



## The Rise of Milan and the “Italian Look”

The rise of the Italian ready-to-wear industry transformed Milan into one of the world's most important fashion capitals. Unlike Paris, Rome, and Florence, Milan was never a glamorous center of art and culture. Inventing a Milanese fashion image necessitated focusing precisely on the fact that Milan is an industrial city. By the early 1970s, fashion magazines and newspapers in America focused much less on the Roman couture and much more on ready-to-wear trends coming out of Milan. “The Italians were the first to make refined sportswear,” recalled publisher John Fairchild. “Americans don’t mind spending, if the sweater is by Krizia or Missoni.”<sup>42</sup>

“Weary of French fantasy clothes and rude treatment on Parisian showroom floors, buyers were happy to take their order books next door,” reported *Newsweek* in 1978. The clothes coming out of Milan were, admittedly, not couture, but they were extremely stylish. “They were classically cut but not stodgy; innovative but never theatrical,” declared *Newsweek*. “They were for real people – albeit rich people – to wear to real places.”<sup>43</sup> Beppe Modenese, sometimes referred to as “the Garibaldi of Italian fashion,” has said that “Decadence is what goes down well in Paris. Milan is the present and the future. The French disguise the industry–designer relationship. We make it quite clear that the concrete side of the make-believe is achieved today through industry.”<sup>44</sup>

GIORGIO ARMANI  
Detail of suit in brown,  
tan, and blue-gray wool  
tweed with single-breasted,  
semi-fitted, one-button  
jacket and matching  
tapered pants, 1982  
The Museum at  
The Fashion Institute of  
Technology. Gift of  
Mr Jay Cocks, BS 58.7 Pho-  
tograph by  
Irving Salera

Because the Italian textile industry focuses on luxury fabrics, there was a foundation for the upscale ready-to-wear fashion shown in Milan. In addition, textile producers gave financial backing to Italian clothing manufacturers, many of whom began to hire freelance fashion stylists to create collections that were neither couture nor mass market. Many designers and companies contributed to the development of the "Italian Look." Indeed, not all the designers involved were Italian, since many companies initially hired foreign designers. However, Italians were particularly influential, above all Giorgio Armani and Gianni Versace.

Giorgio Armani influenced the world of fashion first through his menswear designs. Indeed, he revolutionized the way men and women dressed in the 1970s, in part by making them look more like each other. As his former employer Nino Cerruti says, Armani "became a flagship for success in Italy. From 1974 onward, he and Versace were the symbols of a dramatically growing Italian fashion. He was much closer to people with a normal life. Versace was for a more extreme audience."<sup>45</sup>

When Giorgio Armani was featured on the cover of *Time* in April 1982, the American journalist Jay Cocks began his article by asking Pierre Bergé, the business partner of the French designer Yves Saint Laurent, about Italian fashion. Bergé insisted that except for "pasta and opera, the Italians can't be credited with anything!" And what about Armani? "Give me one piece of clothing," Bergé demanded, "one fashion statement that Armani has made that has truly influenced the world." It was a rash challenge to make to an American journalist, who had probably chosen to interview Bergé in the hope that he would criticize Armani, and Cocks impudently replied, "Alors, Pierre. The unstructured jacket. An easeful elegance . . . Tailoring of a kind thought possible only when done by hand . . . A new sort of freedom in clothes."<sup>46</sup>

Made-to-measure Italian menswear had long been recognized for the quality of its materials and workmanship. Part of the success of the Italian Look in the 1970s was based on the development of luxurious menswear available off the rack. As *Esquire* put it in 1979, Italian designers like Armani provided a "rich, relaxed style."<sup>47</sup> The fashion writer Woody Hochswender has observed that the Italian Look "came to bridge the gap between the anti-Establishment 60's and the money-gathering 80's."<sup>48</sup> Milan showed clothes that were as casual and relaxed as sportswear, but also luxurious and prestigious. The perceived eroticism of Italian style was also related to the way these clothes idealize the body, in a way that had previously been "the prerogative of the rich," since only they could afford the custom tailoring that concealed figure flaws.<sup>49</sup> Now luxury ready-to-wear offered the same promise.

"Armani disarmed men and their clothes erotically without unmanning them," wrote the American journalist Judith Thurman. "He freed them to be looked at and desired by women (and other men)."<sup>50</sup> In place of stiffly tailored business suits, symbolizing rectitude and bourgeois masculinity, Armani introduced softer jackets,

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GIORGIO ARMANI  
Suit in brown, tan, and blue-gray wool tweed with single-breasted, semi-fitted, one button jacket and matching tapered pants, 1982. The Museum at The Fashion Institute of Technology, Gift of Mr. Jay Cocks, 85.58.7. Photograph by Irving Solero

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GIORGIO ARMANI  
Bronze satin evening jacket and black satin culottes, Fall/Winter 1982-83. The Museum at The Fashion Institute of Technology, Gift of Giorgio Armani, 85.144.1. Photograph by Irving Solero

without padding and stiff interlinings. Of course, Armani was not the only Italian designer to utilize luxury fabrics, such as cashmere and silk-and-wool blends, which drape softly and have greater tactile appeal than stiffly woven wools. However, he received unprecedented publicity, especially through his association with Hollywood. Particularly significant was the film *American Gigolo*, which presented the actor Richard Gere as a male sex object who dressed exclusively in Armani. No fewer than thirty Armani suits were featured in the film, and according to Thurman, Gere's "shopping trips provided the film's true sexual excitement." Not only was Armani's menswear immediately recognizable to the movie audience, but the clothes were "also perceived as being in the realm of values."<sup>51</sup> In other words, people knew that Armani clothes signified casual, expensive, sexy elegance. No wonder Jack Nicolson, Dustin Hoffman, John Travolta, and Richard Gere were eager to tell the journalist from *Time* about their own Armani clothes.

No sooner had Armani "feminized" (or eroticized) menswear than he interpreted his menswear look for the female consumer. Although hardly the first or only designer to apply men's tailoring to women's clothes, Armani has probably had the greatest impact of anyone since Coco Chanel. Beginning with his first womenswear show in 1975, and really getting under way in 1979, when he showed draped tailored jackets, Armani dressed women in fashions directly inspired by menswear classics — his menswear classics. Armani "has taught a woman to dress with the slouchy ease of a man," declared *W*.<sup>52</sup> He gave professional women the same kind of subtly powerful uniform that men had.