



Already a celebrated educator, television personality and fashion consultant, Tim Gunn now also holds the estimable position of chief creative officer of Liz Claiborne Inc.

THE FASHION PROFESSOR

Tim Gunn talks about the art and business of fashion design.

MELISSA C. NAVIA | PHOTO BY JOHN KEATLEY/REDUX

Before I met Tim Gunn, I felt like I already knew him. Eloquent, knowledgeable, caring, discerning, honest and always dressed in a sharp pinstriped suit. If it has to do with fashion, in the classroom or on the runway, he would be the person to ask, I used to say. Both a professor and a mentor, a man who could steer you in the right direction whether you were making a dress or just trying one on, this was the man I expected to meet.

Sure enough, it turns out I could not have been closer to the truth. Talking in his city office felt more like a conversation with a friend I hadn't seen in awhile and less like an interview with a renowned fashion personality. Mentor on Bravo's Emmy-nominated reality television show, *Project Runway*, author of *A Guide to Quality, Taste & Style*, host of *Tim Gunn's Guide to Style* and, most recently, chief creative officer of Liz Claiborne Inc.—with everything he's been up to in the past few years, it's no wonder we had a lot to talk about.

Most of us were first introduced to Gunn back in 2004, with the premiere episode of *Project Runway*, but for over two decades he had already been hard at work shaping the future of fashion. In 1982, Gunn moved from Washington, DC, to NYC to work at Parsons The New School for Design in admissions. He came equipped with a degree in fine arts, though, not fashion.

"I received my design education working at Parsons," Gunn recalls. "In admissions, you learn about every field in great depth because you're admitting applicants to those programs. You have to be able to engage with them about what the field is like, test how much they understand, whether they

have the aptitude to compete successfully in a very competitive, high-end program. It's a challenge."

But it was a challenge he was clearly up to, and from 1989 to 2000, Gunn served as associate dean, when he was appointed chair of Parsons' fashion design department. The promotion, however, signaled a call to action, and Gunn was asked to take the reins.

"I was called up because there was a crisis," he says frankly, "one of inertia, of not changing. My mantra is that there are dressmakers and then there are fashion designers, barometric gauges of our society and culture, and when I looked at the program, I had to ask, 'Where is the design? Where is the history?' So we needed to rebuild and restructure."

In time, the overhaul worked, and the department was revitalized, ready to produce the industry's next leading fashion designers. So it was with this history of success and determination, not to mention his rapidly growing television popularity, that Gunn was approached by William L. McComb, chief executive officer of Liz Claiborne Inc., and asked to assume the multifaceted position of the company's chief creative officer. In this capacity, he would be, in McComb's words, "a spokesperson for the creative community, a champion of product innovation and integrity"—in essence, the voice for the design organization in a fashion company that had lost its focus on design.

"The easiest thing in the world would've been to stay at Parsons, where I was in a comfort zone and in charge," says Gunn, calling the move one of the

biggest risks of his life. "Coming to Liz Claiborne, while I was thrilled and invigorated, I was equally terrified. It was a world that I knew peripherally, but I had never really been in it."

In March 2007, Gunn accepted the offer, and the company has been on the move ever since. This past January, the company made two more major announcements: John Bartlett would be designing a men's sportswear line, "Claiborne by John Bartlett," and Isaac Mizrahi was named creative director, with his first collection for Liz Claiborne set to arrive in stores at the same time as Bartlett's, spring 2009, marking the end of his five-year run with Target. Clearly on a mission to recruit some of the industry's best, Gunn says, "The people at Liz Claiborne went to Isaac for the same reason we went to John; there is a taste level, a classicism, a spirit of innovation and whimsy there, especially in colors and prints. Isaac will be able to understand the Liz Claiborne legacy and challenge it."

Then, there is the Best Buy connection. To mark the opening of its Columbus Circle location back in October, the retail electronics giant and Liz Claiborne rolled out the blue carpet to unveil their new line of fashion-meets-function accessories. Think laptop bags, MP3 cases, cell phone clutches, business totes—to name just a few selections—all in a variety of designs and fabrics. "These accessories used to scream functionality, but now they say fashion. I don't care if I have a laptop or not," laughs Gunn. "I'd be inspired to get one just to use the case!"

Round it all out with a \$350,000 gift to Parsons, named in honor of Gunn, for the establishment

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of a scholarship for fashion design students, and it becomes quite evident that the fine-artist-turned-fashion-design-professor is a force to be reckoned with, whether it's influencing young designers, facilitating corporate growth or signing autographs while dispensing fashion advice. That's right, Tim Gunn is not just any chief creative officer. Since his television debut, he has become a bona fide celebrity, the go-to guy for all things fashion, from the Oscars and talk shows to the people he meets everyday.

"I know that Bill [McComb] came to me largely because of the change I had helped to initiate in Parsons' fashion program," Gunn says, "but it was also partially because of my public persona." The result has been a role that is both internal and external, a boost of energy within the company and a recognizable face outside it.

So what happened? How did one man become such a memorable, likeable and trustworthy name in the fashion realm? Well, for the very reason I felt as if I knew him even before I met him. Two words—*Project Runway*. Although without a doubt the catalyst for Gunn's rise to fame, the show in no way created a Tim Gunn that hadn't already been there before. "When the producers of the show called me, they were looking for a consultant," Gunn remembers, "but my role was in no one's vocabulary." One of Bravo's most successful series ever, the show, hosted by Heidi Klum, brings together up-and-coming fashion designers who compete to create the best outfits and designs, in accordance with specific challenges. Each week, Klum, designer Michael Kors, Nina Garcia, former fashion director of *Elle* magazine, and a guest judge eliminate one contestant until the pool of 12 or more designers is reduced to a final three or four who go on to debut their lines at New York's prestigious Fashion Week.

"The show has definitely evolved," he says. "In our first auditions, no one knew what we were, including us. I knew what we were looking for, but I didn't know what the show should be. Between 85 and 90 percent of the contestants were design school students or had just graduated. The first season was a smattering of experience, and with each season, the pool has become stronger and stronger." The result is that many of the participants are now professionals, well established in their fields, but with the competition heating up, Gunn acknowledges that the show can never go back to the talent search it first was. "Unless the audition pool bottoms out, we will never have another home sewer on the show, because unless they've engaged in a design dialogue, unless they're tuned into the pulse of fashion today, they're not going to make it." Now having completed its fourth

season, *Project Runway* is a competition show hard to compete with in the ratings. What's more, it has inspired a whole new generation of people to dig out their grandmothers' sewing machines and take up classes of their own.

As for the "role" that Gunn ended up occupying, it was that of mentor, offering advice, critique and words of encouragement in the 11th hour to frazzled designers. In many ways, it turned out to be an extension of his academic role at Parsons and introduced his persona to the public, not to mention a catch phrase that is practically now a staple in fashion vernacular—"Make it work!" At the risk of asking a question he must have heard a slew of times before, I had to know about its origin. "It came out of my classrooms, and it's vague on purpose," Gunn smiles. "When I first started teaching, I saw that my students were inclined to abandon a project that wasn't working and start from scratch. At first I indulged it, but after a couple of years, I said enough of this. The way they're really going to learn is if they work through the struggle. Take the existing conditions and make them work."

The success of *Project Runway*, along with the knowledge and charismatic personality that Gunn exudes, helped pave the way for another Bravo show, *Tim Gunn's Guide to Style*, a show in which he, along with co-host model Veronica Webb, helps women recapture their fashion sense, beginning with the basics every woman's wardrobe needs. But he is quick to point out that it is not a makeover show or an intervention. "These women contact us. They know they're in a fashion rut and take the initiative to get help." Using the philosophy he delineates in his book, *A Guide to Quality, Taste & Style*, co-written with Kate Maloney, Gunn focuses on an individual's personal style, as long as it adheres to the rules of good silhouette, fit and proportion. His method employs a very Socratic approach. "Who are you? With whom do you interact? With what items of apparel do you resonate? It's all about owning your look and being responsible for the message you're sending."

And for everyone, that look can be different, as opposed to what magazines and retailers would have you think. "The thing I love about New York," says Gunn, "is that there isn't a uniform. If you look at a street corner, you see so many different looks. This city accepts everybody and is very nurturing of who we are."

Optimistic, accepting, helping. With such an outlook on fashion, it's no surprise that when people hear Tim Gunn is coming, they want to look their best. Just as his role on *Project Runway* was the first of its kind, so is the position he occupies now in the world of fashion. He is very much a bridge between the runway and our closets,

what we're told we should look like and what we actually look and feel great in. There is an accessibility about Gunn that is undeniable, and when he explains fashion, it all falls into place.

"Some people say fashion design is a trivial pursuit, but it's not," he insists, "and I take it extremely seriously. If anyone wants to sneer, look at how we know about past civilizations. It's about the environments in which they lived and the clothes they wore." With that much gravity to the matter, you'd better think twice before you put on those leggings and Crocs or oversized sweatshirts and Ugg boots (have your daughters take note) and leave your house. When on Capitol Hill about a year ago, meeting with people around the Design Piracy Prohibition Act, Gunn laughs, "All these women were running from me, saying, 'I'm not a fashion person, don't look at me!'"

On the flip side of that, he finds himself even more aware of how he looks now, knowing that so many people are looking to him for advice. But as many people ask, he is always willing to share his thoughts, with as much sincerity as he does with *Project Runway* contestants. On a recent Liz Claiborne denim bus tour, Gunn fondly recalls that a couple of women came to him for the usual fashion critique, but one of them pointed out, "I came because I knew you wouldn't be mean to me." A simple enough admission, but one that sums up much of what is so endearing about Gunn—the teacher, the mentor, the fashion guru.

A breath of fresh air to an industry that has the ability to appear so distant from everyday life, Gunn is as thankful as we are for where he is today. "I really do believe things happen for a reason," he says. "When I reflect on Parsons, I was there at a great time, and every day now, I also see how great it was and how right the decision was to come to Liz Claiborne. I can definitely say I'm the luckiest guy in the whole world because all these opportunities just presented themselves. It's the serendipitous path of life."

You can look forward to much more news from Liz Claiborne in the coming months, and with spring 2009 just around the corner, a lot more lines that you'll want to add to your collection. As for *Project Runway*, Gunn, the judges and a brand new batch of contestants will be back for a fifth season. And if you should run into him in the city in the interim, perhaps you, too, will want to get his opinion on what you're wearing. During our interview, I received an unexpected appraisal of my dress. To summarize, Gunn said it looked great on me. I wouldn't admit it at the time, but the comment left me beaming well after. Whatever I did that morning before hopping on the train to the city, I made it work, and his acknowledgment made my day. •