



LAFS co-founders Estefania Lacayo and Samantha Tams. All photos courtesy of LAFS.

CONN- ECTING THE DOTS

**MEET THE SISTERS-IN-LAW CHARTING A
COURSE FOR LATIN AMERICAN FASHION.**



Born in Nicaragua, Estefania Lacayo and her Mexico-born sister-in-law, Samantha Tams, had way more in common than relation through marriage. The thread? A love of fashion, a trained eye and an innate talent for entrepreneurship. Pair that with business savvy, a priceless Rolodex and experience as brand-builders and buyers, and that's how LAFS, or the Latin American Fashion Summit, was born.

Early on in Lacayo's career in Manhattan (which included time at *Vogue* and *Rent the Runway*), she observed a generation of Latin American creatives

with incredible visions but without the access to execute their products and concepts. So, while on vacation in Nicaragua, Lacayo and Tams partnered to create a platform that would bridge that gap in the market and allow for meaningful mentorships within the Latin American community. "Because these artists didn't know the editors, the mentors, the investors or the buyers, we wondered who could and would help them refine their collections or dramatically shift their businesses," says Lacayo. The answer started with Tams (then a buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue in Mexico City) and Lacayo.

Their first order of business was to modernize the idea of an industry conference, and in 2018, Lacayo reached out to her vast network, which included fashion legends like entrepreneur Carmen Busquets (a co-founder of Net-A-Porter) and *Elle* editor and *Project Runway* judge Nina Garcia. "I asked, 'If I do this, would you show up?'" says Lacayo. "And when they all said, 'yes,' that's when the trajectory changed and I knew our concept was a viable reality."

This page: A panel discussion from LAFS 2024. Opposite page from top: Lacayo in conversation with Aerin Lauder at LAFS 2022; Tams and Lacayo at LAFS 2024's closing party.



**"FROM THAT MOMENT ONWARD,
WE KNEW THAT LAFS WOULD
CHANGE LIVES FOR THE LATIN
AMERICAN COMMUNITY ON A
GLOBAL SCALE."**



The first LAFS was a multiday experience held at the Rosewood Mayakoba resort in Mexico. The conference allowed for the audience to have intimate access to a panel of speakers that included Moda Operandi Founder Lauren Santo Domingo. “From that moment onward, we knew that LAFS would change lives for the Latin American community on a global scale,” says Tams.

That conference was followed by another in Cartagena, Colombia, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, LAFS was forced to go virtual for two years. But according to Tams, “Even that was a blessing in disguise and the silver lining, as it gave us a reach we never imagined.”

Today, the annual three-day LAFS has grown exponentially and is now headquartered in the Miami Design District. “We realize[d] it was a booming community with ideal energy that had it all,” says Tams. “From retailers who are now our collaborators — like Bottega Veneta, Manolo Blahnik, Natura Bissé, The Moore, Tiffany and Mastercard — to large-scale event spaces where we [can] properly activate pop-up stores for the event specifically, [as well as] throughout the year.” Next up is the annual LAFS competition in November. Essentially the *Shark Tank* of fashion and creativity, it’s held in partnership with Istituto Marangoni. Thousands of contestants are narrowed down to

just nine through a rigorous process where they refine their branding, financials, sustainability practices and strategy in preparation to pitch judges, which include fashion thought leaders from Shopbop, Saks Fifth Avenue, Moda Operandi and Kering. Exclusively for Latin American talent, the competition prize includes \$10,000, mentorship for a year and a trunk show with Moda Operandi. But the real prize is access.

Kika Vargas, the first LAFS winner in 2018, later became the first Latin American designer to be a finalist for the LVMH Prize and had a partnership with Target. The 2022 winner, Susana Vega (who drove from Houston to Miami while still waiting for her asylum visa), currently has her collection in Bergdorf Goodman and Saks. These are the kinds of stories that prove it’s not just about an award; it’s about changing lives and putting Latin American fashion on the global map where it belongs.



This page: Black Ambition CEO Felecia Hatcher and Pharrell Williams at LAFS 2022. Opposite page, clockwise from top: Designer Johanna Ortiz and Moda Operandi co-founder Lauren Santo Domingo at LAFS 2022; a 2023 panel discussion; cocktail hour at Ralph Lauren’s Miami Design District flagship during LAFS 2023.