

EXCLUSIVE

New Paris Auction House Penelope's Hopes to Corner the Market for Fashion

● Founder Pénélope Blanckaert aims to fill a gap in the market with specialized features and hard-to-find items.

BY JOELLE DIDERICH

PARIS - For all the major luxury brands based in Paris, the French capital has so far lacked an auction house specializing in fashion.

Enter Pénélope Blanckaert, a vintage and contemporary fashion expert with 18 years of experience working with auctioneers including Artcurial, Piasa and Millon.

Her eponymous platform, Penelope's, wrapped up its inaugural sale on Monday, and has four more planned before the end of the year, including the first auction of vintage Prada and Miu Miu.

"I realized that I wanted to do this job, but differently," Blanckaert told WWD.

"Generalist auction houses are absolutely not equipped to handle fashion, whether in terms of storage spaces or photographing lots; packing them for dispatch; marketing, or websites, which lack adequate search filters," she noted. "The idea is for Penelope's to become the auction house for fashion."

Her website, penelopesauction.com, allows users to search items by size and color. Potential bidders are redirected to the Drouot marketplace, but she hopes to eventually also control the purchasing end.

A graduate of the Institut Français de la Mode, Blanckaert brings a strong editorial take to the project. For her sale of 20th

century fashion magazines, which ran from Sept. 26 to Oct. 7, she tapped French artist Kat Gallicere to create a series of collages.

She believes it's important to put a modern spin on vintage clothes. Having strong imagery also helps to sell lots to overseas buyers, who are not interested in reading reams of description.

"By mixing, say, Saint Laurent with Comme des Garçons, you totally change the perception of it," Blanckaert noted. "I've always done that. It feels natural, but I've noticed a lot of women love the idea of vintage, but don't really know how to wear it."

Penelope's specializes in items that are at least 20 years old, with prices ranging from less than 100 euros to several thousand.

"I don't want this auction house to be too elitist," said Blanckaert, though she also helped private auction platform Fair Warning sell a Paco Rabanne dress for \$100,000. "There's nothing to say we can't work with that caliber of pieces."

It's a competitive market, with the proliferation of secondhand platforms online, and a lack of transparency on pricing. Penelope's takes a 20 percent commission on sales, and items are priced competitively to encourage bidding.

Formerly Hermès vintage and fashion arts director at Artcurial, Blanckaert works with sellers who have a minimum of 10 or 15 pieces to offload, and also acts as an agent for other auction houses. Bags are authenticated both internally and by an external expert.



A collage by Kat Gallicere.

"The idea is to forge partnerships with auction houses who get the odd fashion item but prefer to pass it on to a specialized auction house. It's like a customer service," she explained.

Rather than throwing a variety of items into the mix, she wants to narrow down sales by theme, with just 150 to 200 lots, in the hopes of appealing to expert buyers.

"We're not going to sell just Chanel, Dior and Louis Vuitton. We want those items, of course, but we're also planning

Pénélope Blanckaert



a Dorothee Bis sale next year," noted Blanckaert, who's been entrusted with the archives of Jacqueline Jacobson, the cofounder of the cult French brand born in the 1960s.

In January, it will be Gianfranco Ferré, another first on the auction scene. Blanckaert hopes to eventually expand from fashion to a variety of branded items.

"You can buy a dress for 80 euros, but also a Kelly bag for 10,000 euros," she said. "We have something for everyone."

EXCLUSIVE

Meet the Other Van Noten With a Fixation for Flowers



Sophie Van Noten

● Belgian designer Sophie Van Noten hopes to make her own mark in fashion with Vallverdù, a clothing line inspired by the ancient Indian practice of Ayurveda.

BY JOELLE DIDERICH

PARIS - It turns out Dries is not the only Van Noten obsessed with flowers.

His relative Sophie Van Noten hopes to make a name for herself with the launch of Vallverdù, a line of clothing inspired by the ancient Indian practice of Ayurveda, which she describes as a fusion between wellness and fashion.

A graduate of Istituto Marangoni in Florence, she's opening an atelier in the Italian city for bespoke appointments that include a full consultation.

Expect to come away with anything from a silk garment in a personalized print to a custom herbal tea or facial cream.

"This personal one-to-one with the clients, and really listening to them and being there for them, is something I very much treasure," Van Noten told WWD. "For me, it goes further than solely making a garment. I want the clients to learn something about themselves."

The 26-year-old became interested in Ayurvedic

medicine after struggling with migraines. She grew aware of the harmful effects of toxic chemicals used to dye clothes.

"I felt like I was not really listening to my body," she recalled. "We can be so obsessed by the things we eat, how our body absorbs that, but we very much ignore all the other things that we absorb through the skin."

This led her to spend a year in the southern Indian state of Kerala, including five months in an Ayurvedic hospital, where she studied disciplines including cosmic herbalism and Ayurvedic massage.

"I really immersed myself in the wellness aspect, making the medicinal oils and the skin masks and all those botanical concoctions, because I think we very much underestimate the power of herbs," she said. "If we use them in the right way, it can do so much for your body."

After returning to Belgium, she started experimenting with botanical dyes, using flowers and herbs from her grandmother's garden. Vallverdù was launched last year via private client appointments and now has an official home in Florence, a city she views as her spiritual home for its commitment to craftsmanship.

"Always when I'm here, I feel this is my space, this is my place, so I'm very happy now that I can finally settle here," she said. "People nowadays are in need of a shared space of intimacy, so we want to be there for the client."

On the luxury end of the collection are garments made from so-called peace silk, which is produced without harming the silkworms. Following a consultation, these are dyed in bespoke prints with plants

from the family garden, or organic farms in Italy.

"I start from scratch to create for you, because I think that's also the most interesting aspect of the concept: what is your type, which herbs are beneficial for you, which print, which landscape we can imagine together," Van Noten explained.

Then there are dressing gowns made of Ayurveda eco-friendly wellness textiles: handwoven organic cotton dyed in India using Ayurvedic herbs and plants. These are designed to provide benefits when worn on bare skin, and remain effective provided they are hand-washed with pH-neutral soap.

Prices start at 1,500 euros and go up to 5,000 euros for a blazer with handmade ceramic buttons, and each garment comes with a personalized herbal creation. Van Noten also offers more accessible items like scarves and fragrance sachets.

For now, she's reluctant to dive into the mainstream fashion system, though she's working with a women-led workshop in India to make pieces that will be more widely available, in keeping with the brand's philosophy of "green luxury."

Though she was born into a family of garment makers and traders, Van Noten is keen to carve her own path. Dries Van Noten, who retired from his namesake label in June after almost four decades in fashion, is her father's cousin.

"The adoration for botanics and flowers is definitely a connection that we do share together, but I prefer to do this on my own and to build this journey," she said. "It's very much creating an escape, a landscape where I myself also would like to be."



A look from Sophie Van Noten's clothing label Vallverdù.