



Many famous designers in *Haute Couture* started by participating in competitions for young designers. The *ITS Contest* has become a platform for many fashion talents. Today, this iconic contest has another direction – *ITS Arcademy Museum of Art in Fashion*, which contains 15.000 creative pieces. *L'Officiel Austria* met with *Barbara Franchin*, the founder of these projects, to find out in detail how to start in the fashion world and remain free in ideas, as well as about the unique exhibits of *ITS Arcademy*.

By VIKA GORDIENKO

L'O: How was the idea of creating a museum of contemporary fashion – *ITS Arcademy* was born?

Barbara Franchin: I have been thinking of *ITS Arcademy* way before knowing how we would name it. We actually began archiving portfolios literally when we launched the *ITS Contest* in 2002, while we began collecting items – clothes, accessories, jewellery; at the time, we even had an exciting photography contest – in 2005. Once this treasure began to take shape, we opened what looked more like a showroom than an archive, in the attics of our old location. But it was there and then when I saw everything displayed (and realised how desperate those

items were for a proper archive space), that I saw the idea of a museum not just coming but taking shape. We finally developed the entire concept and found the space to make it happen in 2019. But I'd like to underline that we're still learning and understanding what we will become.

L'O: Why did you focus on modern fashion when brands and fashion houses with a history are very popular worldwide?

BF: We didn't focus on modern fashion; we focused on unknown designers who deserved recognition, and offered them a showcase, pointed the limelight on their work for the

entire industry to see. And it wasn't about modernity for us or the history... It was about unbound creativity, the kind of creative freedom that graduating students have: we wanted to see those first works a designer develops before stepping into the fashion industry, which is ruthlessly built on marketing rules. We were interested, and still are, in fashion as an art form. It is also the reason why we've named *ITS Arcademy* "Museum of Art in Fashion".

L'O: For many years, you have supported young designers through the *ITS Contest*. What impact does this contest have on global fashion?

BF: Today, the talents we scouted hold positions in the most important fashion houses. I could share a very long list of names: of the over 700 designers we supported, so many today are senior designers, heads of studios, or creative directors. Demna is among them, as is Bottega Veneta's Creative Director Matthieu Blazy or Maison Courrèges Art Director Nicolas di Felice... So, I believe the impact *ITS Contest* had and still has is quite impressive. We're still looked at as the place where the most interesting emerging designers are revealed. Many of today's competitions were created after we created the *ITS Contest*, which stimulated a more serious and structured approach to finding and supporting emerging designers.

L'O: What is the difference between a famous designer or a designer working for a famous brand and a designer taking his first steps in the fashion world?

BF: I guess the first that comes to mind is that a designer popping out of school has no job and no money, and generally no experience at all – except perhaps for a couple internships – about how the fashion system actually works. They are literally walking on uncharted territory, afraid of mistakes that could crush their dream at every step, which is also the reason why they are often so exploited by the industry.

The other thing is, as I said before, emerging designers are still uncompromised; they still haven't experienced what it means to have their creativity limited by production costs, for instance. They are still in a "prototype world" where anything is possible. That's why their creativity fascinates me.

L'O: Young designers' collections and looks often reflect social processes, youthful protest, and maximalism. How do you find common ground with them, and why is an independent view of the fashion market valuable today?

BF: There is so much more that filters through young designers' creativity. There's family, autobiographical memories, fear for the present times and for the future, elaboration of trauma, recalling childhood... For me, it isn't about finding common ground; it's about being amazed by the infinite opportunities that creativity gives them to translate these concepts into works of art. It has a cultural value that goes way beyond fabric and thread, I felt (and still feel) it was my responsibility to provide it with a stage and to underline its intellectual importance, the fact it speaks about who we are, just as the works of a writer or a poet do.

And an independent view is always valuable, in all fields of human existence. It means it's not biased, and when you have that kind of virginity you know you have honesty. It doesn't mean it's right, it just means you're guaranteed it's uncompromised. Listening to and reflecting on such perspectives is fundamental for us to evolve in the right direction.



1. Demna won the *ITS Collection of the Year Award* in 2004. After that, he began an incredible professional career at *Maison Margiela* and *Louis Vuitton* before launching his brand, *Vetements*. In 2016, he was appointed Creative Director of *Balenciaga*.



2. *ITS Contest 2015*: collection of the finalist *Elina Määttä*. 3. *Bottega Veneta's* Creative Director, *Matthieu Blazy*, also began his ascent in the fashion world by participating in the *ITS Contest 2006*. His professional career includes collaborations with fashion houses such as *Raf Simons*, *Maison Margiela*, *Céline* and *Calvin Klein*.





L'O: *How in demand are the laureates of your competition now?*

BF: It goes with the impact the contest has on the industry, as we were saying before. ITS Contest has never ceased to be on the radar of fashion's headhunters looking for the freshest and most exciting emerging talents. And our finalists are spread out quite everywhere, either with their own brands (Chopova Lowena, Cecilie Bahnsen, Yuima Nakazato, Kim Shui, Helen Kirkum, Richard Quinn, for example) or working in key positions for the most renowned ones, from Maison Margiela to Loewe, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Christian Dior, Jil Sander...

L'O: *How does your academy support young talents, and how can young designers connect with you?*

BF: I want to underline that it's called "ITS Arcademy". The "R" isn't there by mistake, of course. We needed to come up with a neologism that would join three different concepts. Metaphorically we've always been an Ark, travelling the world in search of the most precious creativity to safeguard it for

future generations. We did so by creating an Archive, a unique collection representing the foundation of our Museum of Art in Fashion. Finally, by showing in our museum what we collected, we wanted people to be inspired and perhaps challenge themselves with creativity: that's the idea of the Academy, a learning space inside ITS Arcademy with a wide range of hands-on activities people can try.

ITS Arcademy represents the next step in our support philosophy: the finalists we select through ITS Contest don't just become part of a widespread family, a network of talents and insiders supporting each other. Through ITS Arcademy their creativity continues to be showcased in our exhibitions, and they get to come back to a space where they can be inspired and at the same time inspire others through workshops and seminars.

To connect with us a young designer has all kinds of possibilities: applying for ITS Contest, sending through their work via our job offers section, even simply knocking at our door.



4. ITS Arcademy collection archives 14.840 project portfolios, 1.100 garments, 165 accessories, 120 jewellery pieces, and over 700 photographic works. **ON THE TOP:** fragments of the exhibition "The Many Lives of a Garment". 5. The exhibition "Born to Create" presents the best of fashion design from the international talents of ITS Contest 2023/24.



6., 7. ITS Arcademy in Trieste, Italy, is also an educational platform for practical workshops, creative activities and professional courses. Here, experts help to explore creative thinking and practise craft techniques to make, repair, reuse, and rediscover.



L'O: *The museum's motto is "Born to Create". What meaning do you put into this?*

BF: "Born to Create" has a twofold meaning, basically two sides of the same coin. We've been looking for talents who were born to create for as long as we've existed, and still continue doing so. At the same time, ITS Arcademy exists to convince any visitor – of all ages and all walks of life – that we were all born to create. Each and every one of us has that spark inside; it's just a question of remembering it's there and firing it up again... Just think about when you were a kid, the first time they gave you crayons: you didn't question why or what, you just started drawing, whatever came to your mind, in absolute freedom. That's pure creativity. Most of us, growing up, simply set it aside. But it's there. We were born to create.

L'O: *The current exhibition, "The Many Lives of a Garment", explores personal relationships with clothing. Do you have a personal story related to your favourite fashion piece?*

BF: I don't have just one: my favourite fashion piece is the entire ITS Arcademy collection. I sometimes view it as a portrait of hundreds of lives and of my own, too. Every single time I step inside it – to source items for our exhibitions, during visits, check conditions with my conservation team, or simply browse it – my mind fires dozens of different cherished memories at a time. I'm known for having goosebumps quite easily when I feel an emotion, and our archive, for me, is kind of an earthquake. My whole journey is there, as well as the journey of 15.000 creative talents.

L'O: *Modern fashion is developing before your eyes, and you are personally a direct participant in this process. What trends are happening in the fashion industry at the moment?*

BF: I prefer to talk about contemporary fashion; modern sometimes sounds like a style to me. I look at the fashion industry from an outside perspective; I hardly go to fashion shows; I focus on emerging designers and how they look ahead at what fashion could become. So obviously we've witnessed future trends that were still to come. But if I had to express my opinion I believe that, with a few exceptions, there is perhaps way too much fear of going punk, of going wild, of opening new directions in the fashion industry today. For years now, we've seen designers sourcing fashion houses' archives as if they were comforting pieces of a puzzle that just needed reassembling to avoid wildness and risk and follow sales. But isn't fashion about dreaming new trajectories as well? Something is moving by the



way, and I am waiting. Olivier Saillard said it marvellously in an interview for his first exhibition at ITS Arcademy: "I am waiting for the next punk moment, I am waiting for the next designer who says no, this is not my way, I will show you my way".

L'O: *Trieste is a multicultural city whose appearance has preserved the style of the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. What connection is there between the history of Trieste and the ITS Arcademy?*

BF: Trieste is and will always be my home, at the centre of Europe, on the border and at the same time borderless, capable of welcoming so many different traditions and people from all over the world... How can it not be the perfect place for ITS Arcademy, which promotes the same exact idea? An openness to what is different from us, to discover we're simply all human, all connected by this unique human ability that is creativity? I am proud to have contributed, through ITS, to putting Trieste back on the map, bringing international guests who used to tell me, "Trieste? Where?" say "Ah! Trieste! Can't wait to be there!" I believe there is something else we share with the history of Trieste, a history that – particularly in the 19th and 20th century – saw the involvement of families of entrepreneurs, which had a great influence on the decisions that marked the development and the evolution of the city. Such families often had strong women at their helm, and in some way I feel we tread in that same tradition, bringing positive development to our hometown by creating a widespread international family that erases borders, welcoming talented people from all over the world.