

Interview

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REED KRAKOFF





LAUNCH GALLERY »

Reed Krakoff was named the executive creative director of Coach in 1996, and since then, he has helped transform a \$500-million label into a \$4-billion international accessories empire. Krakoff, who cut his teeth at Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, holds control over nearly every aspect of the company: merchandising, advertising, store design, not to mention the vast array of new products—shoes, bags, jewelry, sunglasses—the company releases every month. But while Krakoff, now president, has long been exalted for his big-business acumen and singular talent for tapping into the soft spots of contemporary women’s fashion, his announcement two years ago that he’d be making his first foray into ready-to-wear with an eponymous line was met with mixed responses. Cynics wondered how a branding titan could translate his skills into a genuine design career—and in the throes of a recession, no less. Nevertheless, Krakoff emerged with a debut collection built around what he described as “utilitarian American reimagined,” highlighted by belted waxed-linen dresses, military-accented maxi wrap skirts, and fur-embellished studded boots. Soon after, he opened a store on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, followed by others in Las Vegas and Tokyo. Over the past four seasons, he has continued to pare back the buckles and flourishes as he has veered toward a kind of elegant understatement, culminating in the streamlined buttery leather wrap skirts and subtle shimmery tops he showcased for spring 2012.

The Connecticut-bred Krakoff, though, is, in every sense of the term, a Renaissance man, finding time between his work with Coach and Reed Krakoff to hone his skills as a photographer (in 2008, he released a book of black-and-white photographs of Ultimate Fighting Championship athletes). He has also become an avid collector of modern furniture by such 20th-century masters as Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann and contemporary names like Ron Arad and Marc Newson.

Dutch furniture designer Joris Laarman recently caught up with KRAKOFF at his Manhattan studio.

JORIS LAARMAN: I was wondering where you grew up and how that developed your creativity.

REED KRAKOFF: That’s a good question. I think of my life as divided between a lot of different periods. I grew up in the country, but as I got older—when I was in college and later—I became more of an urban person. That’s really when I started to become more of a creative person who was interested in fine arts, painting, drawing, and music. I studied jazz for a long time. Looking back, all those things were great training.

LAARMAN: So why did you choose fashion?

KRAKOFF: Fashion for me is the perfect combination of all the things I love. There’s an element of history to it. I love understanding why people wear what they wear, why during certain periods in history women looked the way they looked. There was always a strong reason behind it, whether it was because of what was available to them or because of what was happening in the world politically or sociologically. Fashion is like an amazing blend of commerce, travel, and creativity—of studying what people were about during a particular time.

LAARMAN: I always try to look for historic parallels in what I make, you know? But I see fashion as something really . . . volatile? It's really fast. I mean, you have to work by season, while if I do a new project, it could take two years to fully develop. Do you have time to actually be creative enough?

KRAKOFF: A lot of times it has to do with context and what you're trying to accomplish, but I think I would probably do something different if I had longer. [*laughs*] Not better or worse, just different. It's funny because I see my work as being very organic, so I almost feel like I wouldn't do anything different—just further out, further downstream. But I don't think I would change direction.

LAARMAN: It would still be fashion.

KRAKOFF: Yeah. I think fashion is the only thing I'm fully suited to do because I am super impatient, which I think is a good thing for fashion. I could never do what you do and work on something for two years. I would do 20 things and finish none of them [*laughs*]. I always admire people who have that ability to sustain something for that long a period. I'm attracted to that mix of things that are very refined and polished, and things that are almost accidental. I feel like the best things happen when you're on the path to making something, even if where you end up is not where you thought you would.

LAARMAN: I don't think it's the same for me. These chairs that you sit on, for instance, they're generated by a software program, and you don't have too much choice as to where to go. They have to look like that, so in that way they become timeless, you know? I hope. But, of course, they are also a sign of the time. Probably in 60 years I'll look at the chairs and think, Ah, that's probably something from 2000-something. Do you strive for timelessness?

KRAKOFF: It's funny. I can honestly say it doesn't come into play when I'm thinking about what I'm doing. I'm looking for a unique voice. I think it's so important that you understand what you're trying to accomplish, what you're trying to say. Timelessness is never a thing I think about. If you try to make things timeless, you can end up with things that are neither exciting nor timeless. It's sort of like aiming for the middle in a way. At the same time, I never want to have to use the word *trendy* because it's not really what interests me. That's something that is gone tomorrow.

LAARMAN: How do you see your work fitting into the present?

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KRAKOFF: I grew up with American sportswear. I worked at Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger, where it was minimal and then other times very romantic, and they were defining what American sportswear was for my generation. For me, it's about redefining and melding American sportswear with something that's today. But maybe sportswear is more of a starting point; I don't see it as a literal inspiration. I'm trying to understand what it means today by introducing much more in terms of modernity, fabrication, and silhouette. When I think of sportswear, I think of this concept of "form follows function." That's not American, I guess, but when you think of American clothes, you think of the biker jacket, the T-shirt, jeans. You think of the jean jacket and men's tailoring.

LAARMAN: How much do you work?

KRAKOFF: Always [*laughs*]. For me, my work and my life are the same.

LAARMAN: I'm the same. I took my 8-weeks-old baby here to New York because, you know, my wife, Anita, and I work together constantly. We're a team. I met your wife last year. How is it working out if you work all the time?

KRAKOFF: Well, I feel lucky to love what I do. My wife and I both love design, and it's really embedded in our life—whether it's talking about paper clips or floors or the most mundane things. It doesn't feel like working. I do all the projects I do because I like doing them, whether it's a book or a photo shoot.

LAARMAN: What do you look for in design?

KRAKOFF: Really simply, I look for something I'm drawn to. I try to look for an immediate connection with something—something I just fall in love with. I feel if people have to explain to you why it's good, it's not so good. Like, if I just showed someone a handbag and was like, "Well, you know, it does this, and this leather does this, and it comes from this kind of cow . . ." Five minutes into it, the person just sort of stops listening. I find it's the same with design. I loved the bone furniture series you did. When I saw it, I just fell in love with the form. It looked new. It's hard to explain, but we all know when someone does something that's . . . that's just not what you expected. And that's what I look for in design.

LAARMAN: What's your favorite piece of furniture?

KRAKOFF: That's a hard one. Like I said, I've collected for 25 years. I mean, my favorite piece is probably an old sofa. It was done by Jean Michel Frank for Hermès, and it's kind of falling apart because it's leather. What I love about it is that it's so luxurious, but at the same time it's something that everyone just sits on, and it's cracked and has little tears in it. For me, it's about embracing luxury in an unpretentious way—that's the ultimate luxury. It's stamped HERMÈS and was done like 80 years ago, and people still sit on it, put their shoes on it, kids jump up and down on it . . . The piece is so simple, but it's still being copied today. I don't collect anything that's just decorative.

LAARMAN: You are running a business and you're creative. How do these two things work together?

KRAKOFF: I'm lucky that I have a partner, Valerie Hermann, who's the CEO. We totally understand each other. She loves me to focus on the creative. I think sometimes you get too caught up in the business side, and you make compromises, and then the brand becomes unexciting. I think in the early stages you have to be bold. You have to define yourself. Everyone wants to understand who you are and why you're here. I think the best brands are forever surprising people.

LAARMAN: I agree. But time is my enemy. It's crazy.

KRAKOFF: I did an interview for a magazine in which they asked 10 or 20 designers, "What's your idea of luxury?" Everyone's answer—except for one person's, I think—was "time."

LAARMAN: Yes, complete freedom of time . . . You're also a photographer, right?

KRAKOFF: Yeah. Being a photographer helps me see the work differently. I always walk away seeing things differently than when I stare at them myself. It gives me a little distance. So I love photography, but it also helps me tell the story. When I shoot the ad campaign for my work, it allows me to be much more direct.

LAARMAN: Do you always do that?

KRAKOFF: Yeah, so far. Since we started, I've done four campaigns. So it's definitely my process and vision because I'm so familiar with the clothing.

LAARMAN: Yeah, I can imagine. But your book about the fighters is different than a shoot for a campaign. Or is it the same to you?

KRAKOFF: To me it's the same. It's always about finding out what about a person or a thing what it is. You spend a little time with someone,

you watch the way they sit and stand up, and, you know, pretend you're getting to know them. But don't you always have that moment when you see who they are? The way they smile and laugh, the way they tilt their head? So, to me, shooting a fighter is the same. You know, they come in, and they're like this big, aggressive person, but then as you talk to them and spend time with them, you get to see who they really are. Then the idea is to capture that so that when you go to the book, you see pictures where some guys are quite introspective and some are quite aggressive and some are quite bored. They're great subjects because they're so extreme-looking. They have such extreme bodies and tattoos. Do you ever go to fights?

LAARMAN: I'm not much of a fighter. I'm more a love and peace person, I guess. *[both laugh]*

KRAKOFF: For them it's just a sport, though. I mean, they will tell you it's like playing tennis. It's not violent to them; it's just a way to compete.

LAARMAN: I always wonder about sports. Sports are sort of a weird thing to spend your energy on. I mean, you could do great things with the energy that these people have, you know? I recently saw a documentary about some guy canoeing from Australia to New Zealand, and he died, leaving his kids behind, and, you know, you have all these people who want to climb Mount Everest, and they don't even have feet anymore because they froze off, and they still want to do it.

KRAKOFF: It's an amazing drive.

LAARMAN: The drive's really interesting. And, of course, in sports, you have creativity, too . . .

KRAKOFF: That's what interests me about these fighters: their discipline and their control and their ability to will themselves to do something. I find what they can make their bodies do really inspiring. I always find it really amazing—people who have such singular vision.

LAARMAN: Would you like that for yourself—a singular vision?

KRAKOFF: No. I don't have that kind of discipline. I love the randomness of my life—how I have five, six, seven projects going on at one time. I'm doing a film right now.

LAARMAN: What's it about?

KRAKOFF: It's something very unexpected. I'm not sure you'll like it.

LAARMAN: It's about sports?

KRAKOFF: No, but I'm working on something totally outside of design. I'm working on a furniture installation. I'm a little embarrassed to tell you about it. I'm not in your league. I'm also working on a series of portraits of a bunch of different people with a common theme. I like that all these things collide—they kind of feed each other. That's the way I love to work.

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