



Christian Soria, Getty Images

New romantic

Filly, frothy ... and a little bit rebellious – that’s what Wes Gordon, the man in the hot seat at Carolina Herrera, believes fashion should be. No wonder everyone from first ladies to Adele loves his designs, says **Harriet Quick**

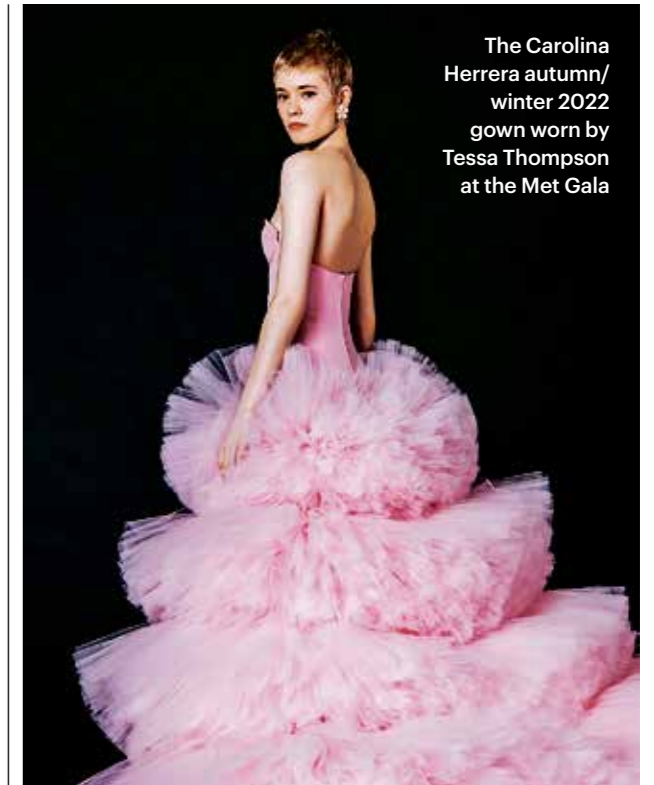
“Carolina Herrera is not overintellectual — it is about making beautiful clothes, and that’s more important than ever before. How we dress is one of the areas that we can control. If an outfit makes you smile, that’s not frivolous or silly ... Excuse me, I’m in a full ramble!” Wes Gordon says from his 17th-floor Midtown studio, where the creative director has a bird’s eye view of 7th Avenue on a hot and sultry New York afternoon.

Dressed in a khaki utility jacket and T-shirt, Gordon speaks with the sincerity and vitality that befits the brand that was founded by the flamboyant Venezuelan-born designer Carolina Herrera more than 40 years ago. In 2018 Gordon, who initially worked as a consultant for Herrera, was invited by the designer herself to take the helm of the business that she established in the heady, bold-faced 1980s. That was an era of fax machines, MTV, Madonna and a new flush of American patriotism championed by the Reagans at the White House. Herrera, who was encouraged to start her own line by Diana Vreeland, seized the moment and created a bold take on elegance that was adored by first ladies, society swans and business leaders alike.

“America has very few legacy fashion houses and Herrera is one of them,” he says. “It is one of the great names of elegance and grandeur intrinsic with Mrs Herrera herself. There is a mystique, an aura, a glamour and a strength that I was mesmerised by growing up as a young boy in Atlanta.”

Indeed, alongside Bill Blass, Halston, Isaac Mizrahi, Oscar de la Renta and Geoffrey Beene, Herrera helped build the firmament of the American designer business and gave it a shape, cosmopolitan personality and sense of pragmatic chic that was distinct from the Parisian powerhouses. Red-lipped and blonde-haired, she was constantly on the best dressed lists alongside her husband, the Venezuelan TV host Reinaldo Herrera Guevara, skilfully crisscrossing society cliques with her flamboyant gowns, cultural knowledge and exuberant style.

“She was downtown with Basquiat and at Studio 54 with Steve Rubell and uptown at galas and hosting parties in her townhouse,” Gordon says. “She was encapsulated by Andy Warhol in a silk-screen portrait and photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe. And she’s still alive and well today and a great-grandmother!” Gordon still socialises



The Carolina Herrera autumn/winter 2022 gown worn by Tessa Thompson at the Met Gala

with Herrera, now 83, exchanging stories but rarely talking about fashion. One delicious anecdote surrounds the Warhol portrait of her. The pop artist swapped it for a woven gold minaudière that Herrera’s husband had given her. (She hid the exchange from her husband, saying the little evening bag was in for repair.) The other great lesson she imparted was not to be consumed by the often boring restrictions of “good taste” — her thinking was that real elegance needs a touch of madness, a hint of spice, visible in her penchant for jewel-toned ballgown skirts and her iconic white shirts with dramatic poet sleeves.

But Herrera’s creative world was starkly different to today’s post-pandemic fashion business, which is driven by environmental concerns and fuelled by social media, influencers and celebrities. Society ladies and the doyennes of magazines

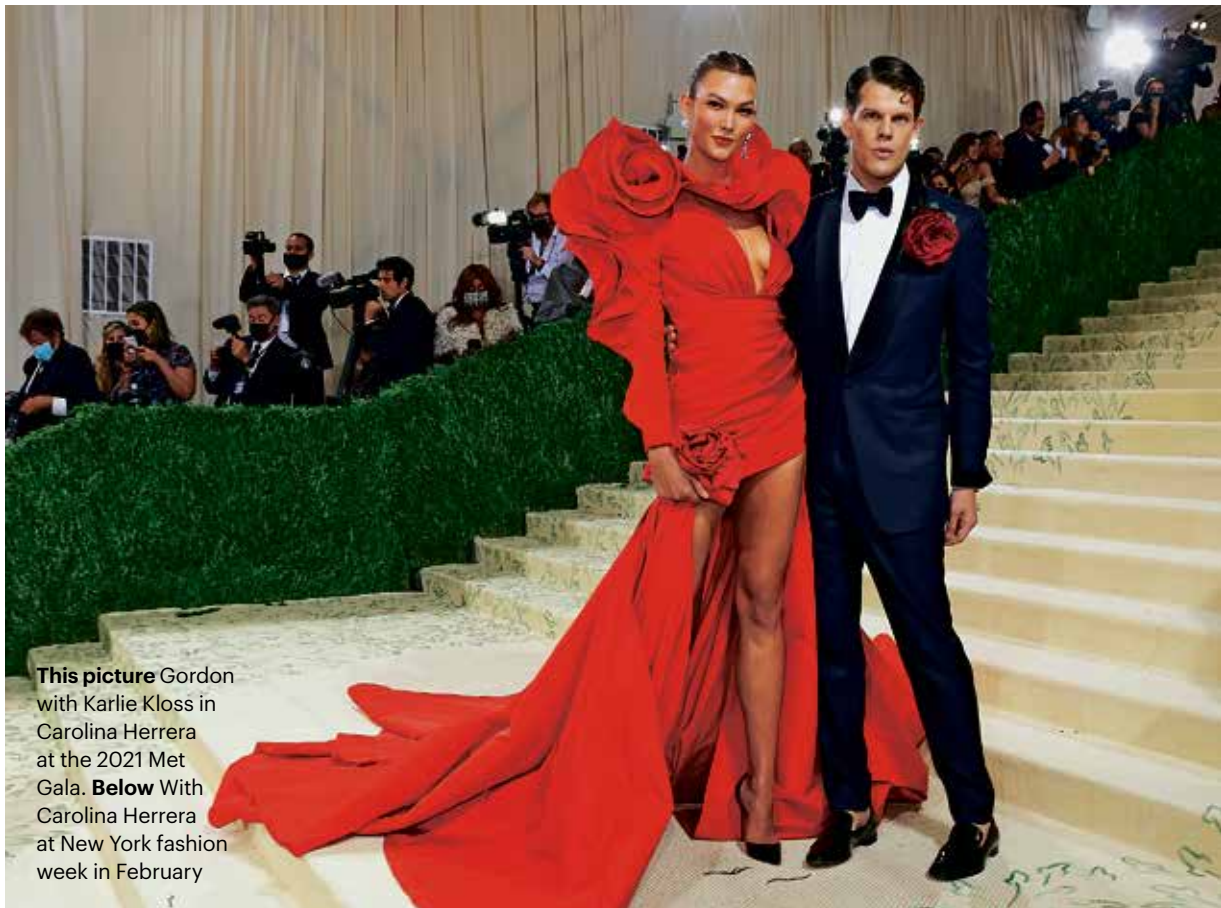
no longer rule the roost delivering diktats from ivory towers: today the customer is king.

Gordon wanted to marry the new and old worlds and evolve the brand to appeal to loyalists and newcomers alike. And there’s a real diversity to the women it attracts, from the actress and producer Tessa Thompson (wearing a pink gown with 200 metres of

‘How we dress is one of the areas we can control. If an outfit makes you smile, that’s not frivolous’



CAROLINA HERRERA AW22



This picture Gordon with Karlie Kloss in Carolina Herrera at the 2021 Met Gala. **Below** With Carolina Herrera at New York fashion week in February

tulle gathered into a train for the Met Gala) and Adele (a balloon-sleeve sequined cocktail dress for her birthday) to Rita Moreno, the 90-year-old star of the original *West Side Story*, who wore a sculptural black one-shouldered number to this year's Oscars. "I never want to give a mandate about colours or hemlines but let clients find something that really expresses their individuality," says Gordon, who has a masterful way with intoxicating colour, exuberant ruffles, sculptural silhouettes and sweeping hemlines.

The softly spoken thirtysomething has rich experience to pour into the brand. Raised in Atlanta and besotted by the work of John Galliano at Dior, he made a beeline for Central Saint Martins in London as soon as he was able. "During high school I used to train with a local dressmaker who taught me how to pattern-cut and sew. I moved to London in 2005, and coming from a traditional southern school to student housing in Aldgate East was a huge contrast. Throughout I had this attraction to the idea of elegance and Saint Martins does a great job pushing you to be who you truly are — it was a beautiful discovery process," he adds. Via his network Gordon secured a summer internship at Oscar de la Renta in New York, and he later took the plunge to launch his own line of flamboyant evening-wear. Little did he know, though, that in 2008 the economy was about to crash after the Lehman Brothers' collapse.

Adversity is sometimes the best teacher. Buyers, unwilling to risk budgets on a new name, invited Gordon to present his collection in intimate trunk shows around the world. And it was that invaluable experience that gave the designer an insight into the lifestyles of

potential clients. Rather than being reliant on a fictitious woman on a mood board, he got to see what truly makes eyes sparkle in the fitting room. Yet running his own brand versus taking on a legacy was a choice that had to be made. On meeting Carolina Herrera, he found an immediate connection. He now oversees all aspects of the brand, from bespoke commissions to seasonal collections, accessories and beauty. The label is one of the few in New York that still runs an atelier with a team of long-standing seamstresses and tailors.

Having been given the chance to sink or swim (Mrs Herrera never previews the collections prior to the catwalk debut), Gordon is defiantly swimming. He has achieved a happy work/life equilibrium with his husband, the real estate developer and celebrated glass-blower Paul Arnhold, and their 15-month-old son, born to a surrogate mother. The couple spend weekends at their farm in Connecticut, which offers a striking alternative to draping metres of silk faille.

"I come into the office on a Monday with fresh eggs from the farm and oversharing pictures of our baby," Gordon says. "I didn't grow up with animals and now they have become a passion — we have horses, ponies, cows, sheep and lots of chickens. The farm is a sanctuary and a huge part of my life.

"The world does not need more 'stuff' and making for the sake of making is the wrong approach," he continues. "Fashion and luxury are about making something when you feel you have something to say, and I remind myself of that every day. Clients want to feel amazing, have a good time and treat all special moments like a celebration." ■

carolinaherrera.com

