

MIUCCIA PRADA

The designer reimagined fashion's relationship to art — and forever transformed what the world considers beautiful.

By Nick Haramis**Photographs by Collier Schorr****Fashion Styled by Suzanne Koller**
EVEN BEFOREheading from the Fondazione Prada, a contemporary art complex housed in an old distillery on the southeastern edge of Milan, to Miuccia Prada's office about a mile away, I'm reminded of her towering presence everywhere I look. A docent, dressed in a black Prada uniform, shepherds a pair of tourists, both carrying Prada handbags, into a screening of "Four Unloved Women, Adrift on a Purposeless Sea, Experience the Ecstasy of Dissection," a short film by the Canadian director David Cronenberg accompanied by a wunderkammer of 18th-century anatomical wax sculptures. Once outside, I pass an abandoned rail yard and billboards for two other Fondazione exhibitions: a permanent re-creation of the home studio in Switzerland where Jean-Luc Godard edited his final movie, and a survey of videos, photographs and other works by the New York-based artist Dara Birnbaum on view at the Osservatorio, a satellite venue overlooking Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, the shopping arcade where Mario Prada, Miuccia's maternal grandfather, opened the brand's first store in 1913. Down another few blocks, an old woman in a pair of Prada sunglasses walks by with her dog.

At 75, Mrs. Prada, as she's known to strangers and friends alike, is perhaps the most peculiar and certainly the most innovative fashion designer of her generation. In 1975, she took over her family's leather goods business. Two years later, she met her future husband, Patrizio Bertelli, now 77 and the chairman of the Prada Group, with whom she began building a global empire. (In 2022, the company's annual revenue was \$4.5 billion.) In addition to Prada, the couple has ownership stakes in Miu Miu, which might be described as Prada's unruly niece; the footwear brands Church's and Car Shoe; and the Pasticceria Marchesi pastry shops. (As of last year, they can also claim some of those dusty train tracks: Prada Holding, which owns 80 percent of the Prada Group and is controlled by the Prada family, is one of three entities that acquired the plot of disused land for roughly \$190 million to convert it into a park, housing, offices and the Olympic Village for the 2026 Winter Games.)

Prada
Women's
Wear



Spring 1992.



Spring 1994.



Spring 1996.



Spring 1999.

Spring 2000.



Spring 2001.

Spring 2002.



Fall 2002.



Spring 2003.

Guy Marineau/Condé Nast/Shutterstock (2); courtesy of Prada (3); Firstview (4)

Those with no interest in fashion have at least seen the house's triangular logo and know Prada's name, whether through movies (in 1999's teen comedy "10 Things I Hate About You," a student explains, "There's a difference between like and love. Because I like my Skechers, but I love my Prada backpack") and TV shows (in a 2019 episode of "The Simpsons," Homer believes himself behind "Prada Marfa," a replica of a Prada store created in 2005 near Marfa, Texas, by the artists Elmgreen & Dragset), books (Lauren Weisberger's 2003 novel, "The Devil Wears Prada," which became a hit film) or music (Beyoncé, Doja Cat and Drake have all name-checked the brand). And yet no matter how far and wide her influence extends, Prada hasn't made it easy to know her, which is, like everything she does, deliberate.

Upon my arrival at the Prada headquarters, a set of stern buildings that occupy approximately 108,000 square feet, I'm confronted by my potential expulsion: the notorious stainless-steel slide connecting the designer's third-floor work space to the courtyard. The German artist Carsten Höller, who installed it in 2000, says it was intended to help her "leave quickly, traveling through the floor under her office to have a glance at the people working there and then land right where her chauffeur is waiting." But, he adds, "It's also a good way to get rid of people."



Prada wool jacket, chiffon blouse and poplin skirt from the spring 2012 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller



Prada combed-cashmere silk cardigan, silk damier shirt and cloqué Lurex skirt from the spring 2002 women's collection and patent leather slingbacks.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

INTERVIEWINGMiuccia Prada, unlike talking to her, can be a tricky enterprise. From her desk in an austere room with white walls and poured concrete floors — what might be mistaken for an operating theater, were it not for the Gerhard Richter painting and a

silver bar cart stacked with cookies — she seems to begin every other sentence with, “Between us. ...” She is 5-foot-4, with hazel eyes and wavy blond hair, and has the measured confidence of someone who’s about to deliver the bad news first. Despite her warmth and frequent laughter, she also seems ready, maybe even eager, to spar. She, too, is recording the conversation and taking notes. When I ask what she does to relax, her answer is “no.”

Although she’s less inscrutable than her intellectual peers — Rei Kawakubo rarely speaks to journalists; Martin Margiela never has — she’s certainly not as flamboyant as Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana or Donatella Versace, flashier designers from the height of Italy’s sex-bomb era. And while she refuses to acknowledge personal achievements (“I leave it to other people to say what I did,” she says), she’s not above engaging in some mythmaking of her own: There’s a reason her last fragrance was called *Paradoxe*.



Prada double-cloth jacket, poplin shirt, faded denim stretch waistcoat and alpaca micro argyle tights from the fall 2016 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller



Prada poplin dress featuring a three-dimensional floral design from the fall 2023 women's collection, \$3,750, [prada.com](https://www.prada.com).

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

"If Harvard was a billionaire woman, it would be Miuccia Prada," says the Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli, her close friend and frequent travel companion. The Belgian stylist Olivier Rizzo, who has worked with her since 2005, tells me she's changed the way we

dress and think about clothing “on every possible level on all levels forever and ever.” She’s “a challenger,” says the Italian creative director Ferdinando Verderi, who has consulted for the brand since 2019. “She’d even challenge the idea of being a challenger.” The American artist Theaster Gates, chairman of Prada’s Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council, says, “If you’re trying to get a character sketch of Miuccia, she’s [expletive] sincere. And sincerity is better than being right all the time.” The actress Uma Thurman, who developed a relationship with the designer after wearing a lilac Prada gown to the 1995 Oscars, likens her to “a growing tree, letting herself have new barks,” while the musician Frank Ocean, who was photographed for the brand’s spring 2020 campaign, draws an analogy between her “tone,” he says — “how she resonates, basically” — and the meditative sound of om. The Italian gallerist Carla Sozzani, the founder of the 10 Corso Como concept store in Milan, who remembers “applauding like children” with her friend at runway shows in the 1970s, says, “Some people are more reserved when they’re in public. I’m not saying she’s another person [in private], but she’s more open.”

Though that might be accurate, it’s also true that no other female designer has produced such a robust body of autobiographical work. (The punk iconoclast Vivienne Westwood came closest; one screamed, the other sublimates.) Prada may not seem especially eager to reveal herself in conversation, but she’s always communicated more freely through her clothes, which make the case against what she calls “cliché beauty” and “the isolation of fashion.” Instead, she has grounded her work in the idea of a uniform — she’s as likely to find inspiration in nuns as in sex workers — craving the proximity to what she considers more noble, or at least more honest, professions. If Yves Saint Laurent created a wardrobe for the modern woman in the 1960s, then Prada, a champion of bad taste and the jolie laide, gave her permission to be weird and mercurial; to be, in a sense, her. “One of the reasons I started doing clothes was because I couldn’t find anything to wear,” she says.



It's almost as if she comes up with her designs because they could be — and maybe so that they will be — deemed unflattering or unsexy. "She's always looking for something that's unseen," says the Russian stylist Lotta Volkova, who consults for Miu Miu, which was established in 1993 as a less intellectualized and slightly less expensive alternative to Prada. Earlier this year, at Miu Miu's fall 2023 show in Paris, some of the models wore underwear as outerwear; many had frizzy hair and cowlicks. The British hairstylist Guido Palau, who contributed to his first Prada show in 2004, says that the designer wanted the models to look as if they'd been caught in a gust of wind. A few seasons earlier, for Miu Miu's spring 2022 collection, Prada delivered raw-edge chino micro-miniskirts belted below the hip bone. "Sometimes it's the breasts, sometimes it's the back," she says about fashion's obsession with the female form. "What wasn't trendy was the lower waist, so I said, 'Let's make it as low as possible.'" The garment, which was her way of poking fun at things like fashion magazines, showed up in all of them.

"It's a lot about being against something," she says. Prada's spring 1996 collection, its first of many "ugly chic" offerings, incorporated jarring colors (rust, mustard and "bile green," as one critic would call it) and banal prints (later described as "Formica"), a response to the relentless sex appeal at the time of brands like Gucci, then stewarded by Tom Ford. But for fall 2002, to avoid being reduced to her somewhat prim, vaguely retro aesthetic — which had, however improbably, come to define Italian style as much as an Armani suit — she released what became known as a "porno chic" collection of transparent PVC coats and knee-high black leather boots. "Clothes were never about doing clothes," she says. "It's about living different parts of your personality."

Prada
Women's
Wear



Spring 2004.



Spring 2007.



Fall 2007.



Spring 2008.



Fall 2009.



Spring 2011.

Spring 2012.



Fall 2013.



Spring 2014.

Firstview (8); courtesy of Prada

PRADA STILLresides in the Milanese apartment where she and her two older siblings, Marina and Alberto, grew up. In 1958, her mother, Luisa Prada — a “beautiful, elegant lady,” says Sozzani — took over Miuccia’s grandfather’s shop, which she then ran for nearly 20 years. Her father, Luigi Bianchi, owned a company that made putting-green mowers. The details of that period bore her. “Nothing bad, nothing good,” she says. But she sits a bit straighter when it comes to her teenage years. “That,” she says, “was the big political moment.”

While enrolled at the University of Milan (where she also earned a Ph.D. in political science), Miu Miu, as she’d been known to her family since childhood, joined the youth-led demonstrations and worker strikes that became referred to across Europe as the protests of 1968 (an era that in Italy would morph into the violent Years of Lead). “I really believed we could transform the world,” says Prada, who also studied mime for five years at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro. When she was a young member of the Union of Italian Women, a feminist offshoot of the Communist Party, the films of Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini, both avowed Marxists then, greatly influenced her; fashion, on the other hand, was considered an inconsequential pursuit. “I was ashamed,” she says. “But nevertheless, I pursued it because I liked it.”

She was also compelled by a sense of duty. “I started kind of against my will,” she admits. “Somehow it just happened.” A couple of years after taking control of the company, she attended a trade show where she met Bertelli, who had recently given up on an engineering degree to run a leather factory that manufactured belts and bags. “We started as competition, and we’re still competing,” she says fondly. “In the end, that’s something that keeps us together.”



Prada cotton guipure-lace dress, poplin shirt, silk stretch collar, cotton guipure-lace basque and suede shoes from the fall 2008 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller



Prada poplin dress.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

People tend to speak about Bertelli, a shrewd industrialist who collects vintage sports cars and sails several yachts — and with whom Prada has two children, Lorenzo Bertelli, 35, the Prada Group's head of corporate social responsibility, and Giulio Bertelli, 33, a sailboat racer — as if they were describing a movie villain they're secretly

rooting for. "He has amazing charm," says Sozzani. "You have to love Bertelli. Or you don't." Francesco Risso, Marni's creative director and a member of Prada's design team for eight years until 2016, recalls "the most theatrical fights" between the couple. "It didn't feel unhealthy ever, but it felt like fireworks, that's for sure," he says. But as much as they might bicker — he was initially against, for example, her decision to do a sneaker collaboration; she released it anyway — Bertelli is also quite protective of her: Seldom does one approach Prada about a project without going through him first.

"If I hadn't met my husband, I don't know if I would've done this job," says Prada, who set out opening factories with Bertelli and creating an international brand for "good women, bad women — the richness of all these different people." The designer, who has no formal training and doesn't sketch, begins each collection with concepts rather than silhouettes. One of her earliest pieces, in 1984, was a statement of intent: a modest backpack made not from crocodile or calfskin but black Pocono, an army-grade nylon more commonly associated at the time with parachutes than with purses. Nearly 40 years later, that utilitarian bag and its many iterations remain unlikely objects of desire. "Any bourgeois subject that I approached," she says, "I always wanted to destroy it." (Well, maybe not any bourgeois subject: "You shouldn't eat, you shouldn't drink, you should just work and work and work," Risso recalls Prada telling him at one of his first staff meetings. "I could see that she was trying to push me to be better.")

With the 1988 debut of her ready-to-wear line — some models came out in black and brown jackets inspired by men's tailoring, others in hot pink dresses with 1950s silhouettes; almost all of them in flats — she introduced house codes that now include specific garments and accessories (knee-length skirts, bucket hats) and signature styles (geometric prints, color blocking). It's often said that she and her trusted design director, Fabio Zambernardi (who is leaving the brand this month after more than three decades), determine the trends one season that others follow the next, which, though true, is incomplete; the clothes are only one part of it. At some point, it became almost obligatory for luxury brands to mount cultural, educational or philanthropic initiatives. But back then, she was the only one. "Basically, now every fashion house is a cultural platform," says Vezzoli. "Bottega Veneta does a show with Gaetano Pesce chairs and Gaetano Pesce becomes the most sought-after Italian designer. Saint Laurent produces a movie for Pedro Almodóvar. But Prada did it 30 years ago."

Miu Miu
Women's
Wear



Fall 2001.



Spring 2003.



Spring 2006.



Fall 2006.



Fall 2009.



Fall 2010.



Spring 2011.



Fall 2011.



Fall 2012.



Fall 2013.



Spring 2017.



Spring 2022.

Firstview (12)

The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, whose research and design studio, AMO, has created the environments for every Prada show since 2004, says that each season the conversation starts with a word or two to “trigger intentions.” The prompts for the spring 2024 men’s presentation, which featured curtains of slime dripping from the ceiling down to an industrial steel grate on the floor — the cascading goo also made an appearance at September’s spring 2024 women’s show — were “creepy,” “flesh and skin” and “organic minimalism.” James Jean, a Taiwanese American painter who in 2007 designed the wallpaper for the brand’s SoHo store (his drawings of fantastical creatures and flowers were later printed on Art Nouveau-inspired skirts, trousers and bags for the spring 2008 collection), recalls their project beginning with three adjectives: “romantic,” “nonlinear” and “surreal.” The French sound artist Frédéric Sanchez, who has scored most Prada shows since the mid-90s, was, in a similar way, also creating for an idea of clothes rather than a finished garment. “With Margiela,” says Sanchez about his other longtime collaborator, “it was very physical”; sometimes they’d even repeat the same soundtrack season after season. His experience with Prada, he says, has been more “cerebral.”

It’s difficult to overstate how radically Prada has changed the landscape of contemporary luxury, a word she hates (“hate,” on the other hand, is one she really likes). These days, every reference seems to lead back to her, whether it’s a padded headband or a utility vest. Such a fixture is Prada on other designers’ mood boards that for her spring 2000 collection — which she referred to as “the ABC of fashion” — she paid homage not only to the work of Yves Saint Laurent but also, rather cheekily, to her own, in the form of reinterpreted cardigans and schoolboy shorts. And yet, what Prada has put out into the world feels more substantial and transgressive than a khaki crop top or the very notion of so-called quiet luxury — both things, mind you, that came from her. “It’s much cooler than being eccentric,” says the designer Marc Jacobs, a friend of hers. “With Mrs. Prada, it’s that thing of style with substance. It’s not just a shell that looks good.”

THE SOUL OF the Fondazione Prada is the Haunted House, a four-story gilded tower that contains work by the sculptors Robert Gober and Louise Bourgeois. On the second floor, there’s a Bourgeois installation called “Cell (Clothes)” (1996), in which pants and dresses appear to be trapped by a ring of wooden doors. On the top floor, there’s a 2010 wax sculpture by Gober of a child’s leg — almost Prada-like in a white sandal and matching ankle sock — weighed down by an anchor. There are no other clothes on this floor. Instead, Gober has installed a storm drain with water running beneath it. Under the metal bars, among the rocks and debris, sits an illuminated heart — discarded, but still beating.



Prada fur mohair, feather and paillette coat, cloqué wool skirt, silk socks and tricolor satin sandals from the fall 2007 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller



Prada pongee printed short-sleeved bowling shirt from the fall 2016 men's collection and alpaca micro argyle tights from the fall 2016 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

Journalists inevitably like to bring up Prada's political past, and not just because she likes to bring it up, too — though as a New Yorker article about her from 2004 notes, "in the '60s it was almost a rite of passage for thousands of young middle-class Italians" to

join the Communist Party. Prada, however, does seem to have a genuine need to reconcile the idealism of her youth with the choices she's made since; and if ambivalence can be paralyzing, in her case it appears to have had the opposite effect. In 1993, her days of on-the-ground protest behind her — she'd long stopped handing out flyers at rallies — Prada and Bertelli created Milano Prada Arte, which later became the Fondazione Prada. It would give them a place to house their growing art collection but, for Prada, it also became a way to funnel her revolutionary spirit — and her money. "I tell my people in the Fondazione all the time to thank me," she says. "I have to sell a lot of expensive handbags to run a museum." ("Handbags are not art," the British sculptor and painter Damien Hirst, a friend, recalls her saying. "Whereas when you meet other people, they're constantly telling you that they are art, and you need 100.")

From the beginning, Prada has been dutifully managing and scrutinizing every detail of the Fondazione's programming — even showing up at Gober's studio in Manhattan to convince him to contribute. Gober remembers that when she appeared on his doorstep, she said, "Like everything else, I have to do this myself!" (Her exit was equally quotable: When Gober sent her home with some books, she took one look at the tote bag he offered and said, "I'll carry them.") In 1999, she and Bertelli dropped in on Koolhaas at his studio in Rotterdam in the Netherlands. "They were bored with their stores," Koolhaas says, and wanted him to oversee the construction of their New York flagship. "All my friends in the art world, or let's say in the cultural sector, were extremely skeptical whether this would be a desirable collaboration," he says. Koolhaas reimagined the Epicenter, as it's called, on the site of what was once the Guggenheim Museum's SoHo location, with an undulating wood floor and motorized hanging displays. In 2008, OMA, Koolhaas's firm, was hired to design the Fondazione Prada.

Thirty years in, having worked tirelessly to earn her place in the art world, Prada has chosen to become the new director of the foundation. "My main track is [the Fondazione Prada]," she says. "I'd decided that I wanted to keep it separate from fashion. And no one knew — I never told anybody." As she deliberates over what to say next, I'm reminded of something that the filmmaker Wes Anderson — who's partnered with her on various film and art projects and who designed Bar Luce, the 1950s-style cafe at the Fondazione Prada — told me. "You quickly sense her vulnerability, which can sort of disappear from a person with such authority. I think without a bit of that, you can't quite reach them. She can be fearless, but I don't think she's fearless," he wrote in an email. "Maybe it's because I'm getting older," Prada continues, "but I want to reconcile my whole life and declare my job: I run the Fondazione."

"She's properly a patron," says Hirst. "She really, genuinely sees art as something beneficial to other people." And unlike almost every other collector who tells him they're building a museum, he says, she actually did. The two were out to dinner one night when Hirst, who grew up working class, ordered caviar for the table. Prada sighed. "I really struggle to eat caviar," she said. "Why would you struggle with that?" he recalls saying. "And she was like, 'Oh, I was a communist.'"



Prada double-satin top and shorts from the spring 2019 women's collection.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller



Prada embroidered-jersey dress featuring double strass and paillettes and viscose socks from the spring 2014 women's collection and brushed leather shoes from the fall 2023 women's collection, \$1,200.

Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

FOR THE PAST few years, Miuccia Prada hasn't had to do quite as much all by herself. In February 2020, just before the pandemic forced Italy into lockdown, the Belgian

designer Raf Simons was announced as her co-creative director. The two of them, she said, would be jointly responsible for Prada's women's and men's wear going forward. (She's still the sole designer at Miu Miu; "When I change floors, I change mentalities," she says.) The next day, Simons flew home to Antwerp. Upon his return to Milan that June, he mostly communicated with Prada through a screen.

It was a challenging start to an ambitious experiment. They both had simple reasons for wanting it to succeed. Prada was, as she puts it, "fed up working alone." She was also, of course, planning her succession. "But they don't want me to talk about that because they're afraid it looks like I want to leave," she says. "I don't want to leave at all." Simons, 55, had briefly worked for Prada and Bertelli before going to Dior and then Calvin Klein. (He was the creative director of Jil Sander from 2005 until 2012; the Prada Group sold the brand in 2006.) Following his two-year stint at Calvin Klein, a tumultuous period he describes as "hysteria," he'd vowed to never again run someone else's fashion brand.

"I'm not a stupid guy," says Simons, who now lives in the Milanese apartment where the first Prada shows took place. When Bertelli reached out to set up a meeting, Simons says he knew they wouldn't be discussing Church's shoes. "It was more like, 'Miuccia and I, this is our age, this is our reality,'" he recalls Bertelli saying. (In January, she and Bertelli stepped down as co-chief executive officers of the Prada Group and were replaced by Andrea Guerra, formerly the chief executive officer of the Luxottica eyewear conglomerate. Their son Lorenzo is expected to assume the role down the line.) Prada had wondered if Simons, who'd overseen his own cultish men's wear brand for 24 years at that point (the line has since been discontinued), might want to look after the men's collections. "But in three seconds," says Prada, Simons suggested, "'Why don't we do the two together?' And I immediately said, 'Yes, why not.'"

Prada
Men's
Wear



Fall 1999.



Fall 2008.



Spring 2009.



Fall 2010.



Spring 2011.

Fall 2012.

Spring 2014.

Courtesy of Prada (3); Firstview (4)

In practice, they couldn't be more different. Simons, whose cool aesthetic conveys restraint, would rather adhere to deadlines; she "loves to design today what needs to go on the runway tomorrow," he says. And yet they share an aversion to traditional clothes. "It wasn't a shock, like, 'Oh my god, what a left-field choice,'" says Marc Jacobs. "If I were doing this movie, I'd have cast Raf."

After years of having to make every decision on her own — even now, she's thinking about the most recent installment of "Women's Tales," Miu Miu's ongoing short film series, by the Croatian-born director Antoneta Alamat Kusijanović, and the Fondazione's next two art shows — Prada is relieved to sit down with Simons and discuss the upcoming women's collection. "Listen," she says the day after the men's show in June from her office, where she's spent part of the morning reading the (good) reviews. "Every single moment you have to have ideas on so many things. Your brain evaporates." Recently, she and Simons have resolved, at least temporarily, not to divulge the references or describe the characters in their collections with the world. "I decided that I didn't want to tell stories anymore," she says. "We'll see how long it lasts."

When it comes to how her own story is eventually told, she hopes not to have, as she puts it, "thrown my life out on superficial things." Her goal, today, as it was in 1968, is to have done something good. "And deep down," she says, "political." But on my way out, I ask Prada if she ever wonders how her life might have looked had she not become a designer. "Always," she says without hesitation. Then, as the elevator door begins to close between us, she smiles. "And never."