

VISIONS AND DREAMS IN LISBON



Lisbon is definitely one of the most happening cities in Europe right now. Back in summer 2017, CNN's travel section featured a widely noticed article entitled "Lisbon could be the coolest capital in Europe." At the moment, its art, nightlife, cuisine, creative scene and design seem to be among the best you can find anywhere on the continent. And now that international superstars like Madonna have started calling the Portuguese city home, it's

clear once and for all that Lisbon is a rising star on the list of hip places. It's only logical, then, that industry icon and doyenne of global fashion journalism Suzy Menkes should host the Condé Nast International Luxury Conference here this year. After Florence, Seoul and Oman, the leading decision-makers, designers, influencers and managers from the fashion and luxury industry gathered in Lisbon from 17 to 19 April to talk about the sector's latest trends and developments. The Language of Luxury is the motto for this year's event - which raises an important question: in an age of globalisation, social media and fast fashion, how does that language need to be spoken if it's going to fascinate an international audience - and clientele - long term?

This year too, White Communications was an official partner of the CNI conference and headed for Lisbon to experience it first-hand. The event begins on Tuesday evening in the summery and luxurious setting of the Palácio de Xabregas, a grand palace with a view of the water and the setting sun. Guests like British Vogue's new editor-in-chief Edward Enninful, shoe designer Christian Louboutin and couturier Giambattista Valli get together over ice-cold mojitos and finger food. The atmosphere is relaxed - a great opportunity to meet new people, catch up with old friends and acquaintances and enjoy the first warm days of spring. At an exclusive dinner with the speakers and selected attendees, the prelude draws to a close illuminated by a sea of candles before the illustrious guests are shuttled back to the Four Seasons Hotel. You can feel it already: the unique mix of international flair and curiosity about the upcoming exchange of views between the people who shape and influence our industry. The next morning, after a short night and a quick breakfast in the Four Seasons' belle époque dining room, it's time to set off for the official venue of the CNI LUX conference: the Pátio da Galé. Set right in the heart of Lisbon, the palace has a colonnaded courtyard that has been transformed into a covered and air-conditioned forum for the two days ahead.



Once Suzy Menkes has welcomed everybody with her usual British charm (and perfectly coiffed trademark pompadour) and offered several explanations as to why Lisbon is growing into the role described above, it's time for the first speaker. At the tender age of 25 he's already CEO of case and luggage giant Rimowa. Alexandre Arnault, a scion of luxury dynasty LVMH (his father is its chairman), has just pulled off a collaboration with the ultra-hip brand SUPREME, thereby creating what is probably the world's most desirable suitcase right now. Asked by Menkes how long the desirability of this brand marriage would last, he initially only gives a charming shrug before, in the same breath, emphasising the incredibly important role of "quality and intensity", which every luxury product depends on for its soul. No matter how

hip a luxury item might be, it's only truly deserving of the name if it's the product of genuine commitment and excellent craftsmanship. A reassuring initial résumé. According to Arnault, true luxury is often also the combination of immaterial experiences and luxury items. It's not so much about merely accumulating possessions as about a smart lifestyle and finding the products that suit one's own personality. In times when it sometimes feels as if the (luxury) world is turning faster than we'd like, the combination of consumption and contemplation seems like a sensible path to take. All in all, you get the impression that reflection is more important than ever in an age such as ours, when mindsets like "better, stronger, faster" or "see now buy now" are the order of the day, we're bombarded by an armada of social media content and the world has shrunk to the size of a smartphone. Sophie Hackford, a regular guest at the CNI conferences right from the start and a futurist of world renown, points out some impressive developments in the field of artificial intelligence and explains which everyday activities and tasks could or will be taken over by robots. From meat grown in a test tube all the way to robots as day-to-day assistants - everything seems possible and surprisingly (alarming?) close. She sums up with the metaphor of a game of chess between a human and a machine. On their own, neither the human nor the bot can come up with the perfect strategy - it's the synergy of the two that stands the best chance. A relieved murmur is heard from the audience. Then it's off to lunch in the palazzo foyer. Christiane Arp, editor-in-chief of Vogue Germany, chats with Dior's head designer Maria Grazia Chiuri; two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank, who'll be taking to the stage later on, is sipping still water, and there are almost as many Birkin bags and Louboutin shoes in the room as there are petits fours on the silver trays. There are certainly less inspiring lunch breaks.



Speaking of Louboutin: THE shoe designer of our decade, the inventor of the red sole and creator of countless dizzyingly high dream shoes, is the next speaker - and for many, an eagerly anticipated highlight of the event. Looking tanned and cheerful, Louboutin has brought a few new specimens up on stage with him. Coloured stones, wicker, feathers, old weaving techniques... As he chats to Suzy Menkes, you soon realise that, behind all the hype, there's an unconditional commitment to artisanship, workmanship and the anatomy of the female foot. A passion for women in beautiful shoes is his driving force, the inspiration that motivates Monsieur Louboutin every single day. His shoe empire is still independent, and has recently expanded into beauty products (nail varnish in Louboutin red!). "There's a showgirl in every woman!" he calls into the microphone like a high-spirited boy. His many fans in the audience respond with tumultuous applause. But Louboutin is by no means the last top-notch designer to make an appearance today. Maria Grazia Chiuri, previously of Valentino and now

head designer at Christian Dior, is also among those to join Menkes on the stage. Her strong vision of femininity and feminism recently culminated in a white Dior Couture T-shirt emblazoned with “We should all be feminists”; overnight, it became the undisputed darling of bloggers from Berlin to Beirut. For her, says Chiuri, feminism and celebrating a strong, independent vision of femininity is a natural frame of mind – and the recurrent theme in the six (!) annual collections she has meanwhile created for Dior. Her female fans are rewarding her with steadily growing sales figures. As the conversation draws to a close, Suzy Menkes wants to know what a feisty Italian woman like Chiuri has in common with company founder Christian Dior – a man known for his shyness. A little flustered, Chiuri laughs, winks and says maybe their shared love of floral patterns and art... As for what language luxury speaks today and what “the language of luxury” means, it seems to go hand in hand with one’s personal mindset and an instinct for what the labels’ customers expect. Couturier Giambattista Valli believes that luxury is over-exposed and overused, and attempts to counter this acceleration with the presentation of his recently launched art film about fashion. For a moment, the dreamy images, interview sequences with fashion icons like Yves Saint Laurent and lots of glimpses behind the scenes of an haute couture show transport the audience to another world.

The last highlight of the day is an appearance by Hilary Swank. The two-time Oscar winner and A-list Hollywood star recently joined the ranks of female fashion entrepreneurs with a sustainable label by the name of “Mission Statement”. The petite and extremely elegant Swank radiates charm as she talks about her plans to promote ethical and sustainable production methods and muses on the common ground between fashion and acting (= telling stories). Swank herself pops up in the black-and-white campaign from time to time and you get the feeling she’s embarked on a path that’s going to be very lucrative. In the evening, an abundance of flowers, gold and chandeliers set the tone for the main party of the event in the ballroom of the Four Seasons Hotel. Karlie Kloss has come along with a few fellow models, Christian Louboutin is dancing to the saxophone band with an unknown beauty and out on the patio guests are engaged in stimulating conversation over scallop carpaccio. The champagne is flowing freely, cameras are flashing, people are shooting Insta stories and taking even more selfies. It’s the climax of the CNI event so far. The guests are celebrating themselves, the industry, and perhaps also simply life itself, which seems very easy here at this late hour. Nevertheless, there’s a packed agenda for the next morning as well.

The first speaker of the day is designer Philipp Plein. The undisputed king of bling-bling chic and probably also his label’s best testimonial has just arrived in Portugal by private jet. He’s

so tired that not even his iPhone's Face ID recognises him, he confesses to Menkes. Wearing a sweater and jogging pants from his own collection, he sits down casually on the white armchair. The combined value of his diamond watch and bracelets would probably easily buy you a loft apartment in downtown Munich. But as polarising as Plein might be, the story of his success reads like a modern business fairy tale. Having started out with just 12,000 marks of seed capital, he now oversees a global fashion empire with more than 200 stores. Models like Naomi Campbell and Irina Shayk feature in his shows. The sky's the limit – and there's no end in sight. All the same, he says, he doesn't actually think much about where he'll be 10 years from now – he never plans more than a year ahead. Even if you don't quite know what to make of him, he certainly seems to be doing a lot of things right. When he posts an Insta story on the way home in his private jet, one fan comments: "I fucking wanna be him." And that's how the "Plein universe" seems to function. In this case and this industry, functioning means creating dreams and aspirations that users and consumers can identify with and imbuing a product with desirability. Mark Shapiro, co-president of production company IMG, believes that's the key to building a brand and speaking a goal-driven language of luxury: customers have to be able to see themselves in the story a brand tells them and want to be part of that story. It's no longer just about a product or a particular message, it's about having the right story to match. It's a question of generating dreams that can ultimately be measured in something as down to earth and unromantic as sales figures. Occasionally, critical voices are heard as well. Stefan Siegel, CEO of online platform "Not just a label", gives a fiery talk in which he urges us to make our children understand that there's more to alligators than handbags and more to life than the pursuit of beauty – and that a real moment can be far more valuable than the Insta story that results from it. The audience claps approvingly; here it is again, that beautiful symbiosis between luxury and humanity.

All in all, it was an eventful few days with a host of speakers who provided an abundance of impressions and inspiration. We are experiencing a world of luxury that is faster-moving, more volatile and less predictable than ever before. We're confronted with an unbelievable flood of images, possibilities and styles that set the course for how we live, consume and delight our clients in our daily work. We must never stop thinking and reflecting for ourselves – that is the essence of this CNI Luxury Conference. And sometimes, we ourselves have to be the filter that provides the things that inspire us to dream. There's certainly no shortage of possibilities. By the way: Mark Shapiro finished his talk with these words: "A car loses its value, but the spirit of the drive lasts forever!" And on that note, it's goodbye until next year's CNI Lux in South Africa!

