



Armani, Giorgio (b. 1934)

by Linda Rapp

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The name of Italian designer Giorgio Armani is synonymous with sophisticated and elegant fashion. In addition to apparel his spectacularly successful business empire includes lines of jewelry, cosmetics, fragrances, and eyewear, among other products.

Armani, born July 11, 1934, grew up in the northern Italian town of Piacenza. His family was hard-working but not prosperous.

Armani aspired to a career in medicine and began a university course. In 1953, after two years of studies, he was called to military service, which included working in a military hospital. The experience convinced him that he was not cut out to be a doctor.

After his stint in the armed forces Armani found a job as a window dresser at La Rinascente, a department store in Milan. He went on to become a buyer for the men's wear department, in which capacity he gained valuable experience in the marketing aspect of the fashion industry.

In the mid-1960s Armani moved to the Nino Cerutti company, for which he designed men's wear. His skills were in demand, and for the next decade, while continuing to work for Cerutti, Armani also freelanced, contributing designs to as many as ten manufacturers at a time.

In 1966 Armani met architect Sergio Galeotti. Galeotti, eleven years Armani's junior, moved to Milan to be with him.

Galeotti had immense confidence in Armani's talent and urged him to produce his own collection instead of designing for others. In 1975 the pair founded Giorgio Armani SpA with an initial investment of approximately ten thousand dollars, part of it derived from the sale of their Volkswagen.

Armani immediately introduced an innovation that has become a signature of his work, the "unconstructed" suit jacket, which he offered in both men's and women's collections. Armani removed the lining and padding that had previously been standard in suit jackets and created a more supple garment in soft fabric. The fluid lines created a look that was at once sophisticated and sensual, flattering to both men and women.

Armani's style has often been described as androgynous. The designer himself saw this as a reflection of wider social change. By the mid-1970s more and more women were entering the professional ranks and needed clothing that was business-like but still appealing. Armani expressed the hope that his garments would give women "a relaxed feeling of security and the salutary feeling of being unattackable."

At first some fashion critics found Armani's designs and palette of mainly neutral colors--especially beiges and greys--too understated and asexual, but customers responded enthusiastically to the subtle elegance of his clothing.

Armani and Galeotti were soon able to expand their enterprises, launching the chain of Emporio Armani stores to sell ready-to-wear lines and to bring in younger customers. They also diversified into other product areas such as fragrances, which were added in 1982.

Armani is a lifelong movie fan, and Hollywood returned the compliment. His suits were prominently featured in Paul Schrader's 1980 film *American Gigolo*, and since then his work has been seen in more than one hundred movies, including *De-Lovely* (directed by Irwin Winkler, 2004), a screen biography of composer Cole Porter. Fashion critics praised the clothing in the latter as a perfect reflection of the taste of the sophisticated set in the 1920s and 1930s and also as timelessly classic in design. Indeed, Armani's spring 2005 collection for men (presented in June 2004) echoed the fashion themes of *De-Lovely*.

In 1985 Armani suffered a severe personal and professional loss: Galeotti died of AIDS at the age of forty. There was widespread speculation within the industry that Armani would choose the moment to retire--as he could well afford to do because of the great success of the business.

An intensely private person, Armani generally reveals little about his personal life. In a 2000 *Vanity Fair* interview, however, he spoke at length about his relationship with Galeotti. Armani stated, "He helped me believe in my own work, in my energy." He acknowledged that he considered retirement after Galeotti's death but decided instead to persevere rather than abandoning "all the hopes of Sergio."

"It is he who gives me the strength even now to continue," declared Armani, who added that Galeotti "is always there" in the home that they shared. Tangible reminders include photographs of Galeotti that adorn the bedrooms of all of Armani's residences.

In the same interview Armani said that he had had both men and women--including a fiancée when he was young--in his romantic life. "You know very well that to do this work one must have a free mind," he commented.

After the loss of Galeotti, Armani not only continued to work but guided his privately-owned company to phenomenal success. The enterprise, now known as the Giorgio Armani Group, had a global value of some four billion dollars in 2003.

Armani retail stores can indeed be found worldwide. There were already over two hundred of them in more than thirty countries when Armani announced plans in 2004 to enter the Chinese market by opening some thirty facilities there within five years.

Armani is known as a tireless worker who diligently oversees every detail of his operation, from small adjustments in the design of a single garment to international financial deals. So intimately has he been involved in every phase of the business that in recent years industry observers have been speculating on whether the Armani empire can survive without Armani himself.

Since 1999 he has received offers from LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) and Gucci to form joint partnerships in which Armani would retain creative control of his fashion line but cede the business operation. This side of the business is also intensely personal to Armani, however, since taking up the role formerly played by Galeotti helped him get over his partner's death. Armani has resisted all offers from other companies.

Armani stated in 2001 that he was "working on a structure that will allow [the company] to go on--a team of people that could go on without me." It appears that the team may include two of his nieces who have become part of his inner circle at the company.

The beginning of Armani's rise to prominence coincided with that of fellow countryman Gianni Versace. The

two designers' approaches to fashion were markedly different: Versace showed overtly sexy clothes while Armani's designs conveyed a subtle and elegant sensuality. During the 1990s there was a rather hostile rivalry between the two Milan fashion houses, but after Versace's murder in 1997 Armani sought to gloss over the unpleasantness, saying that he considered Versace a sincere person who simply had different ideas about women's fashions.

Armani's view is that fashion should evolve rather than change radically from year to year. He commented in 2003 that he had "always tried to do things that are new but that can be combined with what you've already got in your wardrobe." His emphasis has consistently been on the classic and the elegant, gently draped soft fabrics, and meticulously designed details such as exquisite beadwork.

On the occasion of Armani's twenty-fifth anniversary as a designer in 2000 the Guggenheim Museum in New York mounted an exhibition of his work. The show later traveled to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain and to Berlin.

In a 2001 interview Armani was asked about the greatest failure of his career. He dismissed fashion lines or merchandising ideas that did not work--although he had relatively few of those--as "normal things." "Perhaps the greatest failure," he replied, "was not being able to stop my partner from dying."

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