



Q + A

FASHION'S POWER COUPLE

With one triumph after another, Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli have transformed the house of Valentino into their own. Here the duo discuss Paris versus Rome, peplums, Botticelli, and how they can spend so much time together.

BY ELENA BERTON

Since becoming co-creative directors at Valentino, in 2008, you've always shown your haute couture collection in Paris. But in July you showed in Rome and opened an exhibition.

MARIA GRAZIA CHIURI: We work as a couple so we wanted to show together how this city is multifaceted and, as such, our source of inspira-

tion. We wanted to invite our guests to see the place where we work. The [fall couture] show is clearly inspired by Rome and its eras. And it comes through in certain dresses that are draped like modern peplums or brocades, that look like modern Madonnas. There are pieces that are more baroque and embroidered. Those are the aspects that live together in this city and create a beauty full of contaminations and contradictions.

Was the accompanying multisite exhibition a celebration of your own Roman roots, too?

MGC: I saw it as a celebration of the brand. Everything was born here. The Valentino brand [before] was linked to the personality of Mr. Valentino. But the moment we were given the creative direction, we decided to open our workshop to young people who wanted to see how a couture workshop functions. [At the fall couture show and exhibition] we were happy to let our guests have [a similar] experience, through our eyes.

Not everyone thinks of Rome with couture.

PIERPAOLO PICCIOLI: Couture has always been linked to France, to Paris. Being Roman and being a couture house are the two characteristics that make this brand unique. This is a real couture business. There are 70 people employed throughout the year, and this is something that we are very proud about.

Several of your couture-workshop technicians are in their twenties, and a few are men—a rarity in the industry. Do you feel this has energized your couture collection?

PP: These young people are graduates who choose to do this job, while 40 years ago girls were less free when they opted to work in couture. This profession was a way for them to enter the workplace. This notion seemed to us like a breath of fresh air in the workshop. The ladies who have been here for several years teach these young people, who in turn learn very quickly because they have chosen to learn. As a result, the atmosphere in the workshop is now very alive. This dialogue between generations has created a new energy for us. To make couture something that is not exclusively linked to the past, we are opening a couture school that will give a new opportunity to young Italians who will want to do this job. We are convinced that there is a new generation attracted to this profession, a kind of job that has been somewhat forgotten.

On the ready-to-wear side, you both deserve a lot of credit for the floral dresses that are everywhere for fall. Where did your love for the aesthetic come from?

PP: We are convinced that a certain romanticism could be part of this brand, which is inspired by graceful beauty. We like to connect with other artists, and we wanted to work with Celia Birtwell, the [ex-] wife of [the late] Ossie Clark and muse of David Hockney, to remake Botticelli's *Spring* as a pop, more contemporary version. Celia has designed Ossie Clark's fabrics. We pick up things in the air and then we transform them into products. But there isn't a strategy behind [our design process]. It's just artistic sensitivity.

MGC: It must be said that flowers are part of Valentino's legacy, so it was important to give them a different interpretation. It was an artistic collaboration with [Birtwell], even though flowers have always been a trademark.

FABRIZIO FERRI

COURTESY VALENTINO

FALL 2015 LOOKS FROM VALENTINO



HAUTE COUTURE



WOMEN'S READY-TO-WEAR



MEN'S READY-TO-WEAR

Whatever your strategy, your now-iconic Rockstud accessories were a smash.

PP: There are several new things in the Valentino universe that used to be made in a certain way and that today we create with new elements, such as the studs or camouflage, which has been another sign of our creative direction. Or sneakers.

How does your interaction with customers affect your design process?

PP: Couture today is not linked to just one customer but rather to a more artistic vision that customers can recognize. There isn't a direct contact with them like there was at the beginning of couture. Our international clients buy from the show; they don't buy clothes that are specially made for them. They buy them because they are built in a way that's differentiated from ready-to-wear. And now we meet actresses who perhaps want to share a special moment with us. We are not tailors; we are creative directors.

Was there anything in Valentino's heritage that intimidated you when you took the helm?

PP: We spent eight years with Mr. Valentino, so we were aware of the shoes we were stepping into. The fact that we knew the heritage has allowed us to interpret it through our perspective.

MGC: We are not interested in a comparison with Valentino's past but rather in the motifs that are the identity of the brand.

You worked with architect David Chipperfield on the new flagship store in Rome. What was your direction to him?

MGC: Today the stores are the brand's ambassadors. If you want to take care of your customer, you need to have service that will make them feel taken care of—even coddled. We wanted to express durability, which is what we want to do in our fashion designs. Pierpaolo and I have never conceived collections by looking at trends. Choosing traditional Italian materials like terrazzo, marble, and brass was fundamental, because to us timelessness is a value of the brand. We want [the store] to acquire a patina as it ages, like well-built palazzos.

What will a shopper be surprised to find?

MGC: You can buy made-to-measure denim at the Rome store; it's a contemporary couture idea. Couture is often perceived as something slightly dusty, but for us it holds exceptional value. After all, it's *specially made for*. We wanted to give this opportunity to ready-to-wear customers through the most democratic fabric.

You have been friends since you were young designers, and have worked together for 23 years. Do you go separate ways after work?

PP: [Laughs.] We spend enough time together at work, so we prefer to have separate lives!

This interview has been translated from the original Italian.