

'For years I didn't want people to know what I was thinking'

But now the enigmatic Miuccia Prada is ready to open up and reveal the secrets of her enduring success. She gives a rare interview to **Jo-Ann Furniss**. Photographs by **Alasdair McLellan**

I hate being called the intellectual fashion designer!' declares Miuccia Prada. 'I hate being called "conceptual". I want to have ideas and there is a big difference. If you think you are intellectual, what does it mean? It could be classed as an insult. I don't like it. People think you're clever; I am not. I am the opposite, but I try to understand. And the other thing is, who cares? *Boring* [this is her own, rather teenage Italian emphasis]. Intelligence should be exciting, never boring. I have a lot of fun with it.'

This declaration was made 10 years ago, in the same icy interior, in the same part of the Prada headquarters in Milan where we find ourselves today. And yes, Miuccia Prada still hates being called the intellectual fashion

designer. 'Although I probably provoke that,' she says in a more conciliatory mood. 'It's just I am quite shy, though I don't know if that is the right word. It's not guarded, I just don't want to have to explain! Dignified, maybe,' she laughs.

Over the past 15 years, since I began interviewing and talking to Miuccia Prada, she has proven far from icy and has defied all the stock fashion-industry expectations of her. As arguably the most influential fashion designer in the world, known and deified for her imperious intellect, Mrs Prada – as she is frequently called by her Italian staff – is far more than cool, clever and commanding. In the fashion industry it is easy to be cool, to play the calculated game of being 'in' and 'now' – it is also something that rarely lasts. Prada's staying power over the past four decades, since 1978 when she first took



the reins of the Milanese luxury leather-goods company that bears her family name, comes from somewhere else. What Miuccia Prada continues to be is warm: instinctive, human and herself, with the uncanny power of anticipating and communicating what is to come. In her women's and men's collections for Prada, she has the knack of giving people what they want, but not what they *thought* they wanted.

For a leviathan brand, Prada is still distinctly and idiosyncratically personal. With her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, who is also the CEO of Prada, she has led the way in reconfiguring what a luxury-goods business means, not just in terms of their own labels – namely Prada and Miu Miu, the other line Mrs Prada heads – but by setting an example of what luxury can be for the rest of the fashion industry. Something as simple as the reintroduction of a black Pocono nylon rucksack as a luxury handbag in 1985. Originally designed unlabelled by Prada in the late 1970s, the first Pocono bags weren't a hit,



but have become as influential on the recent course of the luxury-goods industry as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* on the path of contemporary art: luxury would no longer be defined by craft and materials, but by ideas. Prada's cultural recognition extends beyond fashion. She is perhaps the closest present-day figure we can correlate to Coco Chanel. 'The Devil Wears Céline' doesn't have quite the same ring to it. Try substituting any other designer name; it just doesn't work. Such are the connotations of Prada. In 2005, *Time* magazine named her as one of the 100 most influential figures of the 20th century.

This building on Via Bergamo is where Prada's interviews usually take place – though she only gives around one each year, so an audience with her has special resonance. There is a purposeful element of disguise here. Imposing yet blank, with a blueish, greyish tinge to the walls, nothing is ostentatiously on display. Even the books stacked in her office are placed just so, face up; you cannot see the spines. They are for her use only. There is the famous 'chute', a twisting slide that protrudes through the floor. It is an artwork by Carsten Höller, like a post-industrial helter-skelter, that spirals through the building and dispenses its occupant in the courtyard. Occasionally, Prada is known to 'have a go on the art' herself when nobody is there. Not for show; just for her own amusement.

Today she is dressed simply in a navy sweater, trousers and chunky hiking boots from the Prada autumn-winter 2016 collection. Now 67, Prada is fearless and revealing in her own clothing choices. In fact, the concrete severity of the building seems an overhang from her collections of the 1990s – when Prada came to real prominence as a clothing designer – which were labelled 'minimalist' and were purposefully inscrutable. Those days are long gone. 'I have learnt that you cannot hide too much,' she explains. 'For years I did not want people to know what I was thinking. That was also in my work, the stage they called "minimal". That was because I did not want to say what I wanted to say. Then I began to express what I like. Of course, then you have to think much more and

try not to make stupid points.'

In fact, this interview is a further moment of revelation by the designer. With the approaching launch of L'Homme and La Femme Prada, the quintessential Prada fragrances, today is the first time she has decided to speak about

perfume, though her eponymous house first introduced a fragrance line 13 years ago.

For many designers and luxury-goods houses, perfumes are often an afterthought. The fragrance market is mainly conceived of as a money-making venture, a sensible commercial entity. Often licensed to one of the beauty giants, the creative director of a fashion brand is not necessarily involved in a fragrance's conception. This does not apply to Miuccia Prada. Perfumes are never an aside from her distinctive world of apparel and accessories, but a life-long passion that is personal and profound. Working alongside Daniela Andrier – the Prada 'nose' – and Fabio Zambernardi – Prada's design director – through Prada Parfums, Miuccia has extended her vision for women and men to encompass a whole olfactory world. For Prada, 'fragrance is pure instinct'.

This is also the reason she could not bring herself to speak about fragrance until now. For her, the world of perfume defies language, intellectual games or any disguise. It gets to the heart of who she is and the identity of the house that bears her name. 'Talking about perfume, I get very nervous,' Prada says. 'Everything is

about defining, having some kind of rhetoric, when I believe in the opposite. And that's as much as I love perfumes, and really, I love perfumes. It's an occasion to put the accent on feelings, irrationality and instinct.'

For Prada, perfume has the transporting, physical power of Proust's madeleine – quite literally it seems. 'Perfume's a lot about pleasure,' she says. 'When you put the perfume on, it's a moment of pleasure, for sure. Then if you really like it, it's more than pleasure. It's like eating a cake you like.'

It was also a personal remembrance of things past that drove the designer to launch the first Prada perfume, Prada Amber. This is the fra-

grance Mrs Prada still mostly wears today, and is the memory of a scent she sampled as a teenager. 'I love perfumes very, very much. I can distinguish quality in a second,' she says. 'For instance, even though I drink wine, I am never able to really understand a wine. But with perfume, I get it immediately. I remember being 16 and the mother of a friend of mine had this incredible perfume. I was obsessed with it. I'd go to her home and smell it in the bathroom. It was from an artisanal shop on Madison Avenue that no longer exists, called Shelley Marks. I had other perfumes, but I really fell in love with that one. I'd go to New York and buy the perfume from the shop; this little shop, always with an old man who only made perfumes in the summer with a few students. At some point it closed down. Then I felt awful; for me this was a disaster. So the first perfume I tried was based on this one. I went to a man with a piece of the bottle and told him what I remembered about it, what was in my imagination. And that is what became Prada Amber.'

Memory, identity, emotion and instinct; for Prada, her fragrances are evocations of character – more akin to music. 'A fragrance touches you or it doesn't. It is a bit like music; abstract and very spiritual, of course.' But above all for the designer, 'It is not playing a game.'

'Perfume is so much more difficult because it obliges you to be even more honest. In fashion you can play because you have so many more occasions and a variety of ways to express. With perfume, I have discovered why I become so nervous about it: you can't play. You can't be smart or funny; it is what it is. You have to go to the core. It's like being in love. You can't play at being in love; you either are or you aren't.'

And so with La Femme and L'Homme Prada the translation of an entire female and male world of Prada into two fragrances has become

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Above The Pocono rucksack, relaunched as a handbag in 1985

Below Miuccia Prada with her husband, and the CEO of Prada, Patrizio Bertelli





a daunting task for the designer and her team. Miuccia is against the standard, fantasy depiction of a single character to define each fragrance. 'It is usual to represent one woman and one man generically; we wanted more than one woman and one man. There is the idea of L'Homme Prada and La Femme Prada, but they don't exist; there are many. So we have two actresses and actors who each play three or four roles. There isn't a main icon representing the dream of a woman or a man: these people represent the reality, the differences and so on.'

For L'Homme Prada, the actors chosen are Dane DeHaan and Ansel Elgort, and for La Femme Prada, Mia Goth and Mia Wasikowska. None are necessarily a 'commercial choice' and they are certainly not known as 'style icons', a concept Prada detests: 'I believe in individuality. I like many different women and men, but an icon of style? I hate the idea.' Chosen for acting ability as much as looks, they are the many wearers of the fragrances that Prada is keen to reflect. 'We wanted the campaign to say, "You are who you are and what you want to be."'

If this all seems rather democratic, contradictory, esoteric and idiosyncratic, it is. This is Pradaland, where high capitalism fuses with high concept. Mrs Prada does in fact possess a doctorate in political science from the University of Milan, and in her youth was once affiliated with the Italian Communist Party, so no wonder contradictions abound for the billionaire businesswoman.

'I am the worst person in the world to answer with one answer!' the designer admits. 'I always give opposite answers.' What Prada excels at is a more human approach to the high-fashion system, away from slick 'on message' delivery, towards a certain morality in the fashion process. Above all, she follows through on the courage of her convictions. And while the past year has been a turbulent one – with the death of her best friend and close collaborator, Manuela Pavesi, together with the aunt she called her second mother, set against the media chatter on the ups and downs of sales figures for what once seemed like an iron-clad company – her belief in her particular direc-

tion of fashion has not wavered. Once more, her instincts have been proven correct, with a wide hailing of the latest Prada collections as a return to superior form.

'You have a piece of life and you have to do something with it. The more you think, the more you act, the more you live it, the better,' she says. 'The last show was about this. Different moments, different times, ups and down, the super-complexity of life. I wanted to say what I really believe in. I am happy with it. When you talk about the vision of your life, the future, the past, in between, it's what really, deeply counts.'

As well as ideas, there are emotions in the output of Prada. In much of what Mrs Prada now does, there is a person laid bare. And perhaps it is time to return to that conversation 10 years ago, when she made the most pointed and profound observation on her own instincts.

'I once read that the instinctive power of women is like the best result of a computer mentality,' she said. 'The thing women are usually criticised for was elevated to something very sophisticated. I am forever checking with my instincts. I always go with my first impression, always. There is something very deep in this, like the outcome of a computer program started thousands of years ago. The first answer instinct gives you is the summary of all knowledge, all pain and all intelligence that's been absorbed.'

In other words, she knew she was right. Prada's La Femme and L'Homme are available exclusively at Selfridges from Thursday, then at selected retailers from September 5



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Left Mia Wasikowska is one of the stars of the new campaign for Prada's L'Homme and La Femme fragrances (pictured at the top right

of the page). **Top left** Prada Amber for him and for her. **Right** From top Prada on the catwalk in 1996, 2006 and 2016



the front

7 Celia Walden raises an eyebrow at 'resting rich face'; **What happened next** Ed Balls keeps on dancing
11 Wildlife It's a shoe-in **13 How to...** beat cancer (with a little help from my dog); **1,000 little things...** The joys of bank-holiday traffic jams **14 The bigger picture** A rediscovered Beatrix Potter story has been illustrated by Sir Quentin Blake **16 Pieces of me** Jonathan Safran Foer **18 Notebook** The style agenda for men and women

features

24 'For years I didn't want people to know what I was thinking' Miuccia Prada on expressing herself, the problem with style icons, and why she hates being called an intellectual designer. By *Jo-Ann Furniss* **30 The price of freedom** The families of Yazidi women kidnapped and made slaves by Isis pay huge sums to secure their loved ones' liberty. *Yvo Fitzherbert* investigates **38 Cover Keeping up with the Jones** Bridget's back. And she's having a baby. *Sally Williams* talks to Zellweger, Firth et al about her return to the big screen **44 Change in store** Having once led the way in high-street fashion, Warehouse has faded from view. But now it's having a makeover. By *Kate Finnigan*

food&home

51 Home & design Pretty in pinks **52 Cotswold dream** An architect combines old and new in the renovation of an Arts and Crafts farmhouse **59 Food news** Chinese treats **61 Making a meal of it** Michael Deacon at Oshibi in York **64 Fresh meat** Harry Eastwood's summer recipes

71 Three of the best Peruvian retreats

74 Flashback Caroline Coon remembers George Harrison turning up at a party in 1969

Cover Photograph by Brian Bowen Smith



24 The model wears Prada
 Miuccia reveals her inspirations



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 020-7931 3350