Domenico Vacca, Italian Hollywood's Fashion Guru

Chiara Basso (December 21, 2018)

From Andria, Puglia, to a luxury store on Fifth Avenue where Hollywood stars are regular customers. Italian designer Domenico Vacca is grateful to be born in a relatively small city of only 100,000 inhabitants in Southern Italy like Andria, but when you dream big like him you want to leave as soon as possible. “The first big step for me was going to Milan where I worked as a lawyer at the multinational law firm Baker McKenzie” explains the fashion designer who has dressed celebrities such as Dustin Hoffman, Daniel Day Lewis and Angela Bassett. Vacca’s family didn’t want him to work in fashion because, according to his grandmother, this business is a lot of work and not so much money. But, eventually, he followed his passion with a mission: showing Americans "how to dress the authentic Italian way." Next dream to realize? Hollywood.

Celebrities feel at home in his store on 55th Street and Fifth Avenue. Just before our interview, Vacca has assisted Academy Award winner and friend Forest Whitaker to choose the right outfit for The Godfather of Harlem, a tv series where the actor is starring as the gangster Bumpy Johnson. When they are done, Vacca invites us all to have a salad right there, at the wood table close to the shopping windows of his 8,000-square-foot flagship boutique, where customers can find not only Made in Italy clothes but an Italian style café, a barbershop, a salon, a members-only club and an art gallery. “I wanted to create an experience for customers when they come here,” says the Italian designer while offering us buffalo mozzarella that arrives fresh from Naples every Thursday and

focaccia pugliese.

Vacca's call for fashion after a successful career as a lawyer

How can a lawyer become a celebrity stylist? "I come from a family deeply rooted in fashion," Vacca tells us, "my grandmother, Sabina Orciuolo, had an atelier in Andria in the 1920s where thirty women were working for her." Nonetheless, Vacca's family didn't want him to work in fashion because, according to his grandmother, this business is a lot of work and not so much money. Like many families from the South of Italy that could send their children to university, they wanted him to become a professional such as a lawyer, a judge or a doctor.

"I did become a lawyer and practiced for ten years at the highest level. Thanks to a scholarship I first came to New York for a master's degree in law and worked here with 90% of the Italian fashion brands in the U.S." Vacca was "the Italian lawyer" for important names such as Tod's, Versace, and Zegna until something happened in his family that would have shaken his world.

"In 1995 my father got cancer, and I went back to Italy for 6 months to stay with him. When he passed away, I realized that we are not gonna live forever and thought that it was time to change my life. I believe that our careers should be more transversal than vertical. It's great to have multiple experiences."

Vacca decided to start again from fashion: "Everybody thought that I was crazy but I always loved fashion and it is in my family's roots. So, first I invested in a company from Naples that was producing for other brands. I developed the American market, the collections, I designed... and I had a lot of fun with it."

His mission: dressing Americans the "authentic Italian way"

Vacca wanted to create a luxury brand with handmade garments for men and women, including the ready-to-wear collections, but he also wanted to dress Americans the authentic Italian way. "There were other Italian luxury brands, of course, but they were selling mainly to departments stores where buyers were looking for collections with the cheapest products and wanted to change the fit and style to meet what they thought was the taste of American market. I thought: this is not how we dress in Italy."

For Vacca, a jacket has to fit close to the body, Italians love colors and they care about fabrics. He wanted to bring all this to America. No more baggy jackets, no more pants with pleats on each side and wide legs.

In order to avoid buyers and departments stores "who kill fashion instead of promoting it," in 2002 he launched the Domenico Vacca brand and opened his first store on Fifth Avenue, in front of the Plaza Hotel. "If I have to be judge, I prefer to be judged by people of Fifth Avenue, I thought."

Vacca was not scared of starting a business just a few months after 9/11. Two months after the store opening, the newspaper La Repubblica called him "the Ferrari of fashion" and since many other publications called him the same. "Like a Ferrari we are classic and we respect tradition, but at the same time, we are modern. My women's collections are chic and sexy with a mix of masculine and feminine elements. I like to empower a woman with clothes. My men's collection is classic but with a twist that can be found in the fabric, the cut, or the colors. The Domenico Vacca's style is the one of an Italian who has travelled the world." Thus, everything is made in Italy, 40% from Puglia, and 90% is handmade.

Celebrities

Over a decade ago, costume designer Frank Fleming, who was working on the movie American Gangster, came into Vacca's store to find clothes for Denzel Washington. "He loved my collection and the fact that we can custom make almost everything," Vacca says. Since then, the designer and his team have created costumes for 50 movies and TV shows.

"My first celebrity client was Daniel Day-Lewis. We started a long professional relationship, to the point that when he was nominated five years ago for Lincoln, he called me and told me that he wanted to be dressed for the academy awards. He won his third Oscar that night, the only actor ever to have this honor. I like to think that we bring luck!"

Vacca dressed Forest Whitaker and Alan Arkin for their academy award nights too. As an expert, we asked him why so many celebrities commit faux pas on the red carpet and what they should do to avoid them.

How to avoid mistakes on the red carpet

Vacca believes that we would see fewer mistakes on the red carpet if celebrities first learned to have their own style, second, they listened less to stylists' advice, and last they stopped following fashion blindly. "Most celebrities don't have a great style and they trust improvised stylists who most of the time pay stars to wear what brands want, and dress them with fashion trends that don't fit the celebrity's body type. Instead, if you are an actor or an athlete and you live in front of a camera, you must take style seriously."

Vacca suggests to spend 10 minutes every night preparing our clothes, and he promises that in a couple of weeks we would all be pro of style. "It's a matter of exercise like in golf or any other sport."

The Italian designer told us that he doesn't pay celebrities to wear his clothes. Only after there is an already established relation, he sends them clothes and then they work together to find the best, personalized style. Usually, this relationship starts with costumes for a movie or tv series - "I think we help them to get into their characters" - and then it expands to the celebrity's private wardrobe and eventually on the red carpet.

After New York, the next step for Vacca could be Hollywood: "I would like to start my next career as a movie or tv series producer. We, a group of friend, my fiancée Eleonora Pieroni, and I, already have a lot of ideas."

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