

REPORT

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THE FIRING SQUAD

Designer firings, venerables retiring and houses pulling down their shutters. Fashion companies are hardly immune to the credit crunch.

Is it just me, or are politics in the design studios overshadowing the clothes on the catwalks? It seems the effects of the economy are spilling into the fashion industry, where careers and brands are in a state of shambles.

It went on a downslide last October, starting with Maison Martin Margiela. Beyond its avant-garde doors, no one seems to know the whereabouts of one of modern fashion's great heroes. And the is-he-isn't-he retiring gossip that started a year ago remains unconfirmed and has since become one big snore. In the absence of any corporate statement, we can only infer from the Autumn/Winter 2009 catwalk, where a less-than-excellent showing points to the fact that he is indeed gone.

There was no inimitable dialogue of excellence, intellectual challenge and wit that loyal fans have come to expect of the designer. Gone also were his ingenious contributions, which have been relied on to drive an entire industry forward. Instead, the tan bodysuits mimicking nakedness, the Perspex shoulder pads, the so-called "deconstructionist" cutouts, the leggings pulled over shoes, the grown-on collars worn as hoods, all looked as if they had been pulled out of the label's back catalogue, without his signature sense of a vivid intelligence pushing an idea towards new conclusions.

Perhaps one of fashion's most tragic ending is the demise of Tokyo-based, Paris-showing men's label Number (N)ine, launched 12 years ago by Takahiro Miyashita. The Autumn/Winter 2009 collection – 'A Closed Feeling' – was its last. This heralded the end of signature collections of the dark side and Americana colonialist garb. To seal its fate, the company sent out an ominous memo to the press saying "when you're finished changing, you're finished."

Rumour has it that Miyashita, who has been ill for some time, has had a relapse. Or that he has joined a rank of other designers (think Helmut Lang, whose current interest is in contemporary art and Hedi Slimane, now dedicated to the art of graphic photography), who bowed out of fashion to pursue other interests. Whether he will start up another company remains to be seen, but Number (N)ine will be sorely missed.

There is hope yet. Expectations having been running high since mid-last year, when Celine announced that Phoebe Philo will be returning to the fashion fold as their creative director, replacing Ivana Omazic. Three years ago, Philo stepped out of the limelight at the height of her fame to nurture her little ones. Her debut

for Celine which will be unveiled in June for pre-Spring, is one of the most highly anticipated shows of the season.

Philo, whose hip-yet-girlish clothes and coveted bags catapulted Chloé into the designer big league, is expected to break the curse for the brand that has seen a revolving door of designers in recent years (and with mixed results). She will be working her cool magic on investment pieces, with a big emphasis on trousers, jackets and blouses and day-to-night pieces that go well together.

“I’m designing the collection in capsules and there’s going to be a part of it based on iconic pieces,” she said. “From a design point of view, it’s very considered, and when it’s merchandised and styled, I hope it’s accessible. I want to make the experience of buying and wearing clothes an effortless one. There’s a soberness and classicism to it. It’s going to be more about a foundation for a wardrobe and I hope the pieces will be relevant for a long time.”

Top design jobs have been in jeopardy, where the “you’re in/you’re out” mentality fostered by the reality TV show, *Project Runway* and the arbitrary nature of what’s hot in fashion gets played out in real life. The situation is now aggravated by the fact that so few designers possess their own houses and are instead working for famous houses. Fine examples are John Galliano at Dior, Alber Elbaz at Lanvin and Nicolas Ghesquiére at Balenciaga.

It first started with Alessandra Facchinetti getting the boot at Valentino, with circulating rumours being confirmed just days after she presented her second ready-to-wear collection for the fashion house. She was replaced by accessories designers, Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pier Paolo Piccioli, making it her second time being replaced by accessories specialists (the first was when Frida Giannini replaced her at Gucci in 2005). Although Facchinetti’s most recent collection was well-received, her dismissal was not caused by the clothes, but rather her inability to build a strong, cohesive team and her failure to make decisions ultimately crippled the production process.

But here’s the rub – Facchinetti’s dismissal was conveyed to her through the press. In a statement, she said, “It was with deep regret that I learnt from the press that I would no longer be working with Valentino...I would like to thank Valentino S.p.A. for showing their appreciation of my ‘creative contribution and my sophisticated talent,’ although I deeply regret the fact that this talent and contribution do not seem to have been adequately acknowledged.”

Ouch.

In another hostile departure, Olivier Theyskens left Nina Ricci when he could not come to an agreement with the bosses at the French house on the use of luxurious fabrics and the high price points of his collections. Case in point: The majority of the Nina Ricci dresses on the racks carry a hefty £7,500 (\$14,958) price tag. He is said to be replaced by former Louis Vuitton womens ready-to-wear director, Peter Copping, and is now looking to revive his signature collection, which he put on hold in 2003 for Nina Ricci. However, Ricci’s management may just be kicking themselves for letting him go, after a

memorable swan song, the Autumn/Winter 2009 outing showed off Theyskens' latent talent beautifully. It was his most mature and saleable collection to date. Why he saved his best for last remains a mystery.

Another piece of news circulating the rumour mills is that of Kris Van Assche being replaced by Gareth Pugh as head designer of Dior Homme. Though this seems highly unlikely, speculations reached a fever pitch when Delphine Arnault, daughter of LVMH chief, Bernard Arnault, sat front-row at Gareth Pugh's very first menswear showing, calling the collection "beautiful" and "amazing" thereafter. But is a replacement needed? From Hedi Slimane's pencil thin silhouettes, Kris Van Assche has added volume to the still predominantly slim shapes. Black is still the dominant colour, though there is a metallic fuchsia blouson, a metallic brown tuxedo jacket, and a nylon gold raincoat. What Van Assche offers is a new take on Slimane's silhouettes and colours, which can be summed up as defining but at the same time, it is also getting a tad stale.

With lauded designers succumbing to the tune of musical chairs, it is hard to say who will top the chart as the design beacons of the 20th century. Which begs the question: Will the younger crop of designers grow old in the job as those before them did? The longevity of these fresh young talents at established houses (such as Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pier Paolo Piccioli at Valentino and Hannah MacGibbon at Chloé) will depend on how quickly or if ever, these designers work their respective brand mojos to their own advantage. And till they prove themselves, their fate in the fickle world of fashion remains hanging by a thread.

But like British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in a *Time* interview, on the current global economic crisis: "Sometimes it's a crisis that forces change. The world that emerges out of this crisis won't be the same." Let's cross our fingers and hope that will apply to fashion as well.