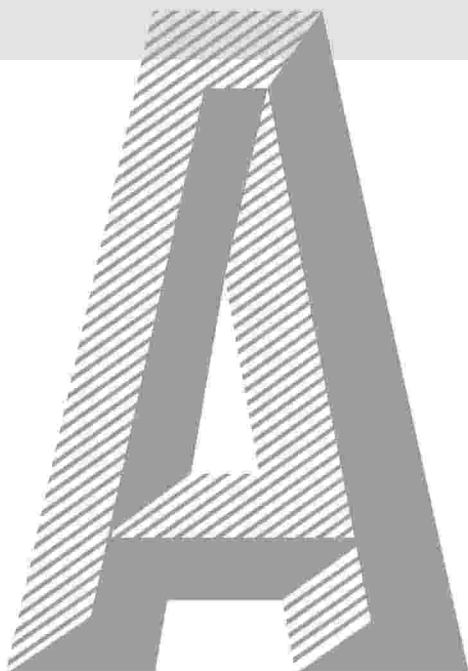


In an exclusive interview, Miuccia
Prada talks about men's wear, fashion,
revolution, history and the arts.
By Luisa Zargani

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n hour with Miuccia Prada flies by. All the questions are duly answered – often with a contagious chuckle and a twinkle in her eye – but it feels like the surface has only been scratched. One can't help but think that the designer's enduring influence on fashion derives from her seemingly endless curiosity, thirst for knowledge and passion. There are no rules, safe answers or pat, prepackaged responses.

During the conversation Prada often questions herself, which clearly doesn't reflect an uncertain nature, but rather her pensive and inquisitive personality. She certainly knows her own mind, but shuns any arrogance. The designer lights up when she speaks about art and the Fondazione Prada, unveiled in Milan last

a fashion company that last year reached sales of almost \$4 billion and that is listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. She's aware of the tough economy and the volatility of the financial markets, which impacted the group last year, as well as the ever-expanding customer base around the world and the power of social media and instant communication. But she stays true to her own impulses, perspective – and continual drive.

Prada designs a constant flow of women's and men's wear collections – and all their accessories – each year for the group's signature brand and **Miu Miu**. She remains one of the few designers who can have a major impact on fashion for both sexes and her men's runway shows in Milan remain among the most anticipated of the season. Men's wear is playing an increasingly important role in the group, now accounting for 30 percent of sales.

Her fall collection was, in WWD's view, the best of the season and its inspiration evolved into a spectacular women's collection shown a month later. In January, WWD's review said **Prada's** take on the naval theme, tailored suiting, oversize outerwear and rich textures made for an "exceptional show, one of her best men's wear outings in years. Finally some edge-of-your-seat fashion and a collection that was not only diverse but thought-provoking and captivating with its strong emotional tug."

Following the show, Tiziana Cardini, fashion director of Italian department store La Rinascente, said, "Miuccia Prada was well-inspired. [She] pushed on the accelerator, adding a real injection of fashion, bringing forward a strong, innovative, original, even complex message, daring to address big issues, yet offering a

reflected in her office in a stately building on Milan's Via Bergamo. In lieu of a desk, a De Padova table stands in the uncluttered room, surrounded by chairs by Charles and Ray Eames. Lucio Fontana's "Concetto Spaziale" [Spatial Concept] from 1967, with the artist's unmistakable slash on a slab of red lacquered metal, adds a vivid touch of color. Behind the table is a steel and polycarbonate tube slide by Carsten Höller that leads into the courtyard. Other standout artworks in the room are Gerhard Richter's "5 Turen II" [Five Doors], oils on canvas from 1967 and Alvar Aalto birch cabinets from 1932. The designer, wearing a long-sleeve white shirt dress belted at the waist and chunky tassel loafers, discusses her vision for men's wear, her personality, her interest in the Big Questions – and what links her about fashion.

Your men's wear collection for fall was one of the most influential in Milan, reflecting the brand's evolution in the category and its growing relevance. You never seemed to listen to the tug of marketing or commercial constraints. I read that you believe you "know when you are doing something interesting." Did you realize this was the case with your fall collection? Did you expect such a success?

I must say that more than any other time, I felt the need to express general problematic issues – because sometimes you can and sometimes you can't. But this time, the sense of questioning was strong. It's all so dynamic now. Everything is changing in politics, we don't know where and we don't know how, in society, in the new means of communication, so the idea was very important for me to ask myself who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Hence this excursus. And then the position of women. I really care about this. After all, unfortunately women still don't count that much in the eyes of the world. There are two trends – those that have given up and just want to be married and be kept, but luckily there is also a new, apparent feminism in the new generation.

Have you been putting more emphasis and attention on men's wear? We've been seeing a common thread between your men's and women's wear collections.

Since forever, when I was designing men's wear, whenever I would find myself looking for ideas, I would pick from women's wear. I would ask myself: If I were a man, what would I wear? I tried to open the possibilities for men, but without reaching the point of being exaggerated or unwearable. I think it's more useful to start with something possible and then people will slowly accept more, rather than

[presenting] exaggerated looks that could be simply rejected. This has always been my point of view, then sometimes I do a little bit more. I remember once a few newspapers were scandalized by a short skirt, but that was actually a high belt [laughing]. But always under the appearance of something classic. What I am interested in is changing things without being too provocative or obviously political. Politics and fashion too directly linked, I don't like that, or to make statements on clothes, [such as] "no to war." That is too serious. Maybe I'm wrong, but I like to be subtly political. Fashion must do its part, but infiltrate the spirits, rather than making big declarations with no result. When I do men's – I never end up doing that part that is more masculine or more serious, which I am really interested in, I really like it. But I can't develop it for women's. I end up adding heels and this and that, creating a strong feminine contrast. There really are many interactions.

You have been showing women's wear on your men's runway. Would you consider showing the collections together? Your husband suggested it years ago.

I am against it. To do two creative shows in one is a massacre. And it has to be a huge show, if you want to do it seriously. Last time, someone complained that there were too many women [in the men's show] and that it distracted from the men's wear – and this is somewhat true, because women are showier and swallow up the rest. Together it could be very beautiful but I would shoot myself [laughs]. The way we work, at the last minute, with things arriving the day before if not the same day... Many designers have things ready ahead of time.

What do you think of the see-now-buy-now trend? In February, you presented a few handbags, for example, that were readily available for purchase.

We've thought about it a lot, but journalists need to see [the collection], buyers need to buy it. So far, we don't see any sense to it. In six months everyone knows everything. Surely, the way we work, with fabrics made for us, it takes two months for the fabrics, two months for the production... It takes around four months from the presentation to the store, to do it well. You can do it anyway and take it out at the last moment, pretend it's just been done, but with a collection that you know by heart – what kind of enthusiasm can you have to show it on the runway? You freeze it? In the meantime, I have moved forward. It's a bit strange. And then, you buy only safe [merchandise]; it's less creative and less interesting. It's true that creativity is at risk. Or else you have to block out communication, but this is against the trend. Everyone should be silent for four months, from producers of

"What I am interested in is changing things without being too provocative or obviously political."

The notoriously shy designer takes her bow after the fall show.

year, which is clearly a priority in her life. But she is equally vocal about the condition of women, a topic she has often addressed through her collections, and about her interest in cinema.

Discipline is a pillar of **Prada's** talent. She isn't a designer tucked away in her ivory tower of creativity. She shares the chief executive officer's title at Prada Group with her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, with whom she has built

desirable, appealing and artistic collection." Bruce Pask, men's fashion director for Bergdorf Goodman, deemed **Prada's** "particularly terrific show," and Jo Harris, general merchandising manager of men's wear at Harrods, said, "It was one of the best shows we have seen from **Prada** in recent seasons."

Sitting down with WWD at her headquarters in Milan, **Prada's** passion for contemporary art is

Photograph by LODOVICO COLLI DI FELIZZANO



fabrics to buyers, journalists? I have yet to understand how this can work.

The Italian and French fashion associations have already expressed a negative view on this issue, while the Americans have a different take, but they are still evaluating different ideas.

Yes, it's one thing to say it, but then when you really think about it...

Earlier, you spoke about exaggeration on the runway – perhaps this is to get attention. Is this a mistake in fashion?

I believe the catwalk is 50 percent reality and 50 percent imaginary, entertainment. I don't know if this is right or not, but surely because communication is so wide-ranging, you need to exaggerate or nobody understands what you are doing. Nobody knows what is right and what is wrong at this moment. I can reason, say: "We must think about what women want to wear; we'll do a simpler, more normal show, with wearable clothes." But then we have the entire world, journalists coming here, and already, they get bored with that idea. If you know how to do it, a show is important; you have to tell them something. People are stimulated by so many things, cinema, television, social media – how can you make yourself heard? With this show, I realized I must give more, or I bring out my theoretical, intellectual part. I am 50-50. Actually, I am more human than intellectual and people don't know this because I have tried not to show that to them.

Why?

It's a form of reserve.

Maybe shyness?

No, maybe that, too, but I don't think so. Yes, I think that by hiding things, it's a form of self-defense.

Especially now, when we all know everything about everyone...

Yes... I am happy this way, but I understand that at work I must externalize my passionate streak. Maybe this is why the shows were well-received; they were more personal, I gave more of myself. I pushed my limits more in what I am and what I think.

This comes from your own needs: you silence what is around you – financial results, store performance – and you listen to yourself?

Always. I'm interested in the economic part because I'm interested in knowing what people think. I challenge myself because I want to verify if I'm in sync with people. My problem is to be sure I am in sync, even when ideologically I'm against fashion.

But if you are ahead of the curve, how can you realize if you are in sync with people?

That is my problem and my husband says we can't be too ahead. I always am, then people copy us. For example, with the Hawaiian shirts, we did them three years ago, and everyone ►

started doing them, so I decided to put them back on the runway [laughing].

When I let my intellectual or political side loose, I censor my work and it's a harm to myself. Then there are periods in which I'm more generous with myself and others. I express myself in a way that is more understandable and people like it. When I do something that is fundamental, pop, it always works, maybe because there is some irony.

But you did speak about the issue of migrants and war, and the show was a success. Did you feel more at ease?

I found a key that I liked; sometimes I find it, sometimes I don't. It started from men's, the adventure, the vagabond, the sailor as symbols of fatigue and pain, and the history of humanity, the suffering of women waiting. I found the way to tell it – the fantasy or what interests you doesn't always find an outlet in the story.

Do you have other ways to let your creativity loose?

I have the Fondazione now.

Yes, and it's brought such new energy to Milan. Do you know how much it's done for the city?

Yes, sometimes I realize it. Yesterday I was on the tower, these huge spaces, sometimes it's scary...

There is more pride in talking about fashion. In February, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi for the first time unveiled Milan Fashion Week, there are government investments in fashion. Do you see the changes now?

Yes, I think now surely fashion is seen in a more positive light, but not entirely. In fashion, there is always something that attracts and something that turns people away. Perhaps this is what has most interested me. I have always tried to understand [the reason], I've asked great intellectuals and artists. One person said that it's because "it's stuff for women." This is really tough [giggles]. I hope it's not that, but it may be, deep down there is a certain diffidence [toward fashion].

Also, fashion touches personal, intimate issues that people have a hard time recognizing, embracing or talking about publicly. Imagine a room filled with people – men, they talk about the pharmaceutical or tire industries, but not fashion. Fashion touches you, your body, your fears, your most intimate things; it's a very delicate subject. You can no longer say it's superficial. Fashion is very difficult, you need to catch an atmosphere – it's like recording an album. Perhaps that's the right comparison – you must capture a feeling, the imagination. It's never only a technical job. This creative, dark part annoys many people. The difficulty to recognize oneself in a sphere that touches your individual sensibilities, your physical and personal weaknesses in a relevant way.

Is there anything really



wrong in the fashion system, something that bothers you?

It annoys me when something that has no value is successful, I confess. I have never been jealous of those that are talented – on the contrary, I appreciate them and recognize them. But when someone or a brand that I don't respect is successful, that bothers me.

Maybe because they take shortcuts to attract customers?

Because I regret that people don't understand the differences, or the superficiality. I like a risk, I like intelligence. In fashion there are many good designers, some less, but when people talk in negative terms about fashion, what's wrong with it... I need to think about it. Perhaps at this moment it's that there is a little too much work, with pre-collections,

post-collections, specials, etc. Also, we must engage with the world of the Internet. In addition, what is tiring is that you have the entire world to think of, the races, religions, the complications of the world make it more difficult to give a more complex, not superficial reading. You can't show the legs there, you think of the smaller bodies in China, the bigger ones in Germany, you can't show the nipples in America. This is what would be more fun, very interesting, if you had the time to analyze and rethink the collection for different worlds.

How do you realize if you are in sync?

When I talk about the Fondazione, I am very proud of my job. And people laugh when I say this, but fashion makes me keep my feet on the ground because it's through fashion that I realize

what people think and want, the manias. It keeps me anchored. If not, I would run with my imagination.

You have always kept fashion and design separate. I've read that you believe design has received a seal of approval, compared to fashion. But do you find a point where the two meet?

In me, they've always met very well. At the beginning, 23 or 24 years ago when we set up the Fondazione, our efforts were so strong to keep fashion and art separate. And the other day, I discovered that a very important journalist did not know that we have been doing this for 20 years. I always kept the two separate because I wanted the respect of the most important artists. But now that I know both worlds, I could let them communicate

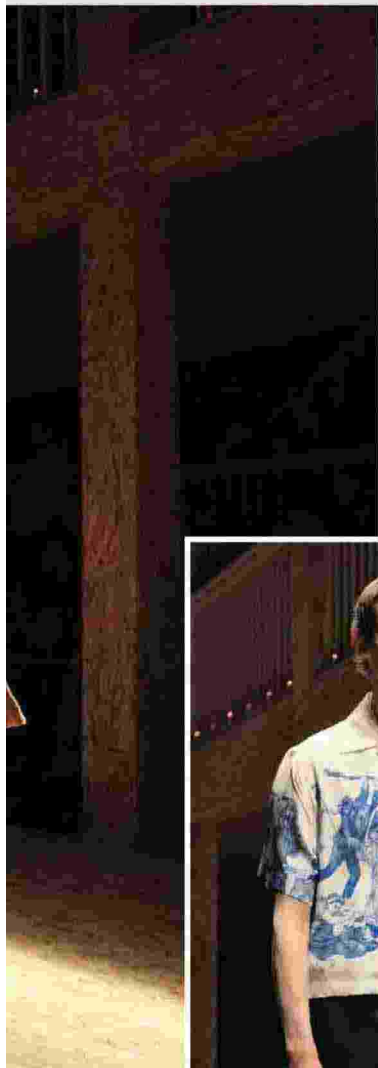
with one another because I know the weaknesses of both worlds. I have a knowledge of the world that can help me because I am not isolated. The world of fashion is fuller, more energetic, as is that of cinema; that's why I am doing cinema more, because it tackles the world in a more passionate way. Art and fashion have always lived together in me, but as part of my ambition, pride and need to discover a different world [I kept them separate]. But that was my problem – I discovered that mega-intellectuals love and appreciate fashion.

You felt you needed to excuse yourself?

"Excusatio non petita" ["accusatio manifesta," Latin for, "He who excuses himself, accuses himself"]. Yes, absolutely.

You have already said you don't want to work with artists

Photographs by **LODOVICO COLLI DI FELIZZANO**



not true. He says it, but actually he doesn't at all. Then there are the sneaky ones that copy from me and from others and nobody sees that. That irks me. Those designers that have spent their life copying a little bit here and a little bit there and pass as creatives, well, that bothers me. Whether they copy me or others, it's the same.

Do you think a wave of new designers can change things?

You can't expect fashion to revolutionize things; revolution happens in society. The miniskirt came [to be] because of the women's liberation. Now comes from the change in society and fashion reflects it. Fashion is attentive to changes; maybe now the real revolution is the closeness between men's and women's wear.

Is there a certain boredom in men's wear?

Yes. Before, men dressed up much more than women. I just saw this wonderful movie from Roberto Rossellini on Louis XIV, or the Sun King. He dressed himself to control politics, he forced people to come to court, spend huge sums; they were poorer that way and he controlled them. It was a strategy.

I remember your show on men's power dressing.

Yes, that interests me a lot.

Have things changed in that sense — the way men dress for power?

Maybe a little, but men are not free to dress and embellish themselves like in the past. Just look around — men wear normal clothes.

You were speaking of the Fondazione. What are the upcoming exhibitions?

My favorite project is now in Venice [at the Ca' Corner della Regina site]. We are closing the

Yes, I like it, I am interested but because I have an institution of visual arts, I am trying to understand what a museum can do with cinema, what kind of exchanges there can be. There are scenarios opening up that are very interesting. I want to bring the younger generations forward so that they experiment with what they want. There's a group of very clever people. Then in Milan there will be another chapter of antique art, with [Salvatore] Settis. We already have a program of two years. Surely my ambition is that important subjects be treated in a complex way, not have rooms with different artists, but all the ground floor covering one subject when possible, if there is an artist or a subject that can carry it. Now there is the exhibition of Thomas Demand, and Goshka [Macuga], both have independently studied history, where we will end up. I choose those who question the same things I do. The end of the human being, of the humanoid, where does science bring us? How much we should accept real or fake, science could dehumanize us... It's a very interesting moment, but it's not easy.

Do you like to read about art and design? What do you like to read?

I try to read as much as possible, for many years I studied art — full immersion, knowing the artists, too.

Could you please talk about the sets, which are always so relevant for your shows?

The sets stem from the relation with [the Office for Metropolitan Architecture]. We say we want to work on this subject, they have to start working ahead of time, and we've discovered that they go their own way and somehow our paths meet, our sensibilities meet. They present many ideas, we choose one or two, and as we go along, we complete them. The process lasts two or three months. The dialogue strengthens and supports the ideas, each conversation enriches you and makes things more complex.

What was the idea behind the fall sets?

A reconstruction of the square, a Spanish square from the 16th century, the Inquisition, and the idea of passing through, this tide of people, exchanging locations. I had this in mind and they independently had this in mind.

Is there a moment you prefer? Do you live in the present or the future?

No, I live very much in history, it's what really interests me now, the history of thought. When I was in school, I studied little, I had other things to do, theater... for years I have been filling the voids, with books from high school.

How do you get to everything?

I try not to waste time, I don't have many social distractions. I don't really like them, so I occupy my time doing things I like. ■

"You can't expect fashion to revolutionize things; revolution happens in society."

on fashion.

Unfortunately I did say it. Now I have to [stick with it] [laughing].

Did you change your mind?

No, I would work with an artist only if the desire stemmed naturally. But for an artist to ennoble my job, no, I want to be good on my own.

How much of you is behind the Fondazione? How involved are you?

All of me is behind the Fondazione. Working with a great group of people, we have a fantastic program now.

Thomas Demand's "L'Image volée" ["The Stolen Image"] kicked off on March 18, and I was thinking of this when

you mentioned the subject of copies.

It was all born from the exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form" [at the Fondazione Prada in Venice in 2013]. The idea of copying is a subject that I am passionate about.

Does it bother you when you are copied?

It depends. If a copy is sly, it bothers me. Otherwise it doesn't create any problem.

Perhaps one of the faults you object to the most is slyness? You've mentioned it a few times.

Yes, I really think so... Marc Jacobs says he loves me and says that he copies me, but it's

Miluccia Prada's fall collection was one of her best in several seasons: an exceptional blend of tailored coats and uniformlike suits, all paraded on a set meant to evoke a theater on public square. She collaborated on prints with French artist Christophe Chérin, whose allegorical drawings — splashed on Fifties camp shirts for him, romantic smocks for her — question and remix history.

Fondazione and a group of young architects and filmmakers, completely independent, have invited contemporary philosophers, economists, urban planners and experimental scholars to come and produce knowledge. It will last all summer, it will be very intellectual. Their goal is to understand how many additional possibilities there are in the world of cinema. They address contemporary image production from a wide and diverse spectrum — from non-Western media production to lessons on neuroscience and military recordings.

You have also wanted a cinema at the Fondazione in Milan.