WSJ. Magazine

Mensile

PRADA

Data 11-2015
Pagina 60/67
Foglio 1 / 8

FASHION

MIUCCIA PRADA

2015

The legendary designer, still fully in control of her fashion empire, has amplified her legacy with the new Fondazione Prada, a cultural mini-village on the outskirts of Milan that embodies its namesake's elusive creative spirit.

BY JOSHUA LEVINE PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG McDEAN

THE SEED FOR PRADA'S latest resort and men's collection was sown when Miuccia Prada—the indefatigable woman who puts her stamp on everything Prada produces, from its color-uncoordinated collections to the paper cupcake doilies in her new art foundation's retro Italian café—called her design director, Fabio Zambernardi, and said, "T-shirt."

Mrs. Prada's collections (she is always *Mrs.* Prada) often start with this kind of head-scratch-inducing utterance, which must then be painstakingly deconstructed, ramified and translated into needle and thread. "She never says, 'Oh, let's do pleated skirts,'" says Zambernardi, Mrs. Prada's chief idea translator for over 30 years (not an easy job). Two years ago, for instance, Mrs. Prada called him in to her office and announced, "I am Pussy Riot." Beg pardon? "Welcome to my world," says Zambernardi with a put-upon grin. "You start with her instinct and then you have to talk about it and talk about it. It's not as easy as working for a designer who just tells the assistants what to sketch. That never happens here. She's much more interested in exploring her *immaginazione* than in the end result."

Those explorations can venture pretty far afield. In the case of the T-shirt, the driving intuition was simplicity. What came out the other end of the Prada process—the word *process* looms large in everything the designer does—were skinny boys in two pairs of socks, leather shorts and untucked bright-blue sweaters covered with rabbits, and skinny girls in dresses with chain straps, printed with crossed-out eyes and interwoven with python skin. And two pairs of socks.

This summer, the collection debuted at Milan's Via A. Fogazzaro, where Prada stages all its fashion shows. A line of pale models, their sternums outlined under parchment skin, wound its way around the bare concrete benches, while overhead hung rows of curved and flat translucent panels made from fiberglass and corrugated polycarbonate. Mrs. Prada is as punctilious about the décor for a show as she is about her clothes, and it plays an integral role in her conception of the whole. (The architectural firm OMA, which designed the new Fondazione Prada, has collaborated with her on staging Prada's fashion shows for the past 15 years.) It was a mystery, however, how the fiberglass panels fit together with the crossed-out eyes, or what any of this had to do with T-shirts. Were they windows? That's how I saw them. A reviewer for an English newspaper saw guillotines.

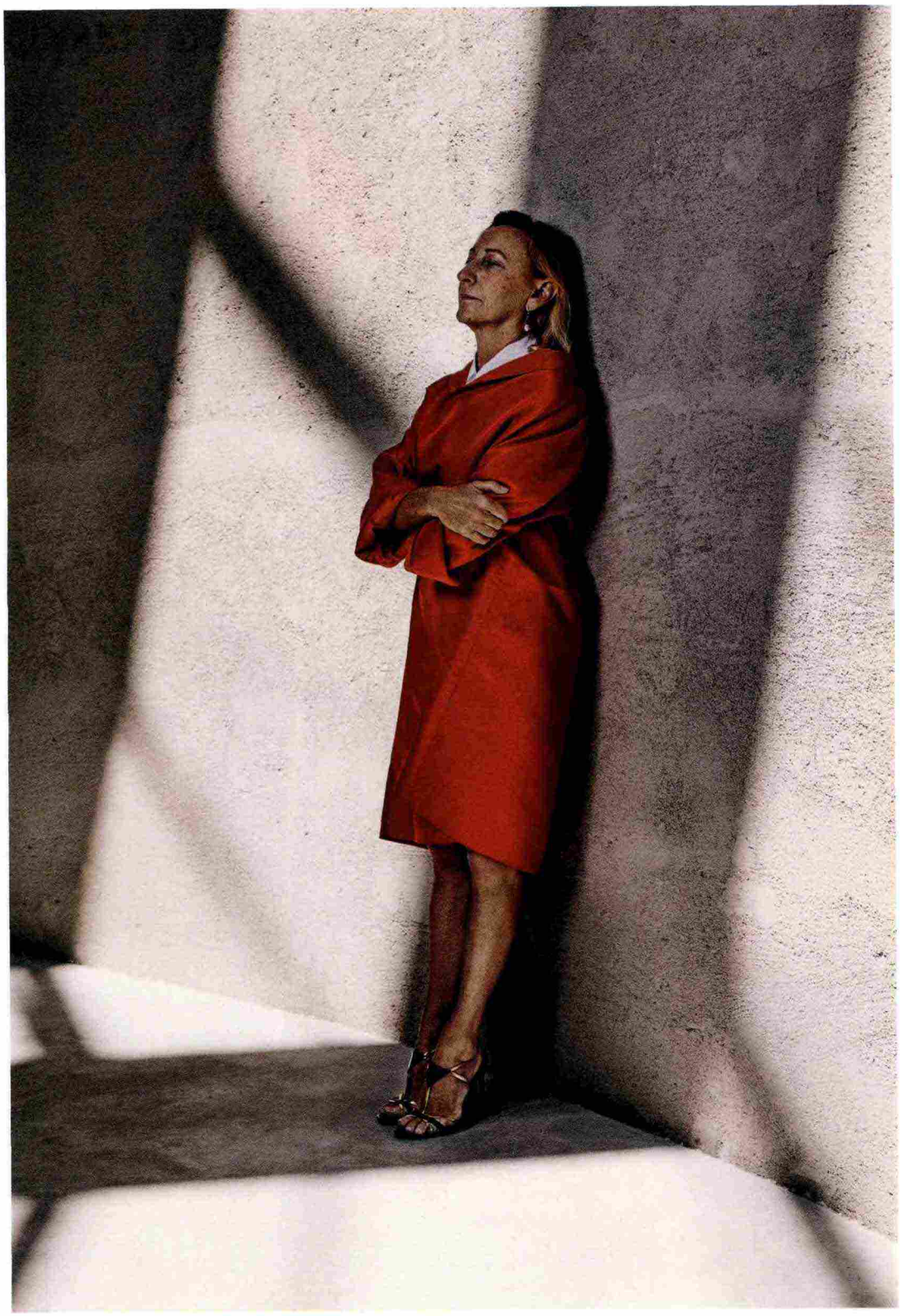
The semiotic analysis kicks off in earnest directly following every Prada show as Mrs. Prada huddles backstage with reporters for a kind of post-game wrap-up. It was here that Mrs. Prada publicly dubbed the collection "post-modest" and shed some light on the intellectual underpinnings of the clothes. This is not just fashion chatter. It is fundamental to Mrs. Prada's process.

I met Mrs. Prada a few weeks after the show in her offices at Via Bergamo, 21. I no longer remember what she wore, I'm afraid, but I can still see the strong features of her face, her alert green-brown eyes and a prominent nose over a mobile mouth. She possesses a fierce Anna Magnani magnetism. When she laughs, everything goes into motion. I didn't get to see her explode in anger, but I bet that would really be something. Across the room was a hole in the floor. This is the entry port to the much-remarked tubular metal slide that Belgian artist Carsten Höller built for Prada. Has Mrs. Prada ever slid down it? Yes, she has, a few times after it was installed about 15 years ago, she told me, but that was it. After all, she explained, you can't keep sliding down the same slide.

"I wanted to do a modest show—that was the T-shirt," Mrs. Prada told me. "But modesty is not relevant today, with everybody wanting to appear on Facebook. So it got transformed from modesty to the complete opposite to the point where it got kind of excessive. So I called it post-modest.

"The titles are like watering cans for me. I use them to try to understand for myself where I've ended

SHADOWS AND LIGHT
Miuccia Prada, photographed at the Rem Koolhaas–designed Fondazione Prada, which opened in May.



up, because I don't know. I go by instinct, which is a very important part of my process, but after I get there, I need to understand why. I know that there is always a reason, even if I only discover the reason two days before the show."

It's safe to say no other designer in the fashion world works this way. There's something sui generis about Mrs. Prada and the dialectical zigzag she follows from a grainy snapshot in her head to a full-blown collection. This singularity hasn't stopped Prada from changing the way a lot of people think about fashion: that it can convey intellectual heft; that *pretty* isn't always the highest praise; and that, most important, designers aren't obliged to turn out uniforms for seduction.

If these notions seem less outlandish now than they did in 1988, when Mrs. Prada made her first collection, it's because her doggedness and conviction have pulled so many people around to her way of thinking. "Everything is so coherent. At many other houses there are too many voices, but Mrs. Prada always takes everything right back to her," says Julie de Libran, who worked with her for 10 years until 2008 and is now artistic director of Sonia Rykiel. "It's a huge strength."

This is unlikely to change. Prada is immense. Sales are now roughly $4.65 billion a year in 605 stores around the world. Prada produces clothing and accessories for its namesake brand and for Miu Miu. Mrs. Prada's more fancy-free second label. In 2011, Prada sold off a 20 percent slice of itself to the public. But Miuccia Prada and her husband, co-owner and business partner Patrizio Bertelli, still filter decisions about nearly everything Prada does through themselves. They have done things that way from the beginning, and they mean to keep at it.

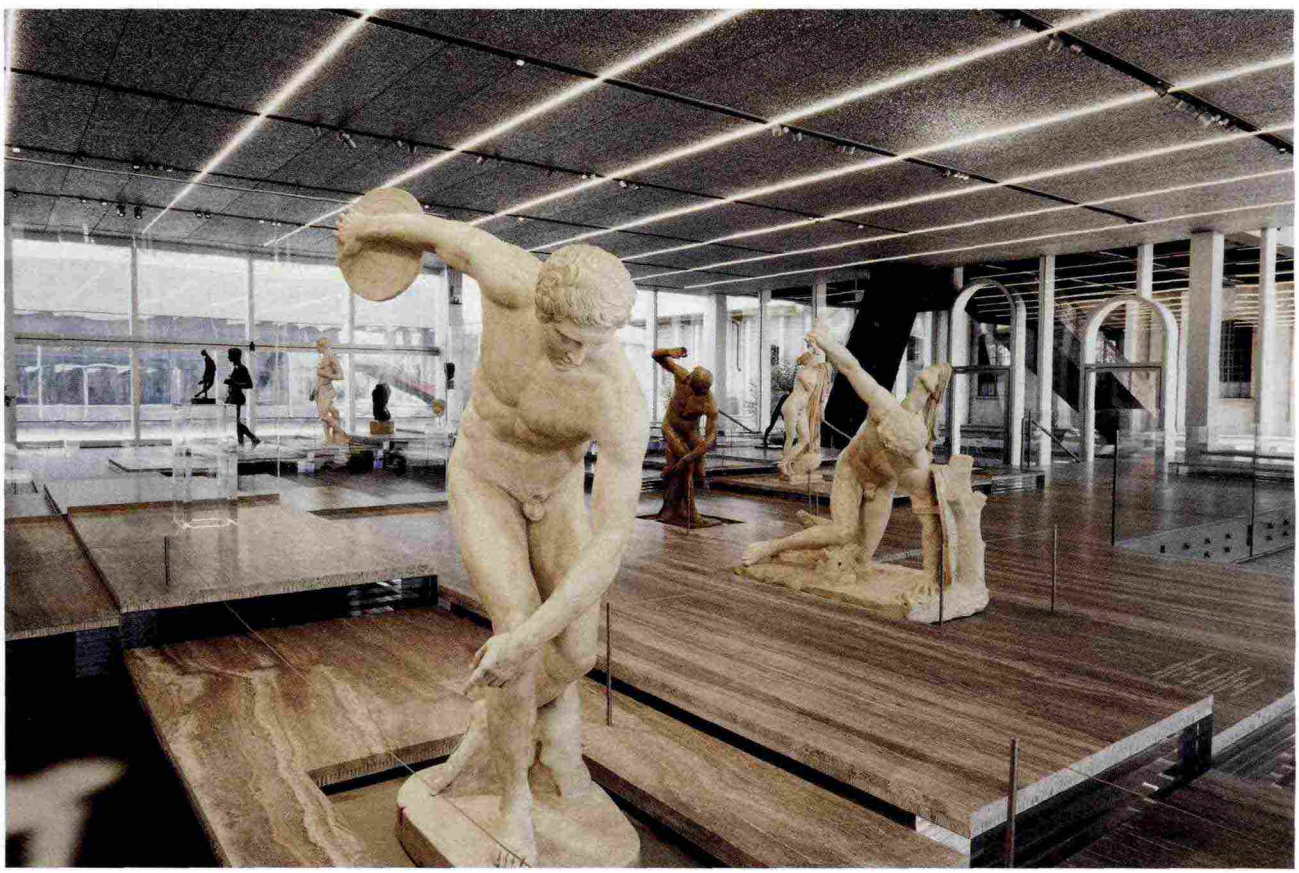
"At the moment, I'm working much more because we're getting bigger," Mrs. Prada says, "and if you don't want your people to dilute the message, you have to really push them so they don't lose the clue, no?"

Mrs. Prada is 66, but lately it looks as if she's just revving up. In May, the Fondazione Prada opened its doors on the outskirts of Milan. This past year has been fashion's Medici moment—the Fondation Louis Vuitton opened in Paris's Bois de Boulogne in a Frank Gehry building that looks like a pod of elegant glass whales. Mrs. Prada, as you might expect, chose a different path, at once more ambitious and less flashy. Across from Prada office buildings in Milan's Largo Isarco stood an abandoned distillery from 1910. To transform it, Mrs. Prada called on her old collaborator Rem Koolhaas, the Dutch architect who runs OMA. He was lukewarm about a straightforward conversion. "He didn't want to work on an old industrial space—too typical of the art thing," says Mrs. Prada. "At the same time, he didn't want to take it down and do something new. But after a while, he found this idea of doing both—a kind of dialogue between old and new. That hasn't been done before. And it fits with our idea of doing different things, more exhibitions, responding to things that are happening. It's much more flexible, and we don't have to worry about doing the best show of the year."

The delightful result is a kind of cultural mini-village comprising seven reworked spaces from the old distillery and three new Koolhaas-designed buildings, the last of which, a white tower, will open next year. There is gallery space for Louise Bourgeois, Damien Hirst and the other contemporary artists Prada and Bertelli have been collecting seriously since the mid-1990s.

A black-box cinema in the center of the courtyard has folding doors that swing out like wings. Mrs. Prada is crazy about the movies, and she's got big

ANCIENT ECHOES
Below: The foundation's *Serial Classic* exhibit focused on the concept of multiples in Roman and Greek statuary; in the foreground, Discobolus, second century A.D. Opposite: The Haunted House, covered with gold leaf, is home to works by Robert Gober and Louise Bourgeois.



plans for festivals and workshops here. In all, the compound covers over 200,000 square feet, but it doesn't feel that big. In fact, it feels welcoming and even cozy—two words not often associated with Prada.

There's nothing inviting about the surrounding neighborhood, however. From the grass-topped roof of the main exhibition space, you can see the weedy tracks of an abandoned railroad line across the street. The nearby buildings are either old and run-down or new and tasteless—just the kind of off-putting accents Mrs. Prada likes. I asked one of the OMA architects whether the new Fondazione might spark a revival of the whole neighborhood. "I certainly hope not," he answered.

I strolled through the campus in May with Federico Pompignoli, OMA's man on site for the project, which will take eight years from start to finish. This was the day the Fondazione opened to the public, and Pompignoli looked exhausted. "It was a very stressful process—always testing, researching, back and forth," says Pompignoli. "When I met with Miuccia, she said, 'I'm not an architect but I am very interested in process—how clearly you can tell someone what you are doing. It must be clear but never obvious.' She was always saying, 'Oh, that's so obvious!' "

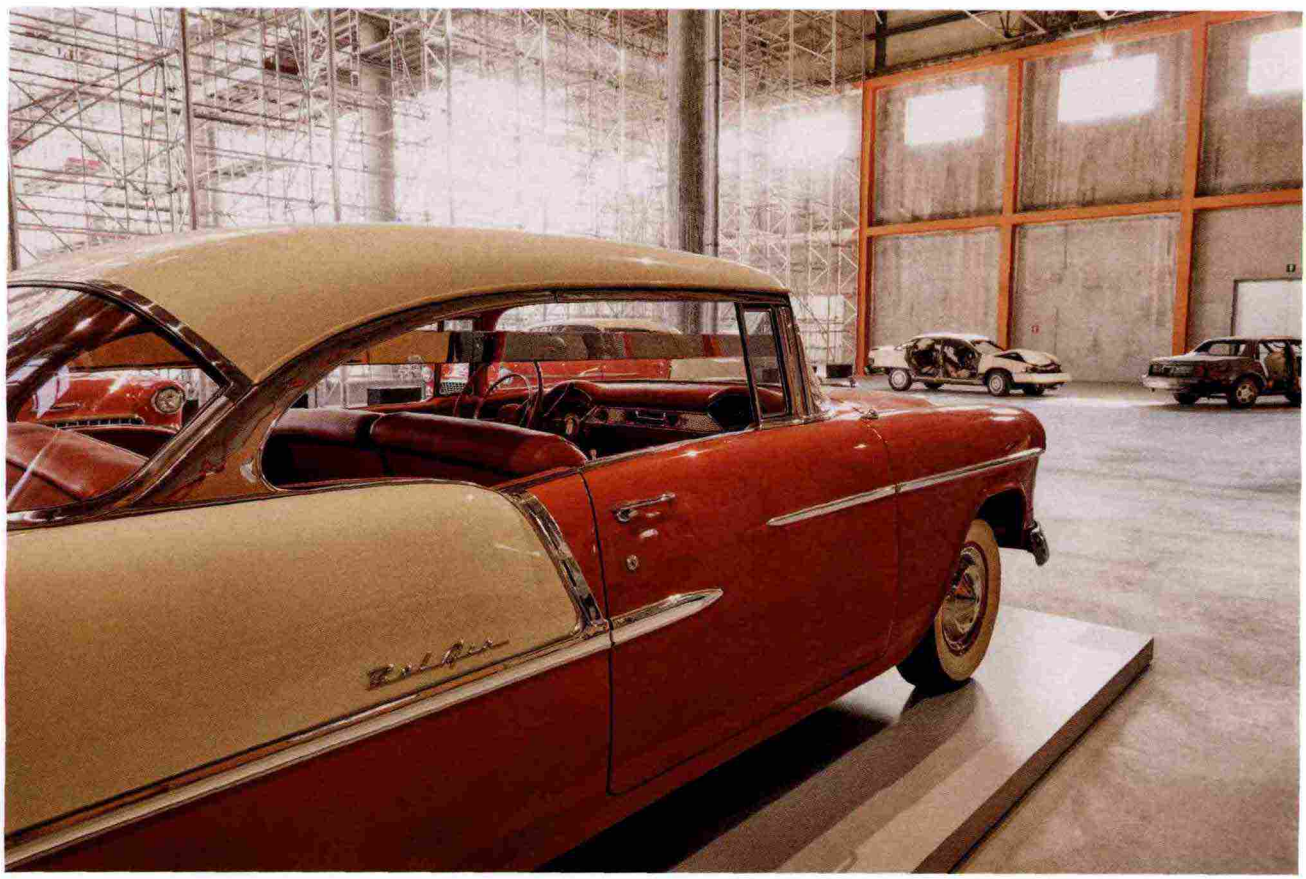
When you do things that way, odd things happen. The roof of one of the new buildings, for instance, runs straight into a window in one of the old buildings. "You would never do something like that if you followed standard procedure, but that's what the exhibit space needed so we just did it," says Pompignoli. "I like the whole project now, but it took me a while. It meant I had to go against all my references and instincts, and that was very hard—almost like psychotherapy. But in the end, this is where the process led."

Perhaps the best-loved corner of the Fondazione is its Bar Luce. The idea was to re-create the kind of old-fashioned Milanese bar that might have served the distillery workers *pasticceria* and thimblefuls of espresso in the 1950s. The staff dutifully started compiling bar scenes from old neorealist movies. "Miuccia said, 'Wait a minute—why not just get a moviemaker to design it?' There's a certain logic to this," says Pompignoli.

"I thought, Wouldn't it be amazing if it could be Wes Anderson? So I kept insisting and insisting and insisting, and in the end he said yes," recalls Mrs. Prada. (It helped that Anderson had already made a short film for Prada.) The two notorious nitpickers, Mrs. Prada and Anderson, promptly went berserk. "There were the poles, the refrigerator, the glasses—even the paper under the cakes!" says Mrs. Prada. "He sketched out a floor in baby pink, which everybody refused to do and which was impossible in reality, but I said, 'No, let's do the baby pink,' and I ended up showing him three different shades to choose from. Can you imagine?" When the Fondazione opened, they were still putting finishing touches on the bar.

The new Fondazione, with its fingers in so many different pies, has gotten Mrs. Prada fired up. The first big art exhibit explored Greek and Roman statues, specifically the role multiple iterations of ancient works played historically as vehicles for mass culture (how culture gets transmitted is a subject she thinks hard about). "I'm always attracted by what I don't know," says Mrs. Prada, allowing that it wouldn't be far-fetched to see an ancient-Greek discus thrower somehow show up in a future collection. Then there's her obsession with opening a school for young movie directors. She says she's found the perfect guy to do it—she won't tell me who—but he's only 24, and she's worried he can't deliver. ("Everybody always says they want to work with young people, but then afterwards you actually have to work with young people.")

HOT WHEELS
Below (foreground): Walter De Maria's *Bel Air Trilogy: Circle Rod, Square Rod, Triangle Rod*, 2000–2011, part of the exhibition, *An Introduction*. Opposite: Robert Gober's *Untitled*, 1993–1994, part of the permanent collection.



At a time when the fashion world is quick—perhaps too quick—to plant its flag on the high plateau of art, Mrs. Prada has always drawn refreshingly clear boundaries between the two. But there's no need to label what Mrs. Prada does to remark that she's begun broadcasting on a much wider spectrum of frequencies. "I wanted to keep things separate in principle, and I was always against it when one thing took advantage of another thing, just because it was trendy. It can get very superficial," says Mrs. Prada. "But in the end, your mind, your ideas, work as one, so everything ultimately gets connected to everything else."

The Milan-based designer Lawrence Steele has been watching Mrs. Prada closely since he worked as her assistant during the early '90s. He sees all her far-flung activities coming together in a kind of global *gesamtkunstwerke*. "When I was there, we didn't have this foundation, we didn't have the current runway space," recalls Steele. "Now there are so many more elements that play against each other. No one's integrated all those elements into a unified vision the way Mrs. Prada has. Everything is part of the same conversation."

This is unsurprising since, for Mrs. Prada, that conversation didn't really start with clothing anyway. Politics and art both came first; clothing arrived much later and almost by accident. Impeccable taste, however, was her birthright from a bourgeois Milanese upbringing. Her paternal grandfather opened his leather shop in Milan's Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in 1913 (it still stands as a kind of Prada shrine, with some of the older artifacts on display not available for sale). Before long, Milanese high society, including the Italian royal family, was buying leather, alligator and walrus trunks there.

"I AM ALWAYS ATTRACTED BY WHAT I DON'T KNOW."
—MIUCCIA PRADA

Mrs. Prada found it all at once enchanting and stultifying, and she still battles with the residue of mannerliness it left her with. "My personal taste tends to be too good," she says, "so I tend to fight against it by working with things I don't like, like lace—I did a whole collection based on lace."

She got a doctorate in political science at the University of Milan before running away to join the circus—or, in her case, the next best thing, a mime troupe. But by the mid-'70s, she was back safe in the family business, which she has said she hated in theory and adored in practice. In the late '70s, she took it over. Around the same time, the push-pull dynamic of Mrs. Prada's life got an important counterweight when she met Patrizio Bertelli, a leather-goods manufacturer from Arezzo, at a trade fair. They married in 1987, and they've been successfully pushing and pulling one another ever since.

The story is often recounted that Bertelli told his new wife that Prada needed to sell clothing, and that if she wouldn't design it, he would find someone who would. She did, thereby establishing a pattern of conjugal head-butting in the creative process. Julie de Libran was there when Bertelli insisted that Mrs. Prada make sexy tops ample enough to accommodate large breasts. "He told her, 'You can't do it—you don't know what sexy is!' It was hard for her. She hated it, but in the end she got it. She always wants to prove she can do the things she hates."

For all the recent flurry of extracurricular activity at Prada, these have not been easy times for its main enterprise. Tough economic conditions in Europe and a slowdown in the Chinese market hit most big luxury-goods brands, but they hit Prada harder. Profits fell 28 percent from $703 million to $505 million for the full year ending on January 31.

This was the first time annual profits declined since Prada went public four years ago. More recent results have been only slightly less worrisome—for the six months ending July 31, profits were down 23 percent from the same period in 2014—suggesting that the hard times are far from over.

Bertelli, a passionate yachtsman (he has managed Italy's America's Cup racing team for years), reaches for a nautical metaphor. "A really smart tactician on a boat anticipates shifts in the wind before they occur, and we didn't," says Bertelli. "So we found ourselves in the middle of a storm without any tools available to counteract it. Our slowdown was solely due to our own mistakes."

Mrs. Prada, who is not a sailing buff, has a simpler diagnosis: It was partly a matter of laziness. As she sees it, Prada had grown too reliant on the steady *ka-ching* of its greatest hits—particularly its most emblematic bags and leather accessories. "You shouldn't rely on one thing," she says. "At least not us." As with most big fashion brands, Prada's entire edifice rests on a pedestal of handbags. Says Bertelli: "When your products are successful, it's hard to stop selling them, but products wear out and you have to be brave and kill them off."

Both agree, too, that Prada must start churning out more new products, which Bertelli calls Prada's historical "war machine." It wouldn't hurt, add Prada watchers, if those new products carried smaller price tags. "Prada is by far the most expensive of the mega-brands," says Luca Solca, the respected luxury-goods analyst at Paris's Exane BNP Paribas. "I'd like to see more canvas and nylon. The name of the game is not to be exclusive but to appear exclusive."

Mrs. Prada is having none of it. "Python is the new cotton," she announced gaily after the recent show. "There's always a lot of irony in my work," she adds, just in case anybody doesn't get it. Still, we're talking about real python from actual pythons. It's one thing to appreciate that kind of irony, and another thing to afford it. Not a problem, says Mrs. Prada. "There are so many people who want to spend a lot of money, it is incredible!" (Indeed, after the latest earnings figures were released in September, Bertelli noted to analysts on a conference call that Prada's priciest bags account for 20 percent of its sales.)

If there's any adapting to a new world to be done, Mrs. Prada says, it is to make her designs bolder and more eye-catching on the surface while retaining Prada's meticulous attention to detail. The nuances and sophisticated references will still be there, subtly stitched into the fabric, but she acknowledges that fewer of her new customers understand them. She calls this approach her *terza via*—a third way—"not too intellectual, not too popular, but in between."

Even with all the demands on her time, Mrs. Prada sees the greatest danger to creativity as doing less, not more. "If you see a designer who's stopped, even an artist who's stopped...." She pauses and sighs. She doesn't envy them. "If you step back, everything becomes more difficult. You have to maintain the rhythm." •

MISE-EN-SCÈNE
Director Wes Anderson designed the foundation's Bar Luce in the style of an old-fashioned Milanese bar.