Ralph Toledano, passing the baton, considers his tenure at the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode

By Godfrey Deeny - 1 July 2022

This Friday marked the passing of a major baton in fashion, as Ralph Toledano retires as president of the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, French high-fashion’s governing body.

Since his appointment back in 2014, in two terms as president, Toledano has managed to coalesce a team of like-minded CEOs, who have overseen a major renewal in the Federation, and the strengthening of Paris’ unique place in the planet’s fashion eco-system. The appointment of his successor Bruno Pavlovsky will officially be announced early Friday afternoon.

A decade ago, Paris’ position as the single most important fashion week on the planet – for both men and women – was perhaps under threat. But during Toledano’s tenure, the city’s reputation as *primus inter pares*, or first among equals, has, if anything, very clearly accelerated well ahead of London, Milan or Paris.

In a remarkable career, Toledano has at various stages guided the creative careers of a half-dozen world-famous designers. Three decades ago, he was the CEO of Karl Lagerfeld, in a period of notable growth for the German legend’s signature house. Toledano was also the man who discovered Alber Elbaz, plucking the brilliant Israeli designer from the obscurity of working for Geoffrey Beene, and launching him to superstardom at Guy Laroche.

Subsequently, he managed Stella McCartney at Chloé, and after the Beatle heiress left to found her own house, was president of the house when Phoebe Philo became the most admired designer in Paris at the beginning of the century.

Toledano has also been president of Jean Paul Gaultier, and today his main day job is as chairman of Victoria Beckham. No surprise then, that when one says the name Ralph in Paris fashion circles, people generally mean the 70-year-old Toledano, and not an American named Lauren. Not bad going for someone born in Casablanca.
the 70-year-old Toledano, and not an American named Lauren. Not bad going for someone born in Casablanca, who only emigrated to Paris aged 18.

So, we sat down consider Toledano’s tenure at the Fédération; hear his fulsome praise of his fellow executives; and appreciation of his management team at the organization.

Fashion Network: When you became president of the Federation, what were your goals for the future?

Ralph Toledano: First, to consolidate and strengthen the role of Paris as the fashion capital of the world.

Number two, to realize an old dream we had. To create a fashion school in Paris capable of competing with the biggest and becoming the best fashion school in the world. It was irritating when we were, in terms of economic power, by far the strongest city, yet had to recruit our stylists from outside. So, it was a dream for a long time. We did have the school of the Chambre Syndicale, but it was above all technical, and not dedicated to creation.

The third objective, which has always been important to me, was to really give a very strong impetus to emerging brands. And the fourth, to adopt governance that is in line with the requirements of today’s world, by being transparent, clear and understandable by everyone.

Behind all that, we had to find the financial means. Obviously because for the school, that meant a lot of money. And then, personally, I had another very strong desire. I had the impression, speaking with people, that the Federation was considered a kind of ticket office, where you could get a slot for a fashion show. And I said no, that’s not what we want. We want the Federation to be an organization that deals with all fashion issues and above all that integrates all fashion people. And that one day, it will become the house of fashion, the house of companies, but also the house of artists, stylists and producers. That was my dream.
FNW: We live in an era, where women are increasingly occupying positions of responsibility. Historically, there were quite a few couturiers and designers who were women but relatively few decision-makers. What role should the Fédération play to reverse this trend?

RT: This is a very important question. When we attend Fédération meetings, we see a lot of men, and few women. When it comes to decision-makers, my predecessor was a man; my predecessor's predecessor was a man. That's true of many federations in France. And it's a real anomaly, especially since I believe that women are much more competent than men to fully understand the world of fashion. Because they have this sensitivity, this intuition that men often do not have. So, the first woman who entered the Executive Committee of the Fédération was Francesca Bellettini (CEO of Saint Laurent) where until then there were only men. Joining four men, Sidney Toledano (LVMH Fashion Group CEO, and no relation), Guillaume de Seynes (Hermès), Bruno Pavlovsky (CEO of Chanel Fashion division) and myself.

This June, Sidney Toledano was named chairman of IFM, succeeding André Beirnaert, who had succeeded founder Pierre Bergé.

Within the Fédération there are three Chambre Syndicales – for haute couture; womenswear and menswear. And we asked women to be candidates because what I noticed is that they often don't quite dare present themselves. Well, we immediately had Séverine Merle (CEO of Celine), Francesca Bellettini, for menswear and womenswear; and they were later succeeded by more women, Elsa Lanzo (CEO of Rick Owens) and Anouck Duranteau (Isabel Marant Managing Director).
FNW: In your opinion how does Paris compare with the other three big fashion capitals - London, Milan, New York?

RT: Firstly I don't like to talk about others, so I won't talk about others. But, of course, we changed the website right away, but the big, big, big, big story, the big change, was at the time of the pandemic. I remember very well that by a miracle we managed to finish the February 2020 fashion shows. And then afterwards, very quickly we asked ourselves the question of what we are doing for men in June? What are we doing for haute couture in July in view of the health crisis? We had a meeting of the executive committee and very quickly the decision was to cancel.

So, we began thinking digital. And the Fédération team lead by Pascal Morand did an extraordinary job! Right away, we contacted Launchmetrics who set up our site. They found correspondents everywhere. And what I like, it's that a federation has an institutional side. But it also has entrepreneurs. The entire Federation team got totally involved in this and we had our first platform. And it's a real pleasure, a joy to have done it. I think that was the big turning point in our digitization. Afterwards, we extended it to live shows, then interviews, and even extended to art and culture.

When we began, we had zero followers on Instagram and that has gone to 700,000. We have established the brand Paris Fashion Week on social media. We are very present! It's been very, very rewarding.

FNW: What has always struck me is that the Fédération did not have the same budget as the British Fashion Council. The BFC's is three to four times bigger than the Fédération and even New York is two to three times greater than Paris. So, tell me what you did to change that?

RT: This is a very interesting question and one that I think needs a lot of work on. In fact, one of the first decisions I made was to increase dues, even if I don't have the figures in my head anymore. When I arrived and was presented with the budget for the following year, it was a bit difficult to realize it. The contribution is based on the size of the companies, there are scales between such and such size. But our dues are very low compared to what they are in London, New York or Milan. It is a historical phenomenon.

I don't have the answer, but our brands may not have had the appetite to increase their contribution. It is possible, it is possible. But the fact is that in relation to our ambitions, and independently of IFM, we have greatly increased the services to members in all areas: sustainable development commission; innovation commission; legal commission; legal commission; seminars; training; mentoring and during the pandemic, help for young brands.
FNW: How did you find the money for IFM?

RT: Actually, it was financed essentially 85-90% by the members of the executive committee and the large groups they represent - Richemont, Lanvin, LVMH, Saint Laurent, Hermès and Chanel. Richemont’s contribution was far from small. We managed to find almost €6 million. In the same way, we set up this new emerging brands department, which Serge Carreira takes care of fantastically. It provides lots of services that people don’t always know about, helping young companies. We are now going to institutionalize a budget to help emerging brands.

FNW: When you increased the contributions, what was the percentage increase?

RT: Honestly, the amounts that are not huge. When you’re with a big brand and you show men’s women’s and couture the sums are more substantial. But the amounts for young brands are very, very low. There’s been an emergence of large groups in the governance of the Federation. So, it’s Sidney’s project, it’s Bruno’s project and it’s Guillaume’s project. Hence, on everything that is public affairs today, both in Paris and in Brussels, we really call on very high-quality experts.

FNW: How are you aiding the next generation?

RT: That’s why we created the school. Because when we looked at each other, we thought Paris is the biggest
fashion capital in the world, but when we look for talented people, we go abroad.

At the time, every designer seemed to come from Central Saint Martins. Well, now it's different, but we said, we want people to come from Paris. And the first graduates, the first Bachelor of the IFM, is this year.

**FNW: Pascal Morand has been one of the most important actors?**

RT: Pascal, who became our executive president, is my partner. We worked together every day. Pascal brought us a lot. Pascal is an economist, who masters technology and sustainable development. He is someone who knows the academic system perfectly. And in addition, he is someone who is extremely cultured and intelligent. That's a lot. So, it's been teamwork and not a one-man show.

**FNW: What has been the secret to finding compromises with the big fashion groups, and working harmoniously?**

RT: It is very simple. When we entered the meeting room, everyone forgot where they worked. In eight years, where I was president, there was not the shadow of a disagreement between us. This group dates from 20 years ago. We were already in the different Chambres. So, we've been working together for 20 years. And when we finally found ourselves in charge in 2014, we all forgot where we worked.

**FNW: At the international level, do you think you succeeded in consolidating the reputation of Paris in fashion?**

RT: I'm sure we have. I read like you, I see like you, and I see all the shows. I see how many designers from abroad want to come to Paris. Another phenomenon is that Paris was the capital of women's fashion for a very long time and today it is also the capital of men's fashion. There was a period when it was Milan; the capital of men's fashion. But now Paris is again.

Haute couture has had some difficult times, but today haute couture is very strong. That is indisputable. Now that doesn't mean it's going to last forever. By definition, it is precarious. And our job is to ensure that it persists. This status is based on creation, know-how, innovation and selectivity. This is what interests us. Historically, we want to keep welcoming foreign designers. We have the Japanese, the Belgians, the Chinese, the Spaniards and the English. Only in Paris can you find so many foreign designers. It is our strength! I always said at our selection meetings, “Raise the ball!” I'd rather have fewer shows and be very good than a lot of shows but be dull.
FNW: Why have designers from the BRICS not had the same impact in luxury as designers from the Big Four fashion capitals?

RT: I hate the term luxury because it doesn't mean anything. If I'm very thirsty, my luxury is to drink. If I'm unemployed, my luxury is to work. If I work too much, my luxury is not to work. In a given country, even if there is a demand for very sophisticated products, the basic needs must first be met: food, education and leisure activities. It is when more educated classes are created that there is a demand and therefore necessarily an offer. Things will evolve; I am sure that there will be more and more African or Chinese designers who will make a lot of impact. We will notably welcome Shang Xia to the next Paris Fashion Week.

FNW: What are your successor's biggest tasks?

RT: The biggest task will be to come up with an exciting, motivating and challenging program.

FNW: With all your previous jobs, what are the most important things you learned and wanted to use at the Federation?

RT: Teamwork, teamwork, teamwork and listening. As a doctor once told me: the more intelligent people around the table, the better. And I believe a lot in that! I believe in the idea of talking to each other directly. And that is in danger today. In our business, we must not forget people, men and women. In the name of growth, of marketing, people are increasingly working in silos. People feel more and more alone. Fashion is a permanent excitement and today we talk much less about the product. I believe that things are done well when men and women are happy and talk together.