

MF: Congratulations on this wonderful award! What was your first thought when you heard that you had won the Swiss Grand Prix Design?

IG: It was more a feeling, a mixture of feelings, something raw, aromatic, unknown, something that opens up new possibilities. It wasn't a thought—at least not right away.

MF: You're going to use the prize money to purchase CAD software for digital pattern making. What is special about this investment and what does it mean for your business?

IG: You can't achieve the sensuality of patternmaking with CAD software, but you can make thoughts and insights accessible to your own team or to others in another environment. The software allows you to save basic shapes for further use so that you can build on what you've already learned.

MF: You have developed an extremely distinctive style of patternmaking. How did that come about?

IG: Probably because I'm driven both by design and curiosity, but also because I am interested in how you position yourself in what you do. When I was a student, I had a conversation with Max Wunderli, my professor in patternmaking. He was supposed to be teaching me how to make tailleur patterns but he had noticed that I wasn't listening. I was obviously interested in the subject matter but not in what was already there but rather in what wasn't. So he suggested we make a deal. Our agreement was that I would listen to him when he was teaching me the basics and he, in turn, would support me in my own search for something new. That was when I realized that I had this inner urge.

MF: It sounds like a seminal experience.

IG: It was. I learned something fundamental about myself in that conversation and it influenced everything that happened after that. It was a decisive moment in my life. It's a great gift when you meet someone who holds a mirror up to you and opens up the world for you.

MF: You abandoned the basic, classical patterns and invented ones of your own.

IG: In training you learn to make more or less three basic patterns: tailleur, raglan, and kimono. These are the systems that underpin everything else. But I was interested in the potential of developing other systems. I tried to emancipate myself from conventional thinking and methods of design. In anatomy, the shoulder blade is part of the construction of the arm; applied to dressmaking, that means that the sleeve emerges from the back.



MF: What are the basic points and decisions that lead to a successful pattern?

IG: We aren't a research studio but a business that steadily learns from practice and experience and then takes corrective measures. We don't get any funding for research and development. It's a prolonged process and the results therefore rest on very solid foundations.

MF: You have acquired a reputation not only for unusual, innovative patterns but also for the use of high-quality materials and special fabrics. How do you find your fabrics?

IG: I go to textile trade shows in Munich and Paris several times a year. The choice is immense.

MF: For several years, you worked on developing textiles for a German company. What challenges did you face?

IG: Developing textiles is obviously also a form of design. You have to develop very specific ideas depending on the company, on the machines they have, and the finishing options. It takes a certain amount of intuition and a feel for the market. The management explicitly hired a fashion designer and not a pure textile designer. They were looking for a fashion designer, who is used to thinking in three dimensions, in envisioning how the material might be worn and used. Ultimately, I also represented the customers.

MF: The way you combine extravagant elegance with everyday functionality is particularly striking. You can ride a bicycle in your clothes and wear the same thing to go to the opera in the evening.

IG: We don't always make sensible things but one reason I like designing clothes so much is because it's like food; it's functional and has practical value. That's always been a crucial factor. It wasn't an intellectual decision but more or less intuitive. Clothing is essential to life, which is always changing. In that respect, it's a cultural idiom.

MF: Can you give me an example of an item that's not so sensible?

IG: We have a transparent pullover in our collection. I like the idea of being able to perceive how a piece of clothing is constructed, its complexity. Veiled yes, but not completely covered up. Such items are more emotional than they are rational.

MF: You have also created specific clothing lines, for instance, for the staff of the Swiss pavilion at Expo 2000, the world's fair in Hanover. What is special about an assignment like that?

IG: That was the first time I created work outfits, and therefore also the first time I designed clothing for people who were *compelled* to wear it. With my own collection, it's always the client's personal decision whether or not to buy something or to wear it. That's an entirely different premise.

MF: What does that mean?

IG: When you develop a line for an entire company, you have multiple responsibilities. For instance, you have to respect the individual because the clothing not only represents the identity of the organization but also has to work for the people who wear it every day.

MF: Have you had other major commissions of that kind?

IG: Yes, shortly after the world's fair, Swissair commissioned me to design their uniforms. That meant clothing for 20,000 people. It meant a lot to me because it was an international competition and my label was still in the running after several rounds, along with three French labels—Givenchy, Ted Lapidus, and Rodier—and Akris, another label from Switzerland. I figured I didn't have a chance as a one-woman company but the people at Swissair assured me that they were primarily interested in quality, and the size of the company was secondary.

That says a lot about the mentality of Swissair in those days. In the end, a blind presentation was organized where 50 representatives from the various operations in the SAair Group decided in favor of my prototypes. It was a miracle!

MF: Your project came to a brutal, unexpected end when Swissair was grounded in the fall of 2001.

IG: Yes, that was a tragedy. It had been such a complicated process; they started implementation of my project several times and then stopped it. I met all three CEOs: Philippe Bruggisser, Moritz Suter, and Mario Corti. Then it was over. It was a catastrophe for my one-woman business because I was billed huge amounts instead of Swissair being billed directly. It's only thanks to the personal and extremely committed support of a lawyer and a loan that I managed to weather that financial crisis, though it took a long time to recover. I'm so thankful that I was able to survive.

MF: After that you worked for Migros, a supermarket chain, where you designed the clothing for 40,000 salespeople in 2004. The clothing and the concept are still in use and working beautifully. Then they came back to in 2017 to elaborate on your first concept, to develop it further. What was it like to work for such a big company?

IG: I learned a lot from the Swissair fiasco. The energy at Migros was positive and everything was in flux. I even hired the former project manager at Swissair to work with me. We couldn't have been more motivated.

MF: Success or crisis, how do you deal with it?

IG: You never have a guarantee in life that everything's going to run smoothly, with no hitches. The very fact that such a major corporation as Swissair chose to select my label was fabulous and showed that a good product has a chance in Switzerland. I experienced the same thing later at Migros. That's what makes this country special. That doesn't happen everywhere. But, of course, you can have bad luck sometimes, too.

MF: In 2009 you founded a limited company. Did that have anything to do with the grounding of Swissair?

IG: No, despite my experience with the Swissair fiasco, I was not primarily motivated by wanting to protect myself from possible failure; it was more about having a board of directors. I wanted the support and expertise that a Board can give you. The people on the Board see me from outside; they can analyze my strengths and weaknesses, keep an eye on me, and advise on further developments. Besides, it's a tried-and-tested company structure.

MF: What does it take to run a successful fashion label?

IG: It's not just about clothes and fashion. The entire production line and distribution are decisive. Developing a product without being sure that the quality is guaranteed or with poor communication or without taking distribution into account won't work. If one link in the chain breaks, the cycle is interrupted and it simply can't succeed in the long-term. And that doesn't only apply to the fashion industry.

MF: Do you like working in a team?

IG: Collaboration is an exceptionally positive factor. I come from a large family. A team is an organism. An organism that is in good shape contributes substantially to a positive atmosphere and makes people happy. Currently, there are six full-time people on our team including me.

MF: What "pressures" do people have in your profession?

IG: The days are long. It's not always smooth sailing; it's normal to run into difficult situations. You just have to be in good physical and mental shape to be on top of all the things you have to do.

MF: Have you never had the urge to go abroad?

IG: People often ask me that. I have been abroad. I was in Paris for a while and I had a licensee in Italy for two seasons and a showroom on the Via della Spiga in Milan. The idea of establishing an international collection is a little overrated in our society. Raf Simons left Dior because he didn't have enough time to invest in development. This industry certainly has its appeal but it also fosters dependency and leads to a loss of freedom.

MF: You have had your own retail store since 1996, first at Brauerstrasse, and since 2007 in an old factory building on Ankerstrasse. You've been faithful to District 4, which used to be the workers' quarter in Zurich, instead of moving closer to fashionable Bahnhofstrasse. How important is the location?

IG: It's a good environment where I am, a stimulating atmosphere, nothing is finished, there's constant friction. Beauty and ugliness collide. I don't know what it would be like to have a store on Bahnhofstrasse. The clientele would certainly be different. Our customers deliberately choose to come to us.

MF: What is the advantage of managing your own store in addition to designing and producing articles of clothing?

IG: Like most people in fashion, I initially wanted to design collections. An agency would handle the sales to wholesalers. I started direct sales and distribution on the advice of a professional colleague. That was the right decision. We were no longer dependent on others and had the advantage of being much closer to the end consumer. The learning curve was much improved; you could see right away what worked and what didn't. Instead of making theoretical decisions in the atelier, our design decisions are based on practical ongoing experience.

MF: Do you sell online?

IG: No. For one thing, you have to invest substantially to start an online shop. The Internet only lends itself to clothing that is easy to understand. You can figure out if a pair of black socks is the right size or a printed T-shirt the right style. My label is different: it offers unconventional, individual pieces that are difficult to display on an Internet platform. Clothing is complicated. Decisive factors are not only taste and needs but also the body of the person who's going to wear the clothes.

MF: Every person can be dressed to advantage ...

IG: Everybody has a slightly different build. The fit of a pair of pants has to be perfect. We women know that all too well. We are all individuals with our own emotions, needs, and body images. These so-called soft factors can't be neatly quantified, unlike everyday items such as a pair of socks. Bodies move around, they change shape, and they have different needs. The clothing is designed to adapt to different circumstances.

MF: Your clients—women for the most part—choose to come to your store because they know they will get specific, tailored advice. It's an experience in itself because the interior of your store exudes a distinctive aura. Through architectural modifications, the former factory floor has been architecturally modified to accommodate various work areas and storage spaces. There is a swing suspended in the middle of your showroom. How did you come up with the idea of designing the space like this?

IG: We have 300 square meters. That's unusual in Zurich. I wanted to retain the feeling of spaciousness and not just divide the area into three simple boxes. Storage, atelier, and sales flow seamlessly into each other. I wanted something different and found just the right interior architects to implement my ideas: Froelich & Hsu.

MF: The space mirrors your approach and delivers the same message

IG: Yes, it's nice that it worked out like that. We renovated the first store on Brauerstrasse in a similar fashion and with the same firm.

MF: You are a trained seamstress and later graduated from the Zurich University of the Arts. How did you decide on your profession?

IG: The question is not really relevant for me today. It is what it is. I never questioned the choice of profession—maybe simply I just didn't have the time. I have four older siblings, and I knew that I wanted to do something different from them, to follow a path of my own. It was probably a mixture of genes, chance, personal surroundings, and economics.

MF: And nobody stopped you?

IG: No. In contrast to my siblings, things were relatively relaxed for me being the youngest. Both of my grandmothers were actually seamstresses but I barely ever saw them in action so they weren't really role models for me. But maybe they did impart a basic sense of pride with respect to that particular craft. When I was training to become a seamstress, it didn't occur to me that I might become a fashion designer. I started in that line of work and essentially let myself drift.

MF: Winter and summer collections aren't enough anymore; there are constant, so-called micro-seasons hitting the market. How do you manage with the fashion carousel spinning faster all the time?

IG: We can't churn out twelve collections a year. Our production of new pieces is continuous. And producing in Switzerland is an advantage because we don't have to deal with things like customs, shipping, and documents. We're also faster and more flexible in filling extra orders.

MF: Would you make a distinction between fashion and fashionable?

IG: That has to do with timelines, that is, the period of time for which the product is intended. "Fashionable" has a shorter timeline than "fashion."

MF: Your clothing certainly falls under fashion then.

IG: When you develop a project on your own, the involvement is much more intense. We make several prototypes, have several people try them out, and rethink or reject ideas before we make a final decision. The longer it takes to develop something, the longer it lasts. That's reassuring.

MF: Ah, that raises the question of sustainability. If clothing ages as well, it's sustainable. Not only that—you also produce everything in Switzerland.

IG: Actually, we have produced elsewhere, we wanted to know how that would work out. The effort is considerable. And it doesn't always make sense because it's only cheaper at first glance. Standard products like T-shirts can be manufactured abroad but as soon as individuality is an issue you have to be able to rely on good cooperation, on people with a similar approach to design and how it is implemented, and people who see the larger picture. There are quite a lot of firms that have brought production back to Switzerland because cheaper prices don't compensate for the complications of manufacturing abroad and for the mistakes that can happen. If you can communicate directly with manufacturers, you can reduce logistical expenses and improve the quality of the end product.

MF: How much can a piece of clothing cost?

IG: In contrast to monoculture, diversity is always more complex and therefore more expensive. Diversity is created by original thinking, limited quantities, variation in fabrics, details, and a special manufacturing location.

MF: Is there really no market in Switzerland for Swiss fashion, as some people claim?

IG: Who says so?

MF: There are not that many labels in Switzerland compared to the number of potential customers.

IG: There have never been so many direct sales exhibitions where Swiss products are sold. The stores that buy Swiss labels have declined but direct sales have been doing better and better.

MF: Italy and France are classical fashion countries.

IG: Traditionally, fashion has been part of the cultural and economic spheres in Italy and France. I was invited for dinner at the French Embassy in Zurich a while ago. There were ten of us and I was the only one from the fashion sector. But there was a lot of talk about fashion and everyone knew about the latest shows. For our neighbors to the west and the south, fashion design is a national treasure.

MF: We could certainly do with a little more of that attitude in Switzerland.

IG: I don't know if they have direct sales exhibitions in France or Italy. A lot of things have to be reinvented nowadays, especially when it comes to distribution. As a small label, we have to be on our toes in terms of development, we have to stay flexible and keep learning all the time. In the old days there were only wholesalers, and buyers would come around at the trade fairs and buy in quantity. That doesn't happen anymore.

MF: Do you go to trade fairs in, say, Düsseldorf, Paris, or Milan?

IG: No, not anymore. We've decided to concentrate on continuous, year-round production. The international market and big trade fairs are an entirely different matter: you have to organize yourself differently and stick to your strategy 100 percent.

MF: What could be improved for fashion designers in Switzerland?

IG: When Switzerland became a member of the WTO 1995, the liberalization of the procurement markets led to a dramatic shift in the 1990s from production to research, education, and services. A lot of domestic manufacturers suffered a severe decrease in government orders and the consequences are still being felt today. When I first started out, there were still about 50 production facilities in the Ticino. Only about three have survived. How can you develop good ideas when you have no idea about three-dimensional implementation, when you outsource production and it's far away? You can only get innovation when the production chain is intact and the transfer of knowledge moves in both directions. The development of textiles in Japan, for example, is still supported by a seamless chain of producers of raw materials, spinning and weaving mills, and suppliers: makers, the market, and distribution are all there. The Japanese textile industry regularly succeeds in introducing remarkable new products and innovations to the market. Actually, their mentality could work among the Swiss too.

MF: But there was a flourishing textile industry in Switzerland, wasn't there?

IG: Not only a flourishing textile industry but also an excellent textile machine industry and well-functioning trade. Historically, fashion is not our core competence. Luckily we have Akris, a business that has been in the same family for three generations and started out making aprons—and, incidentally, run in the early 20th-century by a woman.

MF: How would you assess current vocational training for fashion design?

IG: The two-pronged system is interesting and Switzerland is proud of it but unfortunately it's beginning to fall apart. We need intelligent people in crafts and trades. We'll be in trouble if everybody starts running after an academic career.

MF: What advice would you give budding fashion designers?

IG: There's no recipe for success. That's wishful thinking. You have to stick to it, work hard, and do your best, regardless of all the shortcomings. Having a product idea is not enough; you have to be creative on all levels across the entire chain.

MF: What is your daily life like? What keeps you going day after day?

IG: Difficult question! It's the drive, the drive itself.

MF: So the drive comes from within.

IG: This profession has lots of aspects that will give you an adrenaline rush. We spoke a lot about problems and solutions. But when I discover something new for a particular piece of clothing or when production runs smoothly and the people handling it are proud of their achievement, that makes me happy. When a customer tries something on in the store and sees something in the mirror that she likes: that's what gives me an adrenaline rush. You can see the effect of your work.