



How Bvlgari rethought the role of the creative director

Deputy CEO Laura Burdese and creative director of leather goods and accessories Mary Katrantzou joined the *Vogue Business* Global Summit to share how the heritage brand made the most of a new position.

By Nicole Phelps



At *Vogue Business*'s first-ever Global Summit in Lake Como, Bvlgari's Mary Katrantzou and Laura Burdese had traded one famous Italian destination for another. The brand's creative director of leather goods and accessories and deputy CEO, respectively, keynote speakers Katrantzou and Burdese were fresh off 10 days in Taormina, Sicily, an island whose popularity has skyrocketed in the wake of *The White Lotus* — but this trip was no vacation.

Bvlgari was showcasing its latest high jewellery collection, Polychroma, for its VVICs (very, very important customers). With jewellery bucking the luxury slowdown and outperforming fashion, these destination shows have become an industry phenomenon. "Even high-net-worth and ultra-high-net-worth individuals are shaped by the current moment; some of them are in the mood of wait-and-see," said Burdese. But the ones that are buying, she explained, "it's because they mainly see two things. The first is because it's an emotional kind of purchase; a piece of jewellery or a high-end watch or a high-end bag marks a very special moment in your life. And the second is rightly because it's a piece of art; it holds its value, it's an investment piece, especially when we talk about big important stones."

High jewellery bags have become a sweet spot for Bvlgari since Katrantzou was named the brand's inaugural creative director of leather goods and accessories. In fact, Katrantzou reported that she never even saw some of the final pieces she worked on because they had sold out the first day of sales in Taormina. What makes them such tempting investments, explained Katrantzou, is "they transform. It's part of the opening mechanism of the bag or the clutch, but also you can wear it as a pendant, as a brooch. And the stones that we use are incredible. We had a spinel that went the first day — people are drawn to the colour and to the functionality of the bag. It's one more way to experience Bvlgari's universe."

Katrantzou joined a cadre of creative directors, some in place for decades before her arrival: Lucia Silvestri oversees jewellery and Fabrizio Buonamassa Stigliani takes care of watches. There's also fragrances and Bvlgari hotels. Regarding the quick shifts of creative directors happening in fashion,





Burdese noted: “We have the opposite approach. And the fact that we have different creative directors and that [some of them] have been at Bvlgari for a long time, it creates this positive tension of discussion among them.”

Burdese added that a fellow Global Summit speaker said the role of the CEO is to protect the creative director. “I have a slightly different idea. I think Bvlgari’s creative directors protect themselves very well. We have to put in place the right conditions so that they can really strike the right balance between connecting, but at the same time feel the freedom to inject new creativity, new innovation, new ideas.”

Katrantzou wasn’t necessarily a natural fit for the accessories role, by her own admission. She’s a fashion designer by trade, one with a speciality in digital prints. “It was such a bold decision to even bring me on board, not coming from accessories. Trusting me, that in itself is already showing how originality and creativity and vision are at the heart of this brand,” she said. Katrantzou actually sees her outsider status as a plus, because, as she explained, “I can challenge the team creatively when they say, ‘No, this is not possible.’ I’m like, ‘No is just the beginning of yes.’ Surely it’s possible, we are Bvlgari! That freshness is part naivety, but in fact, a lot of the things we’ve achieved in this short time has been because of that. When we are working on a bag and we’re in dialogue with the jewellery team — sometimes with Lucia [Silvestri] directly, sometimes with the team — we are studying pieces of jewellery that have had decades of evolution in other incredible creators’ hands. We need to be respectful of that and transform it and make it feel relevant to today. But you still have in your hand a blueprint of excellence.”

That trust paid off in the case of the 11 “really high-end” jewellery bags Katrantzou worked on for Taormina. “We were kind of scared of producing those 11 pieces for the brand event in Taormina, but we sold them right away, even before the end of the event, which was very unexpected,” Burdese said. “So sometimes there are things we cannot just predict by numbers, by sales forecast, by analysis — which we love. I’m a very data-driven person. We know results are important, growth is important. But in companies like ours, the creativity part, the innovation part, the part is left to humans, to imagination, to what we cannot foresee — it’s even more important. And sometimes again, we fail, but most of the time we get positively surprised.”

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