

LVMH seizes spotlight with Philo's return to the catwalk

Vanessa Friedman

As the women's ready-to-wear season began yesterday in New York, LVMH, the world's biggest luxury-goods group, ensured all attention was on Paris by announcing the appointment of Phoebe Philo as creative director of Celine, the French fashion house. It is the style equivalent of a vice-presidential bombshell.

Ms Philo, who is British, was the designer responsible for putting Chloé, owned by LVMH rival Richemont, on to the path toward becoming a billion-dollar brand, but she resigned in 2006 to spend more time with her family.

The Celine appointment marks her long-awaited return to the industry, as well as a change in policy at LVMH, according to Robert Burke, chairman of the brand consultancy Robert Burke Associates.

"It's an obvious shift in overall direction," said Mr Burke. "Consumers today are more educated than they've ever been and they want to know who's behind the label."

Pierre-Yves Roussel, chief executive of LVMH's Fashion Group, which includes the conglomerate's smaller brands such as Givenchy, Pucci, Loewe and Marc Jacobs, said: "LVMH is fully committed to developing the potential of the brand within the group."

After the departure of Tom Ford from Gucci in 2004, strategy in the fashion industry moved from one focused on high-profile creative talents to one focused on the brands themselves.

Little-known designers were hired such as Frida Giannini, Mr Ford's successor at Gucci, and Ms Philo's predecessor at Celine, Ivana Omazic.

The last time Celine had a recognisable designer at its helm was four years ago, when Michael Kors resigned. Neither his successor, Robert Menechetti, nor Ms Omazic, managed to turn the house into one of LVMH's "star brands".

Ms Philo's appointment is part of a general reshuffle. On the corporate side, Marco Gobbetti, the chief executive of Givenchy, will move to Celine to become president, and Serge Brunschwig, the current chief executive of Celine, will become chief operating officer of Christian Dior Couture, one of LVMH's flagship brands. Still more changes are coming, as Mr Roussel needs to fill the design chair at Pucci, which has been left empty since Matthew Williamson's departure earlier this summer.

"Pierre-Yves Roussel obviously has a business strategy he wants to implement to turn these brands around, and we're just starting to see it," said Mr Burke.

Ms Philo's first collection for Celine will be shown next February during Paris Fashion Week.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 5 2008, Companies & Markets, p.18.