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Carolina Herrera: Fashion is a dream that becomes reality

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Image courtesy of Carolina Herrera

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Buy now, wear now is a trend sweeping the fashion industry, but it is one that Carolina Herrera will not be buying into.

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LEF's third "Conversations on Luxury" featured Ms. Herrera in talks with Richard David Story, editor in chief of Departures, during which they discussed everything from her personal views on style to her thoughts on the modern fashion industry. There has been much ado about shifting the fashion calendar to align with retail, but Ms. Herrera said she would not be jumping on the bandwagon.

"I don't think it's an easy thing to do, because you have to take a big risk to produce a collection before you know that somebody's going to buy it," said Carolina Herrera, designer of her namesake brand [Carolina Herrera](#).

"So I don't think it's going to work. I don't believe in it, because how do you produce everything to have a whole collection ready to sell if you don't know how it is going to go?" she said. "It's a big risk for a company. But many companies are doing it, and maybe it will work, but not for me."

Timeless tactics

A defining element of Ms. Herrera's 35-year career has been her undying commitment to staying true to her vision and aesthetic, not leaning into fads. This goes against the cultural movement of today, which she feels is less about originality and imagination and more about wanting to be the same.

"I don't think people make any effort anymore to be well-dressed," Ms. Herrera said. "You see all sorts of different people around the streets of New York, they're all wearing the same color and they all look like they came out of a factory at 5:00, because everybody looks exactly the same. No one stands out in a different way.

"Individuality is one of the most important things, and originality, too," she said. "Because I think that that's something called trends, which I don't like to follow.

"Because for me fashion has to be very special and different than everyone and you have to project yourself the way you want to. And with a trend, everybody tends to do exactly the same."

The designer began her label in the early 1980s as a 40-year-old woman looking to make a new move after raising her children.



Carolina Herrera spring/summer 2016 ad campaign

Wanting to try something different, Ms. Herrera first began designing materials. She took some of her creations to her friend Diana Vreeland, then the editor in chief of Vogue.

Ms. Vreeland suggested she think about fashion design, and the rest is history. Ms. Herrera showed her first collection in 1981 at the New York Metropolitan Club, and it was picked up by retailers such as Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, launching her fashion business.

When starting out, Ms. Herrera partnered with a financier from Venezuela, her birthplace. Since 1995, the brand has been owned by Puig, a group that holds both fashion and beauty businesses.

Ms. Herrera has always kept the business and creative sides of her company separate, something she urges others to do also, as it allows each to make decisions without influence. For instance, a designer's fabric choices or silhouettes will not be chosen in deference to what will sell.

Today, Carolina Herrera sells women's wear, menswear and accessories around the world. The United States is the strongest market for the brand, followed by the Middle East.



Richard David Story and Carolina Herrera

The designer explained that China is a tough market to crack unless a brand is very well-known. As luxury shopping malls popped up across the country with the same mega brands such as Prada, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Hermès, there has been an oversaturation of the labels and many have had to close stores.

Fragrance has been big for the brand, which launched its first scent in 1988. Ms. Herrera explained that established designers dream of having their own perfume, since it allows their name to have more of a presence.

Her advice to other brands is to partner with a licensor for fragrance, since they can help navigate the beauty market, a field very different from fashion.

While Ms. Herrera does not play into trends, she has embraced technology in her designs, using techno fabric in her spring/summer 2016 collection. She says that she enjoys mixing traditional craftsmanship with technology.

The runway show for that season was the first ever fashion presentation to be staged at the Frick.

Runway shows of today are often more about the venue and the spectacle than the clothing, something she avoids. The Frick's atrium, her chosen venue for the past two seasons, places guests in an oasis on the Upper East Side while

leaving room for the garments to be the star.



Carolina Herrera spring/summer 2016 runway show

Audience members asked Ms. Herrera to weigh in on some current events in the fashion industry.

Gucci may be planning to send its men's and women's wear down the runway together, but Ms. Herrera will herself pass, although she thinks it is a great idea. Model proportions have also been a key issue of recent fashion weeks, but Ms. Herrera defended the typical tall, thin physique that graces the runway.

"The models have always been very thin," Ms. Herrera said. "And I think the reason why we use very tall and thin girls is because all the women that are sitting watching that show are dreaming that if they buy that dress, they are going to look like that.

"Fashion is a dream that becomes reality, but it's a dream, and a fantasy and you cannot show normal people because it wouldn't be a dream."

Culture club

Ms. Herrera looks to everything from literature to art for inspiration.

The designer honored the artist who has provided inspirations for fashion by sponsoring the New York Botanical Garden's Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden & Life exhibit.

Fourteen of Kahlo's paintings and works will be on display inside the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, and Carolina Herrera also continued the theme at the Conservatory Ball last June. Teaming with a world-renowned artist at a prestigious garden likely only brought positive outcomes for Carolina Herrera ([see story](#)).

Ms. Herrera and Mr. Story talked about what luxury means to the individual. The definition is changing, based on recent consumer insights.

Luxury is currently having an identity crisis as it tries to find a balance between traditional and modern ideals, according to a new report by McCann Truth Central.

With shifts in culture, such as the rise in digital and the democratization of content, luxury will need to adjust as well, finding a happy medium between the practices of the "old guard" and the "new progressives." One element that will continue to unite all luxury is rarity, whether it means a rarity for the consumer or a scarcity of distribution ([see story](#)).

"I always say that I am not in the fashion business, I am in the beauty business," Ms. Herrera said. "And I say that because I want the women who wear Carolina Herrera to look really beautiful and feminine..."

"[Luxury] is a combination of many things. What is luxury for women?" she said. "It's different for a woman. It's to get something that you really don't need."