



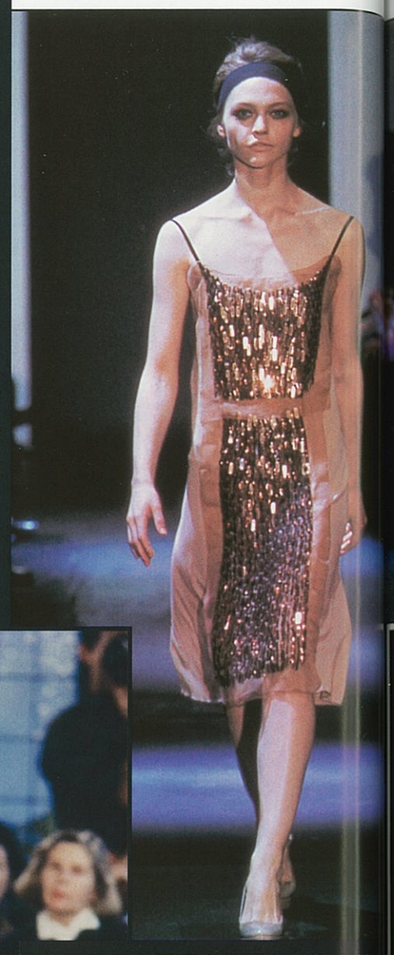





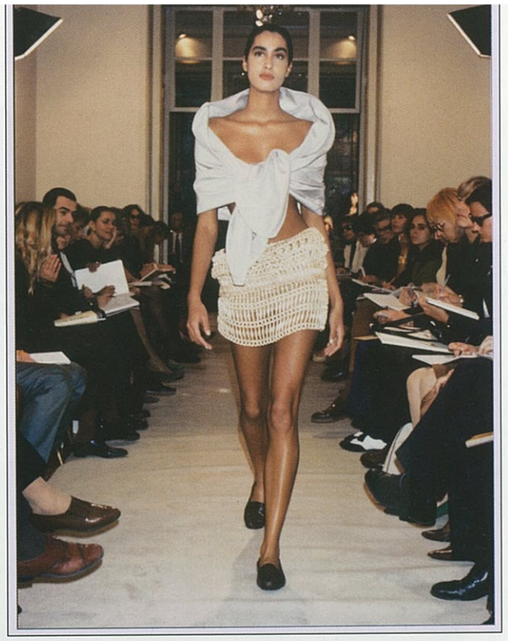



THE BEAUTY OF PRADA

Miuccia Prada is a woman at odds with an industry she is leading: she loves to dress up, hates the frivolity of fashion, yet produces some of the most intellectually-charged collections of every season – endlessly pushing and challenging the definition of beauty.

BY **GORDON NG**

Perhaps the most powerful woman in fashion is Miuccia Prada. You know the story: the Italian-born woman went to mime school, got a PhD in political science from the University of Milan, then joined Fratelli Prada (the family business) out of a sense of obligation. Serendipitous commitments sometimes produce the best results and Mrs Prada has since led the brand towards its status as a global fashion powerhouse, luxury icon and, for industry devotees, an endless source of powerful and intelligent collections.

Rare is the designer who shows us things we recoil from yet feel drawn to. Prada collections are famously called ugly-chic, and it's interesting to explore the connotations of "ugly" where high fashion is concerned. The *ugly* Miuccia Prada proposes is polarising. "When I started, everybody hated what I was doing except a few clever people," she says, in an interview with Alexander Fury of the *Independent*. Indeed, dissecting a new season's catwalk offerings are a challenge. The styling, by Olivier Rizzo, never plays on the commercial safe-side of New York, the cerebral avant-garde of London, the glamour and sex of Milan, or the refined romanticism of Paris. Instead, what one commonly gets from Prada is a whoop of confusion and the inexplicable draw of desire. Unlike the sometimes threatening, maddening and manic genius of creators like Alexander McQueen or John Galliano, Prada produces with a silver-spooned rebelliousness that stems not from the gut but the mind. A lifelong understanding of luxury combined with her nonconformity results in collections that challenge the

here and now and offer us what could and should be. Therein lies her power and talent: to discomfort you and confront you with ideas not yet conventional, though bound to be commonplace, give or take a season or two.

A primer into Prada's career is incomplete without a history lesson. It's best to consider Mrs Prada's start and her early days at the brand to understand how she is the forecaster today, psychically almost, of our changing definitions of beauty. The famous start came not with ready-to-wear, which is now the creative engine of the house, but with bags. Then again, Prada was in the best place to design bags – the company was a legacy Italian house, supplying the royal family with luxury leather goods. The ironic and telling twist to the legacy was in Prada producing a bag in functional black nylon with minimal leather trimming. The reductive and austere style seemed to fight back against the excesses of the '90s. Miuccia was offering us a new beauty in 1989: that less was more, and cheap could be beautiful.

'90s Prada

Determining Prada's core philosophy starts with the early work in the '90s. Considered a golden period in fashion, the greats like Delacroix, Galliano, Gaultier, Saint Laurent were in full creative renaissance with their overblown romanticism, fantasy and dramatically evocative collections. The '90s were also the pioneering era of Jil Sander, Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo, Martin Margiela, Helmut Lang – the leaders of cerebral, austere and conceptually-driven clothing. Miuccia fit the equation of the times almost perfectly. "I always loved and still love [to dress myself]" she said, in an interview for *Document Journal*. The clothes presented were intelligent, created with concepts as a thrust, and captured the imagination of the woman, who like Miuccia, wanted to be clothed beautifully without verging on vanity.

"In total, Prada has produced 58 women's collections since the Spring of 1988, and we are fortunate to continue to watch her fight the tide of convention's dictum of beauty."

The work of Prada in the '90s is, in this writer's opinion, the finest. The attitudes offered were contrary to the times – rather than cutting dresses on the bias, attaching superfluous flounces, or creating with dazzling palettes, Prada made simple clothes in blacks, whites, greys – neutrals that quietly emanated elegance. When Armani and Jil Sander did consistent minimalism and muted tones, Prada overturned the aesthetic every season and jumped into a wider colour palette. She was challenging both decade's leading notions of beauty by suggesting we keep it simple: thoughtful clothes that look great.



'00s Prada

Incremental changes suggested, from the year 2000 onwards, that Prada was enjoying putting more on her models. We began to see embellishments, embroidery, sequins, paillettes, ruffles, lace, volume – the kind of pretty things that characterise feminine dress, but rendered with piercing precision. Making their way into the wardrobe were colours like burgundy, lavender and green, cast in heavy reflective fabrics (as in SS07) that form the backbone of Prada's colour play.

Unrelenting focus on luxury and fabric meant more outings of silk, fur, brocades, velvet etc. Difficult materials, surely, but ones that were melded and combined to Miuccia's exacting eye, ensuring saleable desirability. Observe, too, how the propositions of Prada's soft suiting, layered coats and emphasis on cardigans influenced the dress of women in this decade. Her influence was not lost on the rest of the industry. Alexander Fury famously called her 'the most-copied woman in fashion' and the strength of her vision lent itself to the same kind of emulation by other designers and fashion students, that only Azzedine Alaïa's, Martin Margiela's and Nicolas Ghesquière's (at Balenciaga) work garnered.

'10s Prada

Much of the pining for '90s Prada is hugely ironic and a great laugh if you consider this: the clean lines and monotonality she introduced in the past is now the dress of the day. Minimalism has been the buzzword for the first half of this decade, and Prada's early influence has appeared to catch on en masse. Because Prada is and Prada does, the response is, then, to go the opposite way. FW12 saw the increased use of beauty on the runway shows. Previously, the look had been simple: no-makeup makeup, essentially. For FW12, heavily lined and painted eyes; for SS13, punk kimonos with mussed up pixie cuts and vivid lips; for SS15, desert women with a scalpel-like graphic eye and stringy hair; for FW15, babied-up Lolitas with the nubile flush of youth; and most recently for SS16, pallid gold-lipped beauties.

In total, Prada has produced 58 women's collections since the Spring of 1988, and we are fortunate to continue to watch her fight the tide of convention's dictum of beauty. Most recently, we saw the culmination and creative peak of her contemporary work for her FW16 collection, parts of which were presented as PF16 during the MFW16 runway show. The set: modelled after a public square, the purpose of which was forum and viewing by the people; spoke volumes in its inanimate silence about the over-exposed nature of the industry. The clothes: windswept and tattered shirts layered under sophisticated coats, outerwear for those needing protection, and trinkets piled and chained to bags. The concept: troubled times reconfigure our priorities and sweep (quite literally) away antiquated notions of beauty; the Prada woman is putting herself back together and holding on for dear life while seeking the aesthete's hauteur.

Unsurprisingly, this collection is bound to sell well. It has successfully carried on the codes of the brand from the '90s that made it so beloved: smarts, austerity, and a silently defiant luxury; while representing the anti-aesthetic of today: over-rich detailing, audacious layering despite concerns about global warming, and a refusal to go easy on its audience. That is to say Miuccia Prada will succeed again because she has captured exactly what beauty isn't yet, but will soon be.



