

Giorgio Armani, Italy's Fashion 'King,' Has Died

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By Eric Wilson



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The designer and entrepreneur "passed peacefully, surrounded by his loved ones," the company said in a statement just weeks before a planned celebration of the brand's 50th anniversary.

"He worked until his final days, dedicating himself to the company, the collections and the many ongoing and future projects," the company said.

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For five decades, Armani, a one-time window dresser turned self-made industrialist, towered over the Milanese fashion world as he crafted a multibillion-dollar empire of luxury apparel, accessories, fragrances, makeup, furniture, hotels and restaurants. His signature stripped-down, soft tailoring was widely credited for having redefined the working wardrobe for both men and women in the 1980s, and his pioneering embrace of Hollywood made him a glamorous household name in America long before his peers acknowledged the value of red-carpet exposure.

In an industry where creative and commercial functions are rarely led by the same person, Armani, whose near-obsessive sense of control also extended to business matters, was the rare designer who simultaneously served as chairman and chief executive of his own company. For decades, the results





were spectacular. Even as sales and profits declined in recent years due to a restructuring and streamlining of Armani's brand portfolio, the Armani Group remains among the most lucrative privately held fashion companies in history. With €2.3 billion in revenues and operating profits of €398 million in 2024, not including licenses, it was also the subject of increasingly intense speculation as to whether the designer, effectively the company's sole shareholder, might finally name a successor or pursue a sale.

Armani told the *Financial Times* in an interview published August 31 that he was preparing a "gradual" handover of responsibilities to collaborators including "Leo Dell'Orco, the members of my family and the entire working team," after poor health had forced him to miss his recent fashion shows in Milan and Paris.

Armani, who was both creative director and CEO of the company he founded, had never previously missed one of his catwalk events.

From humble beginnings to the highest-ranking designer to appear on the *Forbes* list of the world's billionaires (No. 177 in 2024), Armani's success was all the more remarkable for having come at a relatively mature age. Armani was 41 when he and his partner, Sergio Galeotti, formally founded the business in Milan in July 1975. Only seven years later, in 1982, he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, looking deeply tanned and handsome, a shock of salt-and-pepper hair, wearing an unbuttoned white shirt and a black leather bomber jacket under the headline, "Giorgio's Gorgeous Style." With sales of \$135 million that year, he was already being called "The King."

Armani's big invention was, in fact, rooted in the traditions of Neapolitan tailoring, which favoured more relaxed, natural looking silhouettes, softer shoulders and lightweight or non-existent linings designed for comfort in the Mediterranean heat. But his initial designs for men were so thoroughly modernised — the buttons moved slightly down and the lapels dropped just so, with fluid fabrics chosen to flatter the body — that the form-fitting look took off like a rocket, especially among a burgeoning class of newly affluent and fitness-obsessed young urban professionals. Almost immediately, Armani was adapting the style for women with neatly fitted armholes and cuts designed to promote movement, emancipating them with power suits in a way Coco Chanel once did with tweed jackets. Seeking to equalise the sexes, he described his designs as "insisting on more gentleness for men and more strength for women."

It is a look that Armani, with a tailor's sense of precision, continued to perfect over nearly five decades, expanding his business with collections targeting a range of price points and lifestyles, while always remaining true to the core essentials of a well-made suit. Though critics sometimes chided the designer for his unerring consistency, or dismissed him as too conventional, his dedication to a singular mission — to create beautiful clothes for his customers — and his position atop the Italian fashion pyramid gave him the final word on style:

"Elegance is not about being noticed," he said. "It's about being remembered."

Made in Milan

Giorgio Armani was born on July 11, 1934, the second of three children of Ugo Armani, a shipping manager, and Maria Raimondi in Piacenza, Italy, about 45 miles southeast of Milan. His grandfather Lodovico made wigs for the local theatre company, and it was on the stage that his parents met while performing in a production of Ibsen's "A Doll's House." Armani described his family as very poor, but spoke of his parents in such reverential terms — "My father was someone for whom it took very little to look elegant," he said — that it was clear his aesthetics were shaped largely in their image.

"There are pictures of my mother and me on the beach," Armani wrote in a monograph published by Rizzoli in 2015, which included several essays by the designer. "She would often wear a black wool





bathing suit with white buttons that I really liked. I can still smell the walnut oil she would rub on our skin so we wouldn't get sunburned."

Any fond memories of his childhood, however, were overshadowed by the start of World War II. As Allied forces began bombing the factories around them, Armani's mother moved the children — Giorgio, then five, his older brother, Sergio and younger sister, Rosanna — to a nearby village, while Ugo remained behind in Piacenza to join Mussolini's Fascist Party (an act of self-preservation, Giorgio later argued, though he was less sympathetic toward his brother's participation in the fascist *Fiamme Bianche*, or White Flames, squads). After the war, his father was shunned as a collaborator and briefly went into hiding. Meanwhile, Giorgio suffered a scarring accident: along with several other boys, he was badly injured in an explosion caused by friends playing with gunpowder from a shell they had discovered in an empty barracks. Armani ended up spending more than 20 days in a hospital, unsure if he would ever be able to see again, traumatised to the point that he said he would throw himself into a ditch whenever a plane would pass overhead. It was hardly surprising that, in later years, Armani often described the solace he found by escaping to the imaginary world of cinema.

"When I was young, movies were my real education," he said. "Much more than what I learned at school, they shaped my imagination, my culture and my tastes."

In the early 1950s, the family moved to Milan, where Giorgio studied medicine and Rosanna found work as a model. Both siblings were strikingly attractive and, taking after their mother, carried themselves with a certain composure that belied their difficult upbringing. Rosanna's arrival was a hit; she briefly worked as an actress, appearing in a film directed by a nephew of Luchino Visconti, and the Armanis were quickly at home among the city's post-war society. Giorgio left for military service for two years, working in a hospital in Verona, but when he returned, he abandoned his studies, which he found too difficult, and found a job in 1954 working on the window displays of department store *La Rinascente*. Before long, he had graduated to the fashion and style department, where he spent seven years, until the mid-1960s, when he was recruited by Nino Cerruti to work as a stylist for a new line. Cerruti later recalled Armani as having an innate sense for fashion.

"He would have stood out from the crowd in any case," Cerruti told *Time* magazine. "Men like Armani are so rare that when one emerges, even the blind are aware of it."

Speaking to director Martin Scorsese for a short documentary called "Made in Milan," in 1990, Armani described learning the trade from scratch:

"I worked in a textile factory so I could really learn about fabrics," he said. "I remember enormous rooms full of looms that never stopped working, and noise and people who seemed deaf. Though they were talking, they didn't seem to hear each other. It was very hard work and I never thought I'd fall in love with it. Then, little by little, it became a passion. A centimetre of fabric, pushed under the table by someone's foot became an act of irreverence toward the person who had created it."

On a seaside vacation in Forte dei Marmi in 1966, Armani met and fell in love with Galeotti, a young architect, whom he persuaded to return with him to Milan. Galeotti was convinced of Armani's talent and urged him to strike out on his own, which he did, in 1970, as an independent designer consulting for Ungaro, Zegna and Sicons, and before long he was being publicly credited for his designs. Five years later, they founded the company that would become the Armani Group with \$10,000 in savings. In an unusually candid interview with *Vanity Fair* in 2000, Armani described his relationship to Galeotti as having been that of a protector, much as he was to become the "Papa" to all of his employees.

"Love is too reductive a term," he told the writer Judy Bachrach. "It was a great complicity vis-à-vis life and the rest of the world... Naturally, Sergio had no experience in business and, naturally, behind Sergio there was me. But in the eyes of the world — even for him — we pushed the idea that Sergio was the big guy behind it all in this business. And I was the creator."





Inspired by the fashions of the '30s and '40s, Armani created unstructured suits that were at first polarising. Some saw the unlined jackets as too unserious and rumpled-looking when compared to the prevailing corporate styles of the '70s, which featured stiffly glued linings for structure, creating strong lines to be worn with thick neckties. But others recognised that their subtle sophistication and gently and richly textured fabrics conveyed an image of wealth, much as would a fine watch or expensive taste in shoes or wine. The name Armani became synonymous with style.

GFT, one of Italy's biggest manufacturers, began producing Armani's collections with an investment that enabled him to create advertisements, art directed by his sister, Rosanna, that appeared on the back covers of *L'Uomo Vogue*. (Rosanna worked closely with the designer on image until her 50s and remained active in various roles.) Fred Pressman, the pioneering chairman of Barneys New York and son of its founder, was so impressed with the images that he introduced Armani to America with a \$90,000 order that quickly blossomed into contracts worth millions. Soon, Armani was everywhere. Maxfield, the Los Angeles luxury retailer, brought his designs to Hollywood, where the filmmaker Paul Schrader became a devoted customer and, in a fateful moment, asked Armani to create the wardrobe for Richard Gere's character, Julian Kay, in the movie "American Gigolo."

In one scene, Julian, whose louche sex appeal can at least partly be attributed to his impeccable ability to loosen a necktie, pulls up in a black Mercedes convertible to Juschi to shop for clothes, funded by one of his clients; in another he samples a range of beige suits and blue shirts from his closet (some with the Giorgio Armani label clearly visible) while preening shirtless and singing along to "The Love I Saw in You Was Just a Mirage" by Smokey Robinson and The Miracles. The film, and that scene in particular, further catapulted Armani to international fame and fuelled a love affair with celebrities that would continue throughout his career. In 1993, he appeared in front of the camera himself, portraying the prime minister of Italy during the cold open of late-night comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, the joke being that he was mistaken for a mentally unstable person visiting the Clinton White House.

In total, Armani outfitted stars for more than 200 movies, including Martin Scorsese's "The Wolf of Wall Street," "Goodfellas" and "The Departed," in addition to dressing hundreds of major celebrities for red carpet appearances. Before Armani became the first international designer to open a major Los Angeles showroom in 1988, most stars either dressed themselves or relied on costume designers to outfit them for their premieres. His designs have famously been worn to the Oscars by Diane Keaton (wearing a jacket over a full skirt in 1978), Michelle Pfeiffer, Jessica Lange, Jodie Foster, Glenn Close, Sharon Stone, Julia Roberts and Cate Blanchett.

"In the movie industry, the young actors were rejecting the theatricality of the old Hollywood red carpet for a new naturalness, and I became the go-to designer for this fresh approach," Armani said in *Vanity Fair*. "People like Diane Keaton and Robert De Niro had a completely different idea of what the image of stardom should be — they wanted to be relatable, people first and stars second."

Total Control

Throughout the '80s and '90s, Armani's sales continued to grow at an astonishing pace. In a way, Armani seemed to be boasting of his ability to single-handedly manoeuvre a fashion company at a time when so many other independent, family-led businesses were being snapped up by conglomerates, which would dramatically change the luxury market. To maximise sales while maintaining the power of his brand, Armani carefully introduced several tiers of new collections — Mani, Emporio Armani, Armani Collezioni, Armani Jeans and EA7 — and managed licensees with an iron fist to ensure quality remained high. If he was dissatisfied with a partnership, as with a money-losing venture with the lower-priced A/X Armani Exchange collection that was launched in the '90s, Mr Armani eventually bought back control of it and produced the designs to his own standard.





In 2019, the company had cash reserves of €1.2 billion, enabling it to remain a competitive force in the face of increasing pressure from French conglomerates LVMH and Kering. While Armani had held fast to what had become a sprawling portfolio of sub-brands, even as others like Saint Laurent and Dolce & Gabbana took discontinued diffusion lines, the company finally trimmed its structure from seven to three divisions — Giorgio Armani, Emporio Armani and Armani Exchange — in a restructuring from 2018, which put a dent in sales.

Armani's insistence on remaining independent, having been courted aggressively by LVMH and Kering precursor Gucci Group during the rush of designer acquisitions in the late 1990s, cost him the support of several key executives over the years but ultimately left him in an enviable position of total control. In 2016, after years of speculation as to whether he would eventually sell or go public, he announced the creation of the Giorgio Armani Foundation to ensure its autonomy. Among the provisions that were included at that time, revealed in a 2023 Reuters report, Armani introduced bylaws directing how its board members would appoint style directors and stating that his heirs must wait five years after his passing should they desire to initiate a stock offering.

Armani's succession issue came to the fore amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit the company hard, sending 2020 revenues down by 21 percent on the previous year. Armani was the first major designer to recognise the peril of the pandemic, showing his Autumn/Winter 2020 collection in an audience-less theatre even as others carried on with in-person fashion week events in Milan and Paris. And he later said that Covid-19 forced him to rethink his approach, hinting that he might be open to a partnership.

"The goal is to return to pre-pandemic levels by 2022," said Armani in July 2021. The same month, Agnelli heir John Elkann was reported to have explored a deal to acquire a minority stake in Armani Group through family holding Exor, with a vision to create a luxury conglomerate that would include Ferrari, Christian Louboutin and Shang Xia. But those talks stalled. In September 2021, Armani called the company's independence "an essential value."

Armani also resisted entreaties to name a successor while he was still alive, even after he suffered a debilitating case of hepatitis in 2009. Most industry observers presumed the company would be taken over by a committee of family members who have held various roles over the years, including Roberta and Silvana Armani, the daughters of his late brother Sergio, and Andrea Camerana, the son of Rosanna, as well as Pantaleo Dell'Orco, the head of the men's style office and Armani's closest companion, who has been at the company since 1977. Silvana Armani heads the women's lines.

"I have always taken care of other people, more than myself, so much that sometimes I should have quit my job or divided my time between public and private life," said Armani. "I could never do it, though, because this is a job that absorbs you completely from morning to night."

His complete dedication to the business struck some as almost monastic, even sombre, despite his obvious personal wealth, estimated at \$11.4 billion, with nine homes and a 213-foot yacht among his assets. His properties included a Milan palazzo designed by Peter Marino in the 1980s, a home on the island of Pantelleria, a penthouse on Central Park West in Manhattan and a weekend compound in Broni that featured a pink stucco villa built in the 1950s by Franco Cella di Rivara, the creator of Marvis toothpaste, as well as a menagerie of exotic animals made up of zebras, alpacas, longhorn deer and a large assortment of rescue dogs. In 2024, he opened a 12-story building on Madison Avenue that, in addition to Armani stores and another restaurant space, included ten Armani-designed residences (starting at \$21.5 million), with one saved for himself.

Armani never bothered to learn English and acknowledged that he had few friends outside of the company, noting that his aloofness may have been due to the fact that his biggest fear was being perceived as a failure. When Galeotti died of AIDS in 1985, Armani seemed to become even more insular, expressing little interest in art, literature or music beyond that of his own self-created world.





“Keep in mind that the goal of your profession, which has also been my goal so far, is to improve people’s image through fashion,” he told students at the Fashion Institute of Technology in 2008. “So, you must somehow subdue your desire to give free reign to your imagination and try to see your designs on the streets, not just on the covers of magazines, not just displayed in fashion shows, but having some kind of follow-up in reality.”

The criticism that his designs never changed chafed at Armani over the years, and he made sure to respond, signalling his own self-importance most famously with a lavish retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 2000, with a set by Jean Nouvel and stage direction by Robert Wilson, that later travelled to museums around the world. Though the museum received some criticism for the ethical questions raised by such a large show dedicated to a living designer, which was swiftly followed by donations of as much as \$15 million from Armani, it demonstrated amply that Armani was about more than just beige jackets. In fact, his more elaborate designs, including celestial costumes for Lady Gaga, later were displayed in exhibitions at Armani’s own Tadao Ando-designed theatre on Via Borgonuovo and a Silos museum that he opened across the street in 2015 for the company’s 40th anniversary.

“Silos is the answer to anyone claiming that I have done nothing or that I repeat myself,” he said. “There are entire floors with a variety of clothes, in which the classic Armani suit goes almost unnoticed.”

Armani’s grand ambitions sometimes exposed the scale of his ego. With more than 2,000 stores under the Armani brand umbrella, none have surpassed the size of the palatial flagship he opened in 2000 on the Via Manzoni in Milan, which includes spaces for both his luxury and jeans collections, a florist, an art-book store, a nightclub, a branch of Nobu and an Armani Hotel that opened on the upper floors in 2012. The footprint of the building, restored by the architect Michael Gabellini at a cost of \$10 million, creates the shape of the letter “A” when seen from above. In 2009, he opened a Fifth Avenue flagship at an enormous cost right after the global financial collapse, with a swirling ribbon staircase, prompting its nickname, “Guggenheim 2.”

In his final years, Armani experimented with new show locations, including a 17th century courtyard, an airport hangar and his New York flagship. The changes of scenery brought a renewed sense of energy that critics had been longing to see.

For Armani, who at the age of 87 was awarded Italy’s highest civilian honour by President Sergio Mattarella, it was business as usual.

Milan, he noted, is a city whose appeal is not always apparent on the outside, but rather tucked away in the details of courtyards and interiors, something that rubbed off on his designs. It was often noted in profiles that Armani was so focused that he insisted the frescoes of his palazzo be covered whenever he was creating a collection, so as not to be distracted by their beauty.

“True elegance,” Armani believed, “is that which is most subtle and hidden.”

