L'Éclaireur debuts new website, as the Hadidas mark four decades

By Godfrey Deeny  -  26 March 2021

L'Éclaireur, the Paris luxury boutique chain, just feted four decades of business, and to kick off the next 40, the uber-insider retailer has just opened a natty, new website.

The mini chain actually reached 40 last year, but due to Covid was unable to celebrate the milestone. But with the new site opening this past week, we caught up with founders Armand and Martine Hadida and their son and current CEO Michaël in one of their pathbreaking stores on Rue Herold, Paris.

Long before the term concept store was ever used, the Hadidas invented the very idea – fusing fashion, accessories, design, art and culinary chic into a series of surprise retail packages. With the refreshed website, Michaël has added a team of high-powered personal shoppers and a sleeker display of the company's special product mix – from avant-garde fashion, and over 140 fashion labels to Fornasetti ceramics and Carlo Moretti crystal; to Stella McCartney blankets and Werkstatt: München silver platters.

Their history began back in 1972 on the Champs-Elysées, when a teenage Martine began working Saturdays in a boutique to earn pocket money, and met a young man called Armand Hadida, who managed a nearby store.

Eight years later, after they had saved enough for a lease and the initial stock, they realized their dream - opening up the first L'Éclaireur boutique on the famous avenue; with looks by Marithé et François Girbaud in the debut window; and clothes by Moschino and Vivienne Westwood inside the underground store.

Born in Settat, Morocco, a city south of Casablanca, Hadida discovered fashion and his future métier as a merchant working as a chauffeur doing deliveries. From the beginning he and Martine wanted to mark out their terrain as distant from the dominant '70s designers with their structured style – Mugler, Montana, Alaïa and Gaultier.

“We had to take a different path; a new aesthetic with a twist. To be culturally different and avant-garde, not followers,” explains Armand over coffee.

“Plus we discovered black – from Yohji or Comme des Garçons; and then we met the Belgians – Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten and Martin Margiela – in London,” added Martine, recalling that now-seminal moment in fashion history in 1986 when a group of six Belgian designers trooped over to a London fashion salon, causing a massive sensation with rule-breaking use of fabrics; ethnic influences; street styling and emotion.

Trained as a window dresser, Martine scoured Paris for ideas for her multiple mise-en-scènes, like culling a campaign from outdoor specialist Vieux Camper to creating a whole rural setting for one Girbaud collection. And developing a blend of accessories and fashion, back when these categories were largely separated; becoming the first retailers to bring Timberland, Topsiders and Tod's to France.

“We sold literally thousands of pairs of Tod’s,” smiles Armand, who then stretched the retail concept further with a pathbreaking store on the Rue des Rosiers in the Marais, showing designs by future stars barely out college – Marc Newson, Tom Dixon and Ron Arad.
All told, the family have had eight different locations, later handing them over to favored friends, like their art space in Palais Royale, which is now Rick Owens’ global flagship.

“At the beginning it was not all so easy. Many customers didn’t accept our mix of ideas. It almost irritated them that we had fine objects next to clothes. And then we added Bulthaup kitchens in the Marais, and invited Alain Ducasse to cook, which really drove them crazy,” laughs Armand, whose retail success has afforded him a comfortable lifestyle. Now retired, he and Martine split their time between homes in Aix-en-Provence and Sardinia.

Martine and Armand also turned heads with their next concept – a gallery located in Saint-Ouen, Paris’ most famous flea market – causing immense consternation among the local antique traders.

Asked who were their greatest all-time best-sellers, they say Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten and Carol Christian Poell, the legendarily reclusive Austrian designer who lives in splendid semi-isolation among the Navigli canals of Milan. Famed for his ingenious cutting, and use of way-out-there materials – like, transparent horse leather. Poell even built a life-size horse-leather stallion statue for another L’Éclaireur project – a boutique within the five-star Royal Monceau hotel. He remains Armand’s favorite designer, and he likes nothing more than to pull out looks by the Austrian designer to expound on his unique talent.

When one arrives for an interview Armand and Michel are literally up a ladder installing a huge vintage silver train set, perched above scores of boots by Poell, with his revolutionary rubber fondu-effect soles.

The family even expanded briefly abroad, and still has a gallery on North Robertson in Los Angeles, named L’Éclaireur - a French play on two ideas: lighting the way and illuminated thinking.

Who, one wonders, among their colleagues do they admire?

“I have to say that on a visit to New York, when I first went into Barneys, I got immensely inspired and wondered, could I ever create something like this? So I have great respect for Gene Pressman,” said Armand, as Martine continued: “We also say bravo to Colette, for their energy and the way they became masters of marketing. Though they unveiled themselves while we liked to remain a little hidden.”

“Let’s be honest, this space breaks every rule they teach you in college about marketing. It’s on an obscure, narrow street with nowhere to park and is hard to find!” he cackles. The obscurity didn’t prevent the likes of Karl Lagerfeld coming for morning spending sprees in the store.

“After he lost all that weight, Karl bought everything we had in our Rue Boissy d’Anglas store by Hedi Slimane and then he came to Rue Herold,” where Armand introduced him to Poell. “Karl had never heard of him, but ended up buying a ton of clothes. Karl was the great living encyclopedia of fashion, and immediately saw how great Carol was.”

After hearing his father talk so much, son Michaël jokes, “Maybe we should schedule my interview for another 40 years’ time?”

He sees his goal as creating a community for L’Éclaireur, which has been the ultimate insider retailer. L’Éclaireur has worked with Farfetch for many years, though as the giant e-tailer closed individual boutiques, it has converted
has worked with Farfetch for many years, though as the giant e-tailer closed individual boutiques, it has converted its store online into its unique edit.

“When you look at influencers they can create stories and they sell, but they don’t have legitimacy. Our challenge is to tell the story of L'Éclaireur and explain our savoir-faire. Via the web, we can invite ourselves into people’s home and introduce our personal shoppers,” he stressed. Allowing online clients to organize individual rendez-vous with each store’s expert retailers.

At one stage L'Éclaireur branched out and acquired the Paris-based trade show Tranoï for young and fledgling designers, but ultimately shuttered that. And if Michaël is bullish about retail, he is gloomy about trade shows.

“It’s a business model from the Middle Ages. The whole point of the exercise is B-to-B, introducing young designers to key retailers, and when that audience began to dry up it was morally wrong to ask young talent to invest in a trade show, fly their teams here and stay in hotels. You could ruin a company in one season,” he concludes.

Just as well, he now has a state-of-the-art site to lead L'Éclaireur into its next four decades.

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