

Viva. Valentino

Revered style-maker Valentino will bid adieu to the fashion world in January, but not before celebrating 45 years of pure glamour. *Camilla Alfthan* meets the maestro of couture in Rome who reflects on the end of an era



Valentino sketch from the 50s

They say that there are two famous people in Rome: The Pope and Valentino. But when Valentino Garavani celebrated the 45th anniversary of his first international collection the city was bursting with celebrities. Hollywood actresses, supermodels, socialites and several dozen princesses – including Firyal of Jordania, Caroline of Monaco and Chantal of Greece – had all followed the

roads to Rome to pay their tribute to the Italian master of couture. “After 45 years, my mantra is still to make women beautiful,” said Valentino who started his three-day extravaganza with a retrospective exhibition at Richard Meir’s modernistic museum, Ara Pacis, by the Tiber.

Three-hundred of his most important creations were there, including dresses from his famous 1958 white collection, tens of red evening dresses – “red is the most beautiful

colour for a woman in the evening” – and gowns worn by women such as Princess Diana, Farah Diba, Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Julia Roberts and Gwyneth Paltrow – the Val Gals. The exhibition was followed by a couture show near the Vatican, which was inspired by Valentino’s many highlights over the past five decades. When the most spectacular dresses were strutted past the crowds, they cheered as if they were at the opera. When it was all



Clockwise from top: Italian entrepreneur, Marco Tronchetti Provera and his wife Afef, Valentino, Giancarlo Giammetti and Karl Lagerfeld; A young Valentino sketching his designs; Valentino and Uma Thurman; Valentino with Jackie O; Claudia Schiffer in a Valentino gown;



over, and Valentino took his bow, he received a standing ovation while some of the women were moved to tears.

But the most surreal moment was perhaps when the stars – including Armani, Versace, Lagerfeld and Tom Ford – were queuing up on the catwalk to go backstage congratulate Il Maestro. “This is no ordinary event. I’m here, because Valentino is a dear friend and a great talent,” said Lagerfeld, leaning closer to reveal a crucial point. “And you know what? The dresses here are much better made than in most other places.”

Indeed, perfection and a passion for all beautiful things were always a part of Valentino’s universe. At 17, he went to Paris to study at the Beaux Arts art academy and at la Chambre de la Haute Couture. During five years he assisted the famous couturier, Jean Desses and later joined his friend, Guy Laroche – after being fired for prolonging his summer holiday in St Tropez – an incident that still makes him feel slightly embarrassed.

When in 1959 he opened his own studio on via Condotti in Rome, near the famed Spanish Steps, it was during an epoch when women went to dressmakers and the most privileged would wear couture. “Today there is more prêt-à-porter than haute couture and an increasing need to replace glamour with vulgarity. These are the biggest changes, due to the fact that fashion used to be an expression of an elite and now it has become a commodity which should reach everybody,” says Valentino, reflecting on his long career.

His worst fashion memories, he continued, were probably grunge and extreme minimalism of the 1990s.

“All these nun-like, black women in military boots were so sad that I could not look at them. Designers are often more interested in showing off their fashion obsessions or ideas about how women should look than making them feel beautiful and good about themselves. For me, the women always come first,” Valentino said, who, despite the fact that he has dressed some of the most beautiful women in the world, never had a particular muse.

“It might sound snobbish, but I really think that all women, famous or not, who have followed and encouraged my work along the years are very important. Of course, when celebrities who are constantly courted by all designers choose you for important occasions, both public and private, it is really pleasing, and very important for the image of the maison. But it is the idea that there are thousands of women who share my dream which is my true muse,” he said.

Pivotal to his success has been his longtime friend, Giancarlo Giammetti. “He



The Valentino Years

1959: Valentino opens his own couture studio in Rome, after more than 10 years as a student and design assistant in Paris.

1962: Presents his first international collection in Florence.

1967: Receives the Neiman Marcus prize, the equivalent of an Oscar in the fashion industry.

1968: Designs Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding dress and launches his famed Collezione Bianca.

1969: Sells his company for US\$4 million to Kenton Corp – the first of many future owners.

1970: Launches his prêt-à-porter line and opens boutiques in Rome and New York.

1989: Presents his first haute couture collection in Paris.

1990: Founds L.I.F.E., an association fighting against Aids, and the art gallery, Accademia Valentino.

1992: Creates his first theatre costumes in Washington for an opera about the movie star, Rudolph Valentino.

2006: Receives la Légion d'Honneur from the French president.

2007: Celebrates 45 years in fashion and his own 75th birthday before announcing his retirement.

has been working on the business and image side of our venture since the beginning. He has helped me concentrate on the creative side only, defending me from all the daily hassle related to running a big fashion house. I was very lucky – and I'll always be grateful for this.”

The evening of Valentino's Roman couture show culminated with a ball at the 17th-century building, Villa Borghese where many of the women wore Valentino red – Rosso Valentino. To most of them, the celebrations – which coincided with the designer's 75th birthday – realised it was the end of an era, but not before his last haute couture collection is shown in January. “The day I retire I wish that my name becomes an adjective of elegance and timeless beauty. Then I wish my fashion house a long and happy life.” ●



Above: Valentino at the end of his final show; right: Sienna Miller and Valentino; left: Valentino with Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick;

