Chanel President of Fashion Bruno Pavlovsky on handling the pandemic; Russia fall-out; excellent new figures and the magic of Monaco

By Godfrey Deeny - 10 May 2022

Not many luxury executives have had as long and momentous reign as Bruno Pavlovsky, the president of Chanel’s fashion division.

In the past three years alone, he’s skillfully overseen the transition from Karl Lagerfeld and Virginie Viard as the house’s creative director; launched 19M, the pathbreaking center of haute-gamme craftsmanship in north Paris; renovated and opened a series of architecturally acclaimed boutiques and eye-catching pop-ups; navigated the pandemic and successfully overseen an impressive series runway shows. Uniquely for any fashion brand
anywhere, Chanel stages six catwalk shows each year.

Which is where we sat down with Pavlovsky, for coffee and conversation on Thursday morning, just minutes before Viard staged her new cruise 2022/23 collection for Chanel. Blending polish and aplomb, Formula One and fabulous princesses, inside the ultra-exclusive Monaco Beach Club.

But while the Med was calm for the beachside show, Pavlovsky has had to navigate plenty of choppy waters. Particularly for Chanel, a brand that has pointedly eschewed any and all e-commerce, and thus felt greater impact when the pandemic forced the closure of luxury boutiques worldwide.

The invasion of Ukraine has also caused a ruckus, after Chanel - like practically all luxury brands - closed its boutiques in Russia, before becoming the target of some angry reactions by Russian influencers. Some Instagram Ruskies even started cutting up their Chanel bags in protest.

Speaking of arms, just after guests had enjoyed a post-show cocktail in Monaco, four masked men held up a Chanel jewelry boutique in Paris at 2.30 p.m. Thursday. Social media video subsequently showed one thief brandishing a Kalashnikov amid reports of a 10-million-euro heist. Unfortunately, an unwanted reminder of the sheer attraction of desirable Chanel products.

The Monaco show also came on the heels of a luxury analysis by Morgan Stanley suggesting that Chanel was losing ground to its nearest French rival Christian Dior. Albeit in the study that raised eyebrows with experienced editors on several of its unlikely assumptions. Whatever its accuracy, the mood was certainly ebullient within Chanel at Monaco. Viard may not have the star power of Karl Lagerfeld, but she is a hyper professional designer, and her latest reimagining of the house’s iconography was crammed with great clothes and sure-fire hits. A collection feted Thursday evening with an elegant dinner inside the neoclassical Villa La Vigie – former residence of Lagerfeld – climaxed by a private concert by Nile Rogers and Chic.

Courtly of manner and cerebral in his approach, after three decades at Chanel Pavlovsky’s rule of thumb is to expect the unexpected. With Chanel due to release its official annual results in late May, he could not talk financials, but characterized Chanel’s performance as “excellent.”

Given his sterling reputation, Pavlovsky is tipped to be elected President of the Federation de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, French fashion’s governing body, in an election due in June, when the highly regarded Ralph Toledano steps down after two mandates.

So, here’s Pavlovsky’s take of managing the nec plus ultra of fashion brands during a global lockdown, worldwide pandemic and darkening skies in eastern Europe.
Fashion Network: Why are you showing in Monaco?
Bruno Pavlovsky: That's thanks to the intimate and exceptional relationship of Chanel with the principality. You know, we even discovered that there was a special decree issued here in December 1913, allowing Mademoiselle Chanel to sell her products in Monaco. Her first subsidiary, dating from her earliest days. Also for the history of Karl living here and his relationship with Princess Charlotte, and now the friendship between Virginie and Charlotte, who is our ambassador. But also because this place represents Monaco’s special imagery and incredible energy, seen in the Sofia Coppola video we just released. We wanted with this collection to tap into that unique dynamic, that sense of desire and luxury in a magical location, where we have always been very well received.

FNW: What sort of year is Chanel having?
BP: The results will be out in two weeks, and they are excellent, as we had a marvelous rebound in 2021. The effect of Covid in 2020 was obvious but we have had a great bounceback based on two factors. First, all the hard work done by our teams with our local clients, even as we were forced to close boutiques. Secondly, the exceptional success of our ready-to-wear thanks to the way Virginie brings a more feminine and liberated sense to ready-to-wear. An enormous amount of clients have responded to this silhouette and the very subtle changes in our accessories.

FNW: How has the war in the Ukraine impacted Chanel's business?
BP: The effect on Russia is obviously dramatic – so one has to be agile. Right now, the most unimaginable things can happen and one needs to find the resources to react. We wanted to fully respect the laws on the sanctions vis a vis Russia. And these sanctions are strict and clear, even if they change a little in many countries. So, we were constrained to apply this very carefully and respect those rules. Hence, we had to inform all our clients that products could not be reimported into Russia. This was not done against Russians in particular. Obviously, Chanel cannot sell in Russia, but the vast majority of clients are not under sanction.

FNW: What's the thinking behind opening summer stores on the Med – Capri, Marbella or Bodrum?
BP: We like how pop ups offer our clients another vision of the brand. Each of them is very particular –giving a different reading of our collections. Often our local clients from a nation’s capital show up in resorts. These clients like a fresh take on the marque. We also developed special pop ups like in the Hamptons or Aspen, where the
location chosen extrapolates in terms of our two capsule collections - Coco Beach and Coco Neige.

**FNW: What did you think of Morgan Stanley’s study?**

BP: I know the real figures so don’t need to look at theirs! Let’s wait until Philippe Blondiaux (Chanel Global CFO) talks of the real figures later this month. They will highlight the capacity of our teams to concentrate on local clients – especially as tourism didn’t exist these last two years. Frankly, I wish we had a 2021 performance every year.

**FNW: Where do you plan to open flagships next?**

BP: We have major renovations planned – especially in Asia and China. We open about 10 boutiques a year, and renovate about 20 a year. That often interests us more – as we can provide more space and more privacy to better protect our clients. Many want to be isolated in a private space, and don't want to necessarily be seen in boutiques.

**FNW: Are you planning any new product diversifications?**

BP: We don’t feel we are at the end of the collections we already have. We want to develop our collections – tactically with Beach and Neige – or with Métiers d’Art, which in December was an enormous success. But I want to be clear, we are not going to announce that Chanel is doing men or décor or children or table-top. We want to be faithful to our values – femininity and luxury as always, with a dose of audacity.
FNW: Why is there no Chanel hotel?
BP: Because we enjoy staying in other people’s hotels!

FNW: What is the usual Bruno Pavlosky day?
BP: Like everyone, I like to work early. I’m at my desk at 8 a.m., but never hold meetings before 9 a.m. In the evenings that depends on what we have in the pipeline. What’s important is that we all work together, without losing respect for when we are not working. We all learnt an enormous amount in Covid about how to work remotely. So, we introduced new rules for our teams, giving them the right to 90 days a year of remote working. Even if that is not always possible as we have so many collections. Personally, I am the first in the office and went in every day in the pandemic when it was legally permitted. But we have to think of a more free idea of working. Even if you are at home, remote work is still work.

FNW: What are the most challenging parts of your job?
BP: Well, the context remains very complicated due to Covid. And the situation in Ukraine means it’s a very tense moment worldwide – so we need to adapt permanently. There’s a new dimension required to be ready tomorrow to take choices on issues you cannot predict today. Moreover, at Chanel – with about 20,000 people worldwide – there is the responsibility to all our staff, and their families. The basic responsibility that people had enough to eat in Shanghai in the lockdown, without entering into their private lives.

FNW: Being president of Chanel’s fashion empire must be a demanding position. What do you do to relax and recharge?
BP: I am from Biarritz and as soon as I can I go to our house in Biarritz. And I like to ski in the Alps. I assure you, I don’t have problems going on holiday.

FNW: If you didn’t have a career in fashion, what else might you have done?
BP: I never thought of it in that way. A career is often about encounters. For me meeting the Wertheimers (Chanel owners), Karl or Françoise Montenay (ex CEO). I have had a certain luck. They brought me here. And they were confident in me. Still today, there is something I love about our products. That love of fabrication and creation, and today the need for sustainability. There is a question of pride in what we do, above all in the materials we use. We work with many partners in agriculture making regenerative cotton, cashmere and linen and silk. We want to assure that there is a full traceability, and to respect nature and the men and women who work in that world. We are going very far in terms this transition, and in three to five years we will have a model that is very correct.

FNW: What was the brief of the Wertheimer brothers gave when they hired you?
BP: Chanel is a marque of ultimate luxury and fashion with exceptional products. That was their vision and I have to maintain that.

FNW: What are your plans for the Federation de la Haute Couture et de la Mode (FHCM)?
BP: The mandate of Ralph Toledano (FHCM President) is coming to an end and there will be an election. I am a candidate – actually the only candidate so far – to take up the baton of Ralph and to support Pascal Morand (FHCM Executive President) and to support his team and to continue the great work done by Ralph. It’s a good moment for the Federation and we want to maintain that.

FNW: We are close to La Pausa, Coco’s famed villa which Chanel has owned since 2015.
BP: Yes, but it has required quite a bit of work. It’s an enormous job, as the villa was very worn out. Plus, in the past couple of years, we completely reorganized our rue Cambon headquarters, built 19M from scratch and opened several new manufacturing plants so we have been busy in construction! La Pausa will be ready next year and we look forward to that very much.

FNW: What would Coco Chanel think if she saw today’s show?
BP: If I were Coco, I would be very proud to have Virginie Viard as a successor with her modernism and taste and her way of making women beautiful. To my mind, she is very courageous to come here and be between Coco and Karl, with the royal family in the middle. That’s an audacious act.

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