



LABEL LAUNCH / MILAN

CUT FROM A NEW CLOTH

Marco Zanini, former creative director of labels such as Schiaparelli and Rochas, has finally struck out on his own. His eponymous collection, launching this autumn, is restrained, highly tailored and delightfully luxurious.

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An acclaimed fashion talent, Marco Zanini has spent more than two decades designing for powerhouse labels such as Versace, Schiaparelli, Rochas and a revived Halston. His latest venture turns inwards: it is a small-scale, self-funded and deeply personal clothing line of his own called Zanini. The debut collection, made in his native Italy and unveiled for the fall season, is a quiet exploration of iconic styles for women.

Highlights include bias-cut slip dresses of Japanese kimono silk in washed-out green and amber; a black duchesse tunic dress lined with crisp white silk gazar; a tuxedo cinched at the waist with a silk ribbon; and an all-black flapper dress hand-embellished with glass bugle beads. Presented via a lookbook shot by Zanini in his Milan apartment, the elegant collection is about to hit the racks in an intentionally limited selection of shops; online retail is pointedly eschewed. The designer – half-Swedish and half-Italian, 47 years old, tall and tattooed – sat down with us to discuss his thoughtfully subversive move against the fashion current.

MONOCLE: Why did you decide to launch your own line after all your experiences working in big houses?

MARCO ZANINI: Japan, along with Scandinavia, is one of my main creative references, and I was travelling there last summer when I understood it's now or never. I was so inspired by the aesthetic that surrounds you everywhere in Japan, and at the same time I was thinking that there's a need for smaller,

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less corporate projects that are more personal, more individualistic. I wanted to try to do something on my own terms, something slower and less exposed.

m: Did you have a clear design concept for the brand from the beginning?

mz: I didn't have a precise idea but it needed to be non-ostentatious and low key yet still luxurious in its materials and manufacturing, because I believe there are women out there looking for a niche product with more substance. This is the moment to do less but do it better – the world is full of stuff and it's appalling. My first collection has 41 pieces. Because I'm accustomed to working with much bigger brands, this seems absolutely micro



to me. But buyers found it refreshing and some even ordered the entire collection. You don't need 300 SKUs [stock-keeping units, or the number of pieces in a collection] to choose something – that's not a collection. That's just merchandising stuff.

m: Are you interested in growing with investors?

mz: At the moment, no. I'm taking a day-by-day approach with this project. It's impossible for me to create a concrete plan right now since everything is founded by me; there's no partner to schedule 10 boutique openings in a year. There will come a time when I'll need to join forces with someone in order to solidify the project but for the moment I just want to construct a foundation on which to eventually grow – and that foundation needs to be free of compromises.

m: Is this a line that you need to see up close to understand? How do you overcome the challenges of the Instagram age?

mz: This is a point I've had arguments about because people say to me, “You can't see the lining of the dress online.” I know. But when you wear it, you feel it. Everything shouldn't be limited to just what's visible. It has to have substance as well because fashion is a craft. The fabrics are important. The finishing is important. And it's important that people are educated about quality. I understand that some details are not apparent on a smartphone but they're apparent when you wear a piece of clothing; then you see it for yourself and you feel it on your skin. The things you wear should feel good and certain details – the layer of chiffon, the gazar lining – make you feel special.

m: You're working with suppliers and producers who you know from your previous positions in the industry. Was it hard to convince them to collaborate with a small, independent project?

mz: Working in fashion for 24 years, you find your favourite fabric producer, your favourite ribbon maker, your favourite button maker – so I contacted them. With a project like this, it could be less appealing for those suppliers, given that I'm not

ordering 100km of fabric for my production, and the prints, even all the colours, are custom-developed exclusively for me. But the suppliers have been really happy to collaborate since they have other brands providing the big numbers for them, and having a little jewel of a project like this is interesting for them because it's more creative, it's more special and it's a lot less corporate.

m: What sorts of things did you learn from your time at the big fashion houses?

mz: That this work is not just about creativity but also about discipline and method. A collection has so many facets that without a method, you get lost. My starting point is always the fabrics, then the colours, and [then] the combination of the colours and fabrics. So I begin by gathering the ingredients and only then do I start to design. Anyone who designs without first knowing which fabrics they'll use doesn't actually know how to design. For me, it's easier to work with the fabric right next to me. It almost suggests what it wants to be.

m: While the food and design sectors have tacked towards the slow and artisanal, the fashion industry seems to be fixated on constant growth and speed. Do you think that this will change?

mz: It's coming, it has to. Exponential growth is just not sustainable forever. The turnover of designers at the *maisons* is a sign of an incredibly high level of panic. The growing number of yearly collections is just a strategy to try to reach the biggest possible number of people, to sell the greatest number of things. That's why I'm doing just two collections a year now – not four, not eight. The numbers have become more important than anything else and if you don't produce 50 per cent growth overnight, you are out. There's no time to develop ideas, no time to try them. There's no margin for error. I've had my moments where after two seasons I was cast out too. All these thoughts about focusing on quality over quantity, on slowness and substance, were things that seemed very interesting to experiment with through my little start-up. I felt that the moment had arrived to try another approach – the kind of approach that first inspired me to dream of being a fashion designer when I was young.

Clockwise from top left: Designer Marco Zanini on the streets of Milan; duchesse silk dress with a gazar lining for the wearer's appreciation; fine stitching on the limited-edition bias-cut dresses in kimono silk from Japan; the silk dresses and a camel-hair coat sporting a blanket edge

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