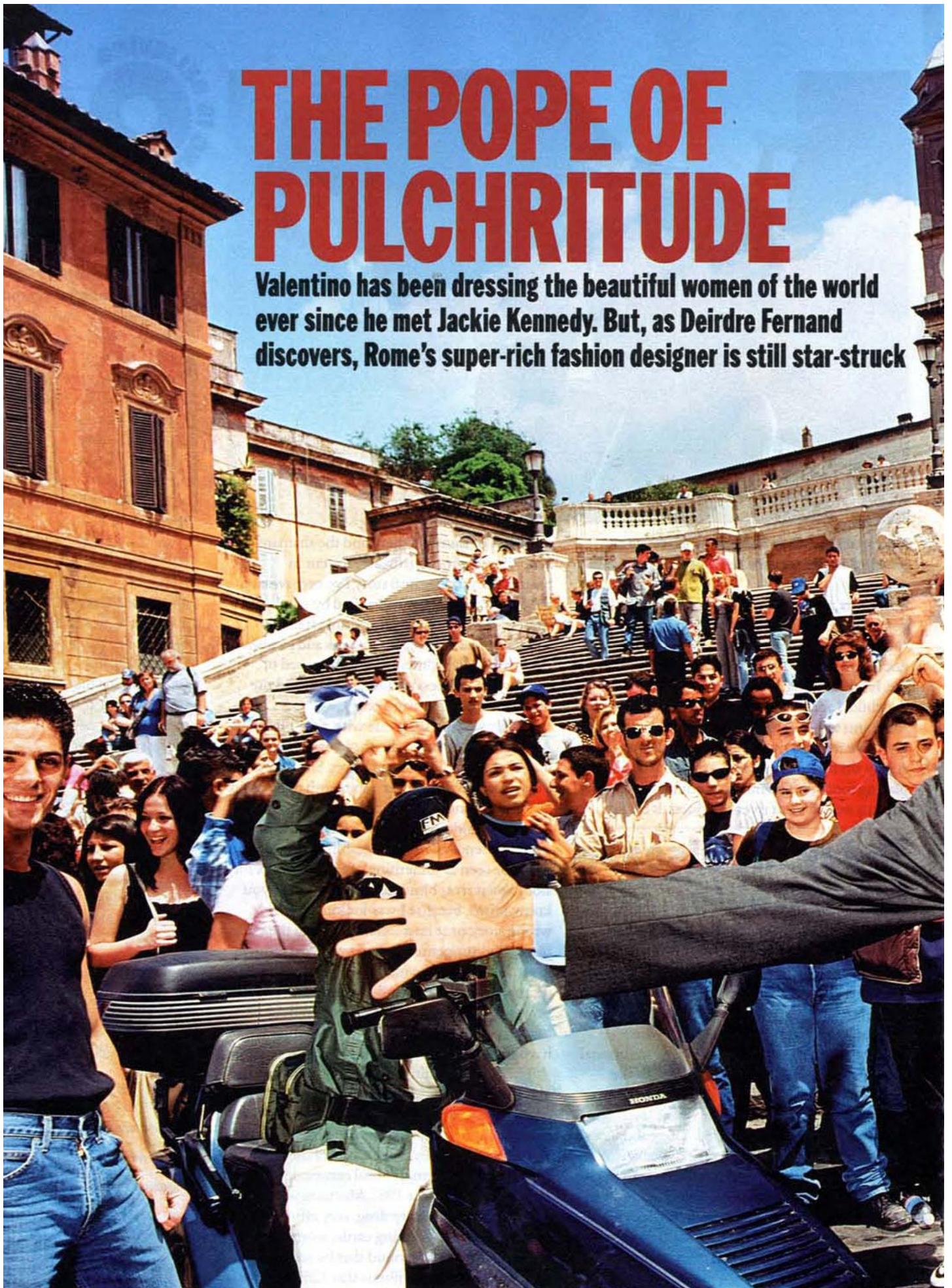
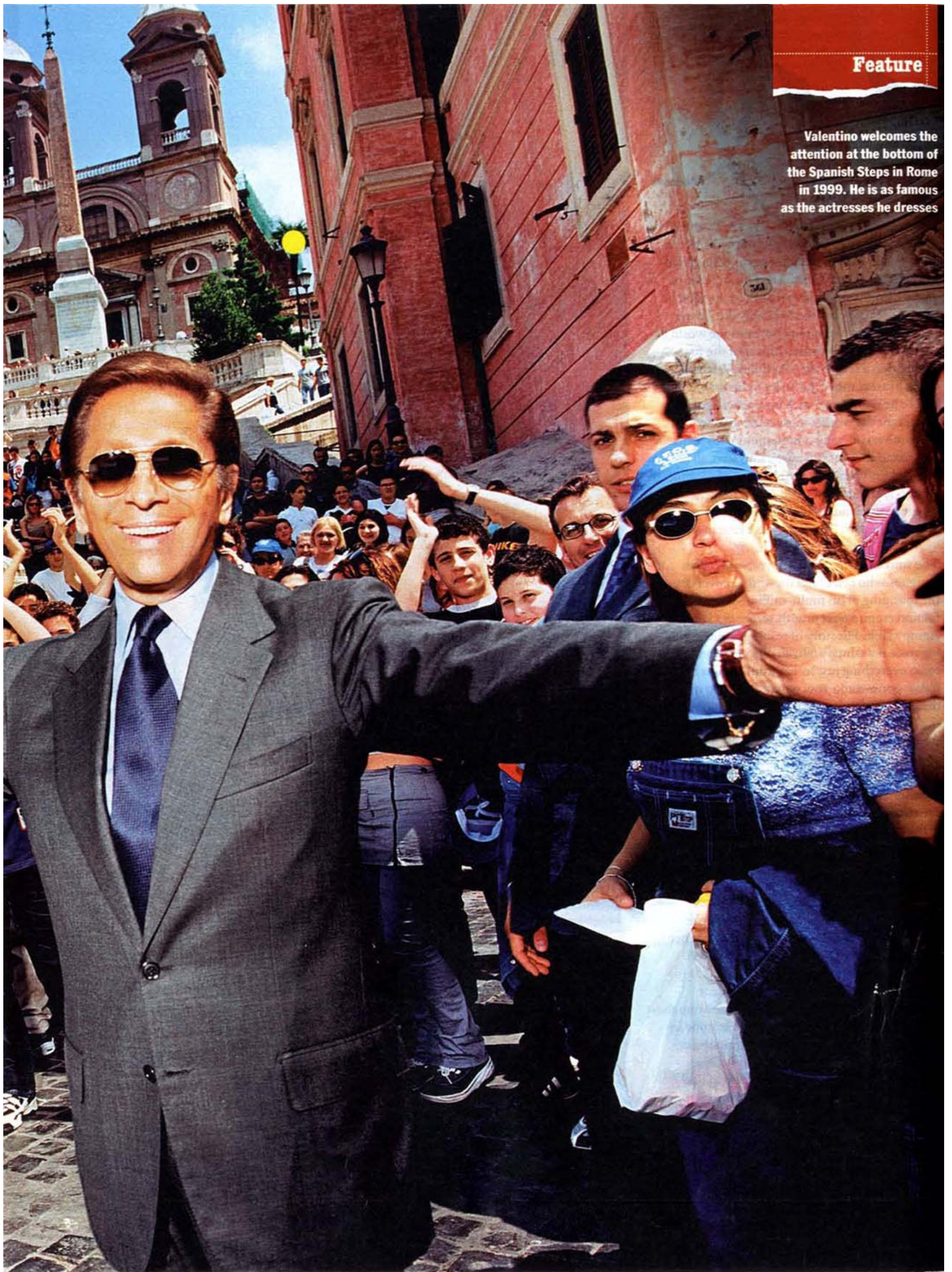


# THE POPE OF PULCHRITUDE

**Valentino has been dressing the beautiful women of the world ever since he met Jackie Kennedy. But, as Deirdre Fernand discovers, Rome's super-rich fashion designer is still star-struck**





**Feature**

Valentino welcomes the attention at the bottom of the Spanish Steps in Rome in 1999. He is as famous as the actresses he dresses

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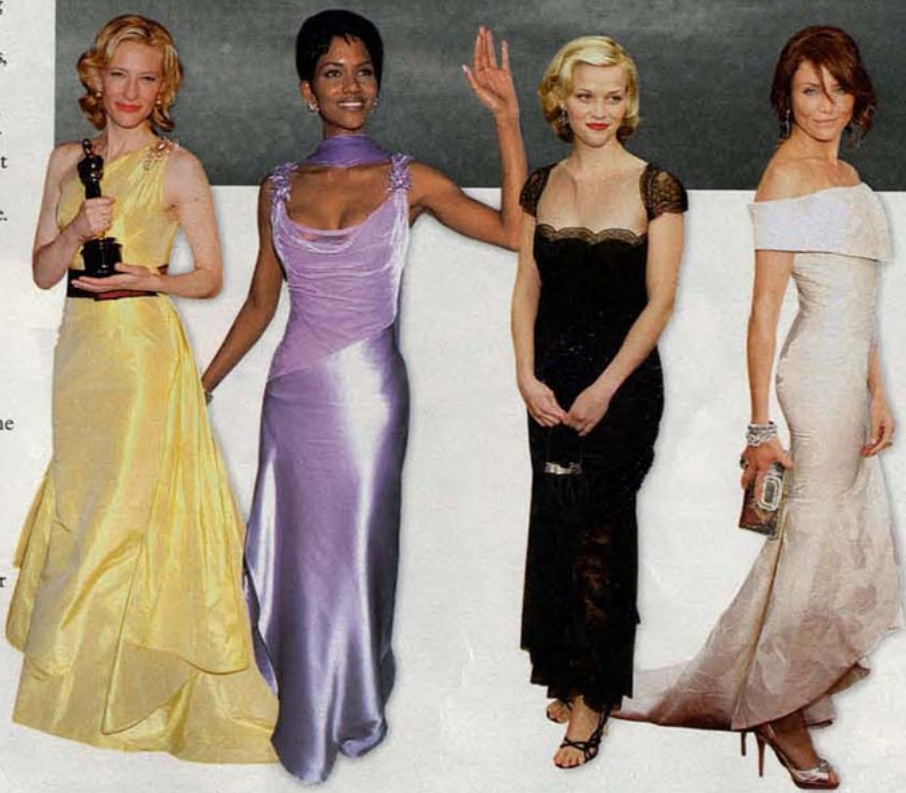
hat's in a name?

When it comes to Valentino, quite a lot. As the great Italian fashion designer surveys his gilded life with his swanky homes and his supersized yacht, he must surely give thanks to the woman who made it all possible. Not only did Teresa Garavani bring a strapping boy into the world in May 1932, she also named him after the first international screen idol, Rudolph Valentino. What a career move. As he lay in his cradle, long before he would ever pick up a pencil to design dresses for the world's most celebrated women, his name was already synonymous with romance and glamour. After this auspicious start, all life ever did for Valentino, the only son of adoring parents and the *enfant prodigieux* of his generation, was get better and better. "I am so proud and so grateful," he says. "I love my job, I love my work."

☆☆☆☆☆

The sun-kissed life of the 75-year-old Italian designer, who celebrates the 45th anniversary of the founding of his multi-million-pound fashion empire next month, serves as a latter-day Aesop's fable. His story of reaping riches in the rag trade is a salutary tale, an object lesson in how to do everything just so. Far from being a here-today-gone-tomorrow sensation like so many designers, Valentino is the tortoise that outstrips the hare. "I'm proud of having done everything step by step," he says. "I never rushed." The approach that brought him success, he explains, was a softly, softly one, always *piano, piano*. No wonder his elegant and opulent style, honed in the cutting rooms of Paris where he grafted for many years, has found him dressing royalty, first ladies and movie stars for nearly five decades.

His clothes are present when history is made. When the empress of Iran Farah Diba fled her country in 1979 in the wake of the Islamic revolution, she did it in Valentino. Madame Bernadette Chirac chose it for the day that her husband became president of France. It was the world's most famous widow who made his name. After the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, Jackie turned to Valentino the following year to make her entire wardrobe in black and white as she came out of mourning. Four years later she married Aristotle Onassis wearing an ivory georgette minidress of his design. "Jackie Kennedy made me famous around the world," he says. As a result, his career went from mere superstardom into orbit, where it remains. As one *Vanity Fair* writer puts it, "Valentino has dressed more princesses than there are in the Almanach de Gotha [the European register of royalty], more socialites than there are in the Social Register, and more



PREVIOUS PAGES: DAVID LAJCHAVELLE. THESE PAGES: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY; REK. TOP LEFT: GIAN PAOLO BARBERIS. TOP RIGHT: LOMBARDINO BOU/VALENTINO ARCHIVES/GROGAN NEIR



A fashion shoot from 1983 modelled on Casablanca.

Bottom, from left: Cate Blanchett, Halle Berry, Reese Witherspoon and Cameron Diaz at the Oscars in their Valentinos. Right: a young Valentino in his workshop in Via Gregoriana, Rome



called him "the Sheikh of Chic", while one fashion writer, Reinaldo Herrera, prefers "the king of Italy". Other sobriquets are "King of the Red Carpet" and "King of Couture".

As befits such regal status, Valentino occupies an 18th-century palazzo in the centre of Rome, next to the Spanish Steps. A former nobleman's house, Palazzo Mignanelli serves as his global headquarters and couture studio, the lifeblood of his empire. Other Italian giants such as Armani, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Moschino and Versace may jostle for a share of the billion-dollar global market, but it is Valentino who dominates the world of couture, where every piece is bespoke. Here, more than 60 seamstresses, known as *petites mains* for their dexterity, labour all day for regulars such as Princess Firyal of Jordan, Lady Bamford, Princess Marie-Chantal of Greece and Kate Winslet – the named dummies on which their clothes are fitted lie around in various states of undress. One clumsy move and you can send a Jordanian queen or a Kuwaiti princess flying. There are clouds of tissue paper everywhere as finished garments wait to be dispatched.

The palazzo also houses part of his vast dress archive. Hundreds are kept here in polythene

## WHEN THE EMPRESS OF IRAN FLED HER COUNTRY IN 1979, SHE DID IT IN VALENTINO

Hollywood beauties than there are, well, at the faded MGM of today." His evening dresses are drop-dead gorgeous creations of lace and chiffon, show-stoppers with heart-stopping price tags of £20,000 and more.

There will be nothing *piano, piano* about next month's celebrations in Rome. Much of the city's ancient heart, near the Forum, will be cordoned off for a three-day extravaganza rumoured to cost over £5m. As Walter Veltroni, the mayor of Rome, has said, "There is the Pope and there is Valentino. In this city, I don't know who else is as famous." Guests will fly in from all over the world to attend a preview of a Valentino retrospective at the Ara Pacis museum, where 300 dresses from his archive will be shown. More than 800 people will feast on delicacies such as quails' eggs and the

finest *mozzarella di bufala*, which is flown to him wherever he is in the world. Fountains will splash, orchestras will strike up and fireworks will whiz-bang overhead. Valentino demands nothing less than perfection. He says: "We are trying to put together something so that people will say, 'This is the Valentino we know and we love... He loves homes, good food; he loves everything beautiful.'"

Veltroni is just one of the people who pay tribute to the man in a new book devoted to his life and legacy. Valentino, a collection of essays, photographs and reminiscences, is published next month. Though it borders on the gushing, this festschrift reminds us just how long he's been at the top. When the fashion industry talk about him they reach for the superlatives. Graydon Carter, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, has

bags; others are in a giant store in Valdagno, northern Italy. As meticulous about the past as he is about the present, he makes sure the history of every item lent is logged on a computer and that each creation is tagged. A sequined dress bears the label "Sharon Stone, 1993". A coffee-coloured polka-dot silk gown is tagged "Melanie Griffith, Cannes, 2001". A sunray-pleated cream frock with crystal droplets was destined for "Wife of Tom Hanks". Avery Agnelli, Jennifer Lopez, Elizabeth Taylor and Jennifer Aniston, to name a few, are all here in spirit.

Gwyneth Paltrow, one of Valentino's most loyal customers, loves the fact that he is very "old-school in his approach. He thinks a woman should look beautiful in a dress and that's the end of the story; that fashion isn't a place for concept and art. He gets crazy with me if ➤ 27

I wear a jacket with an unfinished seam or the sleeve isn't the right proportion. I mean, he goes nuts – it's hysterical".

It's hard to pierce the surface of Valentino because his world is all about surface. Whatever question is posed, the answer always comes back to "beauty, beauty, beauty", recited like a mantra. In short, fashion is fashion for Valentino, not a concept that has to be explained or understood. The aesthetic is everything, "A dress must give beauty to a lady and you must respect the human body," he says. "A woman to my eyes must look sinuous, glamorous, feminine and *distingué*..."

What, all at once? Still, it doesn't matter if you don't have time, like Jennifer Aniston or Susan Sarandon, to drop in for a fitting. His *petites mains* will come to you. They took an emergency call one Saturday from a hostess in the south of France who claimed that her frothy Valentino confection, just delivered, did not fit and her guests were arriving that day. Could they fix it? Two seamstresses boarded a plane and arrived a few hours later only to discover that she had been trying to put the frock on backwards.

A slight man, Valentino seems swamped as he sits behind a huge desk covered with silver-framed photographs. "Here is Queen Rania," he waves, a reference to King Abdullah of Jordan's wife, consistently named one of the best-dressed women in the world and one of a handful rich enough to buy his couture. "And here is Mrs Kennedy as she was then." He and Jackie were lifelong friends and he adored her uniform of trousers, trench and big sunglasses for the day, and strapless gowns for the evening. "I made the whole of her wardrobe when she went on a visit to Cambodia with Bobby Kennedy in 1964."

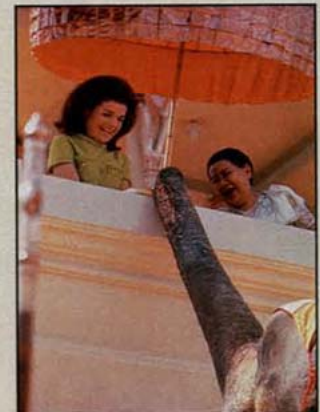
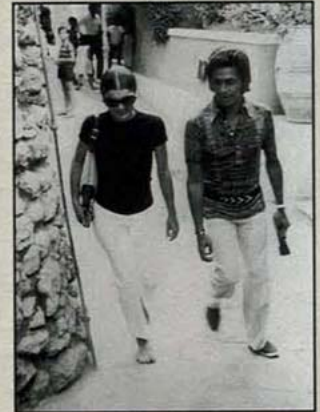
You soon appreciate that the list of glamorous women who send their kissy-kissy signed photos, which has included Princess Diana and Elizabeth Taylor, represents his family. His sexuality is no longer a secret. Valentino, who enjoyed a 12-year romance with his business partner, Giancarlo Giammetti, is now linked to the American designer Bruce Hocksema, an eternally youthful former model. Also in his family line-up is a snap of his six pugs (Margot, Maude, Monty, Molly, Milton and Maggie),



ROSA

POSSIBILE  
DISEGNO  
SPECIALE  
PER J.K.O.

A drawing by Valentino with the inscription 'Possible design specially for JKO'. Below: Jackie Kennedy with Valentino in Positano. Bottom: on her tour of Cambodia, for which Valentino designed her entire wardrobe



ARCA # 67 #

## 'A DRESS MUST GIVE BEAUTY TO A LADY AND YOU MUST RESPECT THE HUMAN BODY'

who often travel with him in his private jet.

At the end of a working day, which starts about 11am and continues late into the evening, Valentino leaps into one of his many cars, usually a Mercedes, and is driven home to his villa on the Appian Way, half an hour outside Rome. Failing that, he can always order the jet to whisk him to another of his homes. He has a house in Holland Park, a 140ft yacht, an apartment in Manhattan overlooking Central Park, a chalet in Gstaad, Switzerland, and a 17th-century chateau outside Paris, Wideville, which once belonged to Louise de la Vallière, the mistress of Louis XIV. There, Valentino has planted the world's largest rose garden, more than a million blooms, and

keeps 12 gardeners busy all year. In recognition of his restoration of one of France's important historic houses, the French government has awarded him the Légion d'Honneur.

Valentino will never play down his taste for the high life. He is far too shrewd for that. He understands how his clients live. And as a collector of houses and art, including works by Picasso, Chagall, Miro, Basquiat, de Kooning and Warhol, he knows he lives better than most of those he dresses. "He's been a revolutionary in this way," adds Reinaldo Herrera, "in the sense that he has kept the thermometer of luxury. People always try to pretend that they're not interested, that they want a simple life. He does

not want a simple life, he wants the grand life."

This grand life sees him granting audiences as sparingly as a pope, while entertaining like a Jay Gatsby. As he once told a journalist from *The New Yorker*, "I have all these things – yachts and houses. And they say I am insane, this is not the world any more, nobody lives this way. Maybe I did [make] a mistake, but I want these things in my life. My eyes want to see perfection. Some people have said to me, 'You have too many houses and rooms.' But too much for whom?"

When terrorism gripped Rome in the late 1970s in the wake of the Red Brigades, he took to riding around in a red bulletproof Mercedes. John Fairchild, editor-at-large of *Women's* ➔

Wear Daily (WWD), was aghast. "My God, I thought, you must want to get blown up."

In fact, the flamboyance of Valentino's life has brought only rewards. He has more than 1,250 outlets across the world, with an estimated profit of over £162m. He was one of the first to understand the importance of licensing his name to leather companies and manufacturers of perfume. Every year he designs *prêt-à-porter* and sport collections, menswear, shoes, bags, belts and cruise wear. In 1998, he and Giammetti sold their company to a large industrial firm, HdP, publishers of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, for over £152m. It was sold again to Marzotto, the Italian conglomerate, in 2002. Last month, Permira, a private equity firm that owns stakes in Tetley and Homebase, bought nearly 30% of the Valentino Fashion Group for £530m.

On the surface, this kind of money doesn't make sense. With the rise of ready-to-wear, the demise of couture has been predicted since the 1960s. But each generation provides new blood: young princesses such as Marie-Chantal of Greece or Mette-Marit of Norway, and the newly rich who crave luxury. This is the reason Dior, Armani and Lacroix, to name a few, continue to create couture as well as ready-to-wear. Neither Valentino nor Giammetti will comment on the recent deal that has put yet more millions in their wallets. Nor will they speak of retirement, rumours of which have been circulating for years. Many industry insiders are talking up the Rome celebrations as a finale, not a fanfare. Valentino has founded an Aids charity, Life, and is considering setting up a museum, possibly in London, so that students can study his work. This is the only suggestion, as he approaches his late seventies, that his thoughts are turning to his own mortality.

Perhaps the wisest move of his career was to dominate Hollywood's red carpet. Once a year, his team decamp to Hollywood just before the Oscars to wait upon the stars. Sophia Loren, Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, Cate Blanchett and Hilary Swank have all accepted Oscars in Valentino dresses. "The real reason is that we like these kind of people," says Giammetti of their Hollywood sojourn. "Maybe we are still under the spell of movie stars – especially Valentino. When he was 10 years old he would go to the movie theatre... To meet and be able to work with an actress is something seducing for him."

When the Academy Awards are screened, hundreds of millions see his designs, giving him publicity that is both unquantifiable and invaluable. And while almost nobody among the audience can shell out £20,000 for a frock, many will go out and buy his perfume at £30 a bottle – cheap at the price for a whiff of glamour.

☆☆☆☆☆

Valentino's own story begins with Hollywood. Growing up in Voghera, a provincial town near Milan, he spent much of his adolescent years in



### TALK OF THE GOWN

Top: Elizabeth Taylor with Richard Burton in 1972: she is wearing a black taffeta ball gown designed specially for her by Valentino. Centre: Taylor in another Valentino creation on her eighth wedding day. Her close friend Michael Jackson gave her away. Above: Valentino with Nicole Kidman, a favourite muse: 'She has the most perfect figure'

the local cinema. He and his older sister were transfixed by the elegance of Lana Turner, Vivien Leigh, Katharine Hepburn and Rita Hayworth. "I was crazy about film stars," he says. "All my life I was fascinated to see a beautiful woman coming down the staircase in a long gown. This was my dream since I was a child and it is for this reason that I am a designer."

He was a *signatore*, a dreamer, who never wanted to study but only to sketch. At 17, he persuaded his parents to let him study in Paris and enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, followed by fashion school, the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. He joined the atelier of Guy Laroche and then Jean Dessès, two of the biggest names in 1950s couture, to serve his apprenticeship. After eight years he returned to Italy to set up his own couture house. His father, an electrical wholesaler, sold his country house to fund him. "I had fantastic parents who let me go when I was so young," he says. His mother, he says, "was always elegant. She was a bourgeois lady who had beautiful crepe-de-Chine dresses and well-cut coats".

Her son's timing was impeccable. He started out just as the world's eyes were focused on Italy in the era immortalised in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. After the grey privations of wartime, Rome, with its vibrant film industry at Cinecittà, seemed a Technicolor place of paparazzi on Vespas and Anita Ekberg frolicking in its fountains. With Antonioni and Visconti making films, it was dubbed Hollywood-on-Tiber. Everyone wanted a piece of it and Valentino, young and handsome, fitted the part. It was here that he met Consuelo Crespi, the American wife of an Italian aristocrat, who went on to be fashion editor of *American Vogue*. Through Crespi he met Jackie Kennedy. Valentino would never need his father's help again. Soon he was dressing Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor – who just happened to be wearing Valentino when she met Richard Burton.

His next piece of good fortune came in 1960 when he met Giancarlo Giammetti, then an architectural student, at a café in Rome's Via Veneto. They soon became an established couple, not an easy feat in the climate of 1960s Italy. Their collaboration has been long and happy and is often compared with that of Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé. Together, Valentino and Giammetti sound like a contented old married couple. "Meeting him was my greatest chance," coos Valentino. "Valentino is as solid as a rock," gushes Giammetti.

That rock knows he can be difficult. "I am much too precise, too concerned about details," he says. "It's difficult because all those things I learnt as a young man, I translated into my personal life. My houses, my objects, my paintings, my surroundings. So is the way I entertain, what kind of food I give my friends. This is all a contest. This is me. I try to be ➡➡➡"

TOP: CECIL BEAZON/SOthebys; CENTRE: HERB RITTS; BOTTOM: GIANCARLO GIAMMETTI

## THE WISEST MOVE OF HIS CAREER WAS TO DOMINATE HOLLYWOOD'S RED CARPET

perfect, but I cannot. One cannot do everything." It is Giammetti who shoulders the burden of the business, leaving the maestro free to fret about collections and customers. "It's a difficult job to satisfy the buyers and the press," says Valentino. "And then you have to know the ladies, the crowd, what's going on, who they are, what people like and what they never like."

Valentino never liked the "excesses" of the 1980s but adored the 1960s and 70s. When he launched his famous all-white collection in 1968, the fashion press saluted his genius.

pain. "Ugh," he winces, "the 1980s were too much for me. Ladies were overdressed, over-combed and over-made-up. The big shoulders and short skirts were out of proportion." If we dwell any more on the ugly decade, we are going to need smelling salts. But the 1990s were better, when he graduated to designing for Nicole Kidman, Susan Sarandon and Halle Berry. His roll call now includes Keira Knightley, Naomi Watts, Scarlett Johansson, Reese Witherspoon, Cameron Diaz and Renée Zellweger.

As for minimalism and grunge, they were

If he could choose a decade to have lived in, it would be the golden age of Hollywood, with its screen sirens of the late 1920s and early 1930s. This was a time of high glamour that masked the terrible reality of the Wall Street crash and the Depression. It was a fiction produced by the all-powerful studios but an alluring one nonetheless. He is misty-eyed talking about his favourites, such as Fred Astaire and Cary Grant. The allure was "the brilliant life, the top of the top. The stars were under contract to the studios and they were always so beautifully dressed. Then there were

## 'LIKE ALL TRUE FASHION DESIGNERS, HE HAS STUCK TO HIS STYLE OVER THE YEARS'

"Americans are going wild about this Italian, who in next to no time has become the king of fashion," wrote WWD of the show that saw white minidresses teamed with lace tights and flat shoes. That year may have seen student uprisings in Paris and Soviet tanks rolling into Prague, but 1968 remains, in the annals of fashion at least, the year of Valentino. The 1970s saw him partying at Studio 54 and spending time with Andy Warhol, who painted him, at the Factory in New York. "I used to see all these art works drying on the floor," he says. "I could have been a billionaire if I had bought them then."

In the 1980s he dressed Jane Fonda, Anjelica Huston, Jessica Lange and Brooke Shields. But padded shoulders seemed to cause him actual

unpleasantnesses that simply didn't happen to Valentino. Many fashion commentators have noted that to him "edgy" and "cool" are four-letter words. As Donatella Versace, who presides over the fashion empire her late brother founded, acknowledges, "Like all true fashion designers, he has stuck to his style over the years, regardless of the changes in trends."

All of which makes him not anti-fashion but supra-fashion, always keeping true to his vision and never chasing after fads. "I think fashion and style are two different things," he explains. One is temporary; the other eternal. And Valentino red, his signature colour, is certainly ever present. A recent New York Times shoot, a homage to his 45 years, was a paean to his scarlet dresses.

ladies who would wear five diamond bracelets and slinky dresses. There were cigarette boxes by Cartier and crocodile suitcases. Such *raffinement*."

No wonder that he has often taken a turn on the catwalk at the end of his shows to that Sinatra showbiz anthem, New York, New York. The lights, the camera and the action are pure Hollywood. He even played himself in that film about the fashion world, *The Devil Wears Prada*. He was thrilled. Even though he is easily as famous as the actresses he dresses, Valentino is still the star-struck *sognatore*, the dreamy child who once sat wide-eyed in his local cinema ■  
*Valentino, edited by Armando Chitolina, is published by Taschen in August, price £600, as a signed limited edition of 2,000 copies; © Taschen*