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ubu
PARIS



Barbara Rihl

In praise of cheerfulness

In only three months, the Galeries Lafayette Haussmann sold 700 bags! In 2008, the brand multiplied turnover by five and the beginning of 2009 already promises to break records. If you have any doubts, a visit to the stand at Première Classe will convince you that it is true. Buyers, including the most important names, abound at every session. "During my first participation in the show, I had orders from department stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Harrods, Neiman Marcus, Joyce, l'Éclaireur, etc. a total of 65 buyers," she states. Customers like Barbara Rihl bags for their colors, Italian leathers, personality, originality and graphics. Her travels, in particular to Cuba and Asia, serve as inspiration, but she also has a penchant for writing. "My bags are cheerful, I think that it is important to create a dream without going overboard into angelism." The rising name in leather goods is spot on and has become a real phenomenon. Yet, she strives to be the antithesis of all marketing manuals. "We have never set appointments for a trade show, and we have never advertised either." That means that she owes her success to her talent and strong creativity that is deeply rooted in her family tree. Her parents were a notary and a lawyer, both art and music lovers, her grandmother wrote her thesis in literature, she spent her childhood between Salzburg and Vienna... her family roots gave her the base for her sense of aesthetics. Painting,

music, writing, fashion, Barbara cultivated all of these artistic expressions. "Childhood poetry still feeds my soul today," she confides. When she entered the University of Art in Vienna, Karl Lagerfeld chose her and he gave her training that was equal to his personality. Then Jill Sander became her teacher. Names that brought her luck. She then continued her studies at the Parsons School of Design in New York. When she finished, she became a designer for various ready-to-wear brands. She climbed the career ladders until the day when she became responsible for the collections at Kenzo Jeans. Thanks to her great skill in knits, her fabric and color sense, she accomplished an amazing feat by increasing turnover from 6 to 30 million Euros in 5 years. Nothing could stop her from continuing on the successful path; however, another challenge was waiting for her in the year 2000. She decided to participate in the accessory boom by creating a new kind of bag, and this time, on her own. "The fact that they followed the seasons became fun for me." She made her first collections in France. Barbara relocated in Asia and relied on the network that she had developed during her career. After having problems with a Chinese factory that caused delivery delays, she went against the current and in 2006, she moved production back to France. "The Made in France label is no longer an argument for quality, however, it is an asset when



it comes to restocking because we are much more reactive," the designer points out. Currently, the brand creates 50,000 pieces annually and is available in 1,000 shops worldwide, including Parisian department stores (Bon Marché, Galeries Lafayette and in the Printemps next June). Export accounts for 40% of the brand's activity, with main markets in Japan, the Middle East and Russia. She has corners in department stores in each of these countries (15 in total). Eight agents, with 4 for France and 4 others for Corsica, Belgium, Italy, Japan, the Middle East and Russia, handle distribution. That shows that in a short period, Barbara was able to structure her business without ever having to recruit customers herself. In the same way, she never tried to convince the luxury sector, it came to her. Abroad, her brand rubs shoulders with the most prestigious labels. Despite the fact that she chose an affordable position (between 150 and 250 Euros a bag shop price). The designer is in the process of working on the set up of a sales website that will soon be operational, the development of gloves and a line of cashmere, as well as a musical work. It is difficult to restrain an eclectic artist who is driven by passion..

Nathalie Raut