



# LAWRENCE STEELE

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
Lorenzo SABATINI

Edited by Charlene FRETT and Alberto CALABRESE

MODELS: VALENTINA CY, IT'S JAWN, NOLIE @OPC MANAGEMENT

# ASPESI

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GROOMING  
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Lawrence Steele is a visionary, a tailor, an innovator, a creator. Whatever he is discussing about how to spend his free time, or the legendary and lucky meets he had during his amazing career, he is passionate and has a clear vision about what fashion is and how an evergreen and authentic wardrobe should be. After important experiences such as Moschino and Prada, he was appointed designer consultant at Aspesi back in 2004. In 2020, almost 20 years later, he is back at the helm of the Italian historical brand as the Creative Director, ready to bring his multicultural approach, as the result of his life as a wanderer. Known for at first focusing on shirts to then being one of the first to introduce duvet into the daily wardrobe, Aspesi is now going through a new era, thanks to the work of Mr. Steele.

**LORENZO SABATINI.** Can you tell us a memory about fashion you are proud of that has been stuck in your heart? Who has mostly inspired the next generation in your opinion?

**LAWRENCE STEELE.** When I first fell in love with fashion, I saw a kitsch movie when I was 12 years old starring Diana Ross called "Mahogany." She played a young black woman who worked in a department store in Chicago and she was discovered by Anthony Perkins as a model. She went to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to study fashion and the movie is about the process of how she became a couturier. That was actually the school where I studied fashion later. It's not related to fashion in my personal experience but that was where my fantasy about fashion began. In terms of people that have influenced fashion

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today, it's very hard to say. To me, the masters are really the biggest influence on today's fashion. Fashion made in the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s has continued to influence people. A person who has really taken a step away from that is Rei Kawakubo with Comme des Garçons and her approach on expressing the possibility of fashion. She introduced the vocabulary of the art era and I think that she opened the way designers approach fashion today.

**L.S.** What is so far the biggest lesson style and fashion taught you about life? And vice versa, what life tells you about them?

**L.S.** I think that there's this famous phrase: "Do clothes make the man, or do man make the clothes?" And what fashion has taught me is clothing heavily carries in terms of suggesting identity. I think singular objects have the capability to transform the person that wears them. When you have a strong identity and a strong sense of taste and you combine the two, you get some really powerful suggestions about identity. I'm not sure I answered your question, but one influences the other. The contradiction between the two becomes the medium where it's

possible to express infinite possibilities. I'm very attracted to both the idea of fashion as a costume that you can use as a way to become a superhero for reinventing yourself, which is not necessarily sincere, and you can use fashion as a way to communicate things. The fact you can hide or reveal yourself based on what you are able to interpret what fashion offers, that always excites me. I was very shy, for example, when I was very young and I traveled a lot. And I realized that fashion was an instant way to communicate with people, even with foreigners, and start a conversation. As I became more mature and grounded in my own identity, even more mature about my style choices, I realized it was a way to express who you are even through clothing. It was like a way to influence people's understanding of your ideas and of the person that you are. It's an active dynamic. For me, it's interesting how these things play from person to person.

**L.S.** A Renaissance concept, referring to the historic Italian period where humanity blossomed, is translated with such contemporaneity in the garments you create. Which part of the Italian heritage and culture excites you the most?

**L.S.** So many parts of Italian culture excites me. I think about the aesthetic



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of Rome, that period, how the aesthetic was important for creating a surrounding. Nowadays the sensibility is about good life; the fact that Italians have August where they chill and lay back enjoying life. And the fact Italians eat simple and healthy food. These are the aspects that matter and are still alive today. This is what fascinates me about Italy. We lost it in the modern world and it's important that in Italy, it is still alive.

**L.S.** How do you turn your ideas into garments? Could we kindly go deeper into the creative process you are experimenting at Aspesi? Functionality certainly represents the main traits of the design. How do you make this trait so recognizable and unique?

**L.S.** The brand already has the idea of evergreen, which means a garment is always relevant. In my life experience, I have been traveling a lot and being an outsider, I get to see what looks alike and what's different between cultures. The language of an evergreen is timeless. So season after season what I do is approach people. To tell a story, I like to build personalities, to build a wardrobe so people are able to wear my pieces that together compose an alphabet. It's a constant dialogue; you compose a word, a phrase, and it gets emotional. That is how it becomes timeless, to express the meaning of timelessness. So I explore all of these things about quality, and from there, something comes out. I usually take a particular garment and I start from that. Last season, for the Spring/Summer collection, I started from a trench coat. This collection, I started from using the idea of tailoring. When the garment says something to you, you kind of explore your own subconscious and it becomes infinite research in terms of creating something.

**L.S.** Inclusion and sustainable living are two hot topics nowadays in fashion and luckily in society. Could you tell us what these concepts mean to you?

**L.S.** I think inclusion means being able to be yourself, to be uniquely yourself, and being respected. Inclusion means bringing your voice to the table and

being heard. Your tone “I THINK INCLUSION MEANS BEING of voice, the cul- ture that you bring into the world are inclusion. Sustainability

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is something that we are just starting to explore. I like to think about it in a more romantic way. Obviously, you have to be aware of the

source of materials and manufacturing things that have a certain life and the effect they have on the planet, but I like the idea of an object that is timeless, that you can wear for 10 to 20 years. To me, sustainability is actually a way of living; it is a consciousness. I think the two things are tied. We are working in an industry that is constantly making things, so there's a sort of contradiction because a lot of people depend on what we do in terms of jobs as a manufacturer.

**L.S.** You create luxury style garments that are meant to stay in customer's houses probably for entire generations. What is the true meaning of family to you in a contemporary society? And where are you exactly driving the brand's heritage in the closest future?

**L.S.** Family, to me, means relationships that are intimate. I think you grow into a family but you also choose a family which tends to be your friend and the people that you surround yourself with. You create family bonds, even on the job, and those are the people which you put yourself in relationships with.

**L.S.** Thinking about inclusion and sustainability, as you mentioned before, where through this concept of affection are you heading the brand to?

**L.S.** I've been in love with the Aspesi brand for a long time. I was lucky to get to know the founder back in the '80s. I learned a lot about making clothes that were not necessarily screaming. When I moved to Italy, the major designers were here. When I met Mr. Aspesi, he talked to me about what a factory does, and how fabrics

were made and where they come from. What I do changes from period to period. Authentic garments is what I'm trying to do; it's a very abstract idea, but to me, it's the best way to realize what it is supposed to be. Taking the brand forward means working with an idea of an evergreen; in a way to create an authentic garment. But also we have this possibility to communicate fashion as very much to define a moment in history. Capturing the moment and what is in people's mind socially, what people are doing with their time. Today, people have the desire to express a democratic idea about inclusion and the idea of identity which is important. I'm an African American, one of the few to have been working in the industry for as long as I have, and bringing my experience to an Italian brand is already saying something. Here I am from the other part of the world — I traveled a lot — and I am responsible for a team of people as the Creative Director. [Seeing the brand through my eyes with my background] is very important in the work. It's very saddled with who I am, and that's what I am trying to bring out every day in the imaginary world we create. I have been working on changing the sizing of the collection, eliminating the sizes 40 and 50 which talks about men's and women's size, going instead for small, medium, large, extra large so you can approach the collection without addressing a gender. [It's not about not being associated with] gender but about focusing on the garment. It's about choice and not attributing a gender or a political statement to the garment.



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**L.S.** Who is in your opinion a person who has really shaped the vision of style and fashion in the last decade and why?

**L.S.** That's a difficult question. I woke up this morning hearing that André Leon Talley passed away. He came one day to my studio. He influenced me a lot; he was an African American in a position of great influence. His beginnings with Diana Vreeland, he remained so long in a group of people that have been in the industry that counts. He influenced me a lot as a human being; he maintained authenticity about himself and how fashion can be. Today, fashion is like Hollywood; when I started it was a little group of people and now it's the entire world. Now everybody is influencing the dialogue of fashion like Kanye West, who is very sophisticated in terms of choice and language of aesthetics. It's a powerful medium that takes fashion out of the street into teenager's telephones and screens. West gave birth to other creatives like Virgil Abloh. But I don't think he's the only one. Even people that have blogs become incredible personalities in the business.



**L.S.** Did you have a mentor in your career before becoming a major player?

**L.S.** I would say Michael Roberts. He's a photographer, an illustrator, a journalist and a writer. I was speaking about André Leon Talley when he showed up to the studio with Michael and they gave me a sort of sense of belonging. Mr. Aspesi also was a mentor for me; he always had a presence that I was part of something bigger. There are many, many more, but these three men have always been there.

**L.S.** And coming back to Aspesi, what to expect from the upcoming collection? Could you reveal to us some new

add-on or outerwear you are currently designing. Maybe a name of the model, or a color you are going to use.

**L.S.** As I mentioned before, each season, I start with a garment. The Spring/Summer collection had the trench as a starting point, while this season, the idea of tailoring which we are presenting in February; a double-breasted jacket — a coat for male and female. The tailor is the focus of the collection. I don't really think of the collection in terms of creating one concept. Mine is a desire to create a wardrobe and see when you enter the

nb, an old woman told me, "Try to see as many places as possible undisturbed by human presence." I have been to Africa with a group of friends to see an incredible landscape. I also chased a monkey and kind of hiked through the jungle. That was a trip that influenced me for so long. I just went this August. I saw Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon. The dimension of the Earth is really humbling. In terms of fashion, I would suggest to young people to look at the biggest cities. Tokyo is beyond in terms of what can inspire you because of the creativity and aesthetics of the population. But any cities — New York, LA, Paris — any major cities where you actually have the pulse of what's contemporary. And that's the starting point before getting into any romantic notions that students can be really inspired by.

**L.S.** Could you describe to our readers your house? Which type of design do you prefer?

**L.S.** My house is an evolution of me. When I decided to do my own collection, I bought a house because I was afraid of becoming poor so I thought, let's buy a house so I can save

money for my business, but I would always have a place to live. It started out as minimal space, open spaces; a parquet floor, but over the years, I collected things I fell in love with. I collected lots of stuff from the '60s and 70s. There's a lot of artwork on the wall; many influences, many artworks.

**L.S.** Last but not least, your life motto hoping for a brighter future in 2022.

**L.S.** On the screensaver on my phone, there is this phrase, "Always remember your focus determines your reality." It's my motto at the moment. Your focus determines your future. If I focus on many things, I'm enriched by them.



