

ITS Contest: The Significance of Validation and Support in Fashion

The annual contest from Fondazione ITS selects ten finalists help develop the early stages of their careers, with residency, funding, and guidance from industry insiders.



ARCHIVE.PDF
APR 01, 2026



Nine ensembles from the ten finalists - Photo: Massimo Gardone, Courtesy Fondazione ITS

By Wonne Scrayen

A diamond in the rough. That is probably the most accurate description of Fondazione ITS (International Talent Support), especially in an industry as fierce as fashion. Barbara Franchini, the founder and driving force, was resolute in her vision from the very start, making her one of the few voices who acknowledge and invest in the potential of young designers before any industry recognition. With ITS, Barbara Franchini has carved out a unique environment where creativity can thrive in its purest form.

Fondazione ITS can be broken down into two main pillars: the ITS 'Arcademy' and the annual ITS Contest.

The Contest

Established in 2002, the ITS Contest is on its 24th edition this year. As is customary, the contest spotlights ten designers between the ages of 22 and 33. This year's finalists were the outcome of a thorough deep dive into no less than 740 portfolios submitted from across 70+ countries. This in itself shows both the scope of and the effort put into this initiative, as well as its position at large within the field of fashion. The formula ensures all ten finalists take home the same prize of 10.000 euros (I:C 10x10x10 Award 2026), avoiding much of the competitiveness and pressure of other fashion competitions.

"What I love about ITS is how well they chose [the finalists]. Each of the finalists has their speciality; there is a real sense of camaraderie. And because of this, they will be able to support each other over the years, when, for example, they need a good embroiderer or fabric maker. Almost like its own little ecosystem, something I didn't anticipate."

-Dana Thomas [author and jury member]

Especially noteworthy is ITS' two-fold approach, allowing designers to express their creativity to the fullest whilst helping them navigate the industry. They receive advice from Barbara and the jury members, industry professionals encountered during the workshops, archive visits, and masterclasses as part of the ten-day residency. The ITS entourage offers these designers much-needed tools to venture into professional life, tools often insufficiently, or not at all, provided in fashion education. This resonated throughout the one-on-one conversations with the finalists.



The ten finalists - Photo: Giovanni Aiello

In this transition period in their lives, things can be hard enough for emerging designers. And so, coming to Trieste, there is only one favor Barbara will ask for, from both jury and press: "Offer them a smile. You have a whole life ahead in which you can criticize them; for now, be gentle and kind with them."

Sign of the Times

This year's theme, "Rise and Shine," touches upon the sensitivities of the current climate. As Barbara Franchini herself put it ahead of the finalists' presentation: "This has been a particularly special year. Never was it so political. These are young people well aware of what is happening in the world." And not only are they aware, but they try to offer an alternative or counterweight to the impasse the world and their generation is facing.

"The realities of the world have definitely struck this generation compared to mine. Maybe because it is so difficult to launch a brand now, with the world being so volatile and scary. There are fewer this year pursuing an immediate launch of their own brand, which seems to be a shift. They are happy to work at houses, even if it's difficult, and interning can be quite thankless. They have a patience I certainly didn't have. I wanted to launch immediately and felt I had the skill set and potential to do that. Where they now seem to have different priorities, which I admire a lot and made me reflect on myself and the choices I made. It has been good to come back and converse with everyone."

-Maximilian Raynor [2025 Jury Special Mention winner and jury member]

Give and Take

The panel of jury members is well-rounded and well-curated, with some familiar names and others less straightforwardly tied to fashion. And as much as the designers learn and grow from the feedback they receive, the jury members, in turn, learn from the designers' unique voices and the overall ITS experience.

"This experience confirmed how passionate people are about fashion. Not just designers, but also someone like Barbara; she would go to war for these kids. I want to make sure I retain the same passion she has. She wants to ensure it is the best possible experience, which is very rare to come by. In fashion, people tend to lose this human element. But not Barbara."

-Hanan Bešović [fashion commentator and jury member]

"My time here has confirmed that I want to be more focused on emerging designers. In the fashion industry, when you've been in it for a long time, you can become incredibly jaded. That's why I like to do things outside of it, too. When you go to the shows now, people rush out as soon as it's over. I still go with a notebook and write things down, to really try and pay attention. So seeing the passion and love that these young people have has reminded me why I am in this in the first place. Not to become that bored person who runs out at the end, but really appreciate the beauty, joy, craft, and the emotion that is invested in the creation that is whizzing by me. I try to spotlight new talent in my Substack newsletter, 'The Style Files'. This season, I did a handful, but who knows, maybe next season I might only do that, go to as many of the young designers and show what you don't see on Instagram. It is a whole different fashion week going on than the one you normally see. I might make it my mission. To not just wait until designers have their breakout, but see it coming and catalogue it."

-Dana Thomas



Members of the ITS Jury - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Lay of the Land

Ahead of the two days when the press and international guests join the ITS family, the finalists have just completed their ten-day residency in Trieste. The Italian setting in Trieste is mentioned more than once as contributing to the platform's genuine and authentic spirit. It recurred when conversing with both the jury and the designers, how the cultural atmosphere shaped them and their work before arriving, as well as the lasting impact after their ten-day stay.

"The context in Italy is very different from the one in Antwerp. Here, there is a strong focus on storytelling, whereas at the Royal Academy, it's all about aesthetics and conceptualism. I soon realized I had to adapt how I presented my portfolio for it to resonate within this novel context."

--Chloë Reners [finalist from Belgium, 2026 Jury Special Mention winner]

"Before we presented, I was told Italians love the storytelling element, and that I should really sell my story. Immediately, I could tell from their faces that they got it. Of course, the collection is not for everyone; fashion is subjective. But I could see that people I wasn't expecting to get it, got it. That meant a lot to me. There's something in the Italian air that made that come to be."

--Anna Maria Vescovi [finalist from the United States]

First-hand speaking to the finalists, it was also noticeable how many of them almost found themselves here by coincidence or arriving with a still overwhelming sense of self-doubt:

"I had this idea, which in hindsight was completely wrong, that they wanted something more visually striking than what I did, more traditional glamour fashion. I was so surprised to be in the first selection round, and even more when I was announced as one of the finalists. I had a lot of questions coming here, and in the past two weeks, I've found a lot of answers. The main lesson for me is to be more confident, to stop doubting myself every step of the way. To accept and acknowledge that what I design can have an impact on people."

--Darius Betschart [finalist from France]

"When you're working on a collection in your bubble at school, it's intense, emotional, you're not sleeping, not eating, and you think to yourself, Why am I doing this? Who's going to care? And then, a year later, I saw how people from both fashion and non-fashion backgrounds could appreciate my work. That truly hit home. It's a feeling I know I'll carry with me forever, to be able to stop and see how my work does, in fact, resonate."

--Anna Maria Vescovi

Maximilian Raynor, last year's Jury Special Mention and this year's jury member, found himself struck by the confidence of the group in front of him:

"This year's projects were extremely impressive and individual. We were unanimous on that final ten. They arrived with a confidence I have not seen among my peers in a while. Compared to my year, they seemed a lot more settled, happy, and patient. That's been a unique characteristic of this cohort. I almost felt doubly proud to see how they have made it through the whole selection process. I was able to see even more clearly how well we did as the ten finalists last year. To actually see what it took to get seen and appreciated.

Europeans generally struggle with self-praise, and I did for a very long time, too. I wanted to feel confident, but I was so fearful of feeling deluded or delusional. To be told that your work has merit by some of the leading industry voices can only be a good thing for your self-confidence in the sense of self-worth. If there is one thing we can offer at ITS, it's validation, support, and praise so that these young designers—if they didn't feel it themselves already—can step away and feel they have achieved something."

ITS 2026 Finalists

A glimpse into the design processes and concepts behind this year's final ten:

Darius Betschart [France] - 'Bakken'

"I asked myself what the wardrobe on the edges of capitalism looks like. Capitalism is the system we exist in, but that doesn't mean we can't question it. That's the least we can do. For this, I linked undocumented subcultures back to historical, specifically medieval feudal references, all tied to the idea of privilege and spectacle. Questioning whether it's a real, genuine attitude or if it's all calculated."



Darius Betschart - Photos: Courtesy of ITS

Steven Chevallier [France] - 'Out Rage'

"Besides fashion, I love to paint and draw; it's a part of my personality. That's why I chose to do knitwear, as it's very graphic and textural. The color aspect emerged during my time in London, studying at Central Saint Martins. Back in Paris, everything was very black and elegant; living in London really opened my mind. It showed me that you can wear texture and that color doesn't mean bad taste. Color can be elegant too."



Steven Chevallier - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Yi Ding [China] - 'Faded Paper'

"As I was doing research, I realized my passion for old items, particularly the storytelling behind them. Back in China, I further explored my own culture, collecting old embroidery pieces I found in the countryside and talking to the handicraft women. This is how I met this woman who owns a papercutting store. Deeply inspired by her, I felt like I needed to do something to spread her voice, but in my own way. This was the start of my paper-cutting collection"

Jamie O'Grady [United Kingdom] - 'SubTraction'

"To make good products, it's not about adding more but about taking the simplest and enhancing it. I quite like the idea of one thing and it being the best. If I don't have my own brand, I just want to be recognized as a designer who doesn't blindly follow trends."



Jamie O'Grady - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

William Palmer [United Kingdom] - 'The Breadwinner'

"There might be a personal experience in my life that will trigger something, which gets me thinking about a concept around it. The breadwinner, for example, emerged at a time when I myself was feeling this financial pressure. I then started to reflect on it in the broader context of society: the breadwinner in relation to money. Another core part of the DNA revolves around masculinity and recreating my type of manliness, which is more emotionally expressive and sensitive than what is considered the norm."



William Palmer - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Stan Peeters [Belgium] - 'The body is a Pavilion'

"This collection is intentionally less experimental in terms of material, but really focused on a specific cut and shape. Through my sculptural and architectural vision, I try to push recognizable garments, such as a bomber jacket, further yet without over-designing them. It's those simple lines that I try to incorporate into traditional garments. Finding a cohesive balance is key for me. If you look at my work, I don't want you to be overwhelmed by too much going on. I mainly look for beauty in those architectural lines and organic shapes, which, in the end, form the core of the collection."



Stan Peeters - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Chloë Reners [Belgium] - 'Dot Dot Dot'

"The summer I was doing research, I became obsessed with the artist George Underwood. Not so much the surreal image, more so the imaginary aspect. I noticed how we as women are always depicted so stereotypically. Even when you don't necessarily see that it is a human being, by the use of certain shapes, you just know that it is a woman. Seeing all this leads to a very distorted image of women, which is very prominent in society, especially in the fashion industry. That's where everything started, this idea of what is real, what is fake, and what is imposed. Looking at family photos, for example, I started paying attention to postures. And something that recurred time and time again was this twisted shape to create a snatched waist, which I then translated literally into the silhouettes."



Chloë Renier - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Tidjane Tall [France] - 'Resonance in the Room'

"I always wanted to question the premise of elegance being chic. During my research, I saw a lot of things that I felt were not meant for me to be seen; I was not the target audience. From an identity point of view, I was inspired and intrigued by how the black body and the ordinary can hold something elegant and effortless. With this collection, and my work in general, I want to show there's another possibility. We see elegance often just in terms of color, either black or white, or through a Eurocentric

Anna Maria Vescovi [United States] - 'Requiem'

"A lot of the techniques that I saw during my archival work at the Opéra Garnier, you don't really see in jewellery today, because of all the machinery and technology that has come out, making jewellery easier. Back then, everything was done by hand. I could translate these techniques to textiles and jewellery for the collection because they are quite basic in craftsmanship, in the sense that they are feasible without crazy machinery. All I needed was a needle, thread, pliers, and some inspiration, really, and that was it. The textiles bring you through the story. For example, one particular piece in black chiffon semi-sheer on top and underneath, I've embroidered in gold lurex. In the light, you can see there's something there, but from a distance, you can't see it. It plays on this idea that we all carry secrets, told through the narrative of the textile."



Anna Maria Visconi - Photo: Courtesy of ITS

Wenji Wu [China] - 'Night Terrors'

"Growing up, I lived with my grandparents, because of that, I always felt more mature. Later on, I kept thinking back to my childhood, reflecting on age and wrinkles, how they are tied to time and also have this fading effect. I love things that are constantly changing, such as light. And that's also what I look for in my designs, for the clothes to be ever-changing. For this one knit [second photo], for example, I brushed up the mohair, as if the monster were launching the magic."

ITS Through the Words of the Jury

"Not only does ITS give you the opportunity to show your work, but most of all, it puts you in contact with so many different players in the industry who will help you throughout your career. It's a family you can always go back to. It is authentic, so many of these competitions around the world are not. Deanna has been here since the first edition. She has been part of many other juries, such as Hyères, but what she genuinely feels here is the work ITS does, especially in those first years. They went around the world to the most remote places and found creative talent in fashion schools that hardly anybody knew about. That sort of sourcing doesn't happen anywhere else. Even those on the jury always have the opportunity to learn something new, like a portfolio from a school you might have never heard of."

-Deanna Ferretti [founder Miss Deanna and co-founder Modateca Deanna] and Sonia Veroni [director of the Master's in Creative Knitwear Design of Accademia Costume & Moda]

"ITS has given me the start of my recognition outside of London. I have made a name for myself in the small, small fashion scene that is London. But you come over to Paris or Milan, and you're completely unknown. ITS has given me the chance to match the momentum I had in London here in Italy. It offered me the chance to network and speak with people I had admired for many years. What ITS does for people is help to cement relationships, and that's the most valuable thing. Apart from the 10.000 euros all of us finalists won, I didn't receive any further cash injection. But what it means to win is far more valuable than five grand that can be gone in a few months. It's an intangible, unspoken stamp of approval that will last a lifetime."

I look back very fondly at my own time here last year. And coming back has been just as joyful and life-enriching. Barbara and the whole behind-the-scenes team are true powerhouses. They lead with joy and emotion, which is why I'm so glad to return. Many of the things I've participated in come from a sort of stale or cold position. At times, there can be this patronizing tone in the industry, whereas ITS is the complete opposite. They speak to you with admiration, saying how they feel inspired by you and the voice that you bring. That's why I hope to come back every year."

-Maximilian Raynor

ITS Arcademy - Museum of Art in Fashion

And then there is the ITS Arcademy—a blend of Art, Archive, and Academy—located in what was once Trieste's bank headquarters.



ITS Archive; "The Power of Being Seen" Exhibit - Photos: Massimo Gardone, Courtesy of ITS

On show at the museum as of right now is *EXPOSURE—The Power of Being Seen*, curated by jury member, stylist, and fashion consultant Tom Eerebout. This exhibition is one of the first of its kind, highlighting the craft and fashion language of styling. Apart from iconic looks by Tom Eerebout, a result of his creative dialogue with celebrities he has worked with, the exhibition also features work by former ITS finalists.

At ITS, everything begins and ends with the library, in itself a very extensive archive. Every portfolio sent in since ITS' inception has been meticulously documented and stored. One of the first rooms you enter within the gallery space offers a glimpse into this collection thus far. After nearly 25 years of archiving, ITS has accumulated around 15.000 portfolios, of which a large share is on the library shelves; the others are stored in the former bank vaults in the basement. Given the opportunity to curate an exhibition of his own, Tom Eerebout carefully browsed the catalogue of former finalists, connecting the dots with his personal work. *EXPOSURE* is a textbook example of the unconditional support of Barbara and ITS towards the talent discovered throughout the years.

Coinciding with the annual themed exhibition, there is a dedicated space for that year's ten finalists, showcasing a silhouette from their submitted collection. This year, this is no different. For the forthcoming year, although still at the very start of their careers, the ten finalists will have their work featured in a museum exhibition, which is quite unseen or unheard of so early on in designers' careers. This is but one of many assets ITS offers to young talent worldwide.

All Images Courtesy of ITS Fondazione.