STATI UNITI - VOGUE - MIUCCIA PRADA COVER - 01.03.24.jpg

Mrs. Prada

Almost everyone refers to Miuccia Prada in the most formal of ways, but she herself has never been one to stand on ceremony. Wendell Steavenson meets a designer who has built an empire in her own image: iconic, iconoclastic—and enormously influential. Photographed by Stef Mitchell.

IT WAS NOVEMBER AND A little windy on the balcony of the Ca' Corner della Regina, the 18th-century palazzo that is home to the Prada Foundation in Venice, where Miuccia Prada was posing for photographs against the backdrop of the Grand Canal. She clasped a red silk coat (from her very first collection in 1988) over a citrine sweater, bright and sharp against the gray sky and the terra-cotta, ochre, and verdigris of deliquescent Venice. She wore no discernible makeup; her long blond-and-auburn hair was unstyled and hung in soft curls at her shoulders. When it fanned in the breeze, she joked about looking very 1990s, like Cindy Crawford in a wind machine.

Afterward, several of us gathered around a table for lunch. Mrs. Prada, as she is deferentially known, took off the two grand gold necklaces (one of lions' heads) and the other medallions she was wearing and laid them on an adjacent chair, as if relinquishing the heavy chains of office, and began, Italian-mama style, to spoon rice onto our plates. The lunch was simple: chicken patties, braised endive, spinach, and salad. The vegetables, she said, came from her garden in Tuscany—oh, yes, she nodded, she takes a close interest in the planting. There is not much, I would come to understand, that Prada does *not* take a close interest in.

Prada, now 74, reminded me of the late Queen of England: a diminutive older lady, magnificently costumed, who commands a regal presence with a softly-spoken manner and a genuine curiosity about both things and people. She is surprisingly warm, self-deprecating, and has a gentle, musical laugh. We discussed the current exhibition at the palazzo, "Everybody Talks About the Weather," a thought-provoking interplay of historical paintings, contemporary artworks, and scientific information about the climate crisis. Prada lamented that it was difficult to find curators who could link art and academic inquiry to put on the kind of ambitious, multidisciplinary exhibitions she wanted the foundation to show. She had been struggling, for example, to find the right person to oversee an exhibition on feminism: Who could unite such a disparate field—and how best to communicate complex and challenging concepts?

"I want culture to be attractive," she said.

When lunch was over, Prada helped clear away the plates to a side table, looped the heavy chains back around her neck, and our interview began.

"Fashion is one third of my life," said Prada, who has created two celebrated fashion labels, Prada and Miu Miu, and, together with her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, helms the Prada Group, a global luxury brand with $4.5 billion in annual revenue (as of 2022) and over 13,000 employees. (Prada Group also has a stake in Church's shoes.) The second third of her life, she says, is "culture and the Fondazione." Since its creation in 1993, the Prada Foundation has become a leading proponent of contemporary art. "After, there is family and friends, and possibly some pleasures." She paused to reconsider. "Actually, they all overlap. I try to make my life useful."

Prada likes the word *useful;* she dislikes the word *luxury,* which she finds vulgar. And here is the rub, the nub, the dichotomy that runs through her life and her work: Miuccia Prada is an extraordinarily successful fashion designer selling beautiful, expensive clothes and accessories. She is also—something confirmed with a nod when I asked—politically left of center, with a doctorate in political science (she also studied mime for five years), a former member of the Italian Communist Party who marched for women's rights. "I always thought there were only two noble

ANGLE OF REPOSE
"I am interested in the lives of people," says Prada, photographed here at the Prada Foundation in Venice. "It's not *designing*—it's putting together personalities, histories, pieces of life, good, bad." Fashion Editor: Alex Harrington.

SHE'S GOT...

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gigi Hadid wearing Prada from fall 2007, fall 2017, Miu Miu spring 2008, and Prada spring 2009.

...THE LOOKS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hadid in Prada fall 2013, spring 2011, fall 2009, and fall 2010.

professions: politicians or doctors," she told me. "Doing clothes [while coming from] a group of very important intellectuals—for me it was like a nightmare. I was so ashamed, but anyway I did it…. The love of beautiful objects prevailed." Her political opinions have mostly had to be kept private. "I work for a luxury company," she said, laughing at the irony. "It's not perfect for a political position like mine—this was always the biggest contradiction in my life."

Miuccia Prada was born Maria Bianchi into a well-heeled bourgeois Milanese family in 1949. Her grandfather Mario Prada had founded Fratelli Prada ("Prada Brothers"), a leather-goods shop, in 1913; her mother took over the family business in the 1950s.

"When I was young," Prada told me, "I always wanted to be different." She immersed herself in the activist generation of the 1960s, but she always loved clothes—while everyone else was wearing jeans at demonstrations, she famously wore Yves Saint Laurent.

"Some people," I suggested, "don't want to do what everyone around them is doing."

"That is probably really deeply a part of myself," Prada acknowledged.

And while she rebelled against the bourgeois assumptions of her upbringing, she joined the family business, taking it over from her mother in 1978. That same year, she met Bertelli, the founder of a rival leather-goods company, at a trade fair. They joined forces, both personally and professionally (marrying in 1987), and she began playing around with the idea of a nylon backpack: practical, lightweight, water-resistant, *useful.* When it first went on sale in 1984 it was far from successful, but a high-end brand making a product that was then considered a cheap, everyday item was groundbreaking; soon it became an iconic piece—one that illustrated a tectonic shift in fashion. In 1988, having renamed herself Miuccia Prada (by having her unmarried maternal aunt legally adopt her), thus bonding herself to both the brand and the family business, she launched her first ready-to-wear line. "I'm not even able to draw," she told me—but she knew what she wanted to wear, and she worked with an intuition that suggested a deep reservoir of knowledge.

Prada and Bertelli had a son, Lorenzo, only two months after that first show. (A second, Giulio, followed two years later.) When I asked her how she had managed that first year, she was sanguine. "We didn't even know, within the family, that at the same time we were building [Prada]," she said. "Probably, we like to be working, we like to be active."

Her first collection, an exemplar of the Prada style, featured neutrals contrasted with bright colors; straight-cut masculine trousers and clumpy, rubber-sole loafers; details and silhouettes that harbored echoes of military uniforms; and a knee-length skirt that would soon become a signature.

Prada was original. She opposed the pristine, languid lines of Armani and the va-va-voom of Versace and Dolce & Gabbana, her Milanese peers. "To have an idea of a woman as a beautiful silhouette—no!" Prada said to me. "I try to respect women—I tend not to do bias dresses, super-sexy. I try to be creative in a way that can be worn, that can be useful."

One whole collection was made of nylon; another was an ironic exploration of her own dislike of lace. Her work, famously dubbed "ugly chic," made clashing—acid green and brown, chunky cable

RUFFLED AND READY
Hadid redefines sporty chic in a coat, shirts, briefs, and bag from Miu Miu's spring 2024 collection.

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knits and gauzy transparents, retro and future, plastic and crystal, socks with high-heel sandals, the bourgeoisie and the rebel—cool. She played around with 1950s nostalgia, 1980s minimalism, and hideous color schemes from the 1970s.

"Of course badness is everywhere—in the movies, in art, in life," Prada told me, "but somehow what they call *bad taste* was never accepted in fashion. Back then it was kind of a scandal, an insult; even now, fashion is sometimes the place of clichéd beauty, but it's the cliché of beauty that has to be completely taken away—yes, changed."

Success was sudden and stratospheric. In 1993, Miuccia Prada began to design a second label, Miu Miu—the name is what her family called her when she was a child—which seemed to provide an outlet for her whimsy, with sparkles and pink and cartoon curves that spoofed girlishness. She also expanded early into Asia, added a men's line in 1993, and debuted Prada Sport in 1997, pairing performance fabrics with urban chic and presaging athleisure by a decade or two. Prada set trends—she never followed them, always chasing that which was "more interesting, more new, more daring, more exciting," as she told me. "Risk is something I kind of like."

"Miuccia is just being very true to herself," said Bertelli, explaining his wife and partner to me. "Interrogation, curiosity, intellectual honesty…. She may be quite a contrarian, but she has very specific historic references, and she has an understanding of costume which is absolutely deep." More than mere form and function, Prada's clothes are, she insists, narrative. "I am interested in the lives of people," she said. "So, it's not *designing*—it's putting together personalities, histories, pieces of life, good, bad."

For Catherine Martin, the costume designer with whom Miuccia Prada collaborated on Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby,* Prada's work embodies a kind of practical feminism centered around nothing less than "what it means to be a woman—a powerful woman, and a working woman, and a mother, and a homemaker, and a sexual being."

"I personally have many characters in myself," said Prada, "and I think that many people have different characters in themselves: the feminine part and the masculine part, the gentle and the tough."

It comes as little surprise, given her youthful background in agitprop and protest, that Prada remains very much aware of the wider world far outside fashion—its wars and suffering, its array of crises and injustices. "That's why I am always ashamed," she told me. Publicly but quietly, as well as personally, Prada supports a myriad of causes, including cancer research, but she tends to be discomfited by showy fundraising galas, preferring engagement

She is very much aware of her age. “It’s strange,” Prada says, “because every single morning I have to decide if I am a 15-year-old girl or an old lady near to death”

to mere charity. The company invested in the development of a regenerated nylon yarn, ECONYL, launched in 2019, which it now uses in its products, donating 1 percent of the sales to their Sea Beyond project with UNESCO, which is dedicated to ocean preservation and education. “It’s something real, tangible—it’s not just a gesture,” she said. “If you really want to be generous, you have to impact your life.”

Prada cleaves to a kind of no-nonsense practicality. “I do clothes for a commercial company, and our goal is to sell clothes,” she says. She is less interested in exploring fashion as a kind of gendered costuming than she is in allowing people to find their own way of expressing themselves, which is in turn about "freedom—representing yourself. We should be able to be who we choose to be, always.” She insists that “fashion is a little small thing, I think: Get dressed in the morning, and afterwards you do something else.” Mostly, she wants her clothes to be “useful, [so that] people feel happy when they wear it,” she said, before correcting herself: “*Happy* is a big word.” Instead, she wants people to feel “confident—that they can perform in life. Fashion is a representation of one’s vision of the world. Because otherwise, I think fashion is useless.”

I met Miuccia Prada for the second time at her apartment in Milan. She still lives in the same building she grew up in, with various family members in apartments upstairs from her. The gate was opened by a butler and I was led across a leafy, cobbled courtyard into a large, modern, vaulted room separated by huge bookcases into quadrants of seating areas. Sofas were upholstered in jewel tones, large modern and contemporary paintings created blocks of color on the walls, and a green velvet Verner Panton Cloverleaf sofa nestled on a black shag-pile rug. In an adjacent space, a long gallery containing a Damien Hirst vitrine of surgical instruments gave out into a pretty garden.

We sat at a table painted with an antique map of the world, with Prada sipping from a cup of herbal tea. Looking at the many books surrounding us, I asked her what she was reading. Rising, animated, she walked away and quickly returned with five books under her arm: a history of women and resistance; a history of fascism; *The Kremlin Ball,* a novel of political fiction by the late Italian writer Curzio Malaparte; a volume of Schrödinger bookmarked with a children’s drawing; and a thick tome of philosophy that “a friend told me it is very easy to read.” She laughed. “I read one third so far!”

The Prada Foundation is an outlet for Miuccia Prada’s intellectual brio. She has had the unusual good fortune to educate herself in contemporary art by “reading, and talking with artists—many became really friends,” and by buying art to understand it. “I hate the idea of being a collector,” she said. “For me, it was kind of part of the learning process.” In the past, she has been discreet about the extent of her involvement with exhibitions, allowing the foundation to establish itself independently from the fashion brand, though now she has publicly taken on the role of director. “I’m trying,” she said, “in my last years to be more political, more effective.”

The Prada Foundation opened its site in Milan in 2015. Conceived and designed by Rem Koolhaas and his firm OMA (also responsible for the dramatic interior of the Prada store in SoHo in New York), the space was built around an abandoned distillery and is a very Miuccia mix of iceberg cool and warm opulence. A gleaming white tower is finished in concrete mixed with marble dust; beams installed to protect against earthquakes are painted orange; the original distillery building (known as the Haunted House) is gilded in 24-karat gold leaf; the Podium exhibition space is clad in foamy-looking aerated aluminum panels; and the Godard cinema has a wild garden on the roof. Inside the foundation’s spectacular and almost surreal spaces, you can grope your way through a pitch-black Carsten Höller labyrinth and emerge into a room of hallucinogenic mushrooms hanging upside down and spinning; recoil at a Damien Hirst canvas composed of dead flies; or ascend in a giant elevator that can hold a hundred people to view the entirety of Milan and the jagged Alps beyond.

The German artist Thomas Demand, whose work has featured in 11 projects with the Prada Foundation over the past two decades, describes the foundation’s Milan home as “public discourse—you can see intelligent things which you can’t see anywhere else. It tries to convince people that art plays a role in our life.” The foundation commissions new artworks, hosts concerts and cinema screenings, lectures, and symposia. *Patronage,* though, is another word Prada doesn’t like. “When they say you are sponsoring culture, I say, ‘No—we want to be part of *creating* culture.’ It’s not about money—it’s about bringing together efforts, people; proposing and finding solutions.” The site in Milan has done nothing less than pioneer the regeneration of an industrial district; it has turned the city into a contemporary art destination. On a Saturday, Demand says, the space is full of people walking and talking. “Milanese people really use it as a corso,” a promenade, he said.

The evening before we spoke, Prada had hosted the legendary conductor Riccardo Muti, who was visiting Milan to teach a series of classes in front of an audience at the Prada Foundation.

“He’s incredibly interesting,” Prada told me. “He talked about the structure of conducting, what it means to be a conductor. He said how much every single phrase, every single note has a reason.”

That same evening, I had attended the opening of a show at the foundation’s Osservatorio, an exhibition space in an attic above the flagship Prada store in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. “Calculating Empires,” co-curated by Kate Crawford, a leading scholar in the social implications of artificial intelligence, examined the connection between technology and power over the past five industrialized centuries. A few days before, recounted Crawford (wearing a classic Prada pleated skirt with a kilt buckle), Miuccia Prada had done a walk through of the exhibition accompanied by Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of London’s Serpentine gallery, and immediately grasped the intent of the main work—a vast and intricate diagram depicting the connections between communication and computation, quantum mechanics and algorithms, architecture and astrospheres—and making a comparison to Marx’s analysis of production methods in the 19th century.

While Prada is an intellectual shark, constantly learning, thinking, and working, in conversation she is gently funny, laughs often (usually at herself), listens intently, and questions her own statements. As we spoke, she often voiced an opinion and then worried that it might come across as too polemical.

“When you’re really smart and you have a lot of thoughts, I think you want to expose them to the rigors of conversation with other people,” Catherine Martin told me. “Miuccia is like a one-person salon.” Prada says she has very little social life, but this is a little disingenuous. “I think she doesn’t like to be social just for the sake of being social,” her son Lorenzo Bertelli told me. “She loves to be confronted by people with different points of view.”

“I am better at working than talking,” Prada said. “If I want to know somebody, I want to work with them. All the enthusiasm, the research—I like working, it’s a way of really communicating a mindset, ideas.”

Her circle is both wide and distinguished. Wes Anderson designed the café at the Prada Foundation in Milan in pistachio and pink, a pastiche-homage to traditional Milanese cafés; the late Franco-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard donated his atelier-cum-living room, which is now on display there; Jacques Herzog, the Swiss avant-garde architect, describes the latticed Prada building he built in Tokyo with his partner, Pierre de Meuron, as an “interactive optical device”; a Höller slide connects Miuccia Prada’s polished concrete office to the ground floor; Hirst, meanwhile, created a Prada handbag studded with insects.

Thomas Demand recalled that when he first met Prada, he had been trying to figure out how to realize a complex art installation, and she had told him that his difficulty reminded her of her own designing handbags. Prada, Demand said, “recognized the trial, the error, the way things come together in manufacturing and don’t look like what you want, and [so] you have to take it off the table,” he said. “[She was] hands-on, and also honest.”

Prada acknowledged her role of sage arbiter, a little chagrined, perhaps, that wisdom comes with age. Though she seems to enjoy the exploration more than the explanation, she told me that she knows when something is right because it makes her smile.

Prada is, at heart, a family business. The Prada-Bertelli family dynamic is discussion, debate, dialectics. Conversations with Prada and her husband and son veered easily into the heavyweight territory of philosophy and philology. According to Lorenzo, different views produce a better synthesis. (Lorenzo also said that it was quite hard to change his mother’s mind—unless he had a very well-prepared argument.)

“I like to push, because in the push you become more creative, more intelligent,” Prada told me.

I asked Patrizio Bertelli why his partnership with his wife had been so successful. “I ask myself the same question all the time,” he said. “We never worked because we were anxious to become famous or rich—we worked for the pleasure of doing something that was interesting and constructive, and to enjoy it, to have fun.”

Their two halves—one creative, the other commercial—have forged a powerhouse global brand in the span of a single lifetime. Prada is now listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, though the family still owns 80 percent of the business. The couple, now both in their 70s, have been careful in planning a smooth succession. A new CEO, Andrea Guerra, was installed just last year, and Lorenzo, who gave up a professional rally racing career with his own Fuck Matiè team to join the company in 2017, is now in charge of technology, marketing, sustainability, and the company’s new fine jewelry division.

In 2020, Prada stunned the fashion world by announcing that Raf Simons, the enormously respected Belgian designer, would come aboard to codesign the label alongside Miuccia Prada as an equal creative partner, collaborator, and instigator.

When I asked Simons why he had said yes, he answered me in one word: “Miuccia—as simple as that.”

Like his collaborator and creative partner, Simons didn’t go to fashion school (he studied industrial design) and easily admits that “my interest in art is much bigger than my interest in fashion.” The two had long been admirers of each other’s work, and both spoke of the need for reality, practicality, meaning, and, yes, usefulness in their collections. And though their collaboration began with the understanding that if either really hated the other’s idea, they wouldn’t do it, they both told me that they have found working together nothing less than a meeting of minds.

“It’s going very well,” Prada said. “We have the same taste, and most of the time we have exactly the same idea. He’s a very nice person and intellectually honest—the most important quality.”

“It clicked in an incredible way,” said Simons. “I think that we are [both] dialogue people—she likes collaborating, she likes to work with people—needs it, I think. Anything can be a starting point, whether we love it or hate it or think it’s silly or funny or sad or stupid or political.”

Prada told me that she is very much aware of her age. “It’s strange,” she said, “because every single morning I have to decide if I am a 15-year-old girl or an old lady near to death.” But her creative drive has hardly dimmed. The collaboration with Simons—their latest collection presented new riffs on military motifs and transparency against the backdrop of a slime waterfall—has blended cool with commercial to critical acclaim, and her own recent shows for Miu Miu have been cutting-edge and timely. Her scissor-chopped outfits for spring 2022—“a joke for me about the erogenous zone,” she had said afterward—went viral on TikTok and were modeled on the runway beside a film by Moroccan-born artist Meriem Bennani. (Increasingly, Prada has invited artists from around the world to create video displays to accompany her shows.)

Maria Bianchi wanted to be different. Miuccia Prada worked hard to be good and to do good, and then to get better and to do more. Mrs. Prada, in her golden age, is a push and pull of contentment, yet still seemingly never satisfied.

“When people say, ‘Are you happy about your achievement in fashion?’ I really, sincerely, couldn’t care less,” she said. “I think about what I have to do next. I am ambitious, I want to be good. And sometimes I think I *am* good—a great exhibition, a good piece of clothing—but only for a second.”

She admits that she finds it difficult to be proud of herself.

“*Decent* is not enough,” she told me, going on to mention a past exhibition that had not turned out as she had hoped. “For me,” she said, “it was a failure.” She said she avoids her own shops “because my imagination is so high, I am scared of the reality.

I asked her if it was difficult to be a brand.

“To do it: no,” she said. “Because it’s basically [about what] we liked. The concept is very easy. But then you have to live it, embody it, be responsible for it.” She said she would love to be able to concentrate on pure creativity, to spend the “whole day working only on fashion—it’s like a vacation!” But there were always multitudes









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STAND AND DELIVER

Hadid wears a spring 2024 Prada jacket, knit top, skirt, shorts, belt, and shoes. OPPOSITE: LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: Prada spring 1996; Miu Miu spring 2011; Prada spring 2024; Prada spring 2008; Prada fall 2022; Miu Miu fall 2008; Prada fall 2014; Miu Miu spring 2010; Miu Miu spring 2022. In this story, for Gigi Hadid: hair, Akemi Kishida; makeup, Karin Westerlund. Details, see In This Issue.

SET DESIGN: ANNE AUBERT. PHOTOGRAPHED AT DAYLIGHT STUDIOS.

"I like to push," Prada says, "because in the push you become more creative, more intelligent"

of decisions and requests, and "every single day you have to solve at least, creatively, 20 different things…. And now we have to solve the problem of the Chinese New Year!" Apparently no one had yet come up with a good concept for the shopwindow displays.

"And you are involved in this decision?" I asked.

"I am involved in everything!"

I raise the notion—surely something she's heard once or twice before—that she must be a perfectionist.

"Possibly," she conceded. "Yes."

On that final third of her life—the part that's about family and fun—Prada is reticent. Past interviews have revealed only scant, banal details: She loves to be in nature, especially in the mountains; cuts her own hair; drinks a cup of hot water first thing in the morning. From the few glimpses she allowed in my conversations with her—her sons and husband are fixated on cooking and kicked her out of the kitchen a long time ago; she is planning an exotic garden of succulents and spiky plants at her house in Southern Italy; she has lost several people close to her in recent years, "but recently I am again in a good mood"—it was clear that this part of her life is as rich and full as the others.

It's hard not to sympathize with her guardedness: Prada is the public face of a global brand, but deliberately has no social media presence, very rarely appears on television, and often seems shy in public, bowing briefly at the end of her runway shows before disappearing behind the curtains.

"She looks very reserved," said Bertelli, "but it's a question of privacy—she's not shy."

I asked him what made his wife happy. "When she works, she is happy," he said. "When she does beautiful things, she is happy. When she travels, she is happy. When she spends time with intelligent people, she is happy."

Lorenzo said that his mother was happiest with her family, which recently had a new addition: Lorenzo's first child, a daughter. "Now, for sure, that she has a grandchild," Lorenzo said, "she is super happy."

Prada smiled broadly when I asked her about her granddaughter.

"I have to learn everything," she said, "because I don't know the education points today. Also dealing with young kids with media, telephones, and so on, all the arguments that I don't know how to master. I have the responsibility of educating the girl," she said.

"I think I will be a good [grandmother]—I will teach, but I will also be fun." □

LEANING IN
The designer in a rare moment of rest. "I am better at working than talking," she says. "If I want to know somebody, I want to work with them—it's a way of really communicating a mindset, ideas."

PRODUCED BY KITTEN PRODUCTION. PHOTOGRAPHED AT PALAZZO PISANI MORETTA, CORNER DELLA REGINA IN VENICE. DETAILS, SEE IN THIS ISSUE.

ITI CREDITS

First Spread: N/A.

Second Spread: N/A.

Third Spread: Left page: Coat, shirts, briefs, and bag; miumiu.com.

Fourth Spread: N/A.

Fifth Spread: Right page: jacket, knit top, skirt, shorts, belt, and shoes; prada.com.

Sixth Spread: N/A.

Manicurist: Eri Narita.

Tailor: Lauryn Trojan.

Tailor for Miuccia Prada: Ombra Renzini.

VOGUE

How Miuccia Prada Sees the World

BY WENDELL STEAVENSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEF MITCHELL

STYLED BY ALEX HARRINGTON

February 13, 2024

COVER LOOK

Miuccia Prada wears a vintage look from her debut fall 1988 collection.

It was November and a little windy on the balcony of the Ca’ Corner della Regina, the 18th-century palazzo that is home to the Prada Foundation in Venice, where Miuccia Prada was posing for photographs against the backdrop of the Grand Canal. She clasped a red silk coat (from her very first collection in 1988) over a citrine sweater, bright and sharp against the gray sky and the terra-cotta, ochre, and verdigris of deliquescent Venice. She wore no discernible makeup; her long blond-and-auburn hair was unstyled and hung in soft curls at her shoulders. When it fanned in the breeze, she joked about looking very 1990s, like Cindy Crawford in a wind machine.

ANGLE OF REPOSE

Miuccia Prada, photographed at the Prada Foundation in Venice wearing Prada. Miu Miu shoes.

Afterward, several of us gathered around a table for lunch. Mrs. Prada, as she is deferentially known, took off the two grand gold necklaces (one of lions' heads) and the other medallions she was wearing and laid them on an adjacent chair, as if relinquishing the heavy chains of office, and began, Italian-mama style, to spoon rice onto our plates. The lunch was simple: chicken patties, braised endive, spinach, and salad. The vegetables, she said, came from her garden in Tuscany—oh, yes, she nodded, she takes a close interest in the planting. There is not much, I would come to understand, that Prada does *not* take a close interest in.

Prada, now 74, reminded me of the late Queen of England: a diminutive older lady, magnificently costumed, who commands a regal presence with a softly-spoken manner and a genuine curiosity about both things and people. She is surprisingly warm, self-deprecating, and has a gentle, musical laugh. We discussed the current exhibition at the palazzo, "Everybody Talks About the Weather," a thought-provoking interplay of historical paintings, contemporary artworks, and scientific information about the climate crisis. Prada lamented that it was difficult to find curators who could link art and academic inquiry to put on the kind of ambitious, multidisciplinary exhibitions she wanted the foundation to show. She had been struggling, for example, to find the right person to oversee an exhibition on feminism: Who could unite such a disparate field—and how best to communicate complex and challenging concepts?

"I want culture to be attractive," she said.

When lunch was over, Prada helped clear away the plates to a side table, looped the heavy chains back around her neck, and our interview began.

SHE’S GOT THE LOOKS

Gigi Hadid in archival Prada and Miu Miu.

“Fashion is one third of my life,” said Prada, who has created two celebrated fashion labels, Prada and Miu Miu, and, together with her husband, Patrizio Bertelli, helms the Prada Group, a global luxury brand with $4.5 billion in annual revenue (as of 2022) and over 13,000 employees. (Prada Group also has a stake in Church’s shoes.) The second third of her life, she says, is “culture and the Fondazione.” Since its creation in 1993, the Prada Foundation has become a leading proponent of contemporary art. “After, there is family and friends, and possibly some pleasures.” She paused to reconsider. “Actually, they all overlap. I try to make my life useful.”

Prada likes the word *useful;* she dislikes the word *luxury,* which she finds vulgar. And here is the rub, the nub, the dichotomy that runs through her life and her work: Miuccia Prada is an extraordinarily successful fashion designer selling beautiful, expensive clothes and accessories. She is also—something confirmed with a nod when I asked—politically left of center, with a doctorate in political science (she also studied mime for five years), a former member of the Italian Communist Party who marched for women’s rights. “I always thought there were only two noble professions: politicians or doctors,” she told me. “Doing clothes [while coming from] a group of very important intellectuals—for me it was like a nightmare. I was so ashamed, but anyway I did it…. The love of beautiful objects prevailed.” Her political opinions have mostly had to be kept private. “I work for a luxury company,” she said, laughing at the irony. “It’s not perfect for a political position like mine—this was always the biggest contradiction in my life.”

Miuccia Prada was born Maria Bianchi into a well-heeled bourgeois Milanese family in 1949. Her grandfather Mario Prada had founded Fratelli Prada (“Prada Brothers”), a leather-goods shop, in 1913; her mother took over the family business in the 1950s.

“When I was young,” Prada told me, “I always wanted to be different.” She immersed herself in the activist generation of the 1960s, but she always loved

clothes—while everyone else was wearing jeans at demonstrations, she famously wore Yves Saint Laurent.

“Some people,” I suggested, “don’t want to do what everyone around them is doing.”

“That is probably really deeply a part of myself,” Prada acknowledged.

CROUCHING TIGER

Prada, fall 2017

And while she rebelled against the bourgeois assumptions of her upbringing, she joined the family business, taking it over from her mother in 1978. That same year, she met Bertelli, the founder of a rival leather-goods company, at a trade fair. They joined forces, both personally and professionally (marrying in 1987), and she began playing around with the idea of a nylon backpack: practical, lightweight, water-resistant, *useful.* When it first went on sale in 1984 it was far from successful, but a high-end brand making a product that was then considered a cheap, everyday item was groundbreaking; soon it became an iconic piece—one that illustrated a tectonic shift in fashion. In 1988, having renamed herself Miuccia Prada (by having her unmarried maternal aunt legally adopt her), thus bonding herself to both the brand and the family business, she launched her first ready-to-wear line. “I’m not even able to draw,” she told me—but she knew what she wanted to wear, and she worked with an intuition that suggested a deep reservoir of knowledge.

Prada and Bertelli had a son, Lorenzo, only two months after that first show. (A second, Giulio, followed two years later.) When I asked her how she had managed that first year, she was sanguine. “We didn’t even know, within the family, that at the same time we were building [Prada],” she said. “Probably, we like to be working, we like to be active.”

Her first collection, an exemplar of the Prada style, featured neutrals contrasted with bright colors; straight-cut masculine trousers and clumpy, rubber-sole loafers; details and silhouettes that harbored echoes of military uniforms; and a knee-length skirt that would soon become a signature.

Prada was original. She opposed the pristine, languid lines of Armani and the va-va-voom of Versace and Dolce & Gabbana, her Milanese peers. “To have an idea of a woman as a beautiful silhouette—no!” Prada said to me. “I try to respect women—I tend not to do bias dresses, super-sexy. I try to be creative in a way that can be worn, that can be useful.”

PLAY/PAUSE BUTTON

SWEET AND LOWDOWN

Gigi on the move in fall 2017 Prada.

One whole collection was made of nylon; another was an ironic exploration of her own dislike of lace. Her work, famously dubbed "ugly chic," made clashing—acid green and brown, chunky cable knits and gauzy transparents, retro and future, plastic and crystal, socks with high-heel sandals, the bourgeoisie and the rebel—cool. She played around with 1950s nostalgia, 1980s minimalism, and hideous color schemes from the 1970s.

"Of course badness is everywhere—in the movies, in art, in life," Prada told me, "but somehow what they call *bad taste* was never accepted in fashion. Back then it was kind of a scandal, an insult; even now, fashion is sometimes the place of clichéd beauty, but it's the cliché of beauty that has to be completely taken away—yes, changed."

Success was sudden and stratospheric. In 1993, Miuccia Prada began to design a second label, Miu Miu—the name is what her family called her when she was a child—which seemed to provide an outlet for her whimsy, with sparkles and pink and cartoon curves that spoofed girlishness. She also expanded early into Asia, added a men's line in 1993, and debuted Prada Sport in 1997, pairing performance fabrics with urban chic and presaging athleisure by a decade or two. Prada set trends—she never followed them, always chasing that which was "more interesting, more new, more daring, more exciting," as she told me. "Risk is something I kind of like."

"Miuccia is just being very true to herself," said Bertelli, explaining his wife and partner to me. "Interrogation, curiosity, intellectual honesty…. She may be quite a contrarian, but she has very specific historic references, and she has an understanding of costume which is absolutely deep." More than mere form and function, Prada's clothes are, she insists, narrative. "I am interested in the lives of people," she said. "So, it's not *designing*—it's putting together personalities, histories, pieces of life, good, bad."

TALL ORDER

Prada, fall 2013

For Catherine Martin, the costume designer with whom Miuccia Prada collaborated on Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby,* Prada's work embodies a kind of practical feminism centered around nothing less than "what it means to be a woman—a powerful woman, and a working woman, and a mother, and a homemaker, and a sexual being."

"I personally have many characters in myself," said Prada, "and I think that many people have different characters in themselves: the feminine part and the masculine part, the gentle and the tough."

It comes as little surprise, given her youthful background in agitprop and protest, that Prada remains very much aware of the wider world far outside fashion—its wars and suffering, its array of crises and injustices. "That's why I am always ashamed," she told me. Publicly but quietly, as well as personally, Prada supports a myriad of causes, including cancer research, but she tends to be discomfited by showy fundraising galas, preferring engagement to mere charity. The company invested in the development of a regenerated nylon yarn, ECONYL, launched in 2019, which it now uses in its products, donating 1 percent of the sales to their Sea Beyond project with UNESCO, which is dedicated to ocean preservation and education. "It's something real, tangible—it's not just a gesture," she said. "If you really want to be generous, you have to impact your life."

Prada cleaves to a kind of no-nonsense practicality. "I do clothes for a commercial company, and our goal is to sell clothes," she says. She is less interested in exploring fashion as a kind of gendered costuming than she is in allowing people to find their own way of expressing themselves, which is in turn about "freedom—representing yourself. We should be able to be who we choose to be, always." She insists that "fashion is a little small thing, I think: Get dressed in the morning, and afterwards you do something else." Mostly, she wants her clothes to be "useful, [so that] people feel happy when they

wear it," she said, before correcting herself: "*Happy* is a big word." Instead, she wants people to feel "confident—that they can perform in life. Fashion is a representation of one's vision of the world. Because otherwise, I think fashion is useless."

PLAY/PAUSE BUTTON

THROUGH THE AGES

Gigi goes deep in the Prada and Miu Miu archives.

Imet Miuccia Prada for the second time at her apartment in Milan. She still lives in the same building she grew up in, with various family members in apartments upstairs from her. The gate was opened by a butler and I was led across a leafy, cobbled courtyard into a large, modern, vaulted room separated by huge bookcases into quadrants of seating areas. Sofas were upholstered in jewel tones, large modern and contemporary paintings created blocks of color on the walls, and a green velvet Verner Panton Cloverleaf sofa nestled on a black shag-pile rug. In an adjacent space, a long gallery containing a Damien Hirst vitrine of surgical instruments gave out into a pretty garden.

We sat at a table painted with an antique map of the world, with Prada sipping from a cup of herbal tea. Looking at the many books surrounding us, I asked her what she was reading. Rising, animated, she walked away and quickly returned with five books under her arm: a history of women and resistance; a history of fascism; *The Kremlin Ball,* a novel of political fiction by the late Italian writer Curzio Malaparte; a volume of Schrödinger bookmarked with a children's drawing; and a thick tome of philosophy that "a friend told me it is very easy to read." She laughed. "I read one third so far!"

The Prada Foundation is an outlet for Miuccia Prada's intellectual brio. She has had the unusual good fortune to educate herself in contemporary art by "reading, and talking with artists—many became really friends," and by buying art to understand it. "I hate the idea of being a collector," she said. "For me, it was kind of part of the learning process." In the past, she has been

discreet about the extent of her involvement with exhibitions, allowing the foundation to establish itself independently from the fashion brand, though now she has publicly taken on the role of director. “I’m trying,” she said, “in my last years to be more political, more effective.”

The Prada Foundation opened its site in Milan in 2015. Conceived and designed by Rem Koolhaas and his firm OMA (also responsible for the dramatic interior of the Prada store in SoHo in New York), the space was built around an abandoned distillery and is a very Miuccia mix of iceberg cool and warm opulence. A gleaming white tower is finished in concrete mixed with marble dust; beams installed to protect against earthquakes are painted orange; the original distillery building (known as the Haunted House) is gilded in 24-karat gold leaf; the Podium exhibition space is clad in foamy-looking aerated aluminum panels; and the Godard cinema has a wild garden on the roof. Inside the foundation’s spectacular and almost surreal spaces, you can grope your way through a pitch-black Carsten Höller labyrinth and emerge into a room of hallucinogenic mushrooms hanging upside down and spinning; recoil at a Damien Hirst canvas composed of dead flies; or ascend in a giant elevator that can hold a hundred people to view the entirety of Milan and the jagged Alps beyond.

FRINGE CANDIDATE

Prada, fall 2007

The German artist Thomas Demand, whose work has featured in 11 projects with the Prada Foundation over the past two decades, describes the foundation's Milan home as "public discourse—you can see intelligent things which you can't see anywhere else. It tries to convince people that art plays a role in our life." The foundation commissions new artworks, hosts concerts and cinema screenings, lectures, and symposia. *Patronage,* though, is another word Prada doesn't like. "When they say you are sponsoring culture, I say, 'No—we want to be part of *creating* culture.' It's not about money—it's about bringing together efforts, people; proposing and finding solutions." The site in Milan has done nothing less than pioneer the regeneration of an industrial district; it has turned the city into a contemporary art destination. On a Saturday, Demand says, the space is full of people walking and talking. "Milanese people really use it as a corso," a promenade, he said.

The evening before we spoke, Prada had hosted the legendary conductor Riccardo Muti, who was visiting Milan to teach a series of classes in front of an audience at the Prada Foundation.

"He's incredibly interesting," Prada told me. "He talked about the structure of conducting, what it means to be a conductor. He said how much every single phrase, every single note has a reason."

That same evening, I had attended the opening of a show at the foundation's Osservatorio, an exhibition space in an attic above the flagship Prada store in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. "Calculating Empires," co-curated by Kate Crawford, a leading scholar in the social implications of artificial intelligence, examined the connection between technology and power over the past five industrialized centuries. A few days before, recounted Crawford (wearing a classic Prada pleated skirt with a kilt buckle), Miuccia Prada had done a walk through of the exhibition accompanied by Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of London's Serpentine gallery, and immediately grasped the

intent of the main work—a vast and intricate diagram depicting the connections between communication and computation, quantum mechanics and algorithms, architecture and astrospheres—and making a comparison to Marx's analysis of production methods in the 19th century.

While Prada is an intellectual shark, constantly learning, thinking, and working, in conversation she is gently funny, laughs often (usually at herself), listens intently, and questions her own statements. As we spoke, she often voiced an opinion and then worried that it might come across as too polemical.

CANAL PLUS

“I like to push,” Prada says, “because in the push you become more creative, more intelligent.”

“When you’re really smart and you have a lot of thoughts, I think you want to expose them to the rigors of conversation with other people,” Catherine Martin told me. “Miuccia is like a one-person salon.” Prada says she has very little social life, but this is a little disingenuous. “I think she doesn’t like to be social just for the sake of being social,” her son Lorenzo Bertelli told me. “She loves to be confronted by people with different points of view.”

“I am better at working than talking,” Prada said. “If I want to know somebody, I want to work with them. All the enthusiasm, the research—I like working, it’s a way of really communicating a mindset, ideas.”

Her circle is both wide and distinguished. Wes Anderson designed the café at the Prada Foundation in Milan in pistachio and pink, a pastiche-homage to traditional Milanese cafés; the late Franco-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard donated his atelier-cum-living room, which is now on display there; Jacques Herzog, the Swiss avant-garde architect, describes the latticed Prada building he built in Tokyo with his partner, Pierre de Meuron, as an “interactive optical device”; a Höller slide connects Miuccia Prada’s polished concrete office to the ground floor; Hirst, meanwhile, created a Prada handbag studded with insects.

Thomas Demand recalled that when he first met Prada, he had been trying to figure out how to realize a complex art installation, and she had told him that his difficulty reminded her of her own designing handbags. Prada, Demand said, “recognized the trial, the error, the way things come together in manufacturing and don’t look like what you want, and [so] you have to take it off the table,” he said. “[She was] hands-on, and also honest.”

Prada acknowledged her role of sage arbiter, a little chagrined, perhaps, that wisdom comes with age. Though she seems to enjoy the exploration more

than the explanation, she told me that she knows when something is right because it makes her smile.

RUFFLED AND READY

Miu Miu, spring 2024

Prada is, at heart, a family business. The Prada-Bertelli family dynamic is discussion, debate, dialectics. Conversations with Prada and her husband and son veered easily into the heavyweight territory of philosophy and philology. According to Lorenzo, different views produce a better synthesis. (Lorenzo also said that it was quite hard to change his mother's mind—unless he had a very well-prepared argument.)

"I like to push, because in the push you become more creative, more intelligent," Prada told me.

I asked Patrizio Bertelli why his partnership with his wife had been so successful. "I ask myself the same question all the time," he said. "We never worked because we were anxious to become famous or rich—we worked for the pleasure of doing something that was interesting and constructive, and to enjoy it, to have fun."

Their two halves—one creative, the other commercial—have forged a powerhouse global brand in the span of a single lifetime. Prada is now listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, though the family still owns 80 percent of the business. The couple, now both in their 70s, have been careful in planning a smooth succession. A new CEO, Andrea Guerra, was installed just last year, and Lorenzo, who gave up a professional rally racing career with his own Fuck Matiè team to join the company in 2017, is now in charge of technology, marketing, sustainability, and the company's new fine jewelry division.

In 2020, Prada stunned the fashion world by announcing that Raf Simons, the enormously respected Belgian designer, would come aboard to codesign the label alongside Miuccia Prada as an equal creative partner, collaborator, and instigator.

When I asked Simons why he had said yes, he answered me in one word: “Miuccia—as simple as that.”

Like his collaborator and creative partner, Simons didn’t go to fashion school (he studied industrial design) and easily admits that “my interest in art is much bigger than my interest in fashion.” The two had long been admirers of each other’s work, and both spoke of the need for reality, practicality, meaning, and, yes, usefulness in their collections. And though their collaboration began with the understanding that if either really hated the other’s idea, they wouldn’t do it, they both told me that they have found working together nothing less than a meeting of minds.

“It’s going very well,” Prada said. “We have the same taste, and most of the time we have exactly the same idea. He’s a very nice person and intellectually honest—the most important quality.”

“It clicked in an incredible way,” said Simons. “I think that we are [both] dialogue people—she likes collaborating, she likes to work with people—needs it, I think. Anything can be a starting point, whether we love it or hate it or think it’s silly or funny or sad or stupid or political.”

WALKING THE WALK

Prada, spring 2024

Prada told me that she is very much aware of her age. “It’s strange,” she said, “because every single morning I have to decide if I am a 15-year-old girl or an old lady near to death.” But her creative drive has hardly dimmed. The collaboration with Simons—their latest collection presented new riffs on military motifs and transparency against the backdrop of a slime waterfall—has blended cool with commercial to critical acclaim, and her own recent shows for Miu Miu have been cutting-edge and timely. Her scissor-chopped outfits for spring 2022—“a joke for me about the erogenous zone,” she had said afterward—went viral on TikTok and were modeled on the runway beside a film by Moroccan-born artist Meriem Bennani. (Increasingly, Prada has invited artists from around the world to create video displays to accompany her shows.)

Maria Bianchi wanted to be different. Miuccia Prada worked hard to be good and to do good, and then to get better and to do more. Mrs. Prada, in her golden age, is a push and pull of contentment, yet still seemingly never satisfied.

“When people say, ‘Are you happy about your achievement in fashion?’ I really, sincerely, couldn’t care less,” she said. “I think about what I have to do next. I am ambitious, I want to be good. And sometimes I think I *am* good—a great exhibition, a good piece of clothing—but only for a second.”

She admits that she finds it difficult to be proud of herself.

“*Decent* is not enough,” she told me, going on to mention a past exhibition that had not turned out as she had hoped. “For me,” she said, “it was a failure.” She said she avoids her own shops “because my imagination is so high, I am scared of the reality.

I asked her if it was difficult to be a brand.

“To do it: no,” she said. “Because it’s basically [about what] we liked. The concept is very easy. But then you have to live it, embody it, be responsible for it.” She said she would love to be able to concentrate on pure creativity, to spend the “whole day working only on fashion—it’s like a vacation!” But there were always multitudes of decisions and requests, and “every single day you have to solve at least, creatively, 20 different things…. And now we have to solve the problem of the Chinese New Year!” Apparently no one had yet come up with a good concept for the shopwindow displays.

“And you are involved in this decision?” I asked.

“I am involved in everything!”

I raise the notion—surely something she’s heard once or twice before—that she must be a perfectionist.

“Possibly,” she conceded. “Yes.”

On that final third of her life—the part that’s about family and fun—Prada is reticent. Past interviews have revealed only scant, banal details: She loves to be in nature, especially in the mountains; cuts her own hair; drinks a cup of hot water first thing in the morning. From the few glimpses she allowed in my conversations with her—her sons and husband are fixated on cooking and kicked her out of the kitchen a long time ago; she is planning an exotic garden of succulents and spiky plants at her house in Southern Italy; she has lost several people close to her in recent years, “but recently I am again in a good mood”—it was clear that this part of her life is as rich and full as the others.

LEANING IN

The designer in a rare moment of rest. “I am better at working than talking,” she says.

It’s hard not to sympathize with her guardedness: Prada is the public face of a global brand, but deliberately has no social media presence, very rarely appears on television, and often seems shy in public, bowing briefly at the end of her runway shows before disappearing behind the curtains.

“She looks very reserved,” said Bertelli, “but it’s a question of privacy—she’s not shy.”

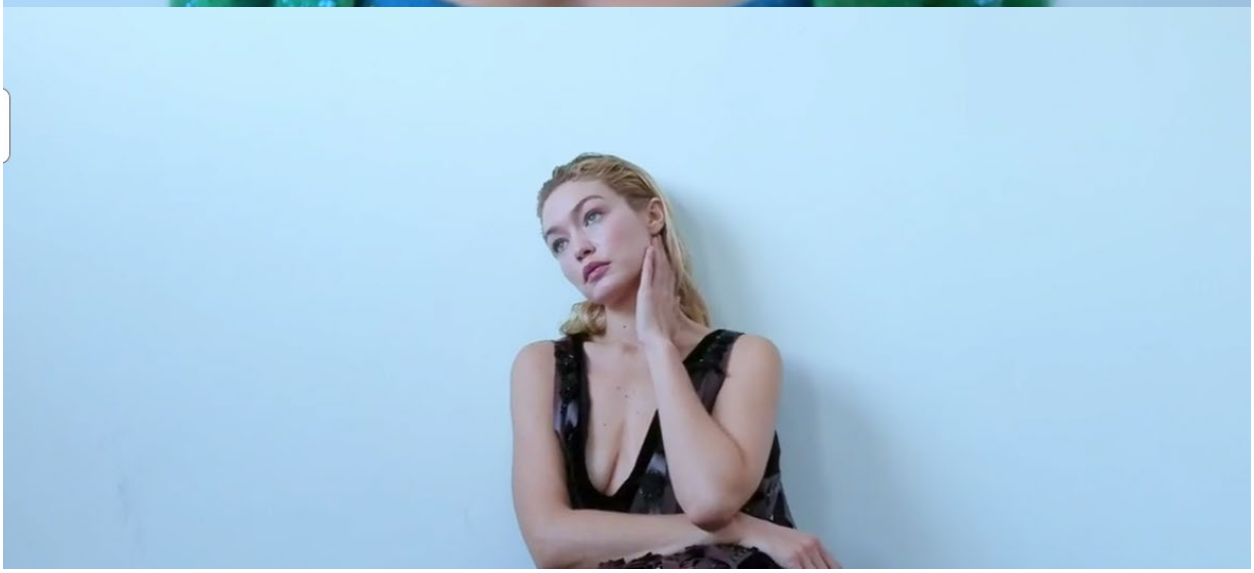
I asked him what made his wife happy. “When she works, she is happy,” he said. “When she does beautiful things, she is happy. When she travels, she is happy. When she spends time with intelligent people, she is happy.”

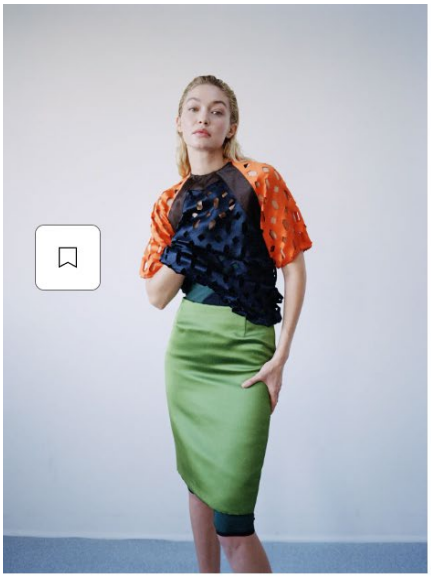
Lorenzo said that his mother was happiest with her family, which recently had a new addition: Lorenzo's first child, a daughter. "Now, for sure, that she has a grandchild," Lorenzo said, "she is super happy."

Prada smiled broadly when I asked her about her granddaughter.

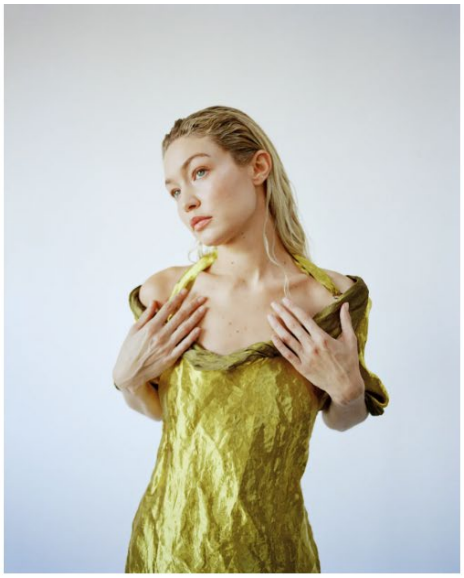
"I have to learn everything," she said, "because I don't know the education points today. Also dealing with young kids with media, telephones, and so on, all the arguments that I don't know how to master. I have the responsibility of educating the girl," she said.

"I think I will be a good [grandmother]—I will teach, but I will also be fun."





Miu Miu, fall 2008

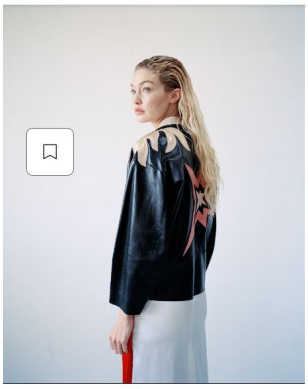


Prada, spring 2009

Prada, fall 2009

Miu Miu, spring 2010

Prada, fall 2010



Miu Miu, spring 2011

Prada, spring 2011

Prada, fall 2013

Prada, fall 2014

Prada, fall 2017

Miu Miu, spring 2022

Prada, fall 2022

Prada, spring 2024

Miu Miu, spring 2024