

RealStyle by Patricia McLaughlin

DESIGNER AS MAGICIAN/DESIGNER AS SCULPTOR

In the wake of Alexander McQueen's suicide and John Galliano's more recent serial meltdowns into hate-spewing drunken rage, there's been a lot of talk about the pressure that marquee designers for big-name luxury labels live with, and how it's worse than it used to be.

For somebody like Christian Dior, the worst results of sending a collection prancing down the runway only to see it fall flat on its face would've been humiliation, ridicule, cutbacks, layoffs and having to jolly along his backer, cotton king Marcel Boussac, long enough to have a shot at redeeming himself with the next collection. No picnic, but nowhere near as bad as now, when the top designer for a house like Dior is venerated and indulged as a great man, a genius, an artist, a seer and (not least) a golden goose -- all the while he and his employers know that he's also an instantly dispensable hired hand.

In the old days, when hemlines rose and fell worldwide on Dior's say-so, the designer ran the show. Now he's an employee of a gigantic enterprise that trades on its ability to confer status on relatively ordinary objects -- sunglasses, eyeglass frames, handbags, lipsticks, bottles of scent -- by attaching its magical name to them. His responsibilities are manifold but, above all, his job is to sustain the magic.

To do so, he is expected, four times a year, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, to pull from his fevered brain a collection of clothes that is new and compelling: It must be astonishing enough to catch the eye, hold the attention and earn the admiration of jaded observers -- but also approachable and ingratiating enough to persuade actual customers to get out their checkbooks. Each succeeding collection must be authoritative enough to vindicate the label's magic power to confer status. It must be startling enough to be oohed and ahed over and endlessly re-imaged on cable and in the fashion press. But it can't be so weird that it risks alienating the normal middle-class customer looking to spend a few hundred dollars on a cool pair of sunglasses.

On top of all those contradictory demands, as New York Times fashion critic Cathy Horyn wrote recently, the fashion designer has "a creative responsibility to reflect these chaotic times, to oppose the status quo" -- presumably the same status quo his brand depends on and within whose parameters it magically confers the status that earns its profits.

Oh yes, and he mustn't spend too much money on fabrics hand-woven from unicorn fur or whatever -- or Jil Sander might still be designing for the label that bears her name.



(Caption: Roberto Capucci's "nine skirts" dress of 1956, inspired by the concentric ripples made by a pebble dropped into a pond, shows his preference for clean, undecorated surfaces and his fascination with geometry. Photo: Claudia Primangeli/Le C. Service, courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

It could drive anybody nuts. And -- OK, this is pure speculation -- but it seems likely that the same sensitivities that allow a person to succeed at channeling the required divine spark of creativity may also make him more vulnerable to the pressures that come with the job. Would you expect the Cumaean Sybil to be prepared, on alternate Wednesdays, to cease her ravings, clean up, get her hair and nails done, and show up for the board of directors meeting in a nice, respectable navy-blue suit?

All this makes the career of the designer Roberto Capucci even more interesting than it would be otherwise. A new exhibition of his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art shows what happens to a talented designer who escapes the pressure cooker of luxury brand-building and designs exactly what he wants.

After a brief apprenticeship to a successful designer, Capucci started designing under his own name in 1951 at the age of 21 and was immediately greeted as the boy wonder of Italian couture. For 30 years, first in Rome, then in Paris, he made elegant, austere beautiful clothes that abstained from surface decoration and experimented with shape: in 1956, a red dress with a pouf of skirt draped, folded and tucked up to simulate the unfurling petals of a rosebud; in 1959, a strapless cocktail dress with a dozen graduated layers of ivory organza overskirt; in 1965, a dress woven from black and white silk satin ribbons in homage to the Op artist Victor Vasarely.

Movie stars and countesses wore his clothes. The actress Gloria Swanson, who covered the Italian spring collections for 1956 for United Press International, said she'd like to burn her whole wardrobe and replace it with Capucci's.

Then, in 1980, Capucci dropped out of the couture calendar. Fashion was moving toward ready-to-wear; couture collections that survived justified their existence -- much as they do now -- by anchoring and validating an associated raft of lower-priced "designer" products: cosmetics, perfumes, scarves, handbags, sunglasses.

Meanwhile, Capucci was moving in the opposite direction, drawn to clothes as sculpture. He decided to go with it. Freed from the fashion calendar's tyranny, he says, he "rediscovered creative freshness, the joy of living."

The "sculpture dresses" he made after 1980 -- there are dozens in the Philadelphia show, the most recent dated 2007 -- are amazing for the way they command the space around them, and for their elaborate experiments with line, shape and color. The partitioned skirt of a dress called Arancia (Orange) isn't a literal copy of an orange in cloth; it's more a dissection of its possibilities, a meditation in velvet on the fruit's shape and its sections and its colors and the relationships among them. A black-and-white dress has scalloped side flounces that evoke a swan drying its wings. Another has a skirt in the shape of a cello. Still others do amazing things with pleats and patchwork.

But -- maybe this is inevitable -- the more they become sculpture, the less they feel like dresses. Ralph Rucci, a designer who counts Capucci an influence on his own work, says the women he designs for "want to look like themselves." The function of his clothes is "to set off the self."

Capucci's sculpture dresses are nowhere near as diffident. They look wonderful without women in them. Better, probably. They always leave room for a female body; there's usually a waistline, and a place for arms to come through and so forth. But eventually I wondered why: The absent wearer seemed so entirely superfluous.

I started wishing he'd try a different shape, maybe a chair or a house or mountain marvelously sculpted out of beautiful cloth instead of always this same absent imaginary diva.

And who knows? He's only 80. Maybe some day he will.