French economy minister trumpets French openness at opening of new IFM fashion school campus

By Godfrey Deeny  -  November 25, 2021

French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire trumpeted the absolute necessity that France remain a culture open to foreign ideas at the official inauguration of the new IFM campus, Paris’ goal to create a major league fashion school.

Underlining the determination of the French luxury and fashion establishment, Le Maire addressed a gang of key French luxe brand executives, including the chairmen and CEOs of such mega brands as Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Hermès, Balenciaga and Galeries Lafayette, along with the presidents of multiple fabric and manufacturing federations.

“IFM represents a spirit of education. And for me education is the most important project for a nation and a society… IFM is also a spirit of international conquest. Here in IFM there are many foreign students and I believe that a nation is strongest when it doesn’t have any fear of foreigners. France is not a country than shrinks when you wash it. That might happen with clothes, never with France. Because we have a sufficiently strong and rich culture that foreign ideas can only enrich it, making a stronger, finer and more dominant new couture. That’s why I say to all the foreigners who have come to render honor to IFM by studying here, ‘you are welcome here and in France’,” insisted Le Maire.

Even if this was a speech to fashion insiders it was very much perceived as a commentary on the current presidential race in France. Where an extremist right-wing journalist Eric Zemmour, who recently went on trial for racist hate speech, is the fastest rising candidate in opinion polls.

“Back in 2019 we were a little group of about 50 to celebrate the opening the IFM underground. Today we are...
hundreds to celebrate the latest extension to the campus,” recalled Le Maire, whose ministry is located on the opposite side of the Seine.

He added that over one quarter of the students received grants to study at IFM, underlying its opening to less-than-wealthy applicants. “I’d like to break this image of fashion as an elitist endeavor. It’s an industry that provides 600,000 jobs and €150 billion in turnover.”

After a tour of the student ateliers and studios, FashionNetwork.com asked Le Maire were his views the same for other sectors.

“Of course, openness is vital not just in fashion. When you have a strong culture like ours, foreign ideas don’t weaken you they reinforce you. Don’t forget the two principal bosses of France’s two great auto companies are of foreign origin. Carlos Tavares is Portuguese and Luca De Meo of Italian origin,” noted Le Maire, everyone wearing a mask.

Why was he so convinced that IFM could rival major schools like St Martins in London or FIT in New York? Didn’t IFM, despite its great potential, risk becoming the Paris Saint Germain of fashion; a football team owned by the Qatari royal family that rules in France, but stumbles in international competitions?

“That’s a provocative remark, but you have touched an important point. Education is fundamental, and that’s we have also pushed to create a great gastronomic school. If there is a fault in France, it was the lack of a great global-level fashion college. Because we cannot have the most famous fashion in the world and not have a fashion college of the same renown. When I first came here two years ago that was a bet. Now it is becoming a reality. I’ll give you one figure; there are 1,000 places in this college, and 6,000 applicants.”

Le Maire, a smooth and silky orator, is also known as an outspoken critic of Brexit.

“I regret the decision taken by the British people, though their decision is sovereign. However, I also believe that fashion is linked to one’s national culture. So, there’s French fashion, Italian fashion and Spanish fashion. Yet, there is also a European culture, to which I am attached, and I am very happy that France remains a pillar in the construction of Europe.

Prior to a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Xavier Romatet, the IFM’s Dean, addressed the gathering.

“Our goal is to create a school that will become an international reference. And figures often speak very clearly. Today, there are 1,000 students, rising to 1,200 in two years’ time: in a campus of 9,000 square-meters by next fall. Of which 300 students from outside of France coming from 48 countries. Studying in 16 different programs in three main streams – savoir faire, creation and management,” Romatet said.

Founded first in 1986 as a fashion management school, IFM was later amalgamated with the Chambre Syndicale’s famed fashion design college, moving the combined school to east Paris and a new location, Les Docks, a snake-like, modernist apple green glass structural rolling along the Right Bank of the Seine.

Referencing Pierre Bergé, the godfather of the project; Didier Grumbach, the long-time president of the Chambre Syndicale, which controlled all fashion seasons in Paris, and his two predecessors, Dominique Jacomet and Pascal Morand, Romatet also revealed that 280 students were studying towards bachelor’s degrees in savoir faire and craftsmanship. A further 380 in fashion design and creation creating new silhouettes “respecting everyone’s cultural identity.”

In a recent agreement the Federation de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, the Chambre Syndicale’s successor, has agreed to put a joint IFM master graduate runway show on the official calendar.

A further 310 are studying a masters in luxury management, profiting from lectures and courses provided by over 200 senior experts culled from the upper reaches of French management.

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“We are the only fashion school in the world that offers all these three types of training. That permits students to understand better the codes of design and the language of creation,” the dean concluded.

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