Post-Colette era sees stores evolving to nurture labels says Hyères Fashion Festival

By Dominique Muret - 1 May 2018

Ever since Parisian concept store Colette closed down at the end of 2017, its legacy has been an open issue. During a 20-year existence, Colette was a genuine showcase of fashion creativity, a standard-bearer for scores of emerging labels. Who will fly their flag now? The 18th edition of the Rencontres internationales de la mode (International fashion meetings) conference, organised by the French Haute Couture and Fashion Federation at the Hyères Festival, tried to address the question, sparking a passionate debate on the future of fashion retail in the post-Colette era.

One core idea emerged from the debate: without passion, you can achieve nothing. In the words of Sébastien de Hutten, Director of the Playtime trade shows, “when there is passion in a store, customers will always experience something special. Exceptional retailers do well because they feature a strong selection [of products], picked with character. This is something which held true before Colette, and it will continue to do so in the future."

Undoubtedly, Colette’s demise will reshuffle the cards among the Parisian multibrand and department stores which are willing to become more of a showcase for emerging talent.

Alix Morabito, promoted to the new role of Fashion Editor at department store group Galeries Lafayette in 2016, confirmed this orientation. “It’s a challenge for us, because we too are a brand, one whose role is also to bring to the fore vibrant new designers. The problem is that, on a retail area of 45,000 m2, until now little space was devoted to emerging designers, as they don’t have the resources to spend on a retail corner. We therefore created more affordable multibrand sections, lowering our financial expectations when dealing with younger [labels]. We can stock them, but we also need to promote them.”
This is the role of a fashion editor, to “educate the store’s staff on fashion labels and trends, in order to create genuine narratives. It’s not just a matter of picking brands. The brands we select must also have a contemporary vibe, and work well with our store and our advertising. Young [labels] will mark the difference between our range and that of other department stores,” added Morabito.

Nevertheless, it is rare for department stores to act as talent scouts. To minimise risk, major chains first of all check if emerging labels have retail distribution. “This means they already have a logistics organisation. Of course, emotional impact is the first criterion. The difficulty is gauging whether this emotion will endure. [New] designers must fit with the market and with our global range,” said Morabito.

This is a kind of risk which individual stores are more willing to take. “My wife and I invested and lost money in emerging designers for 10 years before our store turned a profit. We regularly bought highly-creative-but-virtually-unmarketable items, it was a kind of advertising investment,” said Rasmus Storm, founder of directional Copenhagen multibrand store Storm.

“By showcasing the work of an emerging designer I believe in, I offer my own view of the contemporary. People come to the store because they’re inspired by this, which is what in the end allows me to do good business,” added Storm, the first in Europe, alongside Colette, to sell Off-White by Virgil Abloh, the designer recently put in charge of Louis Vuitton’s menswear.

“Major labels ought to defend stores like ours! Just consider what Colette did for the fashion world at large. Young consumers come to us looking for new experiences. We have a more attentive ear for the market,” said Storm.

“The retailer’s role is to influence, and also to educate,” said Olivier Amsellem, a photographer who three years ago founded the Marseilles-based concept store Jogging. “In my store, I organise aperitifs with designers. People aren’t always chained to their screens, they also like to handle clothes. You can buy fashion everywhere. But if you do it with a certain kind of passion and taste, you’ll always remember it.”

Amsellem knows chapter and verse about the designers he sells, and he is able to highlight each label's DNA. “In the case of Julien David, of course I emphasise his collaboration with Colette, because people miss Colette terribly,” he added.
Julien David started out in 2008 with a small scarf collection, and he began by approaching stores in person. "My first meeting was in Paris with Colette’s Sarah Andelman. She bought 40 of my scarves. Having Colette as my first client immediately boosted my credibility with others," said Julien David, who manufactures all his products in Japan, where he has also opened a monobrand store.

Collection after collection, Sarah and Julien worked more and more closely together. “Her appreciation of something I did gave me a feel for what would be well received, and this of course gradually came to influence my work,” said David, whose label is now distributed worldwide. Undoubtedly, it will be Colette’s role as guide and unique benchmark which emerging designers will miss the most in the coming months.

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