Tom Ford and the CFDA: An era comes to an end

By Roxanne Robinson - May 17, 2022

After leading the American fashion organization for the past three years, Tom Ford announced that he would step away from his role as chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA).

He will step down as of May 31, 2022, and chief executive officer Steven Kolb will fulfill the duties as interim chair through December 31, 2022.
The debonair designer elevated the presence of American fashion at a time when New York Fashion Week was in danger of losing its relevance due to an arduous lengthy calendar filled with commercially driven clothing that often lacked inspiration on a runway.

While some industry folks may be scratching their heads thinking “that was fast,” according to the release issued by the CFDA, Chairpersons/Presidents typically hold the role for two to four years. Ford’s role was intended to last two years, June 1, 2019, to May 31, 2021, but was extended one year.

That two-to-four years concept was eclipsed by Stan Herman, currently on the board as treasurer, who held the post for 15 years (1991-2006), and Diane Von Furstenberg, who had it for 13 years (2006-2019).


One trait that Ford brought to the role was an international perspective, thanks to his time at Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent and his established design studio and held runway shows in London when he founded his namesake brand in New York. His predecessors were Seventh Avenue-born designers and brand leaders.

Ford’s critics were easy to pipe up that his brand, now based in Los Angeles—where the designer lives with his son—was not ideal for the role. It didn’t help when the designer chose to show his second collection as CFDA Chair in Los Angeles in February of 2020, but Ford had made it a point to show it there during the Oscars in previous seasons. He was quick to remind naysayers that it stood for the “Council of Fashion Designers of America and not the Council of Fashion Designers of New York,” according to BoF.

He expanded on this in WWD: "The decision to show in February in Los Angeles feels very natural to me. It is my home and has a strong impact on the way that I live and work within both the fashion and film worlds. There is an excitement in L.A. on that particular weekend, and the relationship between film and fashion is a strong one. In my role as chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, my main intent and priority is to globalize and bring attention to American fashion. There is truly no bigger or more prominent stage in the world at any given time than Los Angeles during the Academy Awards."

More recently, Ford returned to New York for his Spring 2022 showing in September of 2021, just days before his beloved husband, fashion journalist Richard Buckley died on September 19, 2021, at the age of 72. The pair had been together since their first meeting when Buckley was a reporter at WWD and Ford was a designer at Perry Ellis.

The couple spent more than three decades together. Ford told WSJ, "It's been hard after 35 years, very hard. I keep thinking, 'Oh, God, I have to call Richard,' or I need to send him a note about this. And he's not here."

Ford's business faced another hurdle when the designer had to cancel his Fall 2022 runway show slated for NYFW due to issues caused by the omicron. The virus wrecked havoc on design and production room staff in Los Angeles and Italian factories, which prevented his collection from being finished on time. This was a particular sting to the NYFW season, which had noticeable absences such as The Row, Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, and buzzy up-and-coming designer Christopher John Rogers. One lasting effect of the pandemic was opening a door for designers to depart from the traditional physical time frames and formats of a typical runway fashion week.

During his term, Ford initiated key initiatives on behalf of the CFDA. First up, he diversified the board by adding four new directors Virgil Abloh, Carly Cushnie, Maria Cornejo, and Kerby-Jean Raymond. According to an undisclosed source, Ford felt strongly about this mission and predated much of the industry's inclusion efforts that sprung up following the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

This was backed up by initiating new programs to bring much-needed diversity, equity, and inclusion to the fashion industry, including CFDA Impact to identify, connect and support thousands of talents through diversity, equity, and
inclusion work, and partnering with brands to provide access to hundreds of rewarding jobs, opportunities, and mentorships.

Additionally, he led A Common Thread with Vogue, which distributed over $5 million in relief aid to fashion businesses during the first two years of the pandemic – 79% of them women and minority-owned businesses—which kept many companies afloat when their businesses were at a standstill.

He also strengthened NYFW by tightening the official NYFW schedule to five days and five nights. This was a big move since previously it was sometimes as long as eight days and highly criticized for being that long and overfilled with shows often left best to the showroom selling floor.

The collection schedule is a point of contention in New York. IMG also releases a program that differs from the official NYFW CFDA-released schedule, often making the two organizations seemingly go toe-to-toe. Ford's presence helped forge a stronger alliance with IMG. He also launched the American Collections Calendar to include all American designers regardless of when and where they are showing as one act of cohesion.

He also allowed designers to stand out further in the marketplace by launching Runway360, CFDA's innovative digital platform to showcase and sell collections.

Bridget Foley, a New York-based fashion journalist who wrote texts for Tom Ford 001 and 002, thought the American designer was the right choice.

"Tom was the perfect person to succeed DVF as CFDA chair – he's a glamorous, international star with a no-nonsense, get-to-work attitude. He took on the role determined to increase American fashion's global profile and reputation. He also wanted to tighten the very long NYFW," she said via email.

She added that Ford accomplished "the latter and made progress towards the former– a process. But then along came Covid-19, and the CFDA's focus shifted to survival techniques. Perhaps lost in the pandemic nightmare is that Tom recognized immediately the need to open the CFDA to new and different voices."

The news will have the industry buzzing with his potential successor. Currently, the board consists of Tracy Reese (Vice Chairwoman), Vera Wang (Secretary), Stan Herman (Treasurer), Stacey Bendet, Bethann Hardison, Dao-Yi Chow, Prabal Gurung, Tommy Hilfiger, Norma Kamali, Michael Kors, Reed Krakoff, Ralph Lauren, Ashley Olsen, Italo Zucchelli, and Diane von Furstenberg, Maria Cornejo, Kerby Jean-Raymond, and Carly Cushnie. The role is purely voluntary.

By Roxanne Robinson

Copyright © 2022 FashionNetwork.com All rights reserved.