

WWD SALONE DEL MOBILE PREVIEW

Key Differences Between Creative Direction in Design versus Fashion

Top furniture and decor experts weigh in on the frenetic creative shuffle taking the fashion industry by storm. BY SOFIA CELESTE

MILAN – Is it better to have a sole captain of the ship, even for a moment, or a tight group of friends involved in decisionmaking?

Akin to fashion, the design industry has been pondering this question for some time.

According to curator Federica Sala, the most distinct difference between the creative direction in design and fashion is that “fashion is centered around one single person, while design is more of a team effort.”

Sala, who has envisaged and staged exhibits for some of the biggest names in both fashion and design, likened the work of an art director of a design house to a coach of a soccer team. Furthermore, she pointed out that the famous design furniture firms today were started by businesspeople. The teams of Cassina and B&B Italia, two of Italy’s most recognizable companies, for example, were built by their founders, entrepreneurs Cesare and Umberto Cassina and Piero Ambrogio Busnelli, respectively.

“Fashion was started by creative figures like Giorgio Armani, Valentino Garavani, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, some of whom sewed their collections with their own hands before becoming colossal figures. Design companies were born from producers and businesspeople,” she said, adding that these origins have very much dictated how we view creative leadership in those two fields.

Poltrona Frau on Strategic Control

At Poltrona Frau, for example, the company’s management is in control not only of its financial success but also of its design heritage and future.

“The real issue is how you create this consistency in a way that the brand communicates to its clients. And this, to a certain extent, is much closer to what the fashion brands are doing,” Poltrona Frau chief executive officer Nicola Coropulis said, adding that the designer changes recently in fashion have been “hysteric.” Given the speed at which they change direction and the money exhausted on contractual changes, “it’s not infusing any

real value into the brands they represent,” Coropulis contended.

“Maybe we should ask ourselves why Hermès doesn’t have an overall creative director and this is the most credible brand,” argued Coropulis, adding that the real challenge is finding consistency in the communication, pinpointing the most strategic physical and digital distribution channels and spaces, and conveying emotion, among other things.

In fashion, designers are chosen to manage the pressure involved in creating an identity through the many collections each major brand issues each year – which now include a variety of seasons like pre-collections and cruise. In the case of design, however, bygone designers like Gio Ponti and Ray and Charles Eames continue to drive sales and therefore reissues, which cost less to make, and also alleviate the pressure of always having to create a sense of newness.

Another key difference is art directors in the design world can branch out and work for several brands, and so can the furniture designers they work with.

Piero Lissoni: Art Direction Is Crucial

Italian architect Piero Lissoni, known for his grand projects around the world including the Dorothea hotel complex in Budapest, and the Hotel Aka in New York City and Alexandria, Va., is currently the art director of Italian furniture and design brands Alpi, BoffilDe Padova, Living Divani, Lualdi, Porro and Sanlorenzo, a maker of made-to-measure yachts. He’s a firm believer that art direction is crucial to a brand’s future, coherence and style ideology.

Piero Lissoni



“The art director of a company is like the conductor of an orchestra, and I have to choose the best players I can find on the market. I’m not interested in whether the projects are large or small, but in being able to bring players into the company to carry out the projects, obviously always in coordination with the company itself,” he said, adding that no project is too large or too small. Last year he designed the Toka candle for Wait, an Italian clean beauty brand featuring natural skin care products, fragrances and incense with a Japanese ethos.

Why does this model work?

Lissoni attributes its effectiveness to the strong figures within design firms, many of which are family-run and built on the industrial heritage native to northern Italy. “It’s crucial to have a very solid relationship with the person who is the true driver of the company. Without being able to engage in constructive dialogue and to cross swords on a daily basis, it’s impossible for an art director to succeed,” he said.



Francesco Meda and David Lopez Quincoces

Francesco Meda: Nurturing Creativity and Growing Together

Younger names like Francesco Meda and David Lopez Quincoces serve as art directors at three firms: one with Ranieri, a quarry based near Mt. Vesuvius that now makes furniture and objects with volcanic rock; Fast, an outdoor furniture company, and Acerbis, an Italian brand known for its experimental designs.

“All of these brands have their purpose. Ranieri is unique, Acerbis has a vast archive to work with and Fast is an outdoor furniture company....We’re able to lend a strong identity to these three companies,” Meda told WWD. At the moment, the duo is able to unleash their own experimental creative spirit with like-minded brands. At the same time, Meda and Quincoces have secured a plethora of design gigs with major companies around the world for single pieces.

Nemo Group’s Federico Palazzari: The Importance of Friends

For entrepreneur and former corporate lawyer Federico Palazzari, design has the advantage of avoiding the big, messy break-ups in fashion. “It costs a lot of money to get out of these [fashion] contracts. It’s a nightmare,” he contended.

Palazzari, who turned Nemo lighting into Nemo Group when he brought FontanaArte and Driade together, believes that the company’s ethos is firmly established under the daring, explorative spirit of fictional character Captain Nemo for which it was named. Palazzari forged a partnership with Israeli designer Ron Gilad after taking him out on his boat. Gilad learned how to swim for the first time that same day.

“We do not believe in creative directors. We believe in creative friends, which is something different. With these designers and architects it can be long or short love stories,” he said.

You bump into people, you discover someone and you can start again, without big drama, he explained, referring to Nemo’s latest model Dori, a brand new lamp with emerging designer, the Tel Aviv-based Alon Rotman, who graduated in industrial design in 2021 from the Shenkar School of Design. ▶

Alon Rotman



Federica Sala



Poltrona Frau Archibald Denim Edition

WWD

Fashion. Beauty. Business.

Waiting and Watching

Retailers and brands are analyzing the Trump administration's tariffs - and anxiously waiting to see how they actually play out.

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Creative Push

"Creative director" has become fashion's favorite job title, with a host of brands and fashion chains now tapping their own to up their games.

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Pucci in Portofino

The Italian brand showed its spring 2025 collection in a former abbey on the Italian coast, an ideal location for its jet-set image.

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SALONE DEL MOBILE PREVIEW

Vuitton's Growing Home

The Louis Vuitton Home Collections that include five product categories will be unveiled during Milan Design Week and at the renovated Via Montenapoleone flagship. The French luxury brand worked with some of the most highly regarded designers and here is a first look at the collection, presented at the stately Palazzo Serbelloni. *For more on this and what's ahead at Salone del Mobile, see pages 11 to 33.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELE MANGO