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Decline And Fall of Helmut Lang

By ERIC WILSON

ABOUT Helmut Lang's major influence over the fashion of the last 15 years there is little doubt. Consumers can thank him for flat-front pants, the number of buttons on men's suits -- first three, more recently two -- and the spiraling prices of designer jeans and T-shirts. An entire culture of prestige denim was born from Mr. Lang's low-rise jeans with intricate washes, for which he dared to charge close to \$200 in the 1990's.

So powerful was his creative leadership that when he said he would show his collections in Manhattan ahead of European rivals, most American designers followed suit, and New York Fashion Week was permanently rescheduled.

Yet this designer, who was once a driving force of minimalism, who was profiled in *The New Yorker* and who advertised his name in thick black letters on the top of taxicabs, has found himself in a state of free fall, with his empire being dismantled piece by piece.

Four months ago Mr. Lang left the company that bears his name after long-running discontent with the Prada Group, which owns it. In early May, Prada began talks to sell off the business, describing it as unprofitable. This week Prada told managers at the designer's stores in New York and Paris they would be shuttered in July.

Mr. Lang, 49, has been able to hold on to the oceanfront mansion in East Hampton, N.Y., he bought for \$15.5 million after first selling Prada a stake in his business. (He outbid Jerry Seinfeld for the property.) But as he weighs his future, he has told friends, he may never return to fashion. "I don't think he will ever take up the form again," said Elfie Semotan, a photographer who has known him since he began designing in Vienna in the 1980's.

When asked of his plans at a recent benefit in Manhattan for the International Center of Photography, Mr. Lang smiled in his typically opaque way and said only one word, "Patience."

In a sense his ejection from fashion's high table is a familiar story: designers have long sold control of their labels for cash to grow, then clashed with the new bosses and had to leave. Hervé Léger was fired from Hervé Léger. Joseph Abboud quit Joseph Abboud. Jil Sander quit Jil Sander, twice.

But unlike some others, according to executives who worked with Mr. Lang, he was given broad latitude to run his design studio and to decide how to develop his brand, including unconventional marketing like advertisements in *National Geographic*. Success, however, did not follow. Sales fell 60 percent over five years, Prada reported, from more than \$100 million in 1999, when it bought the company, to \$37 million in 2003.

Publicly, Prada executives attributed the slide to declining tourism related to fear of terrorism and severe acute respiratory syndrome and to the strong euro, but not to what some retailers now acknowledge, that Mr. Lang's dedication to minimalism was absolute even as consumer tastes evolved.

"Look at Dolce & Gabbana, Cavalli, Dior and Chloé," said Carla Sozzani, the owner of 10 Corso Como, an influential store in Milan, where Prada is based. "That has nothing to do with Helmut Lang. The whole concept of minimalism was very good in the early 90's, but then for the past several years people were not interested in that look."

Another reason for the decline in sales was Prada's cancellation of a license to an outside company to make Helmut Lang jeans, which were responsible for more than half of the brand's revenues. In their trademark dark blue or black, the jeans were sold at more than 700 stores around the world. The decision to cut back production was in line with the dominant philosophy of building a designer label through expensive leather handbags and shoes and opening chic retail stores.

Mr. Lang said at the time the move would protect the exclusivity of his name. That was the mantra of the luxury industry circa 2000, as intoned by LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton and other companies.

But in reducing the production of Helmut Lang denim, Prada was in a sense killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. "This may have been good for the image, but maybe not good for the business," Ms. Sozzani said. "The entire business was based on the jeans."

Matters were not helped by Mr. Lang's failure to create an "it" handbag. A Helmut Lang fragrance introduced in 2000 was also a disappointment. In the end, friends of Mr. Lang contend, Prada did not invest enough in the brand or fulfill its promise of opening Helmut Lang retail stores. They described how the designer would discuss plans with Prada's chief executive, Patrizio Bertelli, and then not hear anything for months. Prada executives faulted Mr. Lang's exacting control and said it hindered their ability to do business.

"Personally I think that what happened is not the problem of Helmut Lang or Prada," said Franco Pene, the chairman of Gibo, which produced Mr. Lang's runway collections when the label was sold to Prada. "Everyone did the same mistake then, whether it was Prada or Gucci or LVMH. Everyone thought they had such a good formula to develop designer businesses. They thought it was possible to replicate a successful business model with new acquisitions. But it did not happen."

For much of the association of Mr. Lang and Mr. Bertelli their forceful personalities were evenly matched. When Jil Sander resigned from her company the first time, in a spat with Mr. Bertelli over the products he expected her to design, Mr. Lang said publicly he had "no problem" with Mr. Bertelli.

That may have been because Mr. Lang, who is described by friends as extremely loyal, divided his responsibilities and Mr. Bertelli's between business and design, making no complaints if he disagreed with the executive's strategies. Mr. Bertelli has been painted in profiles as prone to spontaneous decisions and to turning his all-consuming attention from project to project, whether it is the opening of a huge Prada store or an America's Cup campaign. He declined to comment on his strategy running Helmut Lang or to say if the label was for sale.

Jason Jacobs, a Prada spokesman, said the company had been in touch with parties that have expressed interest in the business. "Our objective for Helmut Lang is to position it for the long-term success of the brand and to generate positive returns from a business perspective," Mr. Jacobs said.

Much as Mr. Lang rarely submitted to interviews or attended fashion world parties when he was most in demand -- he did not show up at the Council of Fashion Designers of America awards

ceremony in 2000, when he was nominated in three categories -- he has remained silent about Prada since his departure. He has cultivated the position of an outsider since his early days in Vienna, more interested in D.J.'s and artists like Jenny Holzer and Louise Bourgeois than the fashion world. The austere clothes he designed conveyed a message of icy superiority to match his behavior and mystique.

"He loves fashion, and in a weird way he loves that world, but he's not the most social person on the earth," said Kate Betts, the editor of the Style & Design supplements of Time magazine. "I don't think he cares for that part of fashion."

When Mr. Lang showed his first collection in Paris in 1986, his spare structured designs ushered in a new wave of minimalism, which made him an instant star. His influence only grew after he moved to New York in 1998 and announced he would show his collection in early September, ahead of the European runway shows and those of American designers, who had traditionally followed Milan and Paris.

Almost immediately other American designers followed, and New York Fashion Week was moved up six weeks.

Four years later, when Mr. Lang decamped from the New York shows to return to showing in Paris, he left a creative void. But his influence was already waning as a new establishment of talent came to the fore in Paris, designers like Alber Elbaz, Nicolas Ghesquiere and Olivier Theyskens.

Today, after so many high-profile departures by fashion designers -- Ms. Sander, Tom Ford, even Wolfgang Joop -- retailers and consumers seem to have grown weary. There is not much evidence of mourning over Mr. Lang's disappearance from the business. There seems to be no run on his white rope dresses and seersucker jackets currently in stores, the last Helmut Lang collection designed by Mr. Lang.

"The general consensus on the floor with the staff and customers is that they are not buying frantically Helmut's things, but just want to know what he is doing," said Julie Gilhart, the fashion director of Barneys New York. "We're being trained that these kinds of shifting around of designers just sort of happens."

Because Mr. Lang cultivated the image of a fashion designer whose success was based on appearing to be above fashion some of his admirers believe his place in fashion history will be similar to that of a rock star, more of a legend than a failure.

"Helmut made me think that to be a fashion designer was the worst thing in the world," said Ms. Semotan, the photographer. She described him as an attentive friend whose public persona of chilliness has little to do with the real man. When Ms. Semotan's husband, Kurt Kocherscheidt, an artist, died of a heart attack, Mr. Lang became a father figure to their young son, and he helped Ms. Semotan regain her confidence, casting her in his runway shows along with an assortment of characters of unconventional beauty.

She said she was not surprised when Mr. Lang, whom she described as more serious since he sold to Prada, said he would quit.

"When I looked at him working like that, it was really tiring," she said. "I knew he loved his work, that he would go on doing it, but at the same time I knew he did not want to sacrifice himself completely. He did not want to be owned by the fashion world."

