ForeWord Reviews

Valentino: Themes and Variations
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What celebrity has ever gone wrong with a Valentino gown on the runway? The designer himself admits that he has never been revolutionary, but instead he strives for “an elegance that transforms borders,” a goal that has served him well for nearly fifty years.

Born in 1932 in Italy, he was named for Rudolph Valentino, the leading American heartthrob of the day. It was while watching Lana Turner, Hedy Lamarr, and Judy Garland films that he realized his destiny was to create beautiful gowns. At the age of eighteen, Valentino Clemente Ludovico Garavani moved to Paris to study fashion at the École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. After graduation he worked for Jean Dessès, whose clients included Aristotle Onassis. Later, he was invited to work at the house of his former coworker, Guy Laroche. At the same time, designers including Yves Saint Laurent, Karl Lagerfeld, and Christian Dior were sweeping Paris, creating a new, youthful look. With money from his parents, Valentino moved back to Rome to realize his dream of opening his own fashion house. Soon he was dressing Italian actresses and impressing American buyers, and just a few years later, showing his collection at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. An entire wardrobe designed for Jacqueline Kennedy sent his career into orbit and every generation since has embraced the color and grace of Valentino’s collections.

The story of his success is told here in less than twenty pages; the remainder of the book is dedicated to full-color images of some of his most striking pieces, including a short orange cocktail dress from 1959 with twirls of tulle and orange button roses, as well as the narrow black gown with cascading white ribbons that Julia Roberts wore to accept her Oscar in 2001. Many of Valentino’s gowns are timeless and readers may not be able to guess without looking which era they date from. Such is the case with a slender white suit with a vest adorned with pearls and braids. It was part of his spring/summer 1968 collection, but would look right at home on today’s runways.

Golbin is curator-in-chief for the fashion and textiles collections at Les Arts Décoratifs in Paris. She is the author of *Fashion Designers* and *Balenciaga Paris*. Her latest book is a beautiful tribute to Valentino, who put away his drawing board in January and retired from his $2.6 billion empire.

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