

The
**Luxury
Alchemist**

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CRAFT AND TALENT



© Sebastiano Moschini

Gilles Mendel behind the scenes of his Spring 2010 fashion show.

“Young designers need to understand the importance of craftsmanship. Talent might be the essential building block for success, but you need to learn your craft to transform fabric into a whimsical dress, and you need a vision to transform a collection into a brand.”

GILLES MENDEL
creative director and CEO of J. Mendel

When you meet students from the prestigious Parsons The New School for Design, their eyes are filled with dreams of glory and success. They’re hoping to follow in the footsteps of the school’s illustrious alumni, such as Marc Jacobs or Donna Karan. They are all young and talented, but the unfortunate reality is that very few of them will actually succeed in creating a unique style or look that will distinguish them from other talented designers. To achieve this goal, you need to channel your talent and master your craft, and that is something that Gilles Mendel certainly has accomplished.

When you mention J. Mendel, everyone immediately thinks of their exquisitely made furs and striking evening dresses. The company keeps expanding in more categories as the recognition of Gilles Mendel’s immense talent continues to disseminate. After being inducted into the CFDA in 2003,³⁷ he received the prestigious National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in October 2011. The dresses he designed for Taylor Swift (2011 and 2013) and Claire Danes (2012) for the Met Gala were all heralded by the media as the most beautiful gowns of the night. So how does Gilles do it? Where does his unparalleled talent come from?

Well, it started a few years ago. Gilles grew up in a family where fur and fashion were part of everyday life; his family had been in the fur business for generations.³⁸ From his father, who taught him his *métier*, to his elegant mother, who loved fashion and was close to designers the likes of Bernard Perris and Azzedine Alaïa, he was constantly surrounded by beauty, craft, and luxury.

Despite his upbringing, Gilles never thought he would become a creator and designer. He did intend to work for the family company, however, so he decided to go to

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business school. He wanted to know how to expand the business beyond the family's one store, located on Paris's Rue Saint-Honoré. He apprenticed with his father and mastered the trade the way the previous four generations did—by working long hours, learning how to select the best skins, cutting, and sewing. But even as a teenager, Gilles wished to go further than what he had been taught; he wanted to “fly with his own wings” (from the French expression, *voler de ses propres ailes*). He saw the magic in the work. Gilles still remembers how, as a child, he would watch his mother put on a fur, and how this simple act transformed her. She would get up on her tiptoes and walk around feeling and looking equally glamorous and happy. For him, any woman wearing fur is transformed; she has a different attitude and feels beautiful and attractive. This power of transformation has been at the core of Gilles's creativity. The same way that fur transforms women, he transformed the world of *fourrure*; from there he went on to unleash his creativity on eveningwear, then ready-to-wear, and, most recently, accessories.

Fur was sacred in Gilles's world, pieces shown in their most striking simplicity, but he was yearning for a different way to present them. He wanted to experiment with different techniques, to push the envelope and be irreverent. He was not afraid to experiment with his craft and he had a relentless work ethic. Coupled with his hard work and tenacity, his indomitable talent led him to revolutionize the treatment of fur by interpreting it like fabric, which no one had done before.

Given his desire to change the family business, France was just too conventional for his new ideas. Gilles needed a country open to change and iconoclasts, so he saw no choice but to go to New York in the early 1980s. He quickly recognized that



© Daniel Jackson

J. Mendel Fall 2012 advertising; Bette Franke at DNA models.

his dreams were quite ambitious, even by his standards. After visiting several locations on Madison Avenue for the perfect storefront, he realized that they were all out of his budget. He could not believe that he might be forced to return to Paris defeated. Instead of doing that, he redoubled his efforts to conquer the New World. Through an acquaintance of his father's, he arranged to take his sketches to Elizabeth Arden's salon.³⁹ Elizabeth Arden had built a cosmetics empire in the United States in the 1930s, and her beauty salon on Fifth Avenue continued to attract the most sophisticated ladies of New York society after her death in 1966. It was there that Gilles met Joe Ronchetti, then President at Arden, and Jerry Solovei, the company's Retail Fashion Director and

General Manager, who immediately recognized the young creator's incredible talent and offered him space in the salon. Thanks to this opportunity, Gilles met the women who made or broke designers during the 1980s, and he was the immediate *coqueluche de ces dames*, the It designer. From Betsy Bloomingdale to Liza Minnelli and Nancy Reagan, Gilles's creations adorned the most in-vogue ladies of the time. They understood his sensibilities and recognized the amazing talent that allowed him to manipulate fur as if it were just a simple fabric.

As Gilles continued to work fur into new and innovative patterns, it became obvious to him what new challenge was ahead of him: transforming fabric into artwork. One night, he was setting up a display window at his Madison Avenue store (he had managed to make it onto Madison Avenue by then). It was during springtime, and he knew that women weren't thinking about fur with the warmer temperatures. Wanting to highlight a smaller fur that could be worn in warmer weather, he came up with a little dress to place underneath it on a mannequin. The next day, three women entered the boutique asking to purchase the dress. That was the beginning of a new phase for the company, the first step of the firm's transformation into a real luxury brand.⁴⁰ Gilles's greatest satisfaction was the immediate acceptance of his 2003 ready-to-wear line, the moment when he finally took the plunge.

His ready-to-wear collection started with the same thought process applied to his reinvention of fur: craftsmanship, transformation, lightness, transparency, mixing of fabrics, high and low elements, artistry, sophistication, and modernity. For Gilles, fashion allowed him to enter a season-free world of beauty. He combined the principles of the 1920s and 1930s,

as executed by the couture great Madame Grès, with his own vision in order to create a "modern heirloom"—a unique piece, whether fur or fashion, that is both modern and vintage.⁴¹ His goal was to make women feel beautiful and sensual, no matter the medium.

Today Gilles Mendel carries out his vision in every single detail of his creations. For him, J. Mendel is about effortless chic as embodied by his original muses, 1970s icons Jane Birkin and Charlotte Rampling. They represent agelessness, sophistication, independence, and confidence. Whether in her early twenties or late sixties, the J. Mendel woman appreciates and understands craftsmanship, which Gilles delivers. His New York atelier is an idiosyncrasy in today's world of fast fashion. His creations are not just about design; they incorporate a *savoir faire* that only experience can provide. For his first ready-to-wear collection, Gilles had Madame Colette, Yves Saint Laurent's couture director, flown to New York from Paris so that she could critique his work. With her encouragement, Gilles put on his first fashion show, which was widely praised by the media and clients alike. The designer community immediately recognized him as not only one of their own, but one of their best and most talented.

Like most companies, expansion has its challenges, and J. Mendel also faced inevitable growing pains. From outgrowing your flagship store, controlling your image, and entering new markets to attracting new clients, expanding product offerings, and creating an e-commerce platform, all of these issues require attention while still running a day-to-day business, and you can't put them on pause. Everything looks easy on paper, but it's not so simple to execute. Finding the ideal location on Madison Avenue is already a challenge in itself,

but being the lucky tenant is also a battle because the few available appealing spaces are in high demand. Deciding to launch an e-commerce site is an important decision as well, but finding your own voice is another story. Ensuring that you have the right platform, a suitable back end, an inventory system, as well as selecting the appropriate merchandise and the right people to handle this new process are all tasks to master. As J. Mendel continues to expand, the good news is that Gilles's reputation as a designer and the force behind his brand is stronger than ever. Nowadays no red carpet event is complete without a J. Mendel gown, and every young woman dreams of wearing one!

In the fall of 2012, the company took a major step to enter the world of accessories. Gilles, his creative team, and his financial partners, The Gores Group, developed a five-year growth plan with accessories as the first building block—a *must* for any successful luxury fashion brand. When you decide to create an accessory line, you need to make sure that it's consistent with every single aspect of your brand's DNA. In order to do so, it's imperative to really understand what your company stands for. Of course, Gilles and his team knew what a J. Mendel creation represents, but how do you communicate it to your clients? Even trickier, how do you share it with potential customers, people who only have a vague understanding of who you are and what you represent?

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, most people who know J. Mendel automatically think of fur. That's a good start because it's a true differentiator, but how do you go beyond the obvious? How do you translate the creator's talent and vision into a new product? For Gilles, fur is about lightness, which is not the first thing that comes to mind when doing

word associations. To help figure it out, the company asked Laird + Partners—a leading New York-based creative agency specializing in luxury branding—to work on the company's brand book. J. Mendel's leaders wanted the new branding to highlight the company's essence, so that each detail of the first bag collection (and other future creations in different categories) would be consistent with the rest. From a purse's feet to its lining, every detail must reflect the fundamental elements that make J. Mendel Paris different from all other brands: transparency and lightness, luxury and craftsmanship. In the same way that Gilles managed to combine these qualities in his clothing, he also did it for the first (and subsequent) bag collections—from the Kylie bag's transparent Lucite clasp and the Midi Bugatti's silver fox highlights to the Matin Tote's intricate work of mixed exotic skins, the J. Mendel bags incorporate the *maison* "codes" and are already bestsellers!

To this day, Gilles continues to refer back to his craft, which is what roots the brand and its history. He always begins his



J. Mendel Spring 2013 advertising;
Bette Franke at DNA models.

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work on a mannequin (never on a flat surface), and creates his dresses as if they were sculptures. This is the reason why his garments are so flattering on women's bodies. Gilles's motto, "never compromise," is apparent in everything he touches! To maintain a successful luxury venture you must always maintain the highest standards and stay true to your DNA. And Gilles has! Through his talent and savoir faire, Gilles's gowns have enhanced the beauty of countless modern-day goddesses, from Natalie Portman to Taylor Swift to Angelina Jolie.⁴²

Gilles's limitless talent, knowledge of his craft, and business acumen are a rare combination. You most likely will not find (or not be) such a creative genius, but you can still establish your own luxury brand and be successful. You'll need to know how to surround yourself with the right talent, nurture it, and help it blossom. Few designers also possess good business judgment, which is the reason why many creative types also have a business partner, as Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé do. If you are a gifted creator, the biggest challenge is knowing how to find the right business partner and mentor. That person needs to believe in you, even when you have doubts. Sometimes they will not follow every idea you have because they might not be good business decisions. Talent and craft will be the base of your successful brand, but great management, strong leadership, and a resourceful team are all indispensable. In order to find the correct partners, you need to be open to different ways of thinking and recognize good chemistry. Then you grab the opportunity when it appears and run with it!

