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# The State of American Fashion: Let's Talk

In recent years, American fashion has become untethered from tradition as it struggles to acclimate to a new set of consumer realities. WWD surveyed a broad swath of industry professionals on the good, the bad, what's working, what's not.

By [Bridget Foley](#) and [Jessica Iredale](#) on September 4, 2018

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From Left: Looks from Ralph Lauren, Marc Jacobs, Oscar de la Renta, and Calvin Klein  
Giovanni Giannoni and Rodin Banica

The State of American fashion — everyone knows it's an issue both fascinating and unsettling. The tribulations of negotiating [New York Fashion Week](#) have been a topic of conversation for years, recently exacerbated by a move to establish an official June fashion week that integrated some men's spring and some women's spring into what had previously been a resort/cruise season. The prevailing post-mortem on the first attempt at NYFW June is that it won't work without critical mass.

To that end, sheer numbers are a problem — too many show weeks, too many shows — especially in New York. Yet increasingly, the conversation around [American fashion centers not only on the issues surrounding NYFW](#), but on the fashion displayed therein. Or more accurately, there's conversation about the lack of global conversation — of excitement and even interest — around American fashion.

This happens at a moment when all of fashion is in a complicated state of transition, driven largely by the dual forces of technology and casualization, as well as heightened attention to diversity and inclusivity. Everyone must negotiate new territories, often on treacherous ground. But not everyone is suffering for it — e.g.: Gucci, 6.2 billion euros last year. There's

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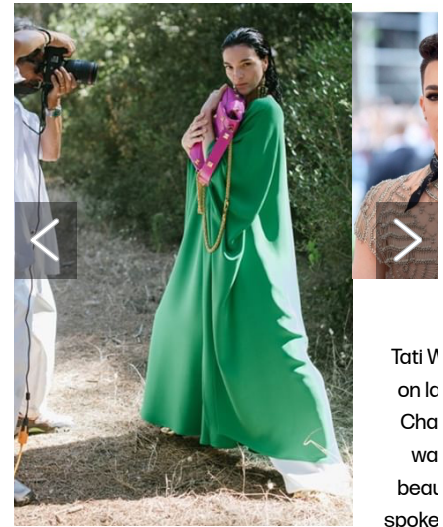
**SOCIAL STUDIES**

no denying the fact that a great deal of excitement currently percolates around many European brands. There's also no denying that most of them are luxury group-owned, speaking to the very real issue of the immense amount of cold, hard cash needed to compete on a global stage, and its general absence in the U.S. Within that context, American designers are no longer driving fashion. The retreat from prominence has been recent and rapid, and speaks to how quickly fortunes can change in this volatile industry.

The mid-Nineties into the Aughts were something of a golden age of American fashion. It started with audacious young Americans having their ways with storied European houses — [Tom Ford](#) at Gucci, Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton, Michael Kors at Céline, Narciso Rodriguez at Loewe. That wave expanded the profile of a U.S. industry until then very much centered on one side by the Ralph-Calvin-Donna triumvirate and on the other, the genteel power brokers Oscar, Blass, Carolina.

That global acknowledgement of American design talent proved major. So, too, did the ever-broadening consumer fascination — the emergence of the proverbial fashion as entertainment — fueled in part by the growing celebrity-fashion fusion and instant access via the Internet. It helped spawn over the next decade a generation of young American designers — mostly newly minted fashion school graduates — who entered the workforce determined to go out on their own immediately, typically with no substantial full-time studio experience under their belts.

Beginning with Zac Posen and Proenza Schouler, they struck the fancy not only of the domestic industry, but the global business, many — but not all — aided by and mentored through the [CFDA](#)/Vogue Fashion Fund, which became a major developer of nascent businesses. Posen was all about glam; Proenza, a bold fusion of high tech and craft; Rodarte, wondrous romance; The Row, refined sobriety; Jason Wu, young-lady chic; Altuzarra, also young chic, with a soupçon of the French savoir faire that courses through his bloodstream. Others came and went:



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going to be a moment between the  
us because we are friends. I want  
of the collection because I want to  
live the feeling I had when I was  
ing it — no filters, so no stylists, no  
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use of the cut and not because of  
volume.” Pierpaolo Piccioli spoke  
WWD Executive Editor, Bridget  
y about photographing his latest  
collection himself, with model  
Carla Boscono. Tap the link in bio  
what the Valentino designer said  
about his creative process in  
quarantine, the importance of  
ecting with his team and his fresh  
ective, inspired, in no small part, by  
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wwdfashion #PierpaoloPiccioli  
Valentino #mariacarlalaboscono  
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Thakoon, Doo Ri, Peter Som, Richard Chai. Alexander Wang played to the cool-kids demographic, marketing himself as its embedded denizen leader.

The world loved all of them. At the same time, many more waded into contemporary waters, often less editorial but building significant businesses: Phillip Lim, Amy Smilovic of Tibi, Rebecca Minkoff, Marcus Wainwright of Rag & Bone.

They were celebrated at home and abroad. Even after the 2008 financial collapse sent world economies and industries into turmoil, there remained a persistent optimism about American fashion, rooted in its youth movement.

But newness is a transitory state; by definition it doesn't last. New businesses eventually have to find their footing, as everyone in the once-fresh-faced Aughts generation has very publicly been forced to learn. At the same time, the power base of American fashion has changed dramatically. As Ralph celebrates a remarkable 50 years of brilliance, Donna now oversees the niche Urban Zen, the Bill Blass company no longer exists as a luxury house, and how the Oscar de la Renta and Carolina Herrera businesses will fare under new creatives remains to be seen. Calvin Klein is regenerating under the European eye of Raf Simons. Marc Jacobs remains the creative jewel in the American crown — yet his business has not been immune to the uncertainty of the market. Each in his way, Michael Kors and Tommy Hilfiger have American fashion's largest global profiles.

All of those noted and many others are doing some great work. But the bottom line is that, as an entity on the global stage, American fashion is not seen as the nucleus of excitement it was little more than a decade ago. And then there's the show system.

As [Diane von Furstenberg](#) says, "We all have to talk to each other." To get the conversation started, WWD asked a broad swath of global industry players — designers, editors, retailers, public relations executives, consultants and chief executive officers — for their input. Many responded — and some

declined, whether due to summer vacations or in the interest of avoiding a controversial topic — some in phone conversations, some via e-mail. We received a wealth of feedback, much of it presented with surprising candor. Again, a conversation-starter. We're not offering solutions, or even definitive conclusions. Save one, which came across very clearly: People care passionately about this industry, the global whole and its American subsidiary. They want it to survive and thrive; they want its many brilliantly talented designers to have a voice in the culture.

Beyond that absolute, some other common points of interest emerged:

1. The American entrepreneurial spirit is alive, well and a source of great pride.
2. There's general acknowledgment that American fashion is not driving the global conversation.
3. Globally, some view American fashion as the land of denim, sneakers and little else.
4. That street and sport are driving international fashion is a source of both pride — they're American concepts, after all — and frustration — the only Americans getting any credit are the iconoclastic Supreme and Virgil Abloh, he of Louis Vuitton and the Milan-based Off-White.
6. Money matters. Many American brands suffer from lack of funding to grow their businesses and to market in a world dominated by the majesty of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, Kering and Chanel.
7. The [CFDA](#)'s Boston Consulting Group-commissioned study that determined “each brand must do what's best for itself” has considerable support among designers.
8. Many designers seem oblivious to or unconcerned with a strong feeling among showgoers that [New York Fashion Week](#) is increasingly unmanageable.

9. Given 1 and 2, the CFDA has a really tough job, starting with, but not limited to, the Fashion Calendar.

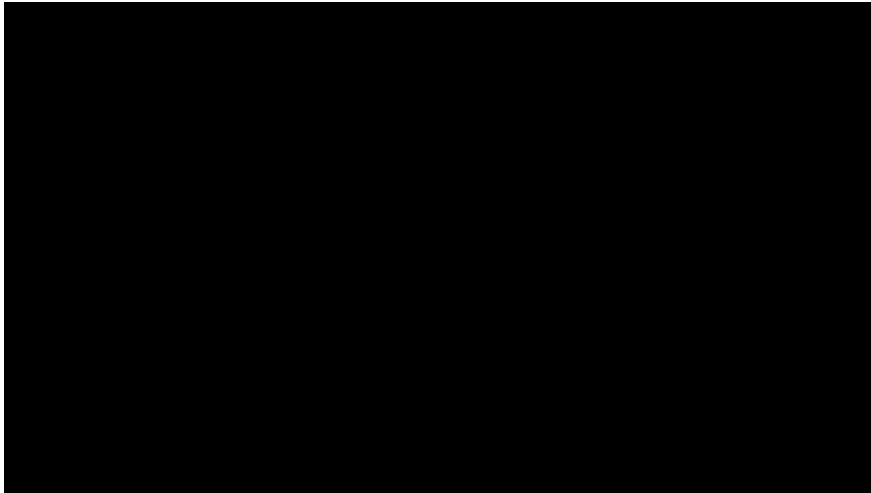
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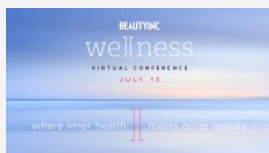
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