



"Fashion should be rooted in the past, the present and the future," says Valli. Here, his pretty posse of Spring 2009 dresses

Make way for the new red-carpet king, Giambattista Valli By Elio Iannacci

VALLI OF THE DOLLS

With his reputation for being one of the most sought-after red-carpet designers du jour, many of us would expect Giambattista Valli to be Tom Ford 2.0. Or at least someone who holds the same high-society smile of, say, a Zac Posen or an Oscar de la Renta. His star-spangled front row, which is periodically filled with Natalie Portman, Emma Watson, Mary-Kate Olsen and the like, would definitely define him as such. Yet, the truth of the matter is, the Parisian-based Roman doesn't even look like he is from this era, let alone Hollywood's. Like a Caravaggio canvas come to life, his poise is gallant, severe, regal and so much more 17th century than 20th Century Fox.

Which is why Valli agreed to produce his first North American fashion show in the confines of Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. As the headlining act during the ROM's annual Material Ball charity event, Valli's exhibit-worthy Spring 2009 collection—which had its première in Paris in the fall of 2008—fit the venue's bill perfectly. With designs that appear too uncomplicated to be considered haute couture and too artful to fit into the ready-to-wear mould, Valli's pieces, like great works of art, defy category. So much so, style prophets from around the globe are predicting Valli will soon join the ranks of legendary names such as Armani, Valentino and, his mentor, Yves Saint Laurent, in the grand canon of fashion.

This thought immediately springs to mind when I enter Valli's work space on the museum's fourth floor—a place that Valli and his team of 22 aides have transformed into a makeshift atelier the night before his show. He's str-

telegically seated in a chair at the end of a mock runway made of light-brown paper, and the first thing I spot is Valli's thin hand slowly waving toward his chest to indicate that, *yes*, the model standing across the room may walk toward him for his inspection. When a teetering 20-something brunette wearing a stunning black '50s-style teacup dress approaches him, his espresso-coloured eyes study her from head to toe. A hush fills the room as the surrounding workers wait for his response. Almost half a minute passes and all Valli does is purse his lips and shake his unkempt chestnut-brown hair as if he is close to solving a riddle.

The silence is worrisome, but understandable. Valli's "vice-president of public relations and celebrities" informs me time is definitely not on his side: models are due to walk the real catwalk in less than 24 hours and more than half of them have yet to be approved by the master himself. This is why I am hastily directed to sit beside him and begin my interview while Valli conducts his dress rehearsal.

As I take my seat, Valli lifts off his chair like a hurricane and thunders "No, no, no!" while treating the room to a loud, disapproving clap. Then, amused by his own fervour, he chuckles and quickly calculates the problem while gently putting his arm around the somewhat-bewildered model. He proceeds to show her how to position her legs while walking in his beautifully made yet skyscraper-high heels. His tips do the trick, and the brunette walks off properly,

offering Valli both a jackpot smile and a demure "no hard feelings" demi-courtsy.

"This is not the challenging part of the process," he says as he clutches the pearls he is known for always wearing around his neck (today's set was purchased in India from a maharaja's private collection). "A [fashion show] for me is like filming the same movie with different actresses. The process of putting together your idea, making it a reality and translating that reality is simple. The most challenging part is coming up with the first moment of design—that first gesture."

For Valli's spring collection, the "gesture" came from early '50s and '60s fashion, "when Balenciaga and Christian Dior were the masters of couture. *They* knew how to cut, the way to stitch, and understood the art of making dresses."

Dismissing the theory that fashion should purely reflect the social and political time it is created in, Valli firmly offers his design thesis: "You cannot interpret the future if you don't know what used to be the past."

When Karl Lagerfeld's name is mentioned mid-conversation—specifically because the man/mogul behind Fendi and Chanel despises using the past as inspiration—Valli's opinion remains as pointed on the matter as the vertiginous heels he designs.

"My idea of fashion is the opposite. I hate style that mirrors the moment because moments pass so quickly. Fashion should be [rooted] in the past, the present and the future. That's when I love fashion—when it is timeless."

Thinking back to moments that shaped his views on

style, Valli credits a major event in his life. It started, he says, with imitating, copying and "devouring" Yves Saint Laurent's watercolours and Jean Cocteau's drawings, referring to his salad days as an art student in the 1980s. He cites YSL's works as one of the motivators that prompted him to pursue courses at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and later work with Roberto Capucci, Fendi, Krizia and Ungaro before launching his own line in 2005. "Saint Laurent's obsession with the silhouette was powerful—he [transferred] it to me without even knowing it," he says, as I inadvertently spy a black cocoon-like jacket hanging on a rack several feet away from us. "Six or seven years ago, I met him and we had a nice friendship. He is a guide for me."

And just like that, his eyes dart from me to an incoming arrival. "Oh, thank God you're here!" he shouts as he moves toward the door and hugs a striking blond teenager I recognize as Canadian model Taryn Davidson. "Isn't she beautiful?" he says as he turns to me and, without waiting for my answer, he begins to pilot the room again, shooing Davidson off ("Go, go, get ready!") and grabbing a comb out of one of the hairstylist's hands while directing them in French. "I need this look to be easy, like a breeze," he explains, while softly tugging the extensions of another model's hair. "Please, no experimenting. I want only real hair tomorrow—this is too shiny, like nylon," he complains. "It looks like hair I used to play with on my Barbie!" he laughs.

Then, Valli settles down and Davidson is the one who traipses toward him for examination. Slightly lifting >

RUNWAY PHOTOGRAPHY, ANTHEA SIMMS; PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY, KATE BARRY.



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the hem of the stunning floor-length gown she is wearing, made with 1,000 metres of tulle—a confection that looks as though it is made of tea-stained hydrangea petals—Davidson crosses the catwalk without a misstep. This prompts Valli to get up and call out “Beautiful! Perfect!” before taking his seat yet again.

“I’m very instinctive,” he offers, as if to explain his outburst. “I’m passionate and I am influenced by everything. I can look at these walls,” he says, pointing to a mossy-green palette behind us, “and say this is going to be the colour of my next collection! I’m not a designer who stares at a piece of grey flannel for half the day to get inspired.”

Considering Valli’s much-publicized Fall ’08 line—a collection the *Herald Tribune’s* fashion critic Suzy Menkes deemed “haute hunchback” evening wear—it is safe to say the designer gets stimulated by anything but a lowly old fabric swatch. Creating tight, slender hobble skirts and balloon dresses of epic proportions alongside

shrugs and jackets that resemble a cross between a tulip and cauliflower, Valli’s vision of autumn seemed fit for a New Age Cinderella.

It’s no wonder Valli cites the fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* alongside Ingmar Bergman’s dark dramatic film *Cries and Whispers* (his synopsis? “The classic story of a bloodless woman that ends in passion”) as two aesthetic touch points for his famous fall clothes. It is precisely these extreme references that indicate both God and the devil are in the details of his work.

And, oh, what details they are. His Resort ’09 show featured pink cocktail dresses held by a grand strap of silk gardenias. These are dresses that can be compared to the chic photographs by renowned ’50s sharpshooter Irving Penn. When the snapper’s name is brought up, it evokes another monumental memory in Valli.

“The first Penn photo I saw was of his wife, Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn, where she was sitting on the floor in Morocco. Penn’s [other] models in black and white encouraged my resort collection because his girls have such feminine, stylish poses,” he says. (They also inspired Valli’s spring collection, he says, referring to the line’s nipped waists and sharp shoulders.) “There was this personality of the girls coming out in the pictures.” But what seems to be of most importance to Valli’s mission is

that the clothes do the same for his clientele. The designer writes off any ideas of the quintessential Valli girl, however. His dresses are for a woman who can be anything she wants to be. “It’s not just actresses [or political names] I like. I am not the kind of celebrity freak who just wants to dress stars. I like real women.

“I am very eclectic; I live my life in opposites. Even my musical choices. I was listening to classical music when I designed the spring collection, but I love pop and pre-punk music, too. I would love to design for Kylie Minogue, who has a point of view in fashion,” he says. “But not Britney Spears. She does not have a clue.”

As for the people Valli thinks do hold zoff Queen Rania, Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni, and instantly expresses why they represent such a positive change in fashion and politics. “I love these beautiful women with such great vision and a human side as well as an intelligent side. I feel lucky to be living today because [they signify] that the world is evolving.”

Then, realizing the time—and his impending deadline—Valli extends his hand, says goodbye and is immediately whisked away by two makeup artists debating over a colour palette on a red-headed model. As I turn to leave, I hear his commanding voice echo through the room. “You have such gorgeous legs, cross them and walk like you are dancing...just like a piece of art!” □

