



Giorgio Armani is for everyone (even if you can't afford it)

The designer led a fashion revolution, but did so with civility.

Robin Givhan

Over the years I've attended dozens of Giorgio Armani's runway shows — first sitting in the modest spaces of his company's Milan headquarters and later in the grander, more austere theater a few miles away that he commissioned from the architect Tadao Ando. But I still recall the first Armani show I ever saw, in 1992 or 1993. I was just learning the players in the Italian fashion industry, but I knew about Mr. Armani because his reach extended deep into popular culture thanks to the scene-stealing presence of his clothes in "American Gigolo" and his brand's dominance on the Oscars red carpet. And so, as I sat along his runway for the first time, I was full of anticipation when the lights dimmed.

I don't know what I expected to see. But I do know how I expected to feel when the show ended: breathless, astounded, desperate to get to my laptop and write, write, write. Instead, I was underwhelmed. Everything on the runway seemed so familiar: loose-fitting coats, roomy trousers, simple pullovers. At the time, I worried that my inexperience had caused me to miss something momentous. How could Armani not be enthralling?

I scratched my head and wondered: What was there to say about something that seemed so temperate? I didn't get it. Eventually, I would realize that was because Mr. Armani had already won the revolution. As the culture digested the news of his death on Thursday in Milan at 91, I was reminded of that moment while I considered the nature of change.

When Mr. Armani founded his company in 1975, he began his attack, ultimately transforming the way in which men and women expressed power, glamour and sex appeal. But by the time I entered the fashion fray, the war was over. Mr. Armani had upended everything; he'd nearly obliterated everything that came before. Everyone else was seen as either one of his followers or his antagonists. He was the standard, the base line.

Mr. Armani removed the internal structure from men's suiting and allowed jackets and trousers to relax around the body. The strict formality of a business suit was exchanged for something loose and sensual. It was easy for a man to unleash his swagger in an Armani suit; the brand quickly

came to represent a macho self-confidence shored up by ambition and freshly made riches rather than generations of tradition and dusty wealth.

With his women's collections, Mr. Armani offered groundbreakers such as the former House speaker Nancy Pelosi a business uniform in which femininity and authority could seamlessly coexist. His version of evening glamour didn't rely on someone's willingness to reveal her cleavage, her upper thigh or the arc of her derrière. He could coax Hollywood dazzle out of a discreet jewel neckline, long sleeves and a luxuriously draped train.

Once was a journalistic fly on the wall in his Rodeo Drive boutique in the hours before the Academy Awards, watching as a parade of nominees and presenters came to preen and, in some cases, live out their youthful fantasy of what they would wear if they ever had the chance to walk the Oscars red carpet. He made space for good taste in front of all those cameras, not just big entrances.

His best work, for actors such as Jodie Foster and Michelle Pfeiffer, echoed with grace and sensuality. To call his work "pretty" was to oversimplify the aesthetic and the women who were drawn to it. One didn't wear Armani to cement a reputation as a gamine or a sexpot. One wore Armani to be taken seriously as a star.

Over the years, Mr. Armani begot generations of minimalist high-end designers as well as mass market brands peddling seasonless basics: from The Row to Cos, and Jerry Lorenzo's Fear of God to Everlane. His legacy touches the 1 percent as well as the 99 percent. He is a textbook example of fashion trickling down and out. So what if one couldn't afford Armani? It was possible to have a little bit of the designer's refinement, dignity and elegance that didn't reek of some strain of cultural warfare. Mr. Armani's aesthetic was civil. It wasn't out to stir up the emotions or create divides.

Ultimately, Mr. Armani provided the culture with the vocabulary to understand what's become known as quiet luxury, and the difference between fashion and style. Customers loved him for this. They came to him because an investment in one of his suits or overcoats promised solid returns. They could wear it until it wore out. The fashion crowd complained about

both the sameness of each season and also the seasonal quirks — the gumball necklaces, the pagoda-like hats — that seemed out of sync with what they'd come to expect or, quite frankly, demand. For a time, they turned their attention from Armani to louder, sexier, streetwise newcomers.

This was the challenge of being Mr. Armani. His place in fashion history had long ago been assured. But he didn't want to be a designer encased in amber, someone for whom the rules were etched in stone. He was a creative force who, long past retirement age, wanted to experiment and surprise himself, wanted to step outside the box into which fashion critics, retailers, historians and educators had placed him.

"I think I give the impression to people that I'm an extremely difficult person and demanding person. But I'm demanding foremost with myself," Mr. Armani told me in an interview when he was 70. "I also do not accept it that these professionals put on blinders, that they don't see evolutions. That they don't see that 20 years ago there was one kind of Armani and today there is a different kind of Armani."

In that same interview, he considered the leeway that other designers — both veterans and upstarts — were given to experiment, to make false steps, to change. In his estimation, he wasn't afforded that freedom. He simply had to take hold of it and brace himself for the chiding that almost

always came.

Over the years, I offered up no small amount of criticism for collections that I thought had gone awry or seemed to be more of an indulgence for the designer

than a service to

the customer. In hindsight, I wish I had recognized the particular hurdles inherent in being Armani.

I also now see the momentous thing that I missed at that first Armani show, with all my inexperience.

The designer had showcased a collection that looked virtually inevitable. His sensibility seemed foundational to what a modern wardrobe should be. It was as if all our unspoken notions of good taste, sophistication





and ease were paraded down that runway.

And that made his work extraordinary. Mr. Armani not only conjured those clothes from his imagination; he also made them look utterly, astonishingly normal. Even as his civility slipped out of the spotlight, it endured throughout his lifetime. And, I hope,

beyond.

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