

Michael Kors and Anna Wintour Debate Body Type Issue

By Katherine Bowers

From *Women's Wear Daily* issue 3/24/10, reprinted with permission

BOSTON ◀ Citing the fashion industry's role in causing eating disorders, Michael Kors said he'll no longer hire models under age 16 and called on his peers to follow suit.

"We are talking about children and the pressures on them are horrendous," he said.

The designer and *Project Runway* judge also urged consumers not to buy from companies "whose imagery turns you off. If you think what they're showing is ridiculous, say no."

Kors joined *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour and model Natalia Vodianova, who spoke about her struggles with anorexia, for a panel discussion on the fashion industry's response to weight and wellness held Monday night at Harvard Business School.

Eating disorders affect an estimated eight to 10 million people in the U.S. More sobering, women suffering from anorexia nervosa had a ninefold greater risk of death and 57-fold risk of suicide than their age cohort, said Dr. David B. Herzog, M.D., director of the Harris Center at Massachusetts General Hospital, which organized the forum to increase awareness of eating disorders. Three years ago, after the death of a Brazilian model from anorexia, the Council of Fashion Designers of America began looking at the ways they could help prevent eating disorders, rather than pretending the problem was rare. Last month, the CFDA held a forum discussing the sample size.

"Each and every one of us needs to realize we are all responsible for models' health," said Wintour, who called on designers to reverse the "tyranny of [sample] clothes that just barely fit a 13-year-old on the edge of puberty."

She noted the past decade's preference for extreme thinness has eroded models' clout. Most work only when they have the uberslim physique of the very young, stop getting jobs when they fill out and hence don't last long enough to develop public personalities, like the Nineties supermodels did. As a result, more magazine covers and lucrative beauty contracts have gone to singers and actresses, she observed.

Earlier, in a separate interview, Wintour said *Vogue* uses Photoshop to erase small imperfections, but does not use it to make girls look thinner than they are. She said *Vogue* editors have made a commitment to feature a wider variety of body types.

It certainly feels like there's a bigger-is-better moment, from the rise of plus-size model Crystal Renn; Karl Lagerfeld's plus-size model shoot for *V* magazine; *Marie Claire*'s plus-size fashion columnist, Ashley Falcon, and even the fall runways. Prada cast Doutzen Kroes and several other "curvier" models, while Marc Jacobs brought back a panoply of veterans for his Louis Vuitton show, including 46-year-old Elle Macpherson, swathed in heavy fabrics that played up natural padding.

Wintour's appearance coincides with the newsstand arrival of *Vogue*'s ninth shape issue, which includes articles on plus-size model Kate Dillon, and model Kim Noorda's struggle with anorexia.

But the other extreme is a real problem, and one which the industry elite have too long swept under the carpet, Wintour said. Kors said he thinks carefully about who will represent his company on catwalks and in ad campaigns, and meets with each model personally before casting them. He cited the example of a high-profile model he booked without an appointment, only to have her show up at a fitting at half her previous size and with bruises along her back from where her body spine pressed. He worked with her agent to admit her to a treatment program. Along with not booking models younger than 16, the designer won't use any model who looks unhealthily thin and advocated 16- and 17-year-olds have adult chaperones backstage and at fittings.

In some ways, despite the significantly larger attendance of about 1,000 people, this year's forum seemed less effective than one held two years ago, where designer Bradley Bayou spoke emotionally about his daughter's struggle with anorexia and where audience members peppered panelists with questions and personal stories. This time, only three prescreened questions were allowed. Neither Wintour nor Kors would predict, over the long haul, how fashion will evolve or whether there would ultimately be a diversity of body types appearing on runways and in ad campaigns.

Vodianova pressed for better and more available information about the early signs of eating disorders in the modeling community. "By the time someone becomes extremely thin, so much damage has been done," she said.