



Versace, Gianni (1946-1997)

by Shaun Cole

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Woody Hochswender noted in *Rolling Stone* in August 1997, "[A]s a designer [Gianni Versace] could be titillating, outrageous, bombastic, vulgar, classic, avant garde and of course, wildly expensive." The characteristic Versace style uses striking colors, materials, and cuts, and has a reputation for ostentation.

Versace's clothes are strikingly well designed garments that flatter the body. Not surprisingly, Versace was the designer of choice of many of the rich and famous: pop stars such as Elton John, George Michael, and Madonna; film stars such as Sylvester Stallone, Will Smith, and Elizabeth Hurley (who famously wore his safety pin dress to the Oscars); and royalty, most notably, Princess Diana.

Gianni Versace was renowned not only for his lavish tailoring and tight body-hugging garments but also for his exuberant personal taste. He owned homes in Milan, Lake Como, Italy, New York, and Miami, all filled with antiques, which inspired the prints on his fashions and his homeware collections.

Versace was very much in the public eye and unlike so many public figures never hid his homosexuality. He lived openly with his lover of eleven years, Antonio D'Amico, who was also the designer of the Versace sport line.

Born in Reggio, Calabria (in southern Italy) on December 2, 1946, Versace was the son of an appliance salesman father and a dressmaker mother. It was from his mother that Versace received his love of fashion and first learned about dress-making. After training as an architect, Versace followed his mother into the fashion business.

Versace worked for a number of top Italian fashion houses, then with the help of his brother Santo, he launched his own label in March 1978. His first collection was of women's wear. His first menswear collection followed the next year.

Although the favor his clothes found with the wealthy enhanced his reputation, his clothes were available not only to the rich. To expand his empire, he launched the Istante label in 1985; and after years as Gianni's muse, his younger sister Donatella became his co-designer and launched the Versace diffusion range, Versus, in 1989.

These labels featured clothes within the budgets of many consumers; not only were they priced lower than the custom-made clothes, but they were also aimed at younger markets.

Versace's skill as a designer, or tailor, as he liked to consider himself, was recognized by the fashion world. In 1988 he received the Cutty Sark Award as "the most innovative and creative designer in the world"; and in 1993 the Council of Fashion Designers of America awarded him the American fashion Oscar.

Versace's love of all things theatrical led to his designing costumes for opera and ballet, and stage costumes



The Miami, Florida mansion where Gianni Versace was murdered in 1997. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2 or above. Photograph created by Wikimedia Commons contributor chensiyuan in 2009.

for Elton John and Prince.

Versace expanded his empire by designing a range of furnishings and accessories for the home, featuring his trademark neoclassical prints and a gold medusa's head.

Versace was a very savvy businessman who understood the importance of marketing. In 1979 he began a collaboration with the American photographer Richard Avedon, first for advertising photography and then in the production of a number of photographic books.

He paid special attention to his advertising campaigns; and to promote his company's image he used top models for advertisements as well as catwalk shows.

On July 15, 1997 Versace was shot to death outside his South Beach home in Miami, Florida by crazed gunman Andrew Cunanan. Cunanan had been on a killing spree and was the subject of a massive police hunt. He was found dead in a Miami Beach boathouse, an apparent suicide, eight days after Versace's murder.

At the time of Versace's tragic death many believed that the House of Versace would die with him. However, thanks to his foresight in increasingly involving Donatella in the business, she was able to assume the helm of the business and is now the company's chief designer.

Bibliography

Avedon, Richard. *The Naked & the Dressed: 20 years of Versace*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1998.

Celant, Germano, et al. *The Art of Being You: Gianni Versace*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1997.

Hochswender, Woody. "Glamour, Freedom and Rock & Roll: Gianni Versace (1946-1997)." *Rolling Stone* (August 21, 1997): 19-20.

Lemon, Brendan. "Gianni Versace (1946-1997)." *The Advocate* 750 (January 20, 1998): 75.

Martin, Richard. *Versace*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997.

Mazza, Samuele, ed. *Versace / Mariuccia Casadio*. London : Thames and Hudson, 1998.

Orth, Maureen. *Vulgar Favors: Andrew Cunanan, Gianni Versace and the Largest Failed Manhunt in U.S. History*. New York: Delacorte, 1999.

Tilberis, Liz. "Gianni Versace." *Harper's Bazaar* 3430 (September, 1997): 390-391.

Turner, Lowri. *Gianni Versace: Fashion's Last Emperor*. London: Essential, 1997.

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).