Los Angeles Rive Gauche: Patrice Wagner on Le Bon Marché’s Californian fall exhibition and returning Le Bon Marché to its roots

By Godfrey Deeny  -  31 August 2018

Patrice Wagner, a modest sort for a major LVMH executive, really doesn’t like to boast, but in his view, there is no more Parisian department store than Le Bon Marché, which kicks off the fall this weekend, with a massive exhibition of fashion, design, products and all sorts of unexpected things from Los Angeles.

On Friday workers were installing a giant cast steel Zeppelin – to house Blaine Halvorson’s cabinet of curiosity ideas collection MadeWorn from his private LA showroom. It’s the 50th anniversary of Led Zeppelin on Sept 28, after all. Practically levitating above the tony perfume section - a massive 6-meter-by-6-meter full-pipe loop for skateboarders, from boarder legend Scott Oster. Live skateboarders on Wednesdays and Saturdays are scheduled. Already all the grand department store’s windows on rue de Sèvres display an array of Californian products.

Entitled Los Angeles Rive Gauche, some 200 brands will be featured in the exhibition, which runs from Sept. 1 to October 21, with an opening party on October 5. This cool cultural and consumer happening is the latest in a series of autumn exhibitions in the store, that has included, in reverse chronology, Italy, Paris, “hyper hip” Brooklyn, Japan, Brazil and London.

Though to hear Wagner, it’s just about respecting the DNA of this famous French institution, which was founded in 1852, and regarded as the first ever department store.

“In a real sense it’s a return to our roots in the 19th century,” says Wagner over coffee in his circular corner. “Le Bon Marché was founded to present beautiful and unexpected products in a fine setting. Retail has certainly evolved. Everyone talks now about the experiential, but that is very hard to achieve. That’s why we invest heavily these experiences – because to convince the clients to come into the store is vital. We are not about always
Wagner argues that the majority of department stores, worldwide and not just in France, operate by leasing some 80% of their floor space in concessions to brands.

“We instead curate, we provide choice and that’s what our clients want. Yes, on the ground floor we have great fashion brands like Vuitton, Prada and Chanel, but concessions only make up 40% of our business. It’s very low but that’s exactly what we want,” he stresses.

That curation extends to the Los Angeles expo, which includes appearances by Dr. Woo, the tattooist to the stars of Hollywood; or displays of Pound Fit – the new sticks and drums Californian gym exercise movement; New Yoga classes in Kundalini, Vinyasa and Hatha; and a Left Bank debut for Goop Lab – beauty products from Gwyneth Paltrow’s wellness movement.

“The briefing for our buyers is to find products you don’t find in Paris or Europe. And, create an expo that surprises even the Los Angelinos,” stresses Wagner.

Each spring, a store committee debates possible themes, before Wagner leads an exploratory mission to the proposed city with a team of a half dozen buyers and merchandisers; picking resources, meeting talent, convincing creatives to come on board.

“That’s how we convinced Blaine Halvorson. He only agreed after I managed to plant a hatchet in his front door with a good throw. A real tomahawk!” marvels Wagner of the bearded creator.

Under Wagner’s management, there are exhibitions almost permanently in the store. Debuting in January and February with a great artist: like Leandro Erlich, the Argentine artist who visually tied the store’s escalators into circuit board knots; or Ai Weiwei, whose massive bamboo and paper sculptures in 2016 turned in the store into a phantasmagorical menagerie.

Each spring witnesses a fashion collaboration, which has included Belgium conceptualist Gorb Stromae, documentarist Loïc Prigent and this year Let’s Go Logo. Fall has its geographic show, while Christmas is a special concept expo.

“We don’t do a different brand each year at Christmas. Not the Noël de Prada, or Noël de Chanel. That does cut the costs in half, but it hurts your image in my view,” he sniffs in a clear crack at competitors like Printemps, Galeries Lafayette and Harrods, even if he pointedly never mentions any of them by name.
Last year, Le Bon Marché dressed their entire staff in a Gang of Noel jersey; a great kitsch Xmas in the Alps sweater. “It’s good for team building,” says Wagner.

To the CEO, Le Bon Marché is “the most Parisian of all stores. We are not a shopping center or a mall. The majority of our clients are French, 60%. It’s more like 80% for the others. Then we have Chinese, Americans and suddenly lots of British. Not sure if that is a Brexit effect!”

Le Bon Marché is the third largest element in the Selective Retailing division of French luxury conglomerate LVMH, behind Sephora and DFS, with total 2017 sales of 13.3 billion euros. Wagner refuses to break out figures for Le Bon Marché, as is customary LVMH practice. However, analysts estimate the store’s annual turnover at some 550 million euros.
“But I’ll tell you that we are having spectacular growth – double-figure growth sans problème,” insists Wagner, who reports to LVMH board member Antonio Belloni, the Cardinal Mazarin of the group.

Wagner has also helped guide the launch of 24 Sèvres, the LVMH multi-brand website named after Le Bon Marché’s address which did not exactly get off to the most spectacular start.

“24 Sèvres? Yes, we gave them the buyers and helped the brands come in. But they function as a start-up, which is smart. It’s a very different concept – it needs to gain its own experience and is hitting its figures. You cannot compare a little baby to a grown man, like YNAP or Farfetch. But, believe me, we are rather happy. And, few digital concepts put together so many luxury brands under one roof,” argues Wagner, somewhat defensively.

Though of Alsatian stock, Wagner was born in the rugby-playing lands of Southwest France. After a stellar career where he rose to manage KaDeWe in Berlin, Continental Europe’s largest department store, he returned to France as CEO of Le Bon Marché in 2010. He lives on the Right Bank but works on the Left Bank, in an area enjoying a striking renaissance, especially with the polished reopening of iconic Paris hotel Lutetia, located opposite Le Bon Marché, and the renaissance of the nearby rue du Bac from a sad street of antique shops to Paris’ chocolate and patisserie street.

His biggest challenge?

“Aiding my team and to maximize their potential. When I arrived it was getting the team to understand that the image they had of the store did not correspond to reality. A certain Left Bank idea that we were so special. Plus, the managerial culture was too Franco Français and had to be more international,” says Wagner who initiated requesting all members of staff to come up with ideas. In the end, some 400 people came with fresh approaches.

“That was a big moment, making me very proud of my team. Some people had to radically change; others to reflect on our strategy. You know, it’s relatively easy to change the décor, but the most important thing to change are mentalities. The French are not so refractory – as people think,” said Wagner in a polite crack at President Emmanuel Macron, who referred to the French as the Refractory Gauls in a recent speech.

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