

THE MATERIAL MAESTRO

STORY Sofia Gnoli

PHOTOGRAPHS Carmen Colombo

From the very beginning of his career, the fashion designer Roberto Capucci knew how to attract attention with his work. Whether it was through his clever use of drapery, silhouette, or color, his visionary creations defied definition.

But how have these fabric features been used to establish his iconic, enduring body of work?



“Dressing is a ritual, an act of magic,” declares Roberto Capucci. Ever since his debut in 1950, the revered artist and designer has revolutionized the fashion world. “If I could, I would abolish the term ‘fashion’ from everyday use,” he says. He is of the belief that “to be fashionable is already to be old-fashioned,” and his wearable fabric sculptures certainly seem to transcend fashion. The dreamlike garments appear to be made of fans and petals, wings and scrolls, in a style once described by the Italian art historian Germano Celant as “soft armor.”

“Designing is like breathing for me,” says Capucci. Even now, at the age of 95, he continues to design every morning. Over a long career that spans 75 years (and counting), he has remained true to his own beliefs, often allowing himself the luxury of creative independence. “What is important,” he stresses, “is to be true to your nature...In every trade, in every profession, we need many brilliant minds, many wonderful people. Only then do you perceive the fire of beauty.”

Much like the Spanish fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga, Capucci is a singular architectural couturier who also, as British photographer Cecil Beaton says of Balenciaga in the 1954 book *The Glass of Fashion*, “belongs to no clique, plays nobody’s game but his own, steadfastly refuses to commercialize either himself or his talent, pays little attention to the seasonal changes of styles, and pursues a solitary creation of values which have won him the respect, admiration, and patronage of those who know modern fashion intimately and can recognize his unusual genius.”

Roberto Capucci was born on December 2, 1930, in Rome, Italy. As a young man, he attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma. After his studies, he took his first steps in fashion when Maria Foschini, the Italian journalist, saw some of his early sketches and encouraged him to set up an atelier. So in 1950, at 20 years old, Capucci opened an establishment on Via Sistina, Rome.

Capucci’s international debut came not long after, in July 1951, when he took part in the Italian High Fashion Show organized by Giovanni Battista Giorgini. To many, Marquis Giorgini and his expositions of Italian fashion houses are thought to have been instrumental in establishing an independent Italian style and sharing it with international buyers and media. Capucci was too young to be officially involved in the event (in fact, his adolescence risked causing a scandal that threatened the involvement of other couturiers), but he designed the dresses worn by Giorgini’s wife and daughters, which aroused great interest despite the gowns not appearing on the runway. The designer confessed, “The effect was explosive... [it was] quite unintentionally...my first great success, leading to enthusiastic articles and a stream of orders from American [luxury] department stores.”

From 1952, Capucci became an official participant in subsequent editions of the fashion show, which were



Page 30–31: the pleated silk taffeta whorls of the 1989 gown *Bougainvillea* bloom and climb up the dress in imitation of its namesake. This page, above: the ruff-like frills of this unnamed gown from 1987 are made of pleated silk taffeta and set on a skirt of viscose velvet. This page, right: the 1995 Venice Biennale was early to identify Capucci as an artist; he was the first couturier ever to present at the exhibition. *Diaspro* was designed for the event and is made of viscose velvet and iridescent silk taffeta. Opposite: the colors and movement of migrating birds inspired the silk taffeta lateral fans on *Ventagli* (1980) that can be opened or concealed by the wearer



WITH THANKS TO VILLA MANIN / ERPAAC AND REGIONE AUTONOMA FRIULI VENEZIA GIULIA





Oceano (1998) was commissioned by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a world's fair in Lisbon with the theme "The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future." Capucci said that the many shades of the ocean, such as how it can appear white under sunlight or dark when seen from a distance, inspired the soft gradient coloring



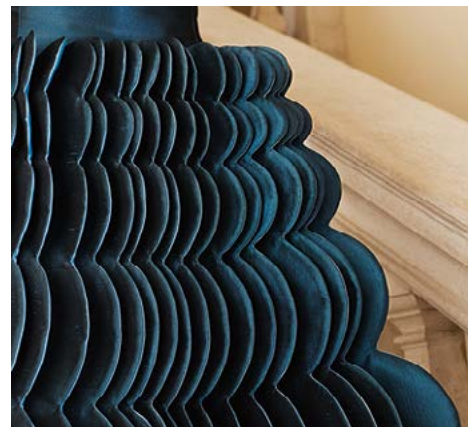
held in the Pitti Palace in Florence. A fascination with experimentation and a predilection for geometric shapes and complex volumes emerges in his earliest designs. Between 1951 and 1956, the collections stand out for their purity of line and use of contrasting and nuanced colors, whereas those after 1956 explored increasingly complex forms, incorporating decorative motifs such as pleats, drapery, and the geometric effects of folds.

For each of his designs, Capucci draws inspiration by looking at works of art, listening to music, or from nature in all its forms. The initial sketches, sometimes 800 or even 1,000 for a collection of 100 or 150 garments, emerge from the images and feelings that his inspiration provokes. Once the sketches are complete, the cutters make cloth prototypes of each model. Only then does Capucci think about color, identifying unexpected combinations with contrasting shades in the warp and weft or by using hundreds of shades of the same color.

The Roman maestro's visionary silk sculptures have enveloped many women, from a Nobel Prize winner (Rita Levi-Montalcini) to film stars such as Gloria Swanson and Esther Williams. For the latter, Capucci designed one of his most famous pieces: the *Nove Gonne* (Nine Skirts) gown (see page 37). The dress stands out for its nine asymmetrical tiered skirts, in carmine silk taffeta, in a shape Capucci said was inspired by "the concentric circles made by a pebble thrown into water."

Another prime example of Capucci's originality is his development of the *Linea a Scatola* (Box Line) silhouette in 1958. This shape, which offered a contrast to the froufrou femininity of the *jolie madame* style that was popular at the time, won Capucci the Filene's Young Talents Award in Boston, US. In Capucci's own words, the shape "represented a new, somewhat Pre-Raphaelite concept of fashion: simple tunics, fabrics that were sometimes rather rough and stiff, handmade,

CAPUCCI ALLOWED HIMSELF THE LUXURY OF COMPLETE FREEDOM OF DESIGN, PRIORITIZING CREATIVITY OVER SUCCESS



Above: pleated silk taffeta makes up this unnamed dress from 1985. Left, far left to right: *Omaggio a Giorgini* (Homage to Giorgini) was made in 2001 to mark the 50th anniversary of the inaugural Italian High Fashion Show established by entrepreneur and patron Giovanni Battista Giorgini; the skirt of this 1992 sculptural dress is made of iridescent silk taffeta; on *Linee* (2007) shades of pink predominate in the colorful silk taffeta inlays, which follow a fishbone pattern

not machine-sewn, worn by barefoot models with no makeup, no accessories, nothing refined or artificial.”

In 1961, Capucci decided to open a second atelier, in Paris, France. In response to his departure from Rome, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci called him “the traitor with scissors” in *L'Europeo* magazine. But Capucci was not deterred by this negativity. The move allowed him to create experimental works with new materials, including phosphorescent elements such as luminous rosaries, and futuristic garments covered in transparent plastic and ornamented with plexiglass.

In 1968, Capucci returned to Rome after closing his Paris atelier. It was then that Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian director, asked him to design costumes for Silvana Mangano in his movie *Teorema*. Capucci was completely captivated. “Dressing her was wonderful,” he said. “She had innate elegance. She could wear the most challenging clothes with extraordinary nonchalance.”

In the 1970s, Capucci continued to experiment with unusual materials such as rope, raffia, and straw. In 1982, a need for greater independence prompted him to distance himself from the commercial demands of the fashion world. He allowed himself the luxury of complete freedom of design, devoting himself to artistic research and prioritizing creativity over success. His resulting creations were increasingly dream-like and fantastical. This period is also when Capucci began creating costumes for the stage that, over a period of 40 years, led him to design for the 12 vestal virgins in the 1986 staging of Bellini's *Norma* in Verona, Italy, as well as for the metamorphic protagonists of *Le creature di Prometeo/Le creature di Capucci* (The Creatures of Prometheus/The Creatures of Capucci), a 2020 play directed by Daniele Cipriani in Genoa, Italy.

In 1995, to mark the Venice Biennale's centennial, the then exhibition director Jean Clair invited Capucci to contribute in a bid to introduce new artists and mediums to the historic event. “Hierarchies between the various creative forms no longer exist,” Clair announced. “Fashion rightfully belongs to the visual arts.” In this spirit, Capucci created 12 fabric sculptures inspired by natural minerals (see *Diaspro*, page 32, bottom). This was the moment when he was recognized as a true artist.

Since the 1990s, Capucci's sculptural garments have been exhibited at the world's leading museums from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria, to Italy's Teatro Farnese in Parma, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, US. Today, Capucci's designs are preserved by his nephew Enrico Minio at the Fondazione Roberto Capucci in Udine, Italy, where they live on as wonderful creations that transcend time and fashion. ♦

Translated by Lucinda Byatt



For more on this subject, scan the QR code to see the exclusive Magazine Extra content on our Owners platform at patek.com/owners



The 1956 *Nove Gonne* (Nine Skirts) gown is a sheath dress in carmine silk taffeta. The layered skirt was inspired by the concentric ripples of a pebble thrown into water