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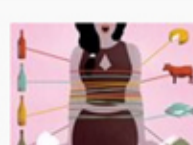
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Giovanni Bedin Revitalizes a Heritage Brand

By MELISSA GOLDSTEIN
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"I love Caravaggio," Italian designer Giovanni Bedin tells me, stretching the name, caramel-like, to five exaggerated syllables. "I love Bacon. And I love Damien Hirst," he says, pausing for the pay-off. "Are they related? Yes! No? Whatever."

We are at the Mayfair Hotel in London, to discuss the coming debut in stores of Mr. Bedin's spring/summer 2011 ready-to-wear collection for the recently relaunched fashion house Worth, and the designer has presented this artistic paradox to illustrate his wide-ranging influences with regard to his collections. Charged with meeting the lofty standard set by the brand's legendary founder, Charles Frederick Worth, Mr. Bedin is simultaneously determined to pursue the modern.

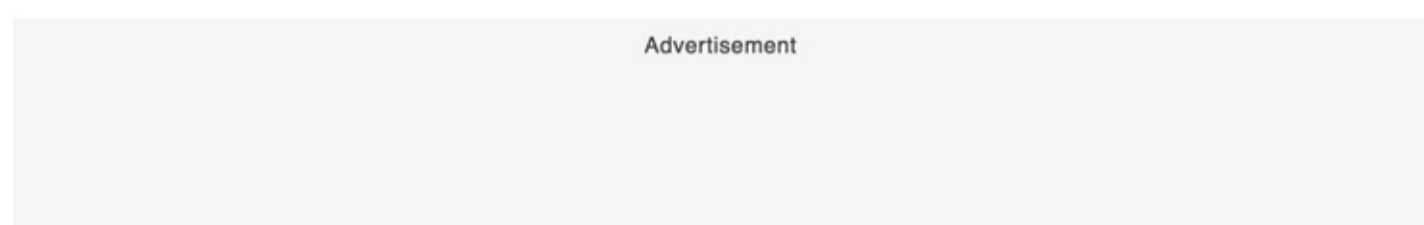


Giovanni Bedin in the Louvre, Paris. STÉPHANE REMAEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

His opening statement for the house, the autumn/winter 2010-11 couture presentation, comprised corseted and tutued dresses overlaid with precious lace and embellished with rich embroidery—the historical effects complemented by shapes that have, in recent years, returned to runways; big shoulders and minuscule waists. While the offerings were widely appraised as exquisite, not everyone deemed them to be wholly relevant, with Vogue pondering whether Mr. Bedin's presentation tilted too heavily to the side of homage, and lacked the designer's own 21st-century personality.

This tightrope walk between past and present, it seems, is among the trickier challenges for Mr. Bedin in revitalizing a heritage brand—or, in Chief Development Officer Martin McCarthy's words, mounting "a 150-year-old start-up."

Founded in 1858 in Paris, the House of Worth is credited with originating haute couture, having introduced the sewing of labels into bespoke garments and presenting clients with personalized options from which to choose.



The fate of the brand would unfold in a Shakespearean manner, passed down through four generations, which saw its internal splintering among the family into separate perfume and clothing businesses, followed by its acquisition by competitor Maison Paquin, before closing down entirely. Thanks to the efforts of fashion entrepreneur Mr. McCarthy (whose industry experience as a designer and creative director is wide ranging, including stints with Gianfranco Ferrè and BMW) and his business partner Dilesh Mehta (CEO of Shaneel Enterprises and a veteran of the perfume industry), who merged their Worth holdings in the early 2000s, the house is now again officially whole.

Mr. Bedin's affinity for Worth's ornamentation, and his intuitive understanding of how to execute it, make him an ideal candidate for the post. "I'm very comfortable with this kind of universe. It comes very naturally to me," he says. "It has nothing to do with costumes," he adds, swatting away any notion that his couture designs are too "period" to resonate. "We work on 65 centimeter [length]...because I love to say so much in such a small proportion," he explains, adding, "I don't see anybody in the past wearing miniskirts. What I use of the archive is techniques...But the shapes are completely up to date."

Though this year marked the start of what Mr. McCarthy calls "the full-on explosion of the House of Worth," the story technically resumed in 2003. "We decided to launch a very small lingerie line; it was a bit like a test," Mr. McCarthy says, adding candidly, "Not just for Worth, but also for Giovanni."

To be clear, Mr. Bedin was no upstart designer for hire off the street. Born in Vicenza into a family whose business is tailoring (they're behind the eponymous line Bedin), he was cloaked in fashion from a young age: "There are a couple of pictures of me when I was 4 or 5 years old wearing a double-breasted, camel-hair coat," he notes.

After studying at the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, Mr. Bedin worked for Karl Lagerfeld and Thierry Mugler before designing his own collection. Subsequently, he signed on with Worth. It was following the 2003 lingerie presentation that he received the ultimate nod of approval: the endorsement of the late Isabella Blow, the respected English magazine editor and style icon credited with discovering Alexander McQueen, among others.

"Isabella told me once, 'I can take a pair of shoes and put some stones and a bow on them. You don't have to be a designer to do that,' and so this is always on my mind," he says. "I never use a fabric by itself: I do patchwork, mix fabrics together. I love when it looks simple; but, in a technical way, I love when it's tricky. It's the only way to protect the product."

Mr. Bedin's 40-plus-piece ready-to-wear collection testifies to this commitment: A parade of cocktail frocks rendered in a subdued palette of blacks, grays, creams and whites, it revels in craftsmanship—both from a construction standpoint (via fine boning and structured supports), as well as in finishing touches: lace frilling and ribboning, bejeweled buttons and hand-sewn detail throughout. "This idea of a hybrid: ready to wear but with this couture mentality; that's the secret ingredient," Mr. McCarthy says.

Guarding his masterplan, Mr. Bedin is coy concerning the details of the way his vision will play out in the forthcoming autumn/winter collection, but speaks with alacrity about a recently discovered dress from the Worth archive called "Night and Day."

The business plan is decidedly more forthright: Following the end-of-January debut in stores of the ready-to-wear line (which is being stocked by an elite selection of boutiques around the world: Browns in London, Joyce in Hong Kong, Podium in Moscow, and in the U.S.—where the brand is sold as Courtworth—at Maxfield in Los Angeles and Blake in Chicago), Worth will focus its efforts toward its next big "statement": the autumn/winter 2011-12 presentation, which coincides with the relaunch of Worth couture lingerie at London Fashion Week in February. The rebirth culminates in 2013, when Worth will move its operations from Italy to the brand's spiritual home in Paris, and open its first dedicated retail space in the original Worth building.

"In 50 years time we'll be judged for the actions we're taking now. It's an incredible responsibility," Mr. McCarthy says.

But with the daunting task of reinterpreting the sacred comes the truism that fashion is, inherently, an ever-refreshing cycle of old-is-new again. The key, of course, is making it feel special and modern; something the House of Worth is banking its old-world-meets-worldly formula for success can accomplish.

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