

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Authenticity, craftsmanship key to reaching Gen Z: Balmain creative director

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Olivier Rousteing became the creative director of Balmain in 2011 at the age of 25. Image credit: Balmain

By SARAH RAMIREZ

As fashion houses look to reinvent themselves for the next generation of luxury consumer, French label Balmain continues to be at the forefront under the leadership of its groundbreaking creative director.

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In a conversation with *Financial Times* menswear critic Alexander Fury at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on Nov. 23, **Balmain's** Olivier Rousteing shared his perspective on democratizing luxury and appealing to Generation Z. Mr. Rousteing is known for contemporizing Balmain and collaborations with pop culture fixtures such as Beyonc, Rihanna and Kylie Jenner.

"Today, luxury is who has strong messages for the world to change," Mr. Rousteing said. "This is a real luxury."

Balmain evolution

At 35 years of age, Mr. Rousteing has been at the helm of Balmain for almost a decade. He often uses social media where he has 6.3 million Instagram followers and 552,000 TikTok followers to engage directly with his fellow millennials and their younger Generation Z counterparts.

Mr. Rousteing explained that he appreciates TikTok in particular for encouraging spontaneity and authenticity, sharing behind-the-scenes moments or playful dancing videos. He is also drawing in viewers, with Balmain's TikTok livestream for its show on the Seine reaching millions of fans.

As Mr. Fury pointed out, social media also acts as a form of two-way communication, allowing brands and designers to receive and reply to consumer feedback directly. This is a shift in luxury, as some brands did not see the internet as a viable platform a decade ago.

Although Mr. Rousteing is the youngest creative director of a French fashion house and is known for working with celebrities, he is still mindful of his legacy.

"I wanted to be known for bringing craftsmanship and a sense of tailoring [to younger consumers]," Mr. Rousteing said. "But at the same time, going with my generation we're going to be doing T-shirts, denim and sneakers."

"But I didn't want to be just a young designer that do sneakers," he said.

In his role, Mr. Rousteing has also pushed Balmain to be a more inclusive and global brand. He also believes that the definition of luxury is evolving, as Gen Z consumers want luxury to be more sustainable or authentic.

Reaching Gen Z

One way the creative director is trying to strike a balance between heritage and accessibility is sharing YouTube videos in which he delves into the Balmain archives. These designs have often served as inspiration for Mr. Rousteing.

Other Balmain efforts have touched on the brand's heritage.

For spring/summer 2018, Mr. Rousteing stepped behind the camera, capturing models as they wore his designs in a natural photo shoot in Paris. While centered on the brand's young spirit under his direction, Mr. Rousteing chose a 17th century castle as the backdrop, making a link back to Balmain's heritage ([see story](#)).

Later that year, Balmain opened its first Italian flagship in Milan, bringing touches of the label's Parisian hometown to Via Montenapoleone.

In Milan, the design was centered on the brand's Parisian heritage. The brand also set up a temporary lounge where consumers could put on a specially designed Oculus headset to take a virtual tour of Paris guided by Mr. Rousteing ([see story](#)).

The designer also debuted the 44 Franois Premier collection, which takes its name from the address of Pierre Balmain's original couture atelier founded in 1945 ([see story](#)).

"I don't believe Gen Z doesn't care about history," Mr. Rousteing said. "Young people need substance."