

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Luxury loses a generational talent with Virgil Abloh's passing

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Virgil Abloh was men's artistic director at Louis Vuitton from March 2018 until his death in November 2021. Image credit: OffWhite

By SARAH RAMIREZ

The unexpected death of Virgil Abloh, men's artistic director at Louis Vuitton with a reputation for pushing boundaries, leaves a dearth of visionary talent at LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton and the luxury industry itself.

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Hailed as an innovator, Mr. Abloh made history in 2018 when he became the first Black designer to hold an artistic director role at the French fashion house. His death at the age of 41 on Nov. 28 comes months after LVMH had expanded its relationship with the designer and founder of the streetwear label [Off-White](#).

"Virgil Abloh's legacy will speak to his generosity," said Rebecca Miller, founder/CEO of [ARTful Communication](#), New York.

"He gave his blueprint to any and all that wished to grow brands, people and cultures," she said. "He understood that his unique value was a blend of expertise, story, values, aesthetic, voice and process."

"Virgil has redefined what we refer to as the Renaissance man to his own exacting standards wrapped in humility and grace."

Rise and rise

According to a [statement](#) by the Abloh family, the designer had been privately battling cardiac angiosarcoma since his cancer diagnosis in 2019.

Aside from a brief leave of absence in fall 2019, as reported by [Women's Wear Daily](#), Mr. Abloh continued working until his death.

He had been expected to present his spring/summer 2022 collection in Miami on Nov. 30. Louis Vuitton has confirmed the presentation will be held as a tribute.

Louis Vuitton is honoring the late fashion designer with a presentation of his spring/summer 2022 collection

"Virgil was not only a friend, great collaborator, creative genius, visionary and disruptor, but also one of the best cultural communicators of our times," said Michael Burke, chairman/CEO of [Louis Vuitton](#), in a statement. "He

paved the way for future generations."

Mr. Abloh was also planning to debut his second collaboration with German automaker Mercedes-Benz, Project Maybach, on Dec. 1 ahead of Art Basel Miami Beach, according to the *Financial Times*.

Known for his frequent and varied collaborations ([see story](#)), this constant output endeared him to fashion lovers and pop culture fans.

"His creative approach was a journey of passion, complexity and editing," Ms. Miller said.

"As all good leaders, he listened and heard," she said. "Then he adjusted the intake to produce a new interpretation sometimes evolving an existing concept or introducing a new varietal."

Beyond Mercedes-Benz, Mr. Abloh's notable collaborations included work with sportswear brand Nike, German luggage brand Rimowa, U.S. jeweler Tiffany & Co., Japanese streetwear designer Nigo, French-Italian outerwear label Moncler and Swedish furniture brand IKEA.



In 2020, Wagener Gorden and Virgil Abloh worked on new artwork for the G-Class. Image credit: Mercedes-Benz

This work helped democratize luxury and fashion for a new generation.

"I was impressed, even though not surprised, by the intensity of the relationship' several young designers had with him, even if [my design students] had never met him in person," said Thoma Serdari, director of fashion and luxury MBA at *NYU Stern* and author of *Rethinking Luxury Fashion*, New York. "He was a mentor to a bunch of young creatives who saw in him a fresh approach to design."

Mr. Abloh's humble beginnings were already legendary before his passing. As described by Dr. Serdari, he was an outsider in both fashion and luxury.

The son of Ghanaian immigrants and a native of Illinois, Mr. Abloh earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of Wisconsin Madison and a master's degree in architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology, with a curriculum founded by German-American architect Mies van der Rohe.

"It must have been easy for Virgil to absorb Mies's ideas about architecture and design, which always included a nod to classicism and a tremendous pull toward timelessness through precise choice of materials and emphasis on construction details," Dr. Serdari said. "Virgil's work in fashion, his adopted field of design, showcases these very principles that the creative absorbed in his early formative years.

"The second element that gave Virgil a unique voice in fashion and luxury was his ability to observe people and classify modes of behavior that were inklings of bigger changes to come," she said. "For example, Virgil understood why streetwear had become popular and also understood which elements of it could work well with a heritage brand so as to help it move forward."



Off-White x Rimowa transparent luggage collection. Image courtesy of Rimowa

Mr. Abloh began his career in luxury fashion with a 2009 internship at Italian fashion label Fendi alongside one of his most famous and frequent collaborators, rapper and record producer Kanye West, now known as Ye. In 2012, he founded his streetwear brand Off-White.

By 2015, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh was a finalist for the LVMH Young Fashion Designer Prize.

"Most people have already associated Virgil's name with the marrying of streetwear and luxury, but his legacy is greater than that," Dr. Serdari said. "His work has shown aspects of his curiosity, which he adeptly translated through the incorporation of novel materials in his work.

"His legacy therefore is greater than a fashion category or a specific luxury sector," she said. "It is mostly about his ability to stretch the established boundaries of design and do so by allowing a hybridity to flourish."

In 2018, he was further anointed as one of fashion's leading voices when he was tapped to replace Kim Jones as men's artistic director of Louis Vuitton ([see story](#)).



Louis Vuitton men's artistic director Virgil Abloh seeking inspiration for his spring summer 2020 collection runway show. Image credit: Louis Vuitton

"I am thrilled to see how his innate creativity and disruptive approach have made him so relevant, not just in the world of fashion but in popular culture today," said Louis Vuitton's Mr. Burke in a statement at the time of Mr. Abloh's appointment. "His sensibility towards luxury and savoir-faire will be instrumental in taking Louis Vuitton's menswear into the future."

Mr. Abloh's tenure at Louis Vuitton may have been cut tragically short, but it was no less influential.

"He was artistic in many different ways, and I think made him a very unique voice in the luxury and fashion industry," said Milton Pedraza, founder/CEO of the [Luxury Institute](#), New York. "He was multifaceted and multi-talented, and chose to develop different talents.

"The fact that he got to work for one of the most iconic brands in luxury fashion, in menswear, made him very just allowed him to really express his creativity in ways that others have not been able to."

Although he occasionally courted controversy, Mr. Abloh centered Black voices and creatives while imbuing one of luxury's biggest names with authentic hip-hop culture.



The Louis Vuitton I (RED) sneakers are nearly identical to the classic ones first introduced by Mr. Abloh. Image credit: Louis Vuitton

He also championed charitable initiatives including UNICEF's Generation Unlimited (GenU), a program focused on youth and entrepreneurship in Ghana ([see story](#)), and the AIDS awareness nonprofit organization, RED ([see story](#)).

"A lot of people have believed that luxury should be arrogant and snobby and holier-than-thou," Mr. Pedraza said. "And no, Virgil brought it down to a level of humanity and creativity that I think very few, if any creative directors have ever lived by."

Mr. Abloh's ascension at Louis Vuitton also made him the third Black designer to serve as artistic director at a French luxury fashion house, following Olivier Rousteing at Balmain and Shayne Oliver at Helmut Long.

With Mr. Oliver focusing on his own label after a stint as Helmut Long's "designer-in-residence," the passing of Mr. Abloh leaves Mr. Rousteing as the only active Black artistic director among the French fashion houses, even as luxury faces a well-earned reputation as an industry lacking diversity and inclusivity.

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A post shared by OLIVIER R. (@olivier_rousteing)

Virgil Abloh and Olivier Rousteing were the only Black men in top creative roles at French luxury labels

"Virgil was someone who changed the luxury industry, that transformed the luxury industry, but without being so much an activist as just being himself being an example," Mr. Pedraza said. "And of course, you know, it was the right time finally, luxury and fashion became realized that they needed to be inclusive.

"I think what Virgil does is leave a legacy, a template for others to follow, whether it's luxury brands, creative

directors or human beings," he said. "There is learning from his legacy that we need to be inclusive.

"We need to foster creativity. And when we do so, we need to do it with generosity and humility."

Next steps

While the fashion, design and music communities continue to mourn the loss of Mr. Abloh ([see story](#)), LVMH will eventually have to consider the next steps for Louis Vuitton and Off-White.

The luxury group had recently bet big on Mr. Abloh's future, recognizing that he was one of fashion's most influential and consequential designers.

In July, LVMH announced an expansion of its relationship with Mr. Abloh. The luxury group now owns a 60 percent interest in the Off-White trademark, while Italy's New Guards Group will remain an operating partner for Off-White through its licensing agreement with Off-White LLC.

LVMH and Mr. Abloh had also planned to launch new brands and partner with existing labels outside of the fashion sector ([see story](#)).

"While another Virgil Abloh is hard to come by, LVMH has the privilege of having nurtured and having access to a substantial pool of creative talent, either internally or through their design school partners," said NYU's Dr. Serdari said. "Perhaps filling the creative position for LV will be easier than the one at Off-White, where the mark of the founder designer is still very fresh and the role is intimidating for whoever will come in.

"It can be done and done well when the incoming designers take stock of the work that Virgil left behind, understand the late designer's thought process and continue his work not by replicating and only by helping it evolve," she said.

ARTful Communication's Ms. Miller largely agrees about the unique challenge facing LVMH and Off-White.

"LVMH will continue its successful collaborations and hire a new creative director," Ms. Miller said. "They most likely will pay homage to Virgil by continuing with Off-White as long as it remains vibrant.

"They will not be quick to dismiss opportunity and will explore how to best project the Off-White brand," she said.

"The other contracts with brands may be of interest to them, but one should not try to predict that path not yet, not out of respect as there are global eyes on LVMH from many cultures encompassing a plethora of markets."

Regardless of what the future holds for Louis Vuitton and Off-White, Mr. Abloh's legacy of generosity and creativity will continue.

"Luxury brands, no, the world could use many more Virgils," Ms. Miller said. "He led by example."