

Schön!

power of ten | its contest 2026



From Matthieu Blazy at CHANEL to Demna at GUCCI, there are a score of designers working in the upper echelons of fashion who share something in common... something from their past... something perhaps you didn't know about them. You will find them in senior positions at Alexander McQueen, Courrèges, Louis Vuitton and Prada, or with eponymous labels such as Cecile Bahnsen and Mark Fast. But no, this is not a sartorial secret society, nor some couture conspiracy. They are, in fact, all former finalists of the ITS (International Talent Support) Contest and the past they share is two weeks spent in Trieste, of all places. So far, so intriguing. Schön! headed to the Italian city to investigate ITS' uncanny ability to predict fashion's future.

"Without creativity, we are going nowhere," states Carlo Capasa, Chairman of Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana and a jurist at this year's contest. "ITS is a quality platform promoting creativity, an extraordinary platform for empowering young people... and for making visible what often stays invisible."

Uncovering the threads of nascent talent is something that Fondazione ITS has been doing rather successfully for almost a quarter of a century, and this is where the number ten becomes significant. It sounds like something from 'The Da Vinci Code', but the I:C 10 x 10 x 10 Award is not that difficult to get your head around.

Each year, fashion schools from around the world submit the portfolios of their most promising students. The 2026 edition, for example, elicited around 740 applications from an astonishing 74 countries. ITS shortlists them to 80 and then an impressive panel of judges, from CEOs to academics, stylists and fashion commentators, steps in to streamline these to the ten finalists who will be transported to Trieste.

There, the chosen ten embark on a ten-day creative residency packed with industry visits, workshops and mentoring opportunities from the likes of Fondazione Salvatore Ferragamo, Pitti Immagine, OTS, EssilorLuxottica and Swatch. But there are also team-building sessions making traditional Italian slippers or fresh pasta. "The word collaboration is stronger than the word competition," Barbara Franchin, President and Artistic Director of Fondazione ITS, explains, and it's not a cliché to say that everyone's a winner here. Each finalist walks away with €10,000.

The finalists' work is also exhibited for ten months at the ITS Arcademy (a name derived from the words arc, academy and archive), Italy's first museum devoted to contemporary fashion. In 2026, that will be in the form of the 'Rise and Shine' exhibition, which opens this week.

Beyond those ten months, ITS preserves the portfolios of all the works it receives, be they garments, accessories, portfolios or photographs. The archive now contains around 15,000 items. Only a fraction of these can be displayed at the museum at any given time, in the glass display cases or in projections or even in books whose blank pages magically populate with illustrations as you turn them. And then there are bookshelves lined with thousands of seemingly unmarked binders. How on earth do the archivists even begin to identify them? Well, there are codes, even if they're not obvious to the untrained eye.

Every page and every item of each portfolio is also scanned to form a digital library and a report titled 'The Seismographer' is produced annually, reflecting the influences shaping that year's young designers. In 2026, anti-fascism stood out as the dominant theme.

Franchin founded ITS in 2002, which she describes as a time of instability and closing borders in the wake of 9/11. The idea was to create a contest that opened some of those borders for creative talent from around the world. Now, 24 years on, we are again facing a difficult time, which she says the young talent clearly feel and interpret in their work. This year's title 'Rise and Shine' is a call to tackle those challenges.

After a tour of the museum, it's time to meet the finalists, who are aged between 22 and 33. They are: **Stan Peeters** and **Chloë Reners** from Belgium, **Yi Ding** and **Wenji Wu** from China, **Darius Betschart**, **Steven Chevallier** and **Tidjane Tall** from France, **Jamie O'Grady** and **William Palmer** from the United Kingdom and **Anna Maria Vescovi** from the United States. Their diverse inspirations range from the privilege of pseudo skate culture to a 1950s kleptomaniac Sicilian nonna, but make no mistake, the ideas are well developed, and the bar is very, very high.

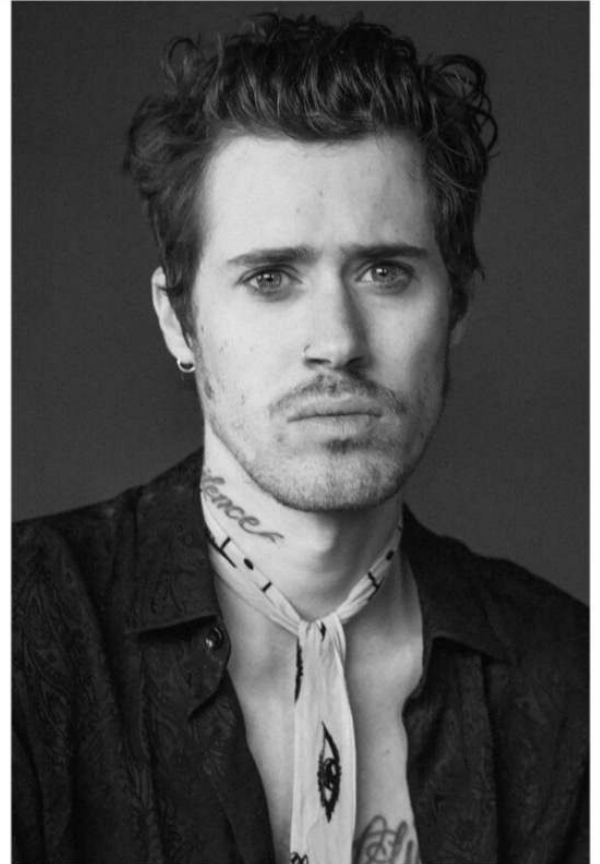


These are arguably the crème de la crème of emerging talent and it's therefore no surprise that several of them have already secured positions as designers at **Balenciaga**, **Dior** and **Schiaparelli**. O'Grady, who is the one finalist focusing on accessories (footwear) is working at **New Balance** and Palmer has a growing number of prestigious international retailers stocking his own brand.

Chloë Reners, meanwhile, is dreaming big. She tells us that she hopes one day to head her own label or perhaps be the Creative Director of **Alaïa**. And why not? Since graduating last July, she has already gained experience at Dior and is now a Junior Designer at Schiaparelli. Over dinner, she admits that it was not easy to take two weeks off from her new job to travel to Trieste, but we are sure she doesn't regret it because, the following evening, she walks away with the I:C Jury Special Mention award, ITS's highest accolade. Her collection 'Dot Dot Dot' explores painter George Underwood's surrealism and the distorted representations of women in fine art. It has won her ITS's ongoing support through mentoring, professional networking and industry opportunities. She will also be invited to sit on next year's jury.

But Reners is not the only one to benefit from ITS's beneficence, as there were further awards and residencies handed out from numerous high-profile partners, and a public choice award of €5,000 that will be bestowed in January 2027 following the vote of visitors to the 'Rise and Shine' exhibition.

Back at the Arcademy, also opening this week is '**EXPOSURE: The Power of Being Seen, from Harry Styles to Lady Gaga**', the first exhibition curated by **Tom Eerebout**, who has dressed everyone from **Banks** to **Lady Gaga** and **Kylie Minogue**. Two years in the making, it explores the ephemeral, yet essential, craft of the stylist, but intriguingly begins with the end result, i.e. the red carpet, and works backwards through the process. The small but carefully composed exhibits display garments and accessories – many of them designed by ITS finalists – worn by icons such as **Harry Styles**, **Madonna**, **Björk**, **Charli XCX**, **Gwyneth Paltrow**, **Jenna Ortega** and **Chappell Roan**.



It's a fascinating glimpse into a mysterious craft that is often underestimated and misunderstood. Over lunch, Eerebout tells us he hopes his mother will finally grasp what he does for a living, but most of all, he wishes that, after seeing the exhibition, just one young person is inspired enough to pursue styling as a career, which he joyfully relays is something that has already happened.

"Start small, but dream big," Franchin tell us of the advice she gives to the young contestants. "ITS is not a promise of a glittering career in an industry still struggling to redefine itself, but a confirmation that their thinking deserves attention and can help shape what comes next. At a time like this, fashion – and society – needs new voices. Creativity is not an optional extra. It is a necessity."

Read more about ITS [here](#).

words. [Huma Humayun](#)

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