

Alaïa, what will become of you?

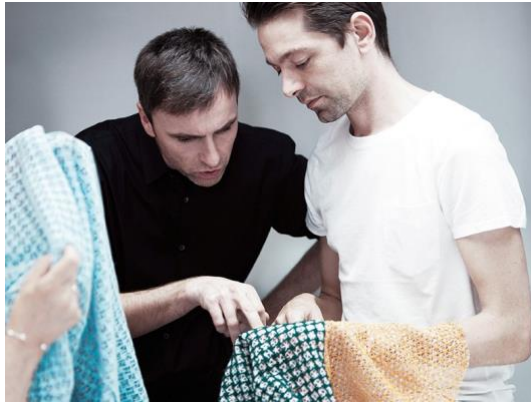
By Taanya Garg



Pieter Mulier, the new Creative Director of Maison Alaïa, photographed by Pierre Debusschere.

Pieter Mulier takes over the reins of the towering legacy left behind by the ‘King of Cling’, three years after his passing. Since Alaïa’s death, the house has reinterpreted designs from his vast collection of archives, until recently, when Richemont Group announced his successor. Alaïa is known for having carved a niche for himself with his form-fitting silhouettes and penchant for abandoning the traditional fashion calendar; stepping into the shoes of a master couturier will be no easy feat. Whilst it is evident that Richemont Group took its time to find a replacement for the irreplaceable, hinting at a decision taken after careful consideration, it is still intriguing to predict where the future of Alaïa is headed with this new appointment and how successful the brand will be.

Belgium-born Pieter Mulier has long been the right-hand man of Raf Simons, the present co-creative director of Prada, as seen in the documentary ‘Dior and I’. Starting as an intern at Simons’ eponymous label, Mulier went on to work alongside him as a Director of Accessories at Jil Sander, eventually following him to Dior. When Raf moved to New York to become the Chief Creative Officer at Calvin Klein, Mulier became its Creative Director, responsible for overseeing the men’s and women’s design teams under his command. For someone whose career trajectory has been so closely aligned with Raf’s, his reputation precedes him. Call it unfair but Simons’ fiascos at these fashion houses cannot be overlooked; and the potential role of Mulier in them.



Raf Simons & Pieter Mulier in Dior and I, photograph by Dior.

Back in 2012, Raf Simons was abruptly let go at Jil Sander because his collections were not commercially viable. [Wall Street Journal](#) wrote, ‘during much of Simons’ tenure, the company remained solidly in the red.’ He then parted ways with Dior when his futuristic designs failed to gel with the house’s identity of treasuring the classics, which was previously upheld by Galliano’s vocabulary of prodigal romanticism. During his stint at Calvin Klein, he left months before the end of his contract, with Emanuel Chirico, CEO of PVH Corp. even criticising the brand’s unsatisfactory financial performance and the swerve towards ‘high fashion’ under Simons’ leadership. Despite being a talented post-modernistic designer in his own right, there has long been a disconnect between his personal aesthetics and the demands of conglomerates driven by commercial success. One of the main reasons cited behind these exits is the changing fashion landscape – one that commands churning of one collection after another to appease customers’ need for instant gratification.



Raf Simons and Pieter Mulier take a bow after the Calvin Klein fall 2017 runway show in New York. (Getty Images)

Phoebe Philo, former Creative Director of Chloé and Céline, was initially rumoured to be offered this role, as ‘Philophiles’ (a name Phoebe’s devoted followers go by) made their case - her minimalistic approach and clean lines can elevate Alaïa’s archives. Add the fact that she has successfully resuscitated two major fashion houses in the past and brought in profits, carefully balancing the scale of creativity and marketability. If anything, this makes Pieter’s role more coveted, and adds excessive pressure on his reputation, as he’ll have to stand against the contemporary culture of fast fashion to keep Alaïa’s spirit alive, all the while striving for the Maison’s commercial success. The new hire also raises a question if seasonless collections only worked because it was Azzedine, a couturier who had earned a name for himself after years of a successful design career and whether Pieter, as someone who has worked in the shadows all this time, can afford to follow ‘it’s ready when it’s ready’ mantra.



Phoebe Philo, former Creative Director of Chloé and Céline (via Celine.com)

Criticism aside, in many ways Pieter's appointment offers hope for the House of Alaïa that can thrive with a new perspective while keeping heritage at the forefront and give 'making the past modern' a new meaning. Like the late Tunisian couturier who studied sculpture, Mulier is an architect-turned-designer who can bring his expertise to the famed figure-hugging creations. The two of them are also united by their love of old clothes, as Mulier likes collecting key pieces as a hobby while Azzedine's individual archive boasts of around 20,000 designs. It is unsure what Mulier's personal style is, but this is a great opportunity for him to become his own person. As he steps away from Simons' shadow, this can be a chance to move beyond the past inefficacies, give the house a new direction and even potentially develop a cult following of 'Mulieratics'. Besides, while Simons juggled multiple collections in his position as a Creative Director and founder of his namesake label, it is understood that Mulier is devoted exclusively to Alaïa.



Azzedine Alaïa with Linda Evangelista (Pinterest)

"It is an absolute dream to join this prestigious Maison, its beautiful ateliers and its talented team," Mulier wrote in his statement. "Always ahead of his time and open to all arts and cultures, Azzedine Alaïa's powerful vision has served as an inspiration, as he always sought to give the necessary time to innovative and enduring creation," he added, acknowledging the responsibility to "carry forward his legacy of celebrating femininity and placing women at the heart of creation."

Pieter has already embarked on his task, while Alaïa's supporters eagerly await his SS22 debut. As the saying goes, "Heavy is the head that wears the crown."