‘No Pain, No Gain. No Risk, No Champagne.’

Behind the scenes with the most behind-the-scenes man in fashion, Etienne Russo, show producer for Dries Van Noten, Dior Men, Chanel, Hermès, Givenchy, Miu Miu and more.

Franco Pagetti for The New York Times

10 Gift Articles

By Kerry Olsen

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MILAN — There’s a new kid in the old part of town. Etienne Russo, the founder of the creative agency Villa Eugénie, and mastermind of some of the world’s most memorable fashion shows, has opened an outpost here.

Remember the Chanel rocket show and that supermarket set? Oh, and the hay-filled barn? He had a hand in them, as he did with other such large-scale designer narratives, transforming runway outfits into phantasmagoria: a life-size reproduction of Christian Dior’s pink house in Normandy, a Dries Van Noten dinner party where guests dined at a banquet table turned catwalk.

Mr. Russo’s new premises are in the tony Palazzo Durini, a storied 17th-century building constructed for the noble Durini family, art patrons and hosts to some of the greatest artists of the Renaissance. A rather understated plaque outside states that the sculptor Antonio Canova had a studio in the building.

The palazzo’s legacy may be memorable, but then so is Mr. Russo’s.

His clients include Chanel, Hermès, Moncler, Miu Miu and Dior Men. He has been plying his trade for some 30 years — that’s about 1,000 shows — ever since Mr. Van Noten, a friend, encouraged him to produce his first show in Paris back in 1991.

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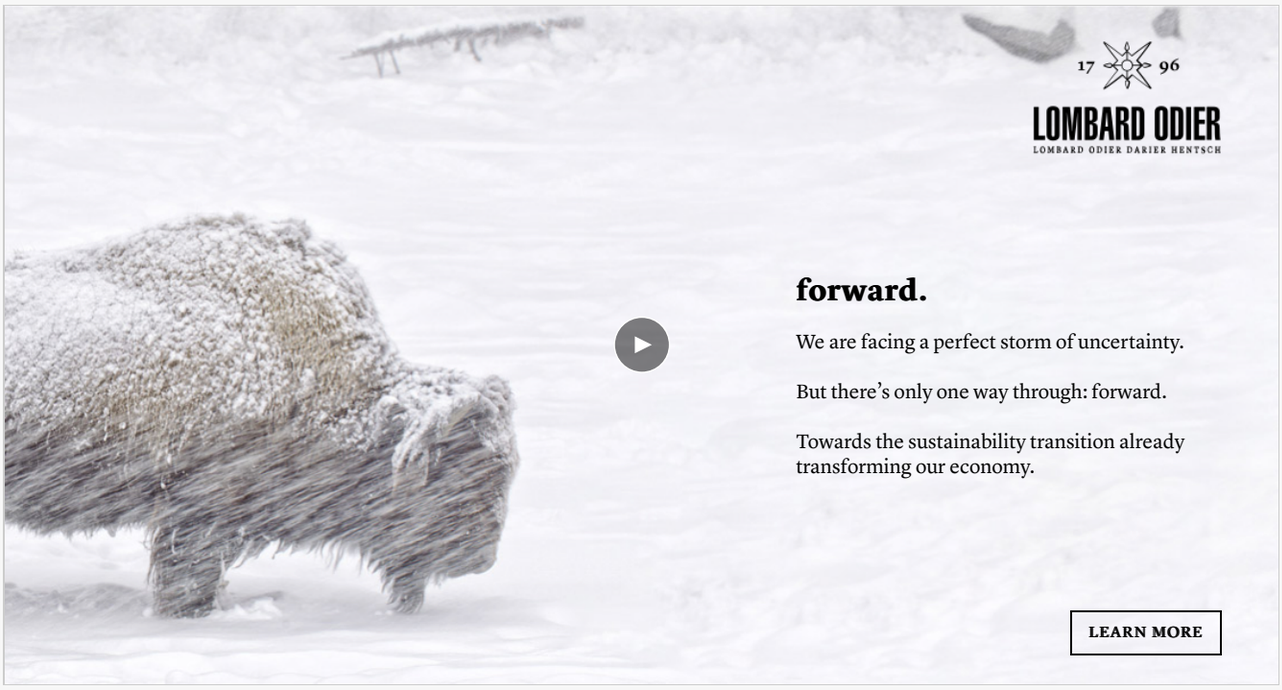

"He was modeling for us, and working in nightclubs, so he knew a lot of people, and a lot about light and sound," Mr. Van Noten said in a video call.

The rooms at Mr. Russo's Villa Eugénie creative agency are a repertoire of curiosities, talismans and chandeliers. Franco Pagetti for The New York Times

Today Mr. Russo's production company and, more lately, digital hub has a team of about 120 employees worldwide and offices in Brussels, Paris, New York and now, Milan.

On a sultry late July afternoon here in Milan, one could hear little other than crickets chirping. Most of the city had fled to the beach. Inside Villa Eugénie, which opened in June, staff members were beavering away in anticipation of the forthcoming fashion weeks. The brief? To mastermind about 11 shows, some of which — Boss, Moncler and Ambush — are part of Milan Fashion Week. More will follow in Paris, including Hermès, Givenchy and Dries Van Noten; he will also help produce Miu Miu and Chanel.

Mr. Russo's showroom is an improbable repertoire of curiosities, talismans and chandeliers, and his client base likewise brims with moods, whims and idiosyncrasies. It's certainly not a job for the fainthearted.

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He installed air-conditioning in the palazzo as quickly as possible and can list the best florists in any given city (although so far, he's not enamored with the local shops in Milan and said that if he had the time, he'd open his own).

A frescoed room painted in the chromatic hues of Tiepolo illustrates his natural reverence for the mise en place. On the table are gleaming pomegranates, compotes of raspberries and, in the corner, a taxidermied ostrich.

Mr. Russo poured iced green tea into porcelain teacups. (He spent formative years modeling in Japan.) Now, at age 65, he retains his striking appearance. He was wearing a Dries Van Noten shirt, an Ann Demeulemeester jacket, loose Balenciaga pants and Rick Owens footwear.

"I'm known for my weird shoes," he said. He often styles his deconstructed, mostly black wardrobe in the manner of a Shinto priest. His hairstyle resembles that of the Austrian artist Egon Schiele in self-portrait.

Mr. Russo pointed out pieces from his treasure trove, including a 1970s-era Pierre Cardin console and a Draga & Aurel light installation. A 1940s framed Moroccan horse saddle and Chinese bar cabinet were procured from Dimore Studio, the Italian design firm founded by Britt Moran and Emiliano Salci known for its thoughtful juxtaposition of elements.

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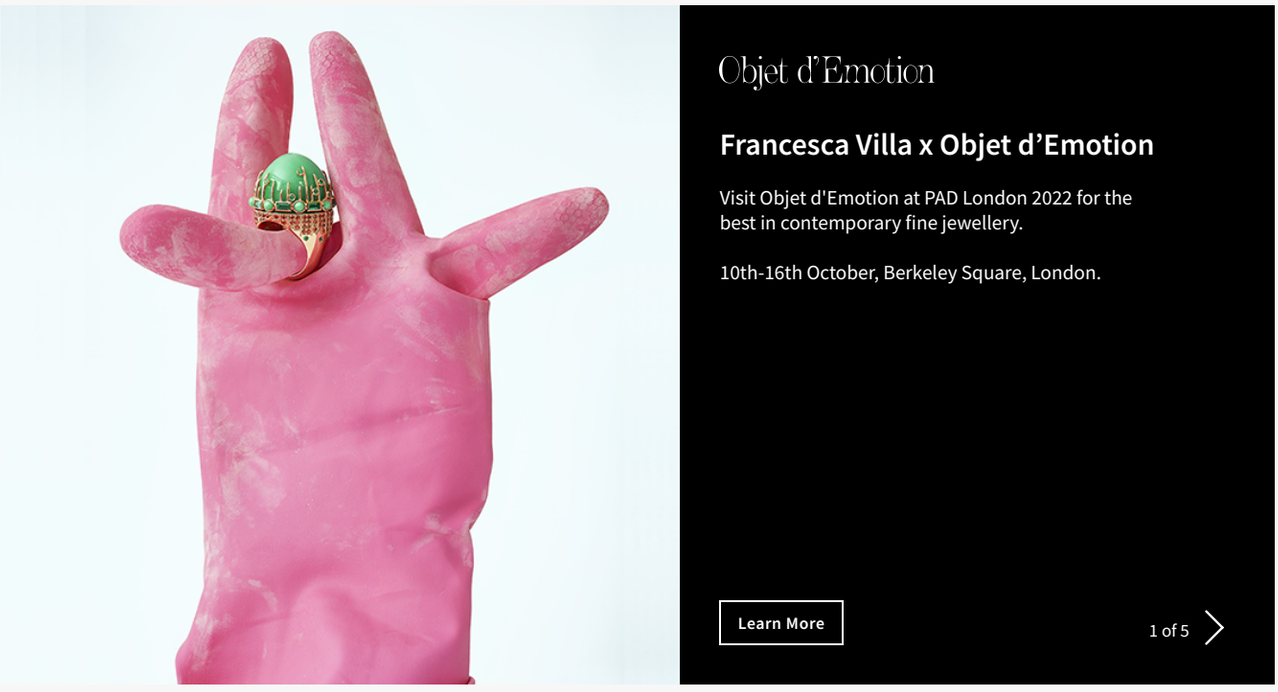
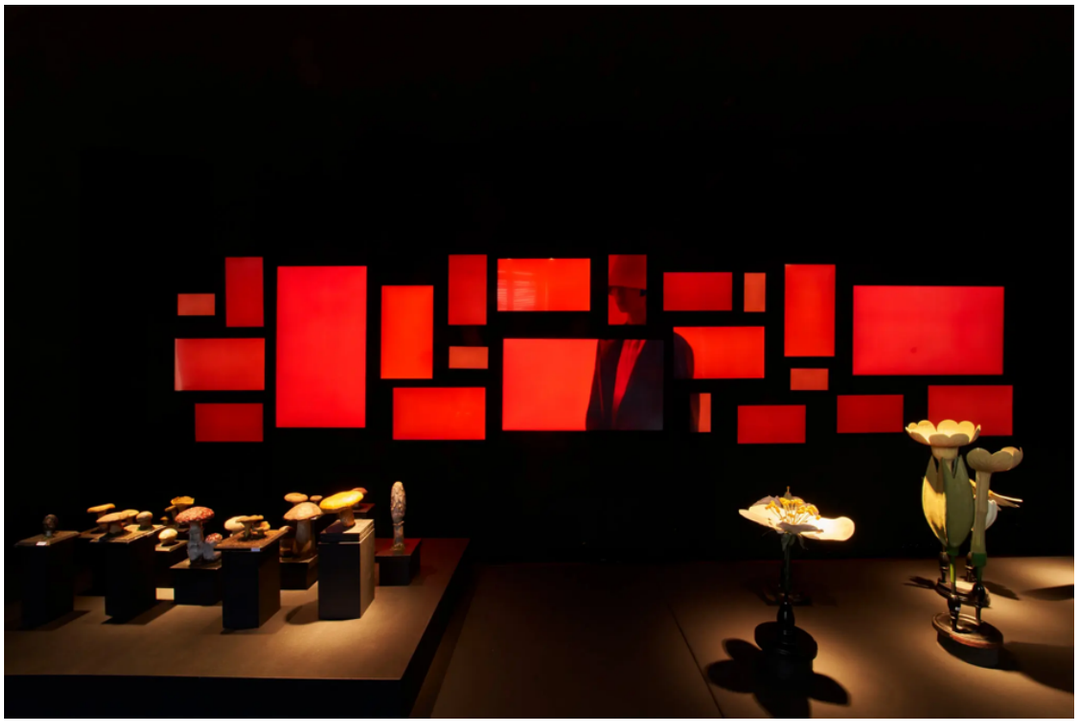


In the lobby, Mr. Russo created a chiaroscuro of light and darkness. Wooden fungi and floral botanical models are illuminated on long benches. Milanese sunshine filters in through venetian blinds, imbuing the place with a louche air.



Wooden fungi and botanical models are illuminated on long benches. Franco Pagetti for The New York Times

"A runway presentation is not always about building sets and catwalks and moving things," Mr. Van Noten said. "It's also creating atmosphere through the layering of sound and lights. Etienne is very good at this."

Before Mr. Russo became a fashion fixture, he was in the kitchen. He worked at high-end restaurants after attending École Hôtelière, a Belgian hospitality school. "When I'd learnt to peel potatoes perfectly, I'd move on to chop parsley and onions," he said, sipping tea. "I learned perseverance."

Mr. Russo, at a Lanvin show in 2014. Villa Eugénie

A few years later, upon meeting the Antwerp Six, the collective of designers who put the Antwerp on the map in the early 1980s, he traded the culinary industry for fashion. He did a short stint as the artistic director of a nightclub in Brussels, which informed his entertainment and showmanship skills.

His Sicilian parents immigrated to Belgium before he was born, which may account for his multilingual abilities. He speaks Italian, French, English and a smattering of Japanese.

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In June he was in Paris, where he produced Kim Jones's spring 2023 show for Dior Men. Models walked a runway between replicas of Monsieur Dior's childhood home and a farmhouse belonging to the painter Duncan Grant in Charleston, England. Vegetation, shipped in, created a lush landscape. Mr. Russo said the greenery was replanted after the show.

Mr. Russo's new Milan outpost is housed in the 17th century Palazzo Durini. Franco Pagetti for The New York Times

For Mr. Van Noten's show decades ago, he laid a grass runway. The morning of the show they woke to find it had turned brown and had to spray-paint it green. Twenty minutes before the show, a panicked Mr. Russo locked himself in the bathroom.

"I was scared, but it was around 30 years ago — there was no social media, and pressure to capture everything," he said. He and Mr. Van Noten have gone on to collaborate on about 125 shows. And he doesn't sweat the small stuff anymore.

"No pain, no gain, no risk, no champagne," Mr. Russo said, laughing.

Like the weather. Often there's no Plan B in case of inclement weather.

"Umbrellas, ponchos … but often we go for it, and if it rains, it rains," he said. "We take risks, but controlled ones."

Mr. Russo describes himself as a sponge, recalling a family trip to Walt Disney World in Florida, where curiosity led him to inspect stage sets. "My daughter said: 'Please stop, Dad. Just enjoy the show.'"

Indeed, fashion weeks demand as much magic as Disney now.

For many shows, runway production usually takes about two and half months but can take up to five. Fees vary widely, but Mr. Russo's agency said that for a show in Europe, fees start at around $15,000 for a fledgling designer to $500,000 and upward for a high-profile brand. He described the creative process between the agency and clients as akin to a Ping-Pong game.

Mr. Russo at work on a Dries Van Noten show in 2002, with Mr. Van Noten, right. Villa Eugénie

Mr. Jones, the Dior Men artistic director, said their working relationship started when he joined Dior in 2018. "I'm often inspired when traveling and sketch things on the back of a napkin." Such scribbles are then dispatched digitally to Mr. Russo.

Flexibility is a must. Samples may return from the atelier and the look or feel may derail a designer's original concept, as may a stylist's interpretation. And it's not only constant adaptation. Cultural appropriation, and sustainability, are also top of mind these days.

In Paris, Mr. Russo connects with La Réserve des Arts, an association that enables artists to construct a circular economy and reuse materials. Mr. Jones said that Dior sets are often dismantled and reused as décor throughout the global network of stores.

"Fashion shows can't be done in a completely sustainable way, but we can try to be as sustainable as possible," Mr. Van Noten said. He said he no longer wanted "synthetic carpets even when they can be recycled."

"Designers must create emotion in different ways now," he added. "We don't have to create things with throwaway elements, so no more fake floors and things like that."

Mr. Russo recalled working with Karl Lagerfeld from 1999 until his death in 2019. Mr. Lagerfeld, he remembered, would respond to criticism of the elaborate sets with: "'What I throw out the window, it comes back through the front door, and even more.'"

Despite the transient nature of the business, Mr. Russo gives the impression he has a historical fancy. When asked about his most memorable projects, he described one with a museum.

"Few know we worked for years with scientists at Manchester Museum," he said of a former commission to revamp its mammals gallery in the north of England.

"Learning about creatures from 400,000,000 years ago, it made me consider, where are we now?"

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