



Dolce & Gabbana Dolce, Domenico (b. 1958) and Stefano Gabbana (b. 1962)

by Shaun Cole

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A shirt bearing the Dolce and Gabbana logo. This image by Wikimedia Commons contributor Zirguezzi was released to the public domain here.

Italian design duo Dolce & Gabbana are known for their sexy, glamorous women's clothing and sharp men's tailoring, all of which embody a distinctively southern Italian feel.

"Sicily, the Mediterranean culture, the neo-realist Italian cinema, Visconti's movie of *The Leopard* and Madonna" are the elements that influence their designs, Dolce & Gabbana told *Observer Life* magazine in 1996. Dolce's native island of Sicily, a place Gabbana had fallen in love with on holiday, became the bond between the two when they met in the early 1980s, when they worked for the same design studio in Milan.

Domenico Dolce was born in Polizzi Generosa, near Palermo in Sicily on August 13, 1958. He began his work in fashion by helping out in his family's clothing company. Wishing to pursue a career in fashion, he moved north and got a job in a Milanese design studio.

Stefano Gabbana was born in Milan on November 14, 1962. Initially he went to art school to study graphics but soon transferred to fashion.

In 1982 the two men left the design company where they were working when they met to pursue separate consulting careers, but they continued to share an office as well as a private life. After eighteen months, they decided to join forces and the Dolce & Gabbana label was born.

Milan's governing fashion organization, the Camera Nazionale, recognized them as up-and-coming talent and invited them to show their first womenswear collection, called "real woman," during Milan fashion week.

For some 19 years, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana were partners in life as well as in business. Their personal relationship, which commenced soon after their meeting in the early 1980s, was well documented and they spoke freely about their home life as well as their business partnership in interviews.

In fact, the home they shared together, Villa Volpe, a nineteenth-century palazzo in the heart of Milan, was the subject of much discussion in the press. Jess Cartner-Morley described their home as a "gorgeously kitsch romp [where] the drawing room has leopard-print wallpaper with matching footstools, a patchwork velvet-and-silk rug, red velvet sofas, and a riot of church candles. . . ."

Although known for their fondness for black in their designs (inspired by the dress of the peasants and gangsters of Sicily), Dolce & Gabbana also mix together the same seemingly contradictory collection of fabrics and influences that are apparent in their home. Their collections have been hall-marked by a flagrant disregard for restraint or convention.

It was this mix that Suzy Menkes noted in the *International Herald Tribune* in March 1993, when she wrote that they have the ability to "mix periods and countries, male and female wardrobes, Swinging London and

Biedermeier period, and they do so in a way that it all becomes Dolce & Gabbana."

From the furs and low cut dresses (1990), patchwork and flowered dresses (1992), and leopard-skin pants (1996) to pinstriped suits worn over white (peasant) singlets, Dolce & Gabbana's clothes for women are both sexy and sensual. Unlike many designers they do not design for stick-thin models but rather for "real" women with hips and breasts. "The sensuality of the body--everything it expresses and the messages it sends--is very important," Gabbana explained to *Observer Life*.

Their clothes for men mix the same key elements of sexiness and traditional detail as do their womenswear collections. Just as they put women in "men's clothes," so they mix traditionally masculine elements such as the white singlet (much loved and worn by gay men in the summer of 1995) and pin-striped suits with overtly feminine designs in bright colors.

"It has nothing to do with sexuality or being gay," Dolce told *The Guardian Weekend* magazine, "It's just that we all have this side It's today's society that has made men and women so different. It's good to search inside and discover this small part of the other sex which is inside you."

Despite interest from the major fashion conglomerates, Dolce & Gabbana remain in control of their business. As well as the expensive main lines for both men and women, they also produce a more affordable White Label Collection, the club-inspired D&G range, and a jeans collection entitled simply &. In addition, they also design sunglasses, accessories, underwear, swimwear, and fragrances.

Dolce & Gabbana's clothes are worn by a whole host of celebrities: Tom Cruise, Brian Ferry, Brad Pitt, Bruce Willis, Isabella Rossellini, Demi Moore, and Nicole Kidman, to name but a few. They are known for donating clothes to and designing for stars they like. To those they do not like, they say "there is a shop." In 1999 they designed stage outfits for Whitney Houston's World Tour, where the costumes ranged from edgy sportswear to dramatic ballgowns.

But by far their favorite celebrity is Madonna. "We love Madonna, so anything she asks we say yes, because we love the person, the style, the music--everything." They designed the costumes for her *Girlie Show* in 1993, put her in the now-famous "Kylie Minogue" tribute and "Rocco" T-shirts in 2000, and in 2001 sent her on stage in a re-interpretation of a "rhinestone cowboy."

Their admiration for Madonna is fully reciprocated. She is a very big fan of the duo, who are known in America as "the Italian designers"; she acknowledged their place in Italian culture when she stated "Now that Fellini, Rossellini, Pasolini and Visconti are gone, all we have is Dolce & Gabbana's neorealistic fashion."

In February 2005 Dolce and Gabbana broke up as lovers. According to Gabbana, they "had been drifting apart for about five years" prior to the split. The two remain friends and are still working together. Both say that they are committed to the ongoing success of their fashion house and that they plan to remain partners in the business even though they are no longer together as a couple.

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About the Author

Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).