Miista: Tradition and craftsmanship join to create avant-garde footwear and garments

By Triana Alonso  -  March 11, 2022

Of all the paths to take in order to make a name for yourself in the fashion industry, Laura Villasenin knew early on that hers would be an unconventional one. The London-based designer and entrepreneur born in Galicia launched her own brand, Miista, a little over 10 years ago, after completing her studies in shoe and accessory design in the British capital.

Her independent project has managed to establish itself on an international level, recognized by its braided designs, unique heel shapes and volumes that have seduced celebrities such as Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner. Miista decided to expand into ready-to-wear in 2022, presenting the line's second collection in Paris through a temporary store at 22 Rue Debelleyme until the end of March.

"I started Miista with what I knew best, but the idea was always for the brand to offer a complete lifestyle, a culture and a community in a more consolidated way," said Villasenin, proud of her company's incessant growth. "We presented our first shoe collection in the summer of 2011. More than a decade later, I can say that we have reached the point we wanted to be at," said the designer and entrepreneur, who was dressed in her own label from head to toe. Her goals were ambitious and the challenges more than substantial for an independent brand. One Brexit and a global pandemic later, Miista not only diversified its product offering by entering a new category, but did so by opening its own production site, which already employs 20 people.

A self-manufactured brand

"My goal was for us to be our own manufacturers. We prefer not to outsource parts of the business, but to integrate them, even if it costs us a lot more money. We want to focus on preserving and caring for craftsmanship," she said about the reasons she does not wish to outsource manufacturing. She added: "Over the last 10 years, we have realized that we are going to run out of places to manufacture in Europe if we don't start training new generations. The vast majority of our craftsmen are over 50 years old, and it is very hard to find young people who want to dedicate themselves to this trade." Only two of the seamstresses in her factory are young. "We have to get young people to see what is done with their hands as something sexy," said Villasenin, praising traditional knitting
and embroidery techniques as well as the highly valued lace of Camariñas, a skill of her birth region.

"Opening our own factory, even on a small scale, is a huge risk, but it’s part of Miista’s character," she explained, mentioning the impact of the pandemic on the industry: "During the Covid-19 pandemic, we realized that it’s no longer just a question of us believing in this concept in terms of its sustainability level, but that it’s the only possible one. The supply chain has faced a lot of difficulties, and the only solution is to fight to preserve craftsmanship in Europe." In addition, the Galician designer stressed the importance of promoting gender equality in the industry. "The most important positions are still occupied by men and this has to change. For example, in the footwear sector, it is extremely difficult to see women, which is very strange... It's 2022!" she exclaimed, pointing out that of the 20 workers in her factory, only one is male.

The entrepreneur chose her native Galicia as the location for her production workshop. The region has expertise in the fashion and textile industry and is also home to the headquarters of international brands such as Bimba y Lola, Adolfo Domínguez, Roberto Verino, and Purificación García, as well as Amancio Ortega's Inditex. Despite receiving a call from the fashion giant offering her a position, like many of her fellow design students after completing their degree, Villasenin made it crystal clear that she was never interested in fast fashion. She continues to question the business model to this day. "They impose unsustainable conditions for factories and destroy many parts of the industry," she argued about the negative role of some fast fashion companies when it comes to local production, both in Galicia and in northern Portugal. She bluntly highlighted how frustrating it is to see small brands suffer their designs being used as “inspiration” by these retailers, creations that require years of hard work just for it to be eventually “burned” in a matter of weeks when it goes out of style.

The brand has now added ready-to-wear to its product portfolio - Miista
In any case, the differences between the premium and fast fashion approaches are considerable. One only has to slip into the brand’s platform shoe with a fit designed for maximum comfort, see the details of its technical garments, or try on the layered silhouettes composed of Japanese denim to recognize its quality. Miista offers a complete wardrobe maintaining "consistent prices", designed by a team of three people led by Villasenin herself, that adopts the same avant-garde style the brand's footwear is known for.

The more accessible shoe line, produced in Portugal for the last eight years, offers products with a price range between €160 and €300 while the more intricate pairs, created in the factory it works with in Alicante, can reach up to €400. The ready-to-wear items range from knitwear starting at €200 to blazers and coats up to €800, with denim costing around €300. "In the long term, we want clothing to represent a major part of the business. We are investing heavily, and we believe it has as much or even more potential than our shoes. We don't want to be seen only as a shoe brand," she added.

From Brexit to a global pandemic: the challenges of an independent brand

"We've had our ups and downs, but in recent years we've managed to make the business profitable enough to launch other projects, such as our apparel line. All profits are reinvested in the development of lifestyle projects," explained the entrepreneur, acknowledging that Miista's maturity period has required several organizational changes. The company went from a centralized model in London in 2001 while producing its products in Spain, to a structure spread out in multiple cities during the last three years in preparation for Brexit. The marketing and sales team is still based in London today, logistics are managed by the brand itself from Porto, product development and garment production from Galicia, while Alicante houses quality control and footwear development.
The fashion brand boasting 448,000 followers on Instagram recorded growth of between 45% to 50% per month over the previous year with e-commerce representing the majority of its sales. "We were able to maintain this growth during the pandemic, when stores were closed and many orders from department stores were cancelled due to an increase in online shopping. I don't know what we would have done without the internet," she said about her "independent organic growth" company. She's currently torn between the pros and cons of recruiting investors and shareholders. "We've often wondered if it would be a good idea to have the financial backing of an investor, but so far we've preferred an organic route that has allowed us to do things in a different and creative way," she added.

Miista's main markets: the US and France

With the US its main market in terms of turnover -- followed by France, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy-- the company intends to extend its network of own stores, which currently operate in London, Barcelona, and in Paris's Le Marais district. Strategic spaces in cities such as New York or Los Angeles will complete its developed network of international points of sale. And Miista is not closing its doors in Paris any time soon. If its month-long ready-to-wear ephemeral boutique is successful, the company plans on opening a second space in the French city. It will additionally take the pop-up to Barcelona in April followed by New York in May.

Customer loyalty "will also be the main focus of investment", by fixing issues related to sizing and customer support in order to avoid direct returns. Customer acquisition will come as a challenge, given the fact that the brand's customer base is very diverse in terms of age groups, with female clients ranging from 20 to 60 years old.

"Our community is fundamental to the brand," stressed Villasenin several times throughout the conversation, insisting on her desire to make Miista "a platform". Along those lines, the company has its own podcasts. "It emerged as a means to talk about female talent and creativity from a different perspective. We want to show the subcultures that have always influenced us creatively". Miista, which stopped selling in Russia as soon as the war in Ukraine began, dedicated its latest episode to the avant-garde Ukrainian photographer Julie Poly.

“We didn't want to limit our projects strictly to fashion, but to share our interests,” she said about her passion in spreading awareness. “Maybe it's because of my Galician character, but in reality, I think it's much more interesting to look over other projects rather than just talking about my own brand,” she said.

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