

# READY TO DARE

HER BRIEF WAS TO GIVE THE TOD'S WOMAN A BODY. AFTER CUTTING HER TEETH AT PRADA, ALESSANDRA FACCHINETTI HAD THE CREDENTIALS TO FILL THE GAP AT THE LEATHER LABEL

STORY **JOSEPHINE MCKENNA** PORTRAIT **BOO GEORGE**

**A**lessandra Facchinetti has a poise about her that recalls her childhood dreams of becoming a ballerina. Her striking blue eyes, fine features and slender frame would lend themselves to a dramatic pas de deux, but the talented designer has instead taken centre stage in Italian fashion and is relishing her latest role as creative director at the luxury brand Tod's.

Billionaire entrepreneur Diego Della Valle has built a global empire around his iconic loafers, handbags and accessories over the years but he was looking for a ready-to-wear clothing range to complement his fine leather and reinforce his brand's identity. Two years ago he turned to Facchinetti and she didn't hesitate. "I said yes immediately for more than one reason. First of all because Tod's is one of the most traditional, authentic Italian fashion brands," Facchinetti says. "It is also a family business and I was attracted to that because during my career I have always worked well with a family business."

It would be hard to find someone better groomed for the job. Forty-three-year-old Facchinetti has an extraordinary track record in the fashion business and enviable experience working for the biggest names in Italian design: Prada, Valentino, Gucci. Tod's sits well on a curriculum vitae already feeling the weight of the industry's expectations. Della Valle's vision was clear.

"When I joined the company the most important thing was to complete the lifestyle of the brand," says Facchinetti. "Without the ready-to-wear line, there was a gap in a sense. Now the Tod's woman has a body," she says with a giggle. After just a couple of seasons the elegant designer has helped to give that woman shape and added a vibrant new dimension to the brand.

"Alessandra has added a contemporary and feminine touch to all the accessory collections and in particular developed the clothing collection, helping to define and complete the image of the Tod's woman," says Della Valle. "She's a person with principles and ideas very much aligned with the philosophy of the brand."

In Tod's flagship store on Via della Spiga in Milan's Golden Triangle fashion quarter, the racks are filled with finely perforated leather dresses and classic leather jackets with vibrant leather inlays from Facchinetti's latest collection. A private salon for custom-made footwear is

filled with portraits of Princess Diana and Hollywood stars including Gwyneth Paltrow and Naomi Watts.

Downstairs clients caress cranberry-coloured handbags shaped like tulips and waves, and there are others made of python and cherry-tinted crocodile skin design selling for €2500 euros (\$3700). Across the room leather bags are covered in cowboy fringes and geometric patterns inspired by the Memphis art movement while classic Tod's suede moccasins are given a new twist with a vintage brooch. Facchinetti has even developed her own line of jewellery for the brand. "Before I used to be much more focused on traditional or classic styles," she says. "Today obviously I don't want to lose that because the classic style is the basis of how I think, but I have also added something contemporary, fresher and feminine. And I have to say I am having a lot of success."

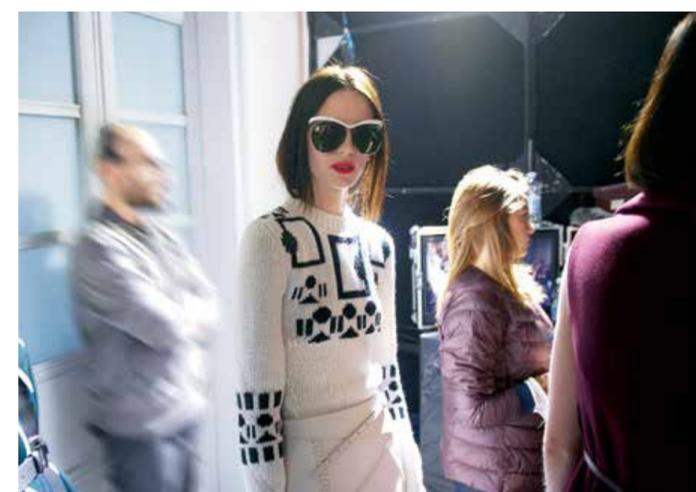
Seated in her office at Tod's stylish art deco headquarters in Milan, Facchinetti is at ease discussing how she draws ideas from many different sources, including art, cinema, music and even her family. Her father Roby is a 71-year-old rock star who fronts the band "Pooh". He has sold more than a hundred million albums and wrote a top-selling song in her honour when she was born. He is a household name in Italy and when he's not performing, he joins Facchinetti's brother, Francesco, another well-known musician, judging talent on the Italian version of the TV talent show *The Voice*.

After her parents separated Facchinetti spent more time with her mother and grandmother, who she says strongly influenced her personal sense of style when she was growing up in the northern city of Bergamo, near Milan. "My grandmother was super-elegant. She was a real woman. She was not obsessed about fashion, but she paid attention to being feminine. I got that sensibility from her without really knowing it."

"I was always attracted to beauty. Since I was very young I have been attracted to beauty, not only clothes but beauty generally. I was always looking without knowing what worked." Facchinetti says her family never pushed her to do anything in particular and always encouraged her to follow her passion. Her father recently gave her a piano even though she doesn't play herself. "What I learned from them was to believe in passion, that's what they gave me. I was always free to decide what I wanted to do. From the moment I decided to work in fashion, like everything in my life, I do it with great passion."

Tod's creative director  
Alessandra Facchinetti, the  
daughter of an Italian rock star,  
studied art and architecture  
before going into fashion





Facchinetti began her career more than 20 years ago. After studying architecture, art and sculpture, she transferred to Milan's prestigious Marangoni Institute to study fashion and eventually landed her first job working with Miuccia Prada at Miu Miu, the hip brand that Prada established in 1993. Facchinetti says she didn't have a clear goal in mind. "It was just something that happened because I did things in a certain way and probably this is why I had the possibility to work with such amazing people. When I started at Miu Miu I was like a baby and I learned everything there. After seven years I was looking for something different."

Her desire for change led Facchinetti to Gucci where she worked with Tom Ford and later succeeded him as design director of the brand's ready-to-wear collection when he left in 2004. But Facchinetti was forced out a year later when management did not get the financial returns they expected. "Gucci was definitely something very different, a challenge," she admits. "I decided to push myself in a new direction with a different woman."

In 2006 Facchinetti moved to the lifestyle brand, Moncler, where she launched the "Gamme Rouge" label and two years later transferred to Valentino where she not only deepened her experience in ready-to-wear but let her imagination run wild with haute couture. In a 2009 TV interview soon after joining Valentino, Facchinetti revealed with disarming honesty how nervous she had been about the challenge ahead and

**“CREATIVITY IS IMPORTANT, BUT YOU NEED TO BE VERY ORGANISED AS WELL OTHERWISE YOUR ENERGY DISAPPEARS”**

how she had burst into tears when she met the white-coated seamstresses of the famous atelier for the first time. Her term there lasted only a year. "Valentino was good, very difficult," she says discreetly. "But I had the opportunity to do haute couture. That was my dream."

Tod's represents a completely different kind of challenge. Working closely with Della Valle, she is responsible for creating the look of the brand and integrating the ready-to-wear line with the shoes, handbags and accessories that define the luxury goods empire. Facchinetti begins her working day between 8am and 8.30 as she treasures a few moments of silence in

the office before the rest of the staff arrive. "I need to concentrate and really organise the day," says Facchinetti, who maintains a punishing schedule that can keep her there late in the evening. "There are a lot of moments where creativity is important, but I have to say you need to be very organised as well otherwise your energy disappears. In the morning I really like to dedicate myself to that part of my work." With a team of 30, she spends the day consulting and elaborating her design concepts for shoes, leather goods and ready-to-wear in what she likes to call an "evolution of ideas".

"I always start by giving directions. Then of course there are people who work and then come back to me and we work together, so there are different steps, different moments," she says. "During the day we share an evolution of ideas. It is really good, it is really well-organised, I have to say." Facchinetti not only works on the collection but consults with architects on store design and store window presentations. She often travels to Brancadoro, home of Tod's leather goods production in Italy's Le Marche region. "I am involved in every sector, including marketing," she says.

Her relationship with Della Valle is critical and the pair are constantly exchanging ideas and concepts for the brand every day. "He makes me a lot more secure in what I am doing," Facchinetti says. "I try to translate his vision in the design process and not lose the DNA of the brand. He trusts what I am doing and that is very good."

Tod's has also given Facchinetti new opportunities to learn. She has enjoyed experimenting with leather and uses it to create dresses, shirts, and jackets as well as new collections of handbags and shoes. She readily admits she has an obsessive eye for detail. "It's been the most challenging thing here. I have worked with leather in the past but it wasn't my focus," Facchinetti says. "The most important part of the collection is the moment when I find a treatment for the leather. I try to work with it as a material like a fabric and give it a natural, feminine aspect. It's been very exciting."

Facchinetti's creativity and hard work culminates in the presentation of the Tod's collection twice a year and she has used the runway shows to not only show off her work but indulge her imagination — even drawing on the movie classics of the legendary Italian director Luchino Visconti for one show. "It's more like working on a movie. I try and think about the set in that way: what is the best performance or stage that you can give to a person to explain your work," she says. "It's not just a runway show. I try to add something to give more emotion and a deeper reference to what I do."

While few industry insiders are prepared to comment on each other, Franca Sozzani, the powerful editor-in-chief of Italian *Vogue*, once described Facchinetti as "very talented" and her first ready-to-wear show for Tod's in September 2013 won plaudits from some of the industry's toughest critics. "With Ms Facchinetti at the

**“IT'S NOT JUST A RUNWAY SHOW. I TRY TO ADD SOMETHING TO GIVE MORE EMOTION AND A DEEPER REFERENCE TO WHAT I DO”**

helm, Tod's seems to have found a winner for its big venture into clothing," wrote influential fashion critic Suzy Menkes in *The New York Times*. Menkes reiterated that view this year, saying: "She embodies a new feeling about fashion for a generation of women." In February fashion blogger Nicole Phelps from Style.com described Facchinetti's 2015 autumn collection as "pushing the edges" of the Tod's label. "All-leather collections can go wrong in any number of ways; Facchinetti's have been subtle and sophisticated," she wrote.

Tod's posted nearly €568 million in global sales in 2014 and the Tod's line is now sold in 146 stores around

the world. A new partnership with Net-a-Porter will open up a valuable new market for the company's menswear and womenswear. It may be a little early to assess Facchinetti's impact on the company's bottom line, but the veteran designer recognises she has to stay ahead of a rapidly changing market to satisfy an ever more sophisticated clientele from diverse cultural backgrounds.

"Today the most difficult thing is to please clients in all these countries, women have different tastes and want different colours and styles," she says. "China is very important, we have more than 30 stores there. The business is huge after Europe and America. We go there twice a year to visit the stores. It is something you have to live, you have to understand how to develop products."

Despite her experience and impressive track record, Facchinetti exhibits an endearing insecurity and is driven to outdo herself with every collection. "Every season you have to start from zero and this is exactly how I feel when I do a new collection," she says. "It's like the first time all over again. Even after 20 years doing this work I don't feel like I am fine because I know what I am doing. I think that is very exciting or otherwise I would never get new inspiration. You need to improve yourself every time."

But in a cutthroat industry where creativity is judged on its originality and potential profitability, Facchinetti is clearly not about to play it safe to protect her reputation. "I am not motivated by ego," she says emphatically. "I have to say it is not part of me. No, no, no." **W**