MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Sara Sozzani Maino

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Sara Sozzani Maino, Creative Director Fondazione Sozzani.
Portrait Sara Sozzani Maino ® Adriano Russo

Questions conceived and hosted by Florian Müller

MODEM:
You've long moved between scouting, mentoring, and shaping global talent platforms. Looking back, which personal moment first revealed to you the transformative power of fashion beyond the image?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
Working with Franca Sozzani shaped everything for me. She showed me that images can speak louder than words, because language can be a barrier, but an image communicates instantly to everyone. At Vogue Italia and later with Vogue Talents, I realized this power could go beyond aesthetics, carrying social issues and new ideas for the future. Franca also taught me to embrace the unknown—she'd throw me into projects I had never done before and simply say, "Do it." I was terrified at first, but that's how I learned that failure is not the end; it's often the most powerful way to grow.

MODEM:
As someone who often works behind the scenes, you've helped many designers find their voice. In your experience, where does guidance end and influence begin when nurturing someone's vision?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
For me mentoring is never about imposing my taste. If a designer shows me their work it means they believe in it, and I respect that deeply. I never tell someone they are not good enough, because who am I to decide that. My role is to ask questions that make them reflect, not to dictate. Sometimes creatives are so focused they do not see what is right in front of them, so I try to help them discover possibilities without losing their DNA. The most important thing is that they grow on their own terms, not by following mine.

MODEM:
With the founding of the Fondazione Sozzani, you expanded your commitment from talent support into cultural preservation, education, and dialogue. Would you say this shift has changed the way you define your role within fashion?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
The Foundation was really a natural evolution of my journey. It grew out of the gallery my mother created in 1990, so in a way it carries more than thirty years of values and vision. When I began working with her, our approaches came together very organically. For me culture, heritage and education are essential pillars, and the Foundation became a way to give those back to the next generation. I do not have children, so in a sense this is what I leave behind. It is a space where people can exchange ideas and leave with something that makes them think differently.

MODEM:
The Foundation fosters long-term cultural awareness through exhibitions, archives, and informative formats. Why did you choose to focus so strongly on continuity and how do you sense its effect on younger generations?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
For me continuity has always been at the heart of the Foundation, following the vision of Carla. I like to think of it as seeding a field: for years I have nurtured projects, exhibitions, and ideas, and now they grow naturally. Everything I have done so far was meant to be shared, and the Foundation has become a home for people to express their values and visions freely. Collaborations must respect our DNA, and while resources are important, we never compromise principles. I see that younger generations understand this approach and it inspires them to create meaningfully and stay true to themselves.

MODEM:
Fashion weeks often highlight spectacle, but your initiatives focus on depth. At what point do you feel real growth becomes visible, even when it remains outside the public eye?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
In my work I am not interested in spectacle, followers, or immediate success. Real growth happens when a project carries genuine values and meaning. Size does not matter; what matters is what you aim to communicate and the impact it can have. I often support small projects that may seem insignificant at first, but over time they grow and resonate far beyond their initial scale. Change can happen quietly and in unexpected ways, and that is what makes it lasting. It is always about quality, intention, and the integrity behind the work rather than the attention it receives.

MODEM:
Supporting early-stage designers also means encountering fragility. How do you balance encouragement with honesty when confidence is still forming?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
I always approach young creatives with honesty and sensitivity. I try to guide them without creating disillusionment. If a project faces challenges, I help them see that there are many ways to express talent beyond the traditional fashion system. Many of the new generation work collectively, supporting each other, and finding fulfillment in their vision rather than chasing approval. Encouragement is crucial, but it must be realistic and grounded in opportunities they can pursue. Over time, I see them return with projects that are richer, more meaningful, and more aligned with their true values, and that is deeply rewarding.

MODEM:
Bridging different life paths is a quiet but central part of your work. What helps build the kind of trust that allows diverse individuals to create something lasting together?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
Building trust among people from different paths is about understanding and support rather than control. The fashion system is changing, and young creatives should know there are many ways to thrive within it. Investment in them is not only financial but also through mentoring and guidance, helping them navigate challenges and make the most of opportunities. Education and continuous support are essential so that talent can grow sustainably. When people feel seen, encouraged, and equipped with the right tools, they are able to collaborate meaningfully, respecting each other's backgrounds and creating something that lasts beyond individual ambitions.

MODEM:
The industry's pace leaves little room for reflection. Could a different rhythm help protect mental wellbeing and if so, what might it look like?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
Creativity and well-being are closely linked, yet often overlooked in the fashion world. The new generation is no longer willing to bend just to fit into the system. They want to preserve both their projects and their health, even if it is not always easy. I see them making choices based on values, not just immediate recognition or financial gain. Structured guidance, clear principles, and slower rhythms could allow creativity to thrive without sacrificing well-being. Ultimately, meaningful work and sustainable practices must go hand in hand with taking care of oneself and the community around you.

MODEM:
You've supported the Mental Health in Fashion campaign from the beginning and now serve on the ASVOFF jury for the related category. What drew you to take on such a visible role in this conversation around care and accountability?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
Taking on a visible role in the conversation around mental health felt natural to me. Having experienced challenges myself, I understand the importance of creating awareness and providing support. Visibility brings responsibility, and it is essential to communicate that mental well-being should be normalized in the workplace, not treated as a trend. People should be

valued for their talent, not their background or appearance. Supporting each other and fostering inclusive, responsible environments is crucial. By speaking openly and providing guidance, we can help the community recognize that mental health and fair practices are fundamental, not optional.

MODEM:
Resilience is a word often used when discussing mental health in fashion. But before people are made even stronger only to be stretched further, isn’t it time to ask which structural conditions should shift first, or at least simultaneously?

SARA SOZZANI MAINO:
The word resilience is often overused, especially in fashion, and it worries me because people are expected to endure more without changing the structures around them. Real progress requires shifting conditions at an institutional level, particularly making mental health a priority in companies. Education and awareness are essential so that seeking support becomes normal and not stigmatized. Everyone, regardless of status or background, should feel able to care for themselves. True resilience comes from having a foundation that supports well-being, not from pushing people to bend repeatedly. Structural change and ongoing guidance are just as important as personal strength.