

ready to dare

Favoured by First Ladies and film stars, Oscar de la Renta embraces change but refuses to follow trends. He's guided by a simple philosophy: making women look beautiful

Oscar de la Renta likes to say fashion isn't fashion until a woman puts it on. Even as a man who has devoted his career to perfecting the silhouette of a dress, the angle of a ruffle or the placement of beading painstakingly worked by hand, he concedes it's the wearer's personality that ultimately injects a garment with life. But in the 43 years de la Renta has been designing his own line, he's also watched fashion morph from a select world of haute couture and ready-to-wear into a global business driven by the engines of celebrity, fashion magazines, stylists, television (hello *Sex and the City*) and the web. Today, fashion is not fashion until the woman, the internet, the red carpet and *Vogue's* Anna Wintour all collude.

Yet however you define the equation, de la Renta has adopted and adjusted to this new world order, which allows him to belong to both design camps resident on Seventh Avenue – the old and the new. As *The New York Times* fashion critic Cathy Horyn wrote last year: "Mr de la Renta has been making clothes since the early 1960s. He has done everything

and dressed everyone who has mattered. What is remarkable is that he remains contemporary, and without the old angst."

"He is one of the unsung heroes of fashion," says John Mincarelli of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. "Not only because of his longevity but because he has stayed true to his philosophy – to make women look beautiful. His designs are as close to couture quality as you can get in ready-to-wear."

By reputation, Oscar de la Renta is fashion's cross-society, cross-generational, cross-political go-to guy. In the same month you might see Sarah Jessica Parker or Cameron Diaz at an event in runway Oscar, the US President's daughter Jenna Bush in wedding Oscar, ladies-who-lunch in his daywear, young socialites at fundraisers in his ball gowns and the First Lady looking Oscar-chic yet Washington-approved. (How the press loved it in 2006 when four women, including Laura Bush, wore the same de la Renta red jacket and skirt to a White House reception. Bush smartly went upstairs and changed.)

"Nancy Reagan had a wonderful figure," de la Renta once told the *Times* of dressing presidential wives. "Hillary Clinton was more difficult. Remember, she was coming from Arkansas. Mrs Reagan was a movie star – she knew how to dress."

Such are expectations that when he makes a perceived

PHOTOGRAPHY: COREYS OUTLINE/EMÉ

Story Sharon Krum Photograph Noe Dewitt



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● The 76-year-old designer, pictured at his New York store, is happy to say he has never worked so hard in his life

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misstep – his brown silk jersey gown with metallic bolero for Oscar-winner Jennifer Hudson in 2007 was not well received – it's duly noted.

To look at de la Renta's designs is to see not one signature but a number, all unified by his love of craftsmanship, honed working for Lanvin and Balenciaga early in his career. The fitted cocktail dress in silk or taffeta. The flamenco ruffle, the tulle, the wide-skirt ball gown. Fur trim. Hand embroidery. Saturated colour and bold prints. Feather and sequin embellishment. His aesthetic is opulent, luxurious, overtly feminine (as opposed to sexual) and entrance-making. A counterpoint to the expanding universe of fast, cheap fashion. De la Renta has admitted he struggled at the height of women's liberation when women embraced the pant suit, and again when minimalism was the flavour of the early '90s.

"Oscar doesn't do trends," says Mincarelli. "It's all about consistency. But he is sly enough to

reflect change in very subtle ways. He is always refining proportions every season, something a lot of young designers don't understand. There is something to be said for a man who takes a ruffle or flounce then cuts it against the grain. He is an expert colourist – the way he mixes colour is unexpected but never jarring. They intrigue, and I think that's mastery."

De la Renta is 76 and, at a time when contemporaries such as Valentino have hung up their needle and thread, and Donna Karan, Calvin Klein and YSL have corporate parents, his not only remains a family business (doing upwards of \$US100 million wholesale) but is embarking on a brand expansion, both in terms of product – bridal, menswear (imminent), accessories, home, eyewear, fragrance, jewellery (including a new collaboration with jewellery designer and former YSL muse Loulou de la Falaise) – and geography.

"Our interest is in markets around the globe, and the Asia/Pacific region is one of those," says CEO Alex Bolen, who is de la Renta's son-in-law. The label is now in 75 outlets around the world, with stores in Madrid, Athens and Moscow scheduled to open this year. "In Australia, we have been in discussions with [luxury-label boutique owner] Belinda Seper. I hope we can develop a great business with her. She has a very interesting eye."

"Japan and China definitely hold interest but the most immediate for us is India. The heart and soul of the firm is cocktail dresses and we need to go into markets where there is a culture of dressing up. In India there is a fashion-conscious consumer and her affluence is rising. Oscar's design aesthetic is influenced by India."

De la Renta, who won the Council of Fashion Designers of America annual award in 2000 (and again in 2007, tied with Proenza Schouler), was born in the Dominican Republic but moved to Spain at 18 to study painting. He found work as a fashion illustrator and eventually landed an apprenticeship with Balenciaga. In 1960 he moved to Paris to join Antonio Castillo as a couture assistant at Lanvin but decamped for New York in '63, interested in ready-to-wear. He worked at Elizabeth Arden for two years developing a line before going out on his own. Couture, however, was always in his DNA. Between 1993 and 2002, along with his New York-based signature line, he designed a haute couture collection for Balmain.

In the new century, when focus returned solely to his own brand, he also started to court a younger customer. Park Avenue's twenty and thirty-somethings weren't lunching but working and/or fundraising. Stepdaughter Eliza Bolen, who works for the firm as creative director of licensing, would help him tap into that world. It's been said she tells him "my friends will never wear this", prompting a new sketch. Adopted son Moises works in the design studio, making it a complete family enterprise.

It's a tricky question to ask but, given his age, does de la Renta have a succession plan? "The answer is no," says Alex Bolen. "Oscar is deeply engaged in all things we are doing here and seems to be enjoying it. When he is focused on making clothes, there is nobody better. Yes, some designers have retired, but look at Karl Lagerfeld. I am pleased to report Oscar has no plans to do anything other than what he is doing."

Which is, despite the economic downturn, growing the brand to become a global player. Bolen says sales in 2008 are still strong: "Retail wisdom suggests when times are more difficult

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people gravitate towards tried and true brands, and we may see that." An online shopping site launches shortly and a further increase in sales is anticipated. "The website is going to be our most important store," continues Bolen. "The power of the internet as a way to communicate with customers is extraordinary. It's a way to engage with Oscar de la Renta and we want to be out in front with this."

He is more circumspect when talk turns to licensing, often the cash cow of a fashion business. "Licensing is important but something we approach with caution." (An agreement with one manufacturer for O Oscar women's sportswear ended recently.) "Certain businesses, like home products, are logical for licensing, but others, like bridal or the fur business, should be done in-house," he explains of the priority to control merchandising and quality.

When de la Renta went solo four decades ago, his client was a very different kind of woman, one who took her cues from the designer. Now her taste and sensibility is king, not the brand. "Our competition today is everyone," says Bolen. "From European and American luxury brands to [budget multi-store brand] H&M, our customer is everybody's customer. People are extremely savvy these days, very thoughtful about how they're dressing. It's made the world a more competitive place for us. It's good. It keeps us sharp."

Design aside, de la Renta has always garnered attention for his genteel, courtly, Latin manner. He's an adopted New Yorker, but not a Noo Yawker. "He's charming without being unctuous," says Mincarelli. "A beautifully groomed man with a demeanour absolutely right for his customer." ❖



● Oscar de la Renta's "essence of femininity" on show on American runways in April.

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IN HIS OWN WORDS: Oscar de la Renta speaks with Sharon Krum for WISH

Q: You have said "fashion is only fashion once a woman puts it on". Really?
A: No question about it. Fashion is not what happens on the runway. It's about when a woman buys your clothes.
Q: How did your time with Balenciaga, Lanvin and Balmain influence your own work?
A: Working with such incredible talents at these world-renowned fashion houses, I learnt about the extraordinary artistry and immense skill involved in couture. Today I apply some of that same detailing and craftsmanship to my designs.
Q: Has your design aesthetic shifted or is there a direct link between your creations of the 1960s and '70s and today?
A: I have been trying to do the same thing for the past 40 years, which is to make a woman look her very best. I've tried to capture the

essence of femininity. I have never worked as hard in my life as I do now, but I love every moment. Designing clothes is my passion – without it I would feel deeply deprived.
Q: Is ready-to-wear still the aspect of the business that most interests you?
A: Each aspect of the Oscar de la Renta brand is equally important. There are times when I focus on one area more than another but I always devote the same amount of energy and creativity to the design process. Every line is a reflection of my style and sensibility.
Q: Can you quantify the benefit of dressing celebrities? Is the exposure important to you?
A: The exposure from a celebrity wearing my clothes or accessories helps create awareness of my designs, highlighting them for a much broader audience.

Q: What are your considerations when designing for the likes of high-profile figures such as Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush?
A: A political figure should dress well, for their sake and our sake. Today, for a woman in the public sphere, looking feminine is an asset.
Q: Of the next generation of young fashion designers, who do you most admire?
A: There are so many new and talented designers producing beautiful, fresh, feminine collections.
Q: Women's lives and the fashion industry have changed a lot since you began designing. How do you explain your continued success?
A: In the '70s and '80s, the professional woman going into a man's world felt she had to dress in a plain, muted way. Now she knows she can look great and that being a woman is an asset. But this is something I've always known. Perhaps this is my time.

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