

Episode 3: Créateur vs Couturier

Transcript of the third episode of the podcast The Gianfranco Ferré Lesson titled “Créateur vs Couturier”. MOOC “Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré”, Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

This is “The Gianfranco Ferré Lesson”, a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center, dedicated to revisiting notes, lectures, and conference texts delivered by the designer throughout his career. Each episode explores a different theme through the words of Gianfranco Ferré himself, enriched by references to books and writings that expand on his vision, along with a rich visual archive that transforms words into images and visual concepts.

In the third episode, “Créateur vs Couturier,” Gianfranco Ferré reflects on the difference between the design methods of haute couture and prêt-à-porter, drawing also from his experience as Creative Director of the Maison Dior.

We can refer to the terms créateur—one who creates prêt-à-porter collections—and couturier—one who also designs haute couture collections. It’s a great privilege and a great fortune to be able to express oneself in both of these dimensions. It means, first of all, being able to draw on different processes, each with its own codes and rules, to bring an idea to life and form, to materialize one’s imagination in a garment or object. It means having access to distinct experiences and working skills, which have been built up over decades in both sectors, each with its own independent potential and production possibilities. Lastly, it means establishing different relationships with the final and real wearer of the garment—the haute couture client or the prêt-à-porter customer, man or woman—thus identifying different target audiences for both the product and the brand image.

The client who orders a Haute Couture garment knows exactly when and in what situation she will wear it. She turns to the designer with very specific requests and expects equally specific answers. The haute couture client is undoubtedly privileged. She lives a lifestyle from which most women are excluded. She has a rich public and social life, travels extensively, and views her wardrobe as an investment—an investment that must be precise and targeted. Haute couture today must respond to the demands of modern life; we designers are therefore compelled to find original and appropriate solutions. This is what true haute couture exclusivity is about: it remains the ultimate training ground for a designer’s creativity and versatility.

That said, the prêt-à-porter customer must never be overlooked. She is not a second-class client—this is precisely why prêt-à-porter must never be a poor imitation of haute couture! Industrial prêt-à-porter in general—and Italian prêt-à-porter in particular—has distinct qualities that have left some of the most original and innovative marks in fashion over the past two or three decades. I would even say that, in some respects, throughout the 1990s, the comparison with prêt-à-porter injected new vitality and dynamism into haute couture. By creating luxury prêt-à-porter collections, I have become very interested in the woman who shops at boutiques rather than ateliers to dress

elegantly. She too seeks sophistication and class, a guarantee of quality, impeccable workmanship, and high-end fabrics. She is a dynamic woman who works, travels, and wants to be the protagonist of her own style and choices. Prêt-à-porter is designed to adapt to a metropolitan, forward-looking lifestyle that is freer and less constrained by tradition. It is conceived to meet the desires of women living and working in Tokyo, New York, Paris, London, Singapore, Milan... It is a global creative reality that still takes into account the nuances of taste that define femininity in each country.

Whether in the role of créateur or couturier, my work on the structure of garments and my efforts to enhance the qualities of the materials always focus on comfort. The role of the fashion designer—who proposes not only aesthetics but behavioral styles—demands a complex design process that goes beyond the product itself and encompasses every stage and tool of communication and interaction with the end user.

This challenge—and the motivation it brought—is what led me to accept the position offered to me by Maison Dior, a role I took on after literally immersing myself in the legendary Dior archives. For weeks, I studied, analyzed, and “breathed” its style. And I discovered—and this is the second important element that allowed me to rise to the challenge—deep affinities and analogies between my own interpretation of elegance and that of Monsieur Dior. For example, in our shared vision of a streamlined, dynamic female silhouette—even when expressed through emphatic volumes; in our mutual love for noble, powerful materials; in our sacred attention to cut and construction; and in our unwavering emphasis on luxury as uniqueness and exceptionality—as magic and poetry that must permeate even the most austere daytime suit.

That said, after ten years of experience in prêt-à-porter, my approach to the absolute “Frenchness” of Dior’s style had to be pragmatic, design-driven, highly logical. In a word: very Milanese. And very Ferré. In Dior’s haute couture, I applied techniques influenced by ready-to-wear, but even more so, I applied the fundamental and modern principle of coherence within the collection—a collection made up of unique pieces that nonetheless must be linked by a necessary and logical thread. I brought to couture the value and importance of the project: the garment as the result of a reasoned intervention on form—even in the case of a soft, flowing dress, like a cloud of organza—and the collection as a narrative composed of diverse inspirations and emotions, yet all immediately traceable to a clear identity, a precise aesthetic and stylistic lexicon.

Behavior—and even more, occasion—defines fashion consumption today: the unique, special event, the workplace, daily life, sport, leisure, and vacation. Each of us moves between these contexts with our own rhythm, habits, and routines. Style is no longer monolithic; it must now articulate and adapt to these varied needs and desires. The articulation of style is one of the most effective ways fashion continues to have meaning in our lives. And the Ferré style has, for several seasons, achieved a high level of articulation through multiple lines and collections that, while consistent in aesthetic identity, differ in content and especially in logic and function of use. The prevailing mindset is, deliberately, one of complementarity: the exclusivity of luxury rooted in tailoring (Gianfranco Ferré) stands alongside sportswear (Gianfranco Ferré Jeans/Sport); the technological comfort of informal wear (GFF) complements the natural, structured elegance of everyday dressing (Gianfranco Ferré Studio). Each line includes both men’s and women’s collections, each with its own “soul” and character.

Sources

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