

Bode: A Commercial Interpretation of Reverence to American History

Jan Biegala

Emily Adams Bode Aulja and her namesake brand Bode has been hailed as the Ralph Lauren of the 21st Century, presenting her own distinct vision of America and its history. The below analysis will highlight key themes of the brand, including the value Bode places on ownership and preservation (of garments, history, and the company) and the importance of scaling at the right pace.

HISTORY

The preservation of historical, domestic narratives is key to understanding the Bode story. The clothes and runways feature personal and distinctive inspirations: the ornately decorated circus wagons crafted by Emily's ancestors in the 20th Century; Senior Cords, a Purdue University tradition of adding personal motifs to corduroy pants; antique domestic textiles, often historically woven by women. These points of reference, and many others, contrast starkly with the history cited by much of menswear, which has for much of recent memory revered traditionally masculine figures like JFK or Paul Newman, and drawn almost exclusively from only five domains - tailoring, military, country, sports, and workwear.

While Bode does not avoid these fields, the other historical canons she draws from are less immediately concerned with masculinity. Instead, she pays homage to objects of personal affection, particularly those which are domestic, and to handcrafts traditionally practiced within the home. Emily's collections are based on people who she believes share her belief in the "sentimentality of material goods", particularly those associated with private and childhood experiences. Fashion starts, ends, and moves on, and Bode certainly exists within fashion, but there is a feeling of permanence to the memories she preserves. It inverts the convention of classic menswear to appreciate craft in its finished form and demonstrates respect for both the historical context of handcrafts – often performed by women at home – and the process of creation, which Bode hopes to preserve. Bode's clothing offers up little in communicating status, career, or gender, and so the history Emily references is much more readily recontextualised. Wearing a black three-piece suit with a top hat is loaded with assumptions and ideas built up over time; wearing corduroy trousers with embroidered motifs does certainly communicate something, but it is comparatively less loaded with meaning, and more receptive to gaining meaning through it being worn.

The preservation of handcrafts is the most explicit way Bode references history, with the brand's fabric archive – much of which is handwoven – being one of their biggest investments. They also support continued practice by developing reproductions of these vintage textiles in female-owned and -operated works in countries like Peru and India, where these techniques were traditionally performed. This links to another pillar of Emily's understanding of history: her belief that apprenticeship is the best form of learning. Where

the recent broad trend in clothing production has been to simplify and cut costs on construction and fabric, especially through mechanisation, Bode understands that there will be consumers and craftspeople who will appreciate and engage with traditional craft. In Emily's own words, "the goal of the business... is to be able to share that knowledge in a way that people celebrate that preservation."

PRESS AND SOCIAL

Bode is not a huge brand in terms of revenue dollars – at most in the low tens of millions. Yet it has received plenty of positive features across fashion media, both from established press and from social media figures, and has now become a key player in contemporary menswear. Their success is no surprise; the brand has consistently demonstrated its broad appeal and authenticity, earning Emily Bode the title of 'America's Next Great Fashion Designer.' Bestowed by *GQ*'s Samuel Hine, it represents perhaps the most glowing endorsement of Emily's ability to draw from American history and capture the latent zeitgeist of changing attitudes towards masculinity and vintage clothing, much like how Ralph Lauren did for his generation over the past half-century.

Bode has recognised changing attitudes in menswear towards masculinity, particularly regarding motifs typically associated with femininity; its clothing makes extensive use of lace, florals, and embroidery, and yet it has found wide purchase among heterosexual men, who can wear the clothing without fear of being called effeminate. The popularity and rampant copying of crochet-style shirts in recent summers is one such example. Though there is a long history of clothing worn by gay men entering the mainstream – flannel, leather, heavy denim – the effect usually took some years. The mid-2010s were different: Thom Browne's popularity grew massively, rapper Young Thug wore a dress on his album *JEFFERY*, and Harry Styles' stylist Harry Lambert won plenty of praise. In other words, gender nonconformity in fashion, or even men's ability to enjoy fashion without being labelled gay, became a real and immediate prospect. Bode is one of the core brands in this new wave of menswear, but the coherence of their whole story is what earns them greater longevity.

Bode has also benefited from other secular trends, including the prominence of social activism and sustainability, which for many companies has formed a part of their corporate strategy. To Bode, these issues are core to the brand identity. Emily's high-profile position as a woman leading a menswear brand and the first female designer to present at *New York Fashion Week: Men's* afforded her plenty of press when the brand first showed, and has signalled a positive direction for representation, alongside other female designers like Bianca Saunders and Martine Rose. Bode has also publicly disclosed donations to organisations including Veteran Services USA, Red River Women's Clinic (following the overturning of *Roe v Wade*), and the International Rescue Committee. Sustainability, meanwhile, is hardly mentioned across any communications from Bode; it is taken as a given, evidenced by the level of consideration given to the brand's production strategy.

It should also be noted that, along with her husband Aaron, Emily has developed a network of key people in the New York fashion scene. By giving access, it has helped Bode to both control the narrative surrounding the brand, and reliably offer a boost to sales. Emily herself has said, “our press has a direct correlation to our sales.”

PRODUCTION

Bode’s attitudes to history and preservation are best represented in its production methods, notable for a sustained commitment to the use of vintage textiles and respect for traditional techniques even at scale.

Bode’s *One-Of-A-Kind* line is the truest interpretation of Emily’s vision to preserve history and craft through clothing, making extensive use of domestic textiles produced in the 19th and 20th Centuries, often originally woven by women at home. The line began as the brand’s core project, but as the brand has grown, has settled at around 40% of production capacity alongside a more accessible ‘reproductions’ line – no small feat, especially considering the challenges of sourcing, identifying, and processing these vintage textiles at scale.

Encouragingly, Emily has stated her intention to continue growing production of the line. In 2017, she seemed optimistic, saying, “when [antique dealers] see something they know I would like for Bode, they reach out.” As the stockist list grew to past a hundred, Emily had to take a more active approach and admitted in 2019 that “it is really competitive”, specifically referring to finding *quality* deadstock fabric. The unpredictability of supply was also a concern: “one season there will be a plethora of 1960’s towels that I find everywhere, and then one season, it just isn’t there.”

Here, Bode’s production strategy began to take on a form more familiar to that one implemented today. Garment production became “not replicable, but repeatable,” as brand consultant Josh Peskowitz explained, meaning styles and garment types could be recreated in a range of fabrics. It was also not necessary for the *One-Of-A-Kind* line to be totally antique – Emily believed the spirit of preservation could be kept by ensuring at least part of the garment was vintage, such as zippers, ribbing, or patches. The proportion of the line’s production allocated to wholesalers was also reduced, instead offering the line primary through direct-to-consumer channels. It makes sense: unique, limited-run items cannot always be explained in a four-photo carousel and brief description. Alongside this, it enabled the opportunity for provide exclusive releases for select wholesalers.

The ‘reproductions’ line, which uses textiles produced with traditional techniques, is also highly considered and likely a necessity at the scale which Bode hopes to achieve. According to a *Vogue Italia* interview from 2017, Bode was already considering the limitations of true vintage textiles, and was already including “a few fabric groups [in] full size runs” in her collections. This has since grown

Across both lines, around 40% of production took place domestically in 2022, and represented the company’s most significant investment for the following year. It reflects

Emily's desire from the start to invest in her own manufacturing capacity, allowing Bode to benefit from faster turnaround times and develop in-house talent capable of practicing specialised techniques.

Where production does not take place domestically, it is often out of necessity or due to great expertise in certain categories being abroad. Knitwear production, for instance, was moved to Scotland after the brand won the Woolmark prize in 2020, and much of the handwork like embroideries are done in India and Peru – in the US, there is no developed industrial base for crochet or handknitting. In an era where even large luxury groups are moving production away from countries with strong labour laws and high wages, despite historically benefiting from lax rules surrounding country of origin, Bode's continued advocacy for what Emily refers to as "rural social enterprise" reflects growing consciousness around the production of clothing.

COMMERCIAL AND RETAIL

When Emily Bode created her first collection in 2016, only one store in Japan stocked it. A senior industry figure told her that no-one would wear her lace shirts, because they were too heavy. That fate would soon change, and by 2018, staff at the NY boutique Totokaelo were reporting that Bode deliveries were selling out as soon as they arrived in store. The brand has since grown to well in excess of 150 wholesale partners, a mature e-commerce presence, and retail locations in both New York and Los Angeles. Their commercial and retail strategy has been led by, like with production, the principle of 'scaling with people', and the subsequent decision to refuse outside funding. Major commercial projects have been limited to one a year: in 2020, a new website; in 2022, the LA store; in 2023, the introduction of womenswear.

As part of their commercial strategy to scale at a manageable rate, Bode has had to turn down many opportunities to collaborate with other brands, and even where they do come to fruition, ideation and development is a long process. Take the recent Bode Rec. x Nike collaboration, for which plans had spanned "many years of conversations" and development "the last two and a half years". Wherever Emily has been able to work outside of the strict timelines of the biannual fashion calendar, the output has proved coherent with the rest of the brand's work.

For Emily, 'scaling with people' also means maintaining a connection to the everyday work of the brand. She has spoken on how she had worked in retail environments since college, and continued to do so afterwards until the Bode project took up so much time that she had to fully focus on the brand. At that point, she was also working as a stylist and developing a business plan with a Berkeley MBA candidate, and it would take being two years out of Parsons that she finally launched the brand. Four years in, in 2021, she noted that she had gotten involved in photography and embroidery for the brand again, helping build her appreciation for the work other people in the studio and office are doing.

The introduction of a womenswear line took even longer, releasing in January 2023 - nearly seven years after the brand's inception. This was despite acknowledging in 2020 that half of Bode customers were women, buying for both themselves and the men in their lives.

Bode's consistent but manageable growth rate has been aided by a healthy balance of wholesale and self-run e-commerce operations: wholesale has offered scale, brand recognition, and the potential for *One-Of-A-Kind* exclusive releases; e-commerce has given them the chance to lead by example, such as reducing waste in packaging and brand presentation, and in developing domain expertise in fields like distribution and logistics. In 2019, Emily said that the mix of both channels ensures "healthy cashflow" – whether that remains true today is less certain, particularly given a broad downturn in the luxury sector in 2024.

As of time of writing, Bode is preparing to open two more retail locations – London and Paris – to add the current roster of stores in New York and LA, and representing the biggest markets for Bode. Perhaps the most notable aspect of Bode's retail operations is how the ethos of preservation is extended, with retail teams being taught practical handwork for basic repairs like sewing buttons back on. The Bode Tailor Shop in New York offers even more services, including a traditional true bespoke tailoring operation, a fuller range of alterations and repairs, and the possibility of antique textile restoration, building on the expertise gained through the brand's archive.

FINANCIAL

Being a private company, Bode's finances are not readily available. However, the consensus seems to be that the company is financially stable, though limited in growth rate if they continue to avoid debt financing or venture capital backing. As evident in the desire to own their own production and scale sustainably, Emily and the management team at Bode deeply value control over their processes, which has given them the lateral movement to be selective on matters like production, rate of retail expansion, collaborations, and hiring strategy. In Emily's words, "we're creating a business that can last for generations."

Emily's own financial standing has been the subject of substantial speculation, and it is understandable why she has chosen not to present her own or family's wealth in much detail. Crucially, though, Bode is not a loss-making pet project funded by family money: the current CEO Dev Aulja has said that, "[Bode has been] basically profitable from the get-go... we operate from our cash flow." Dev, the brother of Emily's now-husband Aaron and advisor to a venture capital fund, was brought in to take on the role in 2019 and has helped strengthen Bode's financial position as an entirely self-funded project.

Despite all this, there have been rumours for some time that the company may be considering outside investment, notably from LVMH Luxury Ventures, a fund which has helped grow Aime Leon Dore and Gabriela Hearst to greater significance within their own niches. Even if financial support might not be entirely necessary, the potential for both

operational expertise – valuable given the complexity of Bode’s sourcing and production – and industry connections might tip the scales. Just as the Woolmark Prize unlocked better knitwear production for Bode, access to more exclusive or more consistently high-quality textiles could alleviate some of the challenges surrounding sourcing and other non-financial barriers to growth.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the particular path Emily chooses to take for Bode, the brand has a positive trajectory, having overcome some of the key barriers for nascent fashion brands, including avoiding a dilution of brand equity and story, scaling too quickly, or falling into irrelevance. The core questions now lie in how Bode will continue to develop its brand story in novel and coherent ways, how much *One-Of-A-Kind* production can truly scale, and whether the introduction of outside expertise and financing truly becomes an appealing prospect. Bode has the pillars needed to become the next Ralph Lauren; whether it will truly come to represent the America of the 21st Century is yet to be known.

Sources Used:

Puck - <https://puck.news/our-bode-our-selves>

The Cut - <https://www.thecut.com/article/bode-menswear-clothing-brand-emily-adams-bode-aujla.html>

GQ - <https://www.gq.com/story/emily-bode-profile>

Vogue Italia - <https://www.vogue.it/en/vogue-talents/news/2017/02/28/emily-adams-bode-new-york-new-talents/>

New York Times - <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/12/style/slow-fashion-meets-melrose-place.html>

Vogue Business - <https://www.voguebusiness.com/fashion/bode-scaling-collections-through-storytelling>

Business of Fashion 2019 - <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/sustainability/how-designers-build-big-businesses-out-of-old-fabric-bode-reformation-raeburn/>

Shaker Museum Interview (YouTube) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7Y5_jRhG44

Bode Instagram Page - <https://www.instagram.com/bode/>

Emma Chamberlain Spotify Interview - <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2nAT8TFRdqJWD91c5ianKB>

Vogue, 2023 - <https://www.vogue.com/article/emily-adams-bode-aujla-launches-bode-womens-line>