

How Thom Browne Launched a Multi-Million Dollar Fashion Brand From His Bedroom

The designer on dressing Doechii for the Grammys and his love of the color gray



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Success, they say, is inspiration plus perspiration. But what of sheer universe-vibration? We ask the most successful people we know to tell us what role luck plays in one's career.

As an altar boy in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Thom Browne was raised by parents who expected him to earn top grades at school and blue ribbons at swim meets. Even a second-rate fortuneteller would have predicted his acquiring an economics degree and freestyle medals at Notre Dame.

Flash forward a couple of decades, and the crystal ball foretold a very different future: Browne showcasing his eponymous fashion brand by sending models down the runway in headless-horseman-inspired suits—and, later, by emerging from coffins or strolling alongside dogs in tweed coats that matched their human “owners.”

At first, the public mocked his [“shrunkn” suits](#), but he eventually won devotees to his 1950s aesthetic of single-breasted gray suits with short sleeves, cut just above the wrists, with pants cropped high enough to reveal the ankles. His fantastical ideas now take in nearly \$327 million in annual revenue.

It’s hard to reckon with Thom Browne’s assertion that “I’m not that interesting.” His customers and fashion peers perceive him otherwise. Apart from designing rap artist Doechi’s showstopping look at [this year’s Grammys](#), Browne now serves as chairman of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, as well as chief creative officer of his company, with 137 retail stores, flagships and shop-in-shops in 40 countries around the globe. Ninety-two percent of the company is owned by Ermenegildo [Zegna](#) Group, and it has been traded publicly on the New York Stock Exchange since 2018.

And the suit he wears almost every day? “The idea of uniformity sometimes drives people crazy,” Browne says. “For me, it’s very liberating.”



‘I think it’s indirectly a pushback because it’s such a non-fashion color,’ Browne says about his use of the color gray. ‘It’s timeless. It never gets old.’ Photo: Joseph Maida

You've said you feel like a father figure to your employees. Is this because you are the boss or older than most?

It wasn't an age thing. It was just that I subjected everybody to this thing that I wanted to do. For the first 15 years, it was just us, a family feeling, and I always felt paternal. I wanted them to own their part in it, in the same way that I needed to really own my part in their lives.

Tell me about your own father and how he dressed.

He was a classic. If he didn't have a suit on, he was in bed. I don't remember a time that he didn't have his suit on. Occasionally in the summer he would have shorts on, but he looked so odd if he wasn't dressed for work, even on a Saturday or Sunday.

When you started, were you very set in what you wanted to make?

I knew exactly what I wanted the brand to be, and that's how it started. Nothing's changed. It's the same that it's been for 24 years.

You and I first met a decade out of college, when you were at Club Monaco. Did you attempt to make this vision work in an already established brand?

I was kind of a nebulous creative director. Ralph [Lauren] had just bought Club Monaco and had a really good design team there. I did have ideas that were basically the start of my collection, but in the world of Club Monaco, they didn't work. It just wasn't right.



Browne wears the same suit almost every day. 'The idea of uniformity sometimes drives people crazy,' he says. 'For me, it's very liberating.' Photo: Thom Browne

So are you flexible with design or not?

In some ways, I am very inflexible, but I think in a productive way. I'm very focused on making sure that what I've started is evolving but essentially unchanged.

Jack Welch at General Electric was known as someone who could turn the whole company on a dime. That's how he led. Do you feel like you could be that person at all?

Well, if I feel like something isn't working, I'm very easily changed, for how I want to proceed or how I do things.

Give me an example of something that just wasn't working.

Like in 2008 or 2009, when everybody was having financial challenges, and I was close to going out of business. For the first time, I needed to figure out something that would actually sell well, so we could rebound. I had the dumb idea of thinking I could do denim. It didn't work. Because my interpretation wasn't what people wanted. We sold some, but it wasn't the thing that was going to turn us around.

What role did luck play in your career?

I think it's luck or timing or even fate. They all kind of play into each other. I know I was lucky that I started what I was doing at a time that nobody else was doing it. I created something that was so personal, so unique in the world, and I think that's the reason why people eventually responded to it.

Did you do it because you knew it was unique?

No, no, I did it because it was exactly what I wanted. I've been lucky for a long time in being able to do something that is so true to me that never has been done by others. I'm still doing something that's so true to what I want.

Do you think you prepare for luck?

I think life leads you to a moment that you could see as being a lucky moment—like everything that led up to when I started the first gray suit.

Tell me about intellect versus instinct. Do your designs start as an intellectual idea? Or is it more about instinct?

I'm definitely more instinctual. Intellectually thinking about things inhibits creativity. It can really cripple you sometimes if you think about things too much.

You don't use mood boards. How come?

I find mood boards intimidating. It's so much better to work by just closing your eyes and thinking of what it can be. There are so many designers who work from mood boards, and unfortunately, you can tell that they know too much already. I want to make sure that everyone is challenged here, and that we're creating something that's as new in people's eyes as it can be.



LeBron James in one of Thom Browne's signature suits. Photo: Getty Images

You say “unique,” but you wear the same vest and shorts every day. Even Saturday mornings, to get a coffee, the same outfit. How on earth is that unique?

I love the purity of it. Also the challenge as you grow, having to keep it as pure and keeping the bigger business as pure a feeling as you can. That's the real challenge.

So, if it's pure, does that mean you or your brand are not multifaceted?

I don't care if people think I'm interesting. Because I'm not. However, I do think my work is interesting. That's what I care about. I care about people seeing the work. My husband, Andrew [Bolton, curator of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art], and I talk about this all the time. We love what we do, that's why we never get away from it. We try, but we never do. It's also a curse, because, you know, you lose sleep over it, you get depressed, you hold people up to standards that sometimes are unrealistic.

Did you think your gray suit would work from the beginning?

I didn't think of it working or not. I remember the only time I thought, This has to work, was when I was going out of business.

Tell me about gray. The artist Gerhard Richter says it's the epitome of a non-statement. For you, everything is gray. Are you pushing back against nosiness and intrusiveness, against all the self-exposure on social media?

I think it's indirectly a pushback because it's such a non-fashion color. It's timeless. It never gets old. There's so many shades you can use. But for me, it's also personal. I love it on myself.

Can you explain the [pre-fall 2022 collection] lobster moment, with that random huge claw on one hand?

I've used lobster claws fairly often. It's almost like, why not? Everybody sees the classic ideas as being very serious and somewhat rigid and rigorous. The idea of uniformity sometimes drives people crazy. For me, it's very liberating; it really makes you look more interesting, but you have to add something that is pure nonsense. Just to make sure that people know—even if I'm not smiling, there's somebody laughing inside.



Thom Browne dressed the rapper Doechii at this year's Grammys. 'She embraced it and made it her own,' the designer says. Photo: Getty Images for The Recording Academy

There is a bit of fantasy in everything you do. Tell me about dressing Doechii for the Grammys. Were you both in on the same joke somehow?

Doechii and I get along because we have a lot of noise and opinions around us and we both stay true to how we want things done. For the Grammys, it was important that a 24-year-old idea still feel relevant to a new customer today. Doechii allowed it to have the same purity, and she embraced it and made it her own.

I remember at the very beginning, your suits were first shown lying out on your bed. I mean, your actual bedroom was your showroom. You didn't even have a rack.

Well, that's the way it starts. Unfortunately, people nowadays think it's going to happen so much quicker than it actually does. It should take a while. If you're going to do something important, that's going to have longevity, it has to be important enough that you create something that is almost like one image. The most important designers of the last 100 years, when you think of their name, you get an image. I think it's important to ground everything in that at the beginning.

Do you think you earned your luck?

Well, some people are afraid of opportunity, they're afraid of success. And I never really understood that until, as we get older, you see friends that you think should be successful, right? And you can see that they just don't go for it, because you have to pursue it. You have to decide to be successful.

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Were you scared of success?

No, I was never, never scared.

Your dad dressed very consistently. They say consistency makes kids feel cared for.

Both of my parents were very, very consistent. The only thing my parents really cared about was that we did well in school or at sports. Outside of that, it was like the easiest childhood. But it made us all very driven. All of us siblings.

You didn't want to disappoint them.

No, we didn't. But we were all driven to do it for ourselves. I don't think any of us ever want to disappoint ourselves.

Corrections & Amplifications

Ermenegildo Zegna Group owns ninety-two percent of Thom Browne, which has 137 retail stores and shop-in-ships worldwide. A previous version of this article mistakenly cited Zegna's stake as ninety percent and said the company has 107 stores. (Corrected on March 13)

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