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The Latest in Fashion: Pink Slips

By [ERIC WILSON](#)

WHENEVER a fashion designer is fired, it is usually a very big deal, a scandal to be chewed on relentlessly by an industry that feasts on the intrigue of disgrace as if it were a long-denied buffet.

That the two most spectacular dismissals in the last five years happen to have involved the same designer, [Lars Nilsson](#), is all the more delicious to fashion insiders. In 2003, Mr. Nilsson was canned from [Bill Blass](#) just hours after a poorly received runway show, and this February, he was mysteriously dismissed from [Gianfranco Ferré](#), put out before he had shown even a single look.

Surely there must be something remarkable about Mr. Nilsson, in addition to his considerable talent for tailoring a suit, for him to be sacked with such melodramatic flair — raw meat tossed on a hibachi.

Rumors that he had been especially demanding in the workrooms of Blass and Ferré, and in between at Nina Ricci, where he worked for several seasons before resigning for personal reasons (among them that Olivier Theyskens was being courted for his job), were never denied by Mr. Nilsson. Over lunch last November, shortly after he had accepted the position at Ferré, Mr. Nilsson, wearing a shirt, waistcoat and tie on a Sunday, said he had never been shy about complaining when the work of the seamstresses and tailors did not meet his expectations. He had often argued with management over little things, even embroideries, he said, because he refused to compromise his designs.

Isn't that what a designer is supposed to do?

Maybe less so today. Designers high and low are facing competitive pressures unlike any they have seen in half a century — and not just because of the tightening economy or the dread specter of an 'It' bag collapse. Fashion has entered an era in which venerable brands that have gone stale expect instant revivals from newly hired designers, with little to no tolerance for one who doesn't sketch a single dress without the bottom line in mind.

If it doesn't sell, it doesn't work.

"That's going to become more and more important as there is a shakeout at brands that spend too much time on image without focusing on the bottom line," said Betsy Pearce, a lawyer and strategy consultant for luxury brands.

"What kind of a business," Ms. Pearce went on, "would rationalize the creation of an entire product line four times a year and then produce it on spec?"

The most obvious result of this pressure is that Mr. Nilsson is not so singular after all. It is increasingly common for designers to be suddenly fired or replaced, as has happened at Anne Klein, Emanuel Ungaro, Chloé, Paco Rabanne and, yet again, at Bill Blass, all in the last 24 months. Anne Klein closed a collection designed by Isabel Toledo after two seasons. At Ungaro, Peter Dundas left after three seasons, to be replaced by Esteban Cortazar.

Chloé dropped Paulo Melim Andersson after three collections. Paco Rabanne stopped producing the collections Patrick Robinson had designed for three seasons. And Michael Vollbracht, Mr. Nilsson's successor at Blass, quit abruptly and was replaced by Peter Som.

On Tuesday, Ferré announced its next designers as well, naming Tommaso Aquilano and Roberto Rimondi of the label 6267 to replace Mr. Nilsson.

THE frequency of turnovers suggests that cracks are beginning to appear in the model of brand reinvention that dominated fashion for more than a decade. The transformations at [Yves Saint Laurent](#), Lanvin and Burberry, for example, benefited from clever managements and, just as important, enough time for the public to embrace the reborn brands — neither of which are in ample supply today.

“It really is a case of these big business people who do not understand why creativity is valuable in the first place,” said Ruben Toledo, the illustrator.

His wife, Ms. Toledo, was, until November, attempting to restore a prestige image to the Anne Klein label, designing an expensive version that was sold at Barneys New York.

After just two seasons, [Jones Apparel Group](#), which owns Anne Klein, decided to return its focus to mainstream sportswear and ended its contract with Ms. Toledo. Despite enthusiastic reviews, there wasn't time for her to change the public impression of Anne Klein and also make a profit.

Mr. Toledo decried the decreasing odds that creativity can flourish within a corporate environment. “Big business people think: ‘Oh, do we have to go with a creative person? Can't we just fill the job with a merchandiser?’ ” he said. “You don't put a scientist into the kitchen of a chef.”

Corporate executives have argued that it is difficult to find a designer who has both creative and managerial skills, and also an ability to understand market directions. They see a shrinking talent pool of potential Tom Fords. “You need somebody who understands the customer base,” said Michael Groveman, the chief executive of Bill Blass. “In today's world, it's not enough to have a critically acclaimed talent. You need a commercial talent as well.”

Ms. Toledo suggested that the problem did not lie with the designers' skill sets.

“Designers can design till the cows come home,” she said, “but if you don't have good business people, good design does not reach its full potential.”

The circumstances may be different enough to discourage generalizing about the fate of fashion, but they do illustrate a deeper regard for commerce than for creativity. Such an impression is also left by the [Liz Claiborne](#) company's recent decision to downgrade Dana Buchman from an upscale department store label to one sold at [Kohl's](#); or the persistent sense in [John Galliano's](#) ready-to-wear collections for Dior that the designer is checking off a list: four coats, six suits, three day dresses, 19 handbags, et cetera.

At Anne Klein, Peter Boneparth, the executive who had championed Ms. Toledo, resigned from Jones after a disagreement with its board, leaving the expensive strategy of building a designer brand without an effective proponent. Jones cut its losses. At Ungaro, Mr. Dundas, whose sexpot sequins were championed by the severely styled editors of several French magazines but less appreciated by a more sober American audience, left in July after the company changed the stylist for his shows.

Meanwhile, the announcement three weeks ago that Mr. Andersson (formerly of Marni) had been dropped at Chloé and replaced by Hannah MacGibbon, an assistant, did not surprise anyone who ever wondered if a square peg would fit a round hole.

“The problem is that the talent pool is too young for some of these big positions,” said Kim Vernon, a luxury brand consultant. “They never learned how to be creative and design into a business.”

What concerns Ms. Vernon is that there are fewer seasoned designers than available positions. Ungaro, a company with \$250 million in sales and numerous licenses to support, raised eyebrows when it replaced Mr. Dundas with Mr. Cortazar, a 23-year-old design prodigy. As Mounir Moufarrige, the chief executive of Ungaro, told Women’s Wear Daily at the time, “The brand has aged, and it needs buzz — and fast.”

Mr. Cortazar is no dummy. He recognizes the potential peril in his decision to move to Paris only eight months after moving to New York. But the opportunity was too good to miss. “This is on my shoulders,” he said. “But there has been such a revolving door at Ungaro that I think the owners feel this is a time to nurture someone and make it work. All that jumping around was hurting the company.”

At Ferré, the circumstances are more complicated. The company may have moved too quickly in naming a successor less than three months after Mr. Ferré died last summer. Mr. Ferré was revered in Milan, most dearly by the employees who remained loyal to his company and did not entirely welcome Mr. Nilsson. In fact, several of them were crying when the new designer was introduced.

According to three employees at Ferré, who did not want their names to be used because they are forbidden to talk about the circumstances that led to Mr. Nilsson’s dismissal, it quickly became clear that the changes Mr. Nilsson wanted to make were not in line with their ideal of the architectural drama of Ferré. He had asked for creative control over certain aspects of the house, including its men’s wear and myriad licenses, for children’s clothes and fur coats, they said, and so they iced him out.

Although his departure from Ferré was indeed noteworthy for its haste, it lacked the Shakespearean undertones of his experience at Blass, where a colleague had been designing an alternative collection simultaneously to his, then secretly showed it to retailers before Mr. Nilsson was dismissed.

“Maybe these companies are feeling they need to radically change to survive,” said Kim Hastreiter, an editor of Paper magazine. “It’s a defensive position instead of an offensive position. They are not willing to give it the long haul.”

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