

The *Pilier d'Or* recognizes a leading business figure, diplomat, or philanthropist for outstanding contributions to the French-American community.

Sidney Toledano is the visionary President and CEO of one of the most successful and renowned French luxury houses.

## PILIER D'OR 2017 SIDNEY TOLEDANO

President and CEO, Christian Dior Couture



Sidney Toledano © Eva Baales

**The sun is shining on this October afternoon on Avenue Montaigne in Paris. At No. 30 to be exact. An iconic address in the world of style and luxury.**

A lover of fashion, of course, will know this as the address of the famous Dior boutique on the corner of Rue François 1er. But No. 30, Avenue Montaigne is also the private residence where Dior was established in 1946, and is now the headquarters of a worldwide enterprise. On the fourth floor, there is a meeting room as elegant and comfortable as a living room. This is where, on the first day of March 1994, Sidney Toledano became Dior's director of fine leather goods.

"I was sitting right here," the silver-haired Toledano recalled, at exactly 8:30 am. Fifteen minutes later, Bernard Arnault, the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of LVMH, Dior's parent company, entered the room, invited him into his adjacent private office and asked the new recruit: "And so?" There was no time to waste for Arnault. A few days earlier, he had spent a mere 30 minutes, interviewing Toledano in a hastily-scheduled meeting.

"The night before my meeting with Bernard Arnault, I received a call from his right hand."

"Mister Toledano," she said, "I am putting together a file for Mr. Arnault for your meeting and I can't find your resume."

"That isn't surprising," I told her, "I don't have one." "Would you mind sharing your information over the phone?" she asked. "My assistant will call you shortly."

Growing up in Casablanca, young Sidney dreamt of becoming a stage director, an architect, an engineer, a physician, or perhaps a mathematician. Einstein was his role model. "My father wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer, two jobs that he thought would make me independent and secure."

Fashion was nevertheless an important influence in Toledano's life. "Society in Casablanca in the 1950s and 1960s was defined by elegant Moroccan-Franco-Spanish style." His mother bought her clothes from the Dior Couture representative, a sign of what his future held!

And couturiers, including Francesco Smalto, designed his father's suits. "My parents dressed and went out almost every evening. I grew up surrounded by fashion."

Sidney's maternal grandfather, a Turkish immigrant, created one of the first knitwear



Dior exhibition at the Arts Decoratifs © Adrien Dirand

businesses in Casablanca. In a word, Toledano adored fashion, an interest, he admits, that he had to tone down when he studied in Paris because his fellow students had no interest in trendy clothes. And he never really thought of it as a possible career. Instead, he chose engineering and was selected for École Centrale Paris (ECP), one of the most elite schools in France.

Becoming a business analyst was not Toledano's only goal. America was also calling. His first name was a tribute to an American soldier who was with the forces that liberated Morocco in 1942, and to the America his father greatly admired.

"American culture was everywhere," said Toledano of his childhood.

Toledano's first recollections of America, which he visited in the mid-1970s, were of JFK Airport, the yellow cabs, Manhattan's energy, and skyscrapers in the distance.

"I felt like the hero of an American movie." The engineering student also flew to San

Francisco. "I rented a Mustang one day, like the one I had seen in Claude Lelouch's movie *A Man and a Woman*; another day, I would rent a Cadillac." He cruised down the California coast on Highway 1: Monterey, Carmel, Big Sur, then on to Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, all the way to Mexico. Toledano was considering enrolling in M.I.T., but while applying for the East Coast school, his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Sidney decided his student days were over and accepted a position with the American firm AC Nielsen. The job took him back to the United States and to Brazil.

He compiled marketing studies for Procter & Gamble and quickly gained expertise and confidence. "I remember asking the marketing director of Coca-Cola if we would still be drinking this five years from now!" America has always impressed him. While studying at Centrale, he met Jacques Maisonrouge, the Chairman of IBM World Trade Corporation: "Here was a French

businessman who had a Hollywood look in the style of the 1960s movies— an impeccable haircut, wore dark blue suits and colorful ties, and was self-confident. I wanted to be like him."

One day, five years into his job at Nielsen, while he was having a steak tartare at the old Bar des Théâtres on Avenue Montaigne, he reconnected with a friend who had just bought the French shoe brand Kickers. The friend offered him a job, pointing to his first major career change. "I was no longer doing quantitative marketing, I was doing qualitative marketing."

Then came Lancel and the world of high-end luggage. America once again beckoned. "American marketing was way ahead of France's at that time." So, Toledano sent a telex (a precursor of email) to the President of Samsonite Luggage in Denver. "My dear friend, I would love to meet with you," he wrote. Less than 24 hours later, he was invited to an America

very different from the one he had visited. He discovered products unknown to the French market such as the garment bag. He visited American department stores, traveled to Asia; luggage, handbags, and wallets absorbed his life.

Toledano drew from this research and created innovative campaigns for Lancel and introduced the famous red bag. He built expansive media campaigns. He worked with American photographers and hired the young models Estelle Lefébure and Christy Turlington. He dealt directly with stylists, marketers, producers, and spokespeople.

A window into fashion was slowly opening and Toledano was making a name for himself. And that's when the president of Dior called to arrange a meeting for him with the fashion world leader and visionary Bernard Arnault. Just days later, Toledano began his job at 30, Avenue Montaigne. "And so?" Arnault asked him that first day. A question that embodied the hopes Arnault had for Toledano and Dior.

But that day in March 1994, Toledano was savoring the moment. "There is the power of Dior, the brand, and there is Bernard Arnault, who not only had a clear vision of the road ahead, but also was determined to use all necessary means to succeed." The keys would be excellence, image, and details.

Toledano worked at a fever pitch. On Saturdays, he was at the store to analyze sales.

While visiting a factory in Italy with Arnault, the two men decided to bring back a hundred samples of a newly-designed bag. Toledano told Arnault to replace all the bags currently in the Avenue Montaigne store with the samples, "just as a test, without any advertising."

"We were plotting like two bridge players." The next day, Arnault came to the store, curious about the results. "We had sold 15 bags," Toledano recalls, "15 of the new, now iconic 'Lady Dior' bags."

The move was a pivotal step on Toledano's path to president and CEO of the famous house. He was learning a profession that neither schools nor books can teach. "It is a peculiar job," he says, describing it as a

little like "opera director or movie producer." Working with artistic directors, fashion designers, and artisans "is like a dance: you need to move forward, to strongly hold your partner, but also know when to let go, to let ideas flow and take risks, to understand the creative mind."

Toledano has known and worked with many fashion talents who have become worldwide names: Gianfranco Ferré, for one, and of course the immensely talented, John Galliano. In 2016, Maria Grazia Chiuri was appointed Dior's artistic director — the first woman in the House's history to hold this position.

An innovator, with strong ideas of her own, Chiuri nonetheless regards herself as a "curator" of the Dior legacy, inspired not only by the founder but also by his successors. Her first collection was a liberating exploration of femininity and the role of women in modern society. She followed that with haute couture collections and a cruise collection, which was presented in Los Angeles in May 2017. In her most recent collection, for spring-summer 2018, she drew inspiration from the artist Niki de Saint Phalle whose story is intimately linked with that of Dior.

Chiuri approaches the functionality and comfort of clothes with a woman's perspective. "She understands that a woman walks and walks fast." More than two decades after entering the temple of fashion, that's still Toledano's pace. He is still moving forward with exuberance.

Dior's potential remains immense, he says, "I want Dior to be a fashion brand for the new generation that lives with its iPhone and is 'Googleized.' I'm reassured when I see young women visiting the Dior exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs mesmerized by the haute couture dresses and the work of the embroiderers."

To pass on to the new generation his knowledge and passion is one of Toledano's dreams, a dream to keep Dior's sun shining brightly at 30, Avenue Montaigne.



Sidney Toledano © Bakas Algirdas

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