

La Dolce Vita, or Rome Triumphant

Italy offered also Hollywood-style glamour, with the prestige of a European label. The marriage of fashion and film was crucial to the success of the Roman couture. Rome was Hollywood on the Tiber, center of the Italian film industry and also the place where many American films were made. Italian and foreign film stars formed a major clientele for the Roman couture. Not only did individual actresses patronize Roman couturiers, but the studios also employed them to make film wardrobes. The existence in Rome of a complicated and highly social upper class was also relevant, since the scions of noble houses formed yet another group of couture clients. As a result, many couture houses flourished. Emilio Schuberth, for example, was born in Naples in 1904 and opened a couture house in Rome in 1938. Among the clients who appreciated Schuberth's glamorous dresses were Gina Lollobrigida and Sophia Loren.

Even more famous were the Fontana Sisters – Zoe, Micol, and Giovanna – daughters of a dressmaker who opened their couture house in Rome in 1944. “We could still hear the bombs going off on the beaches when we moved into our first atelier in Rome,” recalled Micol Fontana many years later. “But that didn’t matter. It was our dream to own an atelier.”²³ The Fontana Sisters created luxurious, dramatic dresses, often with lavish decoration. They were especially famous for their evening gowns, film costumes, and wedding dresses. By 1948, Hollywood stars such as Loretta Young and Myrna Loy were already being photographed wearing Fontana evening dresses. The Fontanas received even more publicity in 1949 when Linda Christian wore a

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VALENTINO
Claudia Schiffer
photographed in Rome for
La Dolce Vita campaign,
Spring/Summer 1995
Photograph by
Arthur Elgort, courtesy
Valentino Archives

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Micol Fontana at the Brooklyn Museum, 1954, with a model in a dress worn by Ava Gardner in *The Barefoot Contessa*. Courtesy Fondazione Micol Fontana

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Micol Fontana showing Margaret Truman the embroidery on an evening dress in the Asterle Sorelle Fontana, 1954. Courtesy Fondazione Micol Fontana

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Micol Fontana and Ava Gardner at the premiere of *The Barefoot Contessa* in New York, 1954. Courtesy Fondazione Micol Fontana

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ROBERTO CAPUCCI
Short black lace dress with tulle and lace ruffle, 1963.
The Museum at The Fashion Institute of Technology, Gift of Mrs. Sylvia Sifka, 86-89.1
Photograph by Wang Salsola

Fontana wedding dress for her marriage to Tyrone Power, while the couple were in Rome filming *Prince of the Foxes*. Ava Gardner wore dresses by the Fontana Sisters in the 1953 film, *The Barefoot Contessa*, and in 1956 President Truman's daughter, Margaret, wore a Fontana Sisters wedding dress. Other film stars who wore Fontana dresses included Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, and Kim Novak. One of the Fontanas' most famous designs was the black silk-wool "cassock dress" designed for Ava Gardner in 1956, as part of the Fontanas' "Cardinale" collection, which was inspired by ecclesiastical dress. This controversial design later served as the inspiration for one of the dresses worn by Anita Ekberg in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

Not all Roman couturiers were associated with film, however. Roberto Capucci emerged early as one of the most extraordinary artists of the Roman couture. Born in 1930, he opened his own atelier in 1950, and in 1952, *Vogue* described him as "easily Rome's most promising young designer." His clothes might sometimes be "too costume-y," wrote the American journalist, but they "are completely original and full of ideas."²⁴ Highly gifted and imaginative, Capucci was – and remains – a true architect of fashion. "In my continuing search for beauty and purity, I concentrate initially on the basic form," he says. "During this phase I do not want to be influenced by outside factors, and I think in black and white. Next comes color in all its intensity . . ."²⁵ Indeed, Capucci became almost as well known for his dazzling colors as for his extraordinary silhouettes. Uninterested in trends, he has always focused on artistic expression, pleating and manipulating fabric into fluid, sculptural forms.

Contessa Simonetta Visconti, referred to in America as the "Titled Glamour Girl of Italian Designers,"²⁶ was born in 1922, the daughter of Duke Giovanni Colonna; she married Count Galeazzo Visconti di Modrone, and used her married name, Simonetta Visconti, when she began designing clothes in 1946. Her marriage to Count Visconti was terminated in 1949, but press reports continued to alternate between her paternal and marital titles for several years. Described as the "youngest, liveliest member" of the Italian fashion world, the "petite and coquettish" Simonetta was best known for her young, ultra-feminine cocktail dresses.²⁷ Also popular were her sports clothes, and *Life* reported happily that Simonetta enjoyed vacationing in America and had "an affinity for American style."²⁸ In addition to her couture dresses, Simonetta, like the Fontana Sisters, also produced high-quality ready-to-wear, which was usually referred to in the press as "boutique" fashion. Her use of materials was imaginative, and her clients included the fashion editors Bettina Ballard and Carmel Snow.

In 1953, Simonetta married Alberto Fabiani, another well-known Roman fashion designer. After their marriage, they maintained separate, rival establishments in Rome. "My husband is known for his style and I for mine," she said. Whereas Simonetta favored feminine dresses, Fabiani was described as "the surgeon of suits and coats."²⁹



"An acknowledged master," he was known for his "superlative – elegant and aristocratic" tailoring.³⁰ Among the first to defect from Florence to Rome, in 1962 the couple moved to Paris. "Bonjour Paris, Adio Rome," reported *Women's Wear Daily*. "The mother and father of Italian fashion, Simonetta and Fabiani, are off to Paris . . . a real blow to the Italian couture."³¹ The transplant was unsuccessful (Fabiani returned to Rome, while Simonetta abandoned fashion altogether), but the Roman couture survived.

In a world transformed by youth culture, Rome remained an oasis of high style. The international jet set included many members of Italian high society, such as Princess Irene Galitzine, who became famous for what the fashion editor Diana Vreeland dubbed her "palazzo pyjamas." Hailed by *Women's Wear Daily* in 1966 as a

GALITZINE
Orange silk crepe palazzo
pyjamas, halter top, divided
skirt and belt, 1968
The Museum at The
Fashion Institute of
Technology, Gift of
Vera Gavandky, 70.46.1
Photo by Irving Solero



FEDERICO FORQUET
Coat in orange double-
faced wool printed with
red and black squares,
c. 1955. The Museum at
The Fashion Institute of
Technology. Gift of
Diana Vreeland, 79.147.12
Photograph by
Irving Solero

“Leader of the Italian Couture,” Federico Forquet was another one of the Beautiful People who worked as a couturier, creating some extraordinarily beautiful garments.³² His clients included Diana Vreeland and socialite “Baby Jane” Holzer.

The single most important and successful designer to emerge in Rome during the 1960s was Valentino. Described once as looking like a Roman emperor, Valentino Garavani studied at the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture in Paris before opening his own couture house in Rome in 1960. Over the following four decades, he moved from one success to another, including ready-to-wear, menswear, fur, and fragrances, but the foundation of his style remains the couture tradition of luxury, quality, and extravagance. His White Collection of 1968 created a sensation. Yet his signature color is a brilliant shade of red – Valentino red – which appears in every collection. He

VALENTINO
Black wool coat with
corded buttons and tassels
trimmed with leopard,
matching black wool skirt.
1974 The Museum at
The Fashion Institute of
Technology. Gift of
Ms. Mary Russell.
96.84.1a/b Photograph by
Irving Solers



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VALENTINO
Sophia Loren wearing
Valentino to accept an
Academy Award.
Courtesy Valentino
Archives

is also known for his extravagant combinations of textures and patterns, for his sumptuous applied decoration, and sophisticated sense of proportion.

Throughout his long career, Valentino has dressed many celebrities, from Sophia Loren to Gwyneth Paltrow. But perhaps his most famous client was Jacqueline Kennedy, who chose to wear a lace-trimmed Valentino dress for her marriage to Aristotle Onassis. Refined yet opulent, Valentino's clothes continue to attract an international clientele who share his style of life.