

Luxury goods

Inside the world of luxury headhunting

Hiring a creative director requires spycraft as well as luck



Alessandro Michele, Gucci Creative Director has helped bring record profits to parent company Kering © John Phillips/Getty Images

10 HOURS AGO by: **Harriet Agnew**

When Berluti’s chief executive, Antoine Arnault, was looking for a new creative director to reinvigorate the brand, a chance introduction to Colombia-born [Haider Ackermann \(https://www.ft.com/content/e3ff7060-b87d-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62\)](https://www.ft.com/content/e3ff7060-b87d-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62) turned out to be a stroke of luck. Mr Arnault and his team had between them conducted 50 or so interviews but had not found the right person.

Mr Arnault recalls that when he met Mr Ackermann, “we had a two-hour coffee and we just clicked.” Mr Ackermann’s catwalk debut was well received, which Mr Arnault is hoping will translate into sales. He says: “Haider doesn’t think of himself as an artist, he thinks of himself as a designer. He understands the importance of commerciality.”

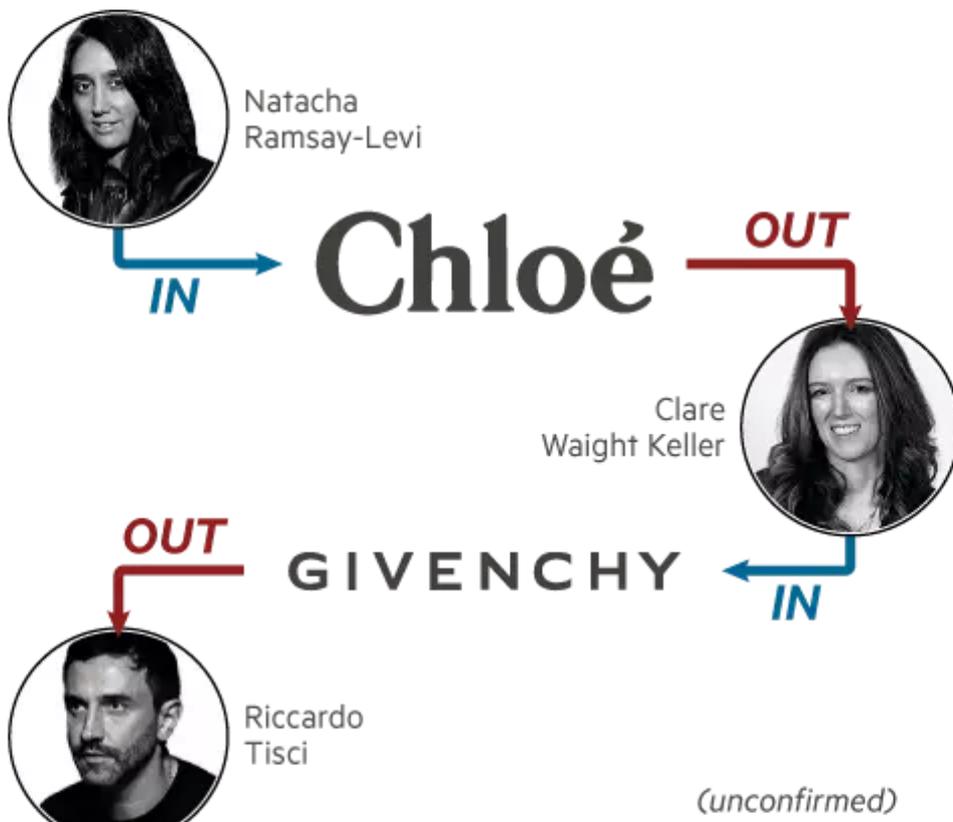
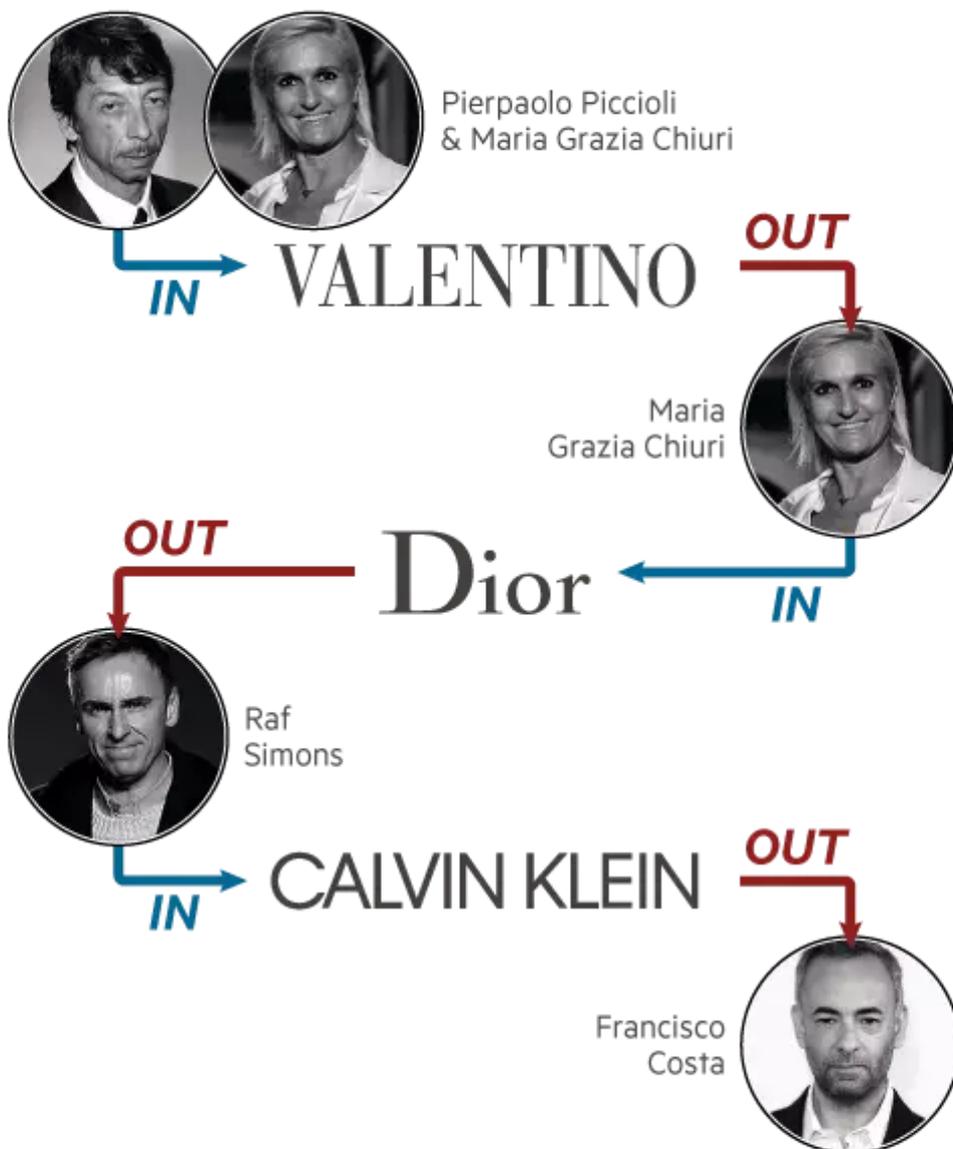
It was a similar story at [Gucci \(http://markets.ft.com/data/equities/tearsheet/summary?s=us:GUCG\)](http://markets.ft.com/data/equities/tearsheet/summary?s=us:GUCG). When its chief executive Marco Bizzarri was working his way through

Gucci's senior staff to introduce himself, he met Alessandro Michele, number two to the creative director who had just left the company. A half-hour meeting turned into four hours, and such was the chemistry between the two — and Mr Bizzarri's belief in the low-profile Mr Michele's creative vision — that he quickly arranged a meeting with François-Henri Pinault, chief executive of Gucci's parent Kering. They tore up the official shortlist and Mr Michele has helped fuel the [strongest revenue growth \(https://www.ft.com/content/c2560660-29d7-11e7-9ec8-168383da43b7\)](https://www.ft.com/content/c2560660-29d7-11e7-9ec8-168383da43b7)h at Kering since 2012.

But as much as luxury brands may like to project the atmosphere of alchemy which promoted Mr Michele and hired Mr Ackermann, they normally take a much more rigorous approach to headhunting. The appointment of a new chief creative officer — a move made in the past year by luxury houses including Givenchy, Oscar de la Renta, Dior and Calvin Klein — often marks the culmination of a process that has begun years earlier.

The task starts well before the jobs come available. Luxury conglomerates such as LVMH and Kering track fledgling designers in Paris, Milan, New York and London before they have even graduated, in a range of disciplines including fashion, graphic and industrial design. Karen Harvey, chief executive of Karen Harvey Consulting in New York, which headhunts for luxury brands, says: “Many people we place after knowing them for many years. You develop five, 10, 15-year relationships with people and you become intimate with what they're good at.” That said, “new discoveries are incredibly important.”

Who's in and who's out? Fashion's headhunting merry-go-round





Source: FT research Photos: Getty

Prominent fashion journalists — such as Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, former French Vogue editor Carine Roitfeld or Suzy Menkes, Vogue’s international editor — may be unofficial talent scouts or sounding boards for Mr Pinault or LVMH’s Bernard Arnault.

[LVMH \(http://markets.ft.com/data/equities/tearsheet/summary?s=fr:MC\)](http://markets.ft.com/data/equities/tearsheet/summary?s=fr:MC) tries to get an early look at potential star designers through the LVMH Prize. Each year it gives prizes to a designer under 40 and three graduates from fashion schools; the awards provide winners with money and an opportunity to work with LVMH. The selection process alone helps LVMH cultivate relationships with designers.

Just as the digital dimension is disrupting how luxury brands sell to their clients, so it is changing how they search for talent and the types of skills they are looking for. Floriane de Saint-Pierre, a consultant to luxury brands and the go-to person when fashion houses need a new designer, has created Eyes on Talents, a digital platform for brands to find creatives. Karen Harvey Consulting is launching something similar this year.

Digital business has also lowered barriers to entry, meaning that there is the potential for designers to build a following through sites like Instagram. “Having digital experience has become a key point in recruiting a creative today,” says Gilles Auguste, a consultant and author on the luxury industry. “Yesterday a designer just made their collection; today it’s on YouTube, on Instagram, and designers can interact with their followers directly.”

Once the fashion houses have found a promising person, they must consider the relationship with the chief executive. Think of designer [Tom Ford \(https://www.ft.com/content/06c14b98-a026-11e6-86d5-4e36b35c3550\)](https://www.ft.com/content/06c14b98-a026-11e6-86d5-4e36b35c3550) and chief executive Domenico De Sole, Gucci’s great pioneers in the 1990s. “The dynamic between the chief creative talent and the CEO is tantamount to ongoing success or failure,” says Michael Boroian, president of executive search firm Sterling International.

Negative examples include Hedi Slimane, who parted ways with Saint Laurent then sued owner Kering, and Dior's Raf Simons, who blamed his departure on a relentless working environment.

Another prerequisite is that the right designer, however located, needs to have an elemental understanding of their era. "I don't think you can relaunch a brand just by putting in a creative force if the brand is not [then] connected with today," says Ms Saint-Pierre.

The past looms as large as the present. "You have to have known what the company was before you can decide where to take it," says Ms Harvey.

Despite the time and expense which go into searching, an indefinable alchemy of factors does play its part. "At the end of the day it's about societal intuition combined with culture," says Ms Saint-Pierre. "The motto of Steve Jobs has never been more true: think different."

The Financial Times [Business of Luxury Summit \(https://live.ft.com/Events/2017/FT-Business-of-Luxury\)](https://live.ft.com/Events/2017/FT-Business-of-Luxury) takes place in Lisbon May 14-16 2017

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Explore the Special Report

READ MORE

Buoyant growth returns across the world, lifting luxury industry



Currently reading:

Inside the world of luxury headhunting

Luxury brands look for new models in a radical era

Buoyant growth returns across the world, lifting luxury industry

Dining is about experience, not expense, says Nuno Mendes

Designers must succeed on the catwalk and in the boardroom

Chinese bloggers bridge the gap between brands and buyers

Special Reports

Special Report Responsible Investing

Fears over farm links to pharma

Overuse of antibiotics in food supply chains poses financial risks

Special Report Combating Rare Diseases

Orphan drugs attract rich returns for pharmaceuticals

Scientific advances and legal incentives have encouraged investment
