Swarovski unveils new creative direction in Champs-Elysées boutique

By Godfrey Deeny - 18 March 2021

Now that's what we call a significant shift in direction.

Swarovski, the world's premier crystal supplier, has unveiled its latest new concept store, named Instant Wonder, a high-color, full-immersion boutique which its new creative director Giovanna Engelbert refers to as a Willy Wonka candy store of crystal escapism.

Located opposite Christian Dior and Moncler at the top-end of France’s most famous avenue, the hyper-hued, two-floor boutique is also the latest expression of a revamp of Swarovski’s structure and the repositioning of the brand by Robert Buchbauer, a scion of the family who took over as CEO last year.

Few brands anywhere have played as significant a role in fashion history as Swarovski, which supplies crystals to pretty well every major house of note staging shows in London, Milan, New York, or Paris. But somewhere along the line, its multi-pronged strategy went off the rails, as the Buchbauer freely admits. Which is why FashionNetwork.com caught up with Giovanna and Robert to discuss where they want to take Swarovski, a multi-billion-euro company with global influence, and a network of 3,000 stores.

“Our brand used to be run as many independent divisions rather than unified under one roof. And we did pretty well for many years and decades, so there was no case for change. However, in early 2020, just before lockdown, we saw a huge tsunami of problems coming at us!” explained the agreeably frank Buchbauer.
Facing a potential tidal wave of losses, the brand had to shut down 25% of its stores; close down activity in some production plants, and let go over 6,000 staff worldwide, some 20% of its worldwide labor force. The cuts were the most serious overhaul in the company’s history. The brand was founded in 1895 by Daniel Swarovski, the great-great-grandfather of Robert Buchbauer, who invented an industrial crystal-cutting machine. He first took his crystals to Paris to the 1900 Paris Exposition, where he introduced them to Charles Frederick Worth, often named the first true fashion designer.

“The lockdown showed that we had to get out of this predicament in an agile manner and prepare for the future,” stressed Buchbauer.

“We needed to be under one roof, one company and one brand, which led to a lot of streaming exercises like making four or five marketing departments into one. We took out a lot of complexity, which was a painful exercise, but on the other hand it made us fitter for the future. So there are no more complex parallel activities,” he explained.
Privately held, Swarovski doesn’t release results, but a candid Buchbauer reveals: “Last year, was a tough year. But at least online we had a good base, and now it is 30% of our business, which makes us an industry leader. But overall, in 2020 we shrunk turnover by over 30% from over 2.6 billion euros to below 1.9 billion. We plan to come out flat this year, but then grow from there.”

Buchbauer had already met Engelbert in London in December 2019, when the first shocking images of people suffering from Covid in Wuhan province emerged. A highly experienced fashion editor, who was a senior editor at Uomo Vogue, Vogue Japan and W, Engelbert had already been working as a consultant to the house.

“That gave me very good experience, as I started from the basics of how crystals were made, giving me a better global vision on jewelry. I want to give crystals a glorified place in the world. It already had it, so I didn’t invent anything, but to regroup it and repolished it and put it out there. I almost wanted no design, just the beauty of crystals around the neck, arms and fingers,” explains Engelbert.

The results are immediately apparent, and impressive. Perched on three walls; green, in shades of parakeet, mint and seafoam; pink, in shades of taffy, flamingo and bubblegum; and yellow, in shades of banana, daffodil and honey. Hues apparent in Engelbert’s designs.
Her designs are maximalist Italian, without being overpowering: fab-looking geometric rings; contrast color bracelets; ornate clear crystal necklaces – all at an affordable price.

“Don’t forget that Daniel Swarovski first came here to Paris 120 years ago with a full spectrum of colors. So, the color wheel was a working tool for creating for me. Along with my mood boards in Stockholm. At its heart, Swarovski is about white light going perfectly through crystal, and discovering lots of colors,” opines Engelbert, who after a decade living in New York, is a young mum living in Sweden.

The geometric all-crystal mono-color ring, available also for men, is already a best-seller online.

“I’m not wearing one, as we are running out of stock like crazy,” chimes in Buchbauer.

Continues Engelbert: “My definition of Swarovski is design and purity of materials glorified in the simplest way, but very joyfully. We are relaunching a brand at a moment when many people don’t have anything to eat. Where the role of dreams and escapism is maybe more important and the fact that this is attainable by many women is a very fantastic plus,” stresses the designer, dressed in a hot pink wool jacket, frayed black jeans and a pair of Swarovski crystal pumps.

Another key problem Swarovski – a key crystal wholesaler historically - faced was that low-cost Chinese manufacturers were causing a massive price war at the lower end of the market.

“So, we will sell no more crystals for the mass market; our stones can end up via intermediaries and wholesalers everywhere and we lost control. There is hyper competition in price from China in the mass segment. Our brand deserves much better than fighting that war, and throwing crystals at anyone,” shrugs Buchbauer.

Hence, Swarovski has opted for the upper end of the market. In the past it has collaborated with such diverse stars as Gianni Versace, Hussein Chalayan, Jean Paul Gaultier, Mary Katrantzou, Christopher Kane and Hubert de Givenchy. Major stars like Marilyn Monroe, Madonna and Nicole Kidman have all worn Swarovski crystal screen goddess gowns.
Due to Covid, Engelbert has not been to Austria since becoming creative director.

“I believe all my creative styling and jobs in journalism working in Japan, China and Korea and living in 10 years in New York all prepared me for this job. Because Swarovski is a lifestyle brand connecting to so many creative industries - cinema, fashion, decoration. It’s all in our DNA,” she insists.

This weekend, to underline her new direction, the house will realize its latest campaign video, shot in December.


Perched on a velvet couch on the upper floor, she looks around: “I wanted the feeling of a candy store, Willy Wonka, sort of magical. Something that would not scare people off, but would attract every age. Putting it all vertically on the walls to see everything! Figurines, watches, pens and jewelry.”
That those figurines even include dinosaurs, Yoda and Darth Vader shows the brand’s mass market emphasis is still present. The kisky boutique concept actually began last month in Milan, and will now roll out in around 30 locations within the next few weeks. Then eventually in hundreds of stores, even if more standardized.

Currently still 20% of Swarovski’s stores are still closed due to lockdown, but the numbers change from week to week. At one point, 90% of the brand’s global stores were temporarily shuttered due to the pandemic. In the long run, the CEO expects there will be some 25% less boutiques than pre-pandemic, but with bigger stores, as they get rid of locations that don’t enhance image.

“Then we will have a few new flagships which include our collaborations with the grandest brands in the world, and probably a restaurant or cafes,” concludes Buchbauer with a twinkle.

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