A Fashion Runway Hit Gets a Department Store Makeover
Designer Joseph Altuzarra's turned thick, handwoven garments into light, digital prints for Neiman Marcus and other stores

By RAY A. SMITH
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The Inspiration | Fashion designer Joseph Altuzarra saw the work of artist Sheila Hicks, including 'Cord Structure,' above, while at Art Basel/Design Miami in December. Susan Einstein/Demisch Danant

Sometimes in fashion you can't always get what you want. Even if you're the fashion director at Neiman Marcus.
As Ken Downing sat in the front row at Altuzarra’s show during New York Fashion Week in February, he fell in love with four striking colorful, handwoven ensembles that marched down the runway roughly midway through the presentation. He recalls thinking: “We have to secure that we get those pieces.”

As it turned out, Neiman Marcus couldn’t have them. No retailer could. The man who designed the pieces, Joseph Altuzarra, only intended for looks 9, 11, 14 and 15 to be a “wow” moment in the show, rather than mass produced and sold in stores.

It is a strategy other designers use. Show a dramatic and perhaps impractical item on the runway and then alter it to be more affordable, wearable or both before it reaches retail racks. Deep plunging necklines may get shallower. Ruffles or embroidery may be removed. In some cases, the modifications are at the request of a retailer.

What Mr. Altuzarra did to make these pieces from his Fall 2014 critically-acclaimed show commercially viable included a new wrinkle: He reimagined the looks using high-resolution digital prints. The result is three garments, two made with silk twill and one in stretch cotton, instead of the originals’ silk and wool.

Mr. Altuzarra had a hunch the handwoven pieces would resonate with retailers, so his team developed the digital-print versions at the same time as the woven pieces.

For the original pieces, special looms were needed. The label did an extensive search to find local artists that could execute Mr. Altuzarra’s ideas. The originals would have cost customers at least $10,000 each. (A spokeswoman said the woven pieces could potentially be made and sold upon request on a one-on-one basis.)

Ray Smith, Wall Street Journal, 30 April, 2014
"The reality is they're beautiful pieces, but they're quite thick," the designer said. "They're a wool/silk woven piece, which is not the most comfortable for a dress." The digital print versions, rendered in a button-down shirt, a pencil skirt with a vampy slit (an Altuzarra signature), and a sleeveless top will cost $695, $995 and $795, respectively.

The woven pieces were inspired by works by fiber artist Sheila Hicks that the designer saw at Art Basel/Design Miami in December. Mr. Altuzarra and his team worked with artisans from the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. The garments were constructed by seamstresses that the label flies in from Italy each season to help with fittings and final changes to runway looks.

Since his label's start in 2008, Mr. Altuzarra, a nominee for this year's Womenswear Designer of the Year award by the Council of Fashion Designers of America, has become known for his grown-up, sexy silhouettes and for his craftsmanship and deft weaving of disparate ethnic and cultural references without being overly literal. The designer, who studied art and art history at Swarthmore College, says of Ms. Hicks's work: "It had sort of a tribal quality to it, but not really of any place, not really of any time."
Mr. Altuzarra tried to capture the spirit of her pieces. "We didn't want to reproduce Sheila Hicks's work," he said. "We wanted to use it as a springboard to do things of our own."

Neiman Marcus is ultimately getting the pieces it wanted, just in a somewhat different form. "When we found out the textural pieces were being recreated, we were very excited," said Mr. Downing, of Neiman Marcus. "A lot of our [online and store] business is in warm-weather climates. Fabric weights are very important to our customer," he said. "We knew it would be perfect for our customer in L.A."

Mr. Downing said he liked that the digital prints retained "that depth of texture and of the weave." Neiman Marcus ordered all three of the garments, which will arrive in stores in August and September. (A spokeswoman for the fashion label said at least three other retailers ordered the digital-print versions.) Mr. Downing wouldn't say how large an order Neiman Marcus made. "We were very enthusiastic," he said. "We have them well represented."

The Print | To sell the designs in stores, the Altuzarra label created digital prints of the woven items, including this pencil skirt with drape on lightweight fabrics for $795 to $995. Rebecca Greenfield for The Wall Street Journal
Joseph Altuzarra sent three handwoven pieces down the runway recently that the label didn’t expect retailers would realistically order. WSJ’s Ray Smith discusses how the design team planned ahead, and made less-costly versions that could be mass-produced for retailers. Photo: Rebecca Greenfield for The Wall Street Journal.

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