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Christian Lacroix: A King Without a Kingdom

I can't stand the idea that people think I am to blame. But to a certain extent I am paying for not having done what everyone else did, with their logos and It-bags. I never went down that route.¹

– Christian Lacroix, Designer and Co-founder Christian Lacroix Company

It is not every day that a fashion show triggers rivers of tears and group hugs. But that is just what happened on 7 July 2009 as Christian Lacroix presented what could possibly be his last haute couture show.² Hard-boiled fashion editors and members of the elite cadre of ultra-wealthy women who actually buy the made-to-measure couture garments wiped their eyes following the presentation, which had an almost funereal feel about it.³ Loyal fans unfurled a banner reading “Christian Lacroix forever” as the genial designer took a final lap around the catwalk.⁴ “I did it my way”, sung in French, the soundtrack played.⁵

That Lacroix, who had been declared insolvent by a Paris court in May 2009, even got a show put on was a minor miracle.⁶ His advisors were against it.⁷ Money was so tight that Lacroix's friends had to pitch in to make the show happen.⁸ His staff worked for free, as did the embroiders and beaders. The venue was given free of charge. Maison Roger Vivier donated the shoes and Lacroix begged €15,000 from the administrators to pay the models. In the end, 24 creations made it to the catwalk – each an exquisite, if toned-down, example of the artistry that had marked Lacroix's career.⁹

In 1988 Christian Lacroix was crowned “the new king of couture” by *Time* magazine. For over two decades he seduced fashionistas around the world with wild colours, exuberant pouf skirts and fairy-tale wedding dresses.¹⁰ The French Minister of Culture called the demise of Lacroix a “cultural disaster”.¹¹ Yet, in a pure business sense, Lacroix was a chronic failure. The company never turned a profit, incurring lifetime losses of €200 million and passing through 15 chiefs.^{12,13} Lacroix blamed the woes on a “lack of chemistry” between creativity and business.¹⁴ Lacroix's CEO, Nicolas Topiol, countered that going through so many CEOs suggested the designer was the source of problems.¹⁵

Lacroix's last show was part of an effort to attract potential investors to allow him to relaunch haute couture and a ‘very high-end’ ready-to-wear line, as well as more affordable accessories. By his calculations, it would take €60 million to reintroduce the label properly.¹⁶ At the end of July 2009, the company's 125 workers would be asked to go on holiday until the end of August. If a buyer was not found, 112 staffers – plus Lacroix himself – were expected to lose their jobs.¹⁷ Christian Lacroix would also lose the rights to design under his own name, becoming “a king without a kingdom.”

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