Some years after Ava Gardner first arrived in Spain to shoot the 1951 Albert Lewin film Pandora and the Flying Dutchman, she returned to Madrid to find herself in love with a bullfighter and out of love with her husband Frank Sinatra. It was at this time that her friend Ernest Hemingway took her shopping at Loewe. On that warm afternoon, the green-eyed beauty, who was garnering quite a reputation for nights spent dancing on tabletops, emerged from the Gran Vía store looking absolutely a lady, her chic ensemble accessorized with a chocolate brown crocodile handbag.

No surprise, then, that among the first bags offered by Loewe’s creative director, Stuart Vevers, who joined the company last January, is a hip remake of that Ava bag, now in white croc punctuated by shiny gold hardware. Add to that the Paloma, a structured bag that manages to be both proper and sexy and is named after Paloma Picasso. Then, in contrast, there’s a completely new design: the slouchy, oversize Calle, thus called because the Spanish word for street was one of the first terms that Vevers, a Brit who hails from the north of England, learned in his twice-weekly intensive Spanish lessons.

It’s now almost a year since the 35-year-old Vevers, whose name isn’t that well known even within the fashion pack, became the surprise hire at one of the oldest luxury houses in the world. Loewe (pronounced Low-way-vay) was founded in 1846, less than a decade after Hermés and eight years before Louis Vuitton, and has been wholly owned by the Paris-based luxury group LVMH since 1996. Yet the Spanish brand remains something of a sleeper. This could change in 2009, a big year for Vevers. He will present his first full womenswear runway show in Paris in March. The spring will see the opening of the first revamped store, designed by Peter Marino, in the eastern Spanish city of Valencia. New packaging — a rich khaki with the company logo in shiny black — is in the works, while in
New York City, Vevers’ fall creations have been gathering notice at Jeffrey, the downtown multibrand store.

Although one of the star pieces is a leather trench coat so soft that it feels almost liquid and so pared down that its edges are razor-cut, what pops are the bags. Vevers arrived with the nickname “the It-bag man” because he has created so many of them. He was behind the Givenchy Pumpkin and the Luella Gisele — as well as the Roxanne, the Bayswater, the Araline, the Astor and the Ayler, all for Mulberry — and also best sellers for Louis Vuitton. While he does have womenswear-design experience too — he started his career in 1996 at Calvin Klein in New York City and before moving to Spain was in London, beefing up both the bags and the clothes for Mulberry — he’s earned his gold stars designing bags. Who better to helm a leather house that owes its heritage not to the horse-and-carriage trade, like Hermès, or to travel, like Vuitton, founded by a trunkmaker, but instead — from the very beginning — to bags that are held in the hand?

Loewe’s heritage stretches back to the time when Enrique Loewe Roessberg, a German émigré to Madrid, was so impressed with the know-how of craftsmen making bags, wallets and tobacco pouches that he decided to form a partnership, merging his work methodology with their creativity. Today the factory, on the outskirts of Madrid, remains the embodiment of this fusion as master craftsmen using hand tools work alongside state-of-the-art technology.

Yet in today’s tough economic climate, is heritage enough? Especially given that Loewe has been revamped twice already since LVMH took control? In 1997, Narciso Rodriguez was enlisted to head to Spain as fashion director; he left in 2001, citing a wish to build his own brand. The mantle passed to José Enrique Oña Selfa (who, despite a name traced back to Andalusia, is Belgian). Oña Selfa never quite reignited the fire, and his contract terminated in 2007. Unlike his predecessors, Vevers, charged with revitalizing womenswear, menswear, costume jewelry, bags, shoes, image, stores, windows — an across-the-board sweep akin in scope to Tom Ford’s 1990s revamping of Gucci — has the grander title of creative director, the first in the company to hold that post since the late, legendary José Pérez de Rozas.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. When in Madrid, Ms Gardner was famous for dancing
   a. with Hemingway
   b. on tables
   c. at all times

2. Stuart Vevers’ first Loewe bag is a ... of Ava’s old bag
   a. trendy version
   b. shiny punctuation
   c. full impression
   d. white reminiscence

3. The bag named “Calle” is a ... one
   a. stiff
   b. structured
   c. floppy
   d. golden

4. Louis Vuitton was founded in
   a. 1846
   b. 1852
   c. 1746
   d. 1752

5. New York’s Jeffrey store has gathered Loewe’s new ... collection
   a. autumn
   b. winter
   c. spring
   d. summer

6. Vevers is a specialist in
   a. trenchcoats
   b. bags
   c. chocolate
   d. liquids

7. Before coming to Spain, What did Vevers use to do in London for Mulberry?
   a. To spy on their bag collection
   b. To strengthen their clothes collection
   c. To design their jewellery collection
   d. To brush up their accessories collection

8. Hermès origins date back to the time when there were no
   a. trunks
   b. trips
   c. prams
   d. cars

Supplement to Time.
9. Enrique Loewe mixed ... in his business partnership
   a. tobacco, leather and innovation
   b. methodology, craftsmanship and creativity
   c. hand tools, bag clasps and Spanish handcraft
   d. technology, design and trends

10. What’s been up in Loewe since LVMH took control?
    a. They’ve done away with womenswear
    b. They’ve revitalized their creative directors
    c. They’ve renovated the firm twice
    d. They’ve moved the firm to the outskirts of Valencia