creative officer, while maintaining 82% of the voting rights. He's still very much the face of the brand and makes the majority of business decisions to make sure his brand remains one step ahead of the competition in a fierce and unforgiving industry. Despite his success, the designer has not forgotten his roots – philanthropy is a big aspect of what he does. One example is his support of cancer research, which Ralph has supported for the last 30 years by co-founding Georgetown's Nina Hyde Centre for Breast Cancer Research in 1989.

His work hasn't gone unnoticed and the fashion pioneer has scooped scores of accolades along the way including awards for Lifetime Achievement (1991), Womenswear Designer of the Year (1995), Menswear Designer of the Year (1996, 2007), and the Legion of Honour by the French Government (2010), to name but a few. So, what does 2020 hold for RL? One thing's for sure, he won't be resting on his laurels, his passion for the game won't let him. By countering the fashion industry's fickle nature with true grit, the world's most famous designer has etched his name into the history of style. 🎯