

VERSACE

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Gianni Versace was born in Southern Italy in 1946. He moved to Milan at the age of twenty-five, where he established his eponymous fashion house in 1978. Beginning with a womenswear collection, the Versace brand would become one of the most prominent fashion and luxury goods empires of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Gianni's younger sister, Donatella Versace, was born in 1955 and from an early age served as her brother's creative muse. She studied literature at the University of Florence and joined Gianni and their older brother Santo Versace, who directed business operations for the company, in Milan in the early 1980s. Donatella grew to be an invaluable collaborator, overseeing the design for a number of projects including the youthful diffusion line Versus, a clothing line for children, and accessories. Following Gianni's shocking murder in July 1997, Donatella took over as artistic director and ushered Versace's haute couture and prêt-à-porter divisions into the new millennium. Donatella carried on her brother's vision and infused the brand with a younger, edgier aesthetic adapted for the modern woman.

Both Gianni and Donatella socialized with a celebrity set. Highly visible figures themselves, they mastered media relations for the Versace brand, crafting mediagenic fashion show spectacles. Their charismatic designs clung to celebrities' bodies and thrived under lights and cameras. In 1994, the actress Elizabeth Hurley wore Versace's memorable, figure-hugging dress adorned with safety pins on the red carpet. In the early 2000s, Donatella collaborated with Bruce Weber and Steven Meisel in creating sensational, sensual promotional images, while Richard Avedon had photographed many of Versace's bold advertising campaigns under the leadership of the brand's founder.

Gianni's brazen fashion designs were peppered with art historical references, revealing his interest in the classical and baroque aesthetics. He paired his encyclopedic knowledge and modern intuition to update fluid drapery with flashy fabrics, technical prowess, and unconventional materials such as Oroton, a metal chain-mail material he created in the early 1980s. In another expression of his mastery of spectacle and grandeur, Gianni Versace designed costumes for several theater and dance productions beginning in 1982.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Gianni Versace introduced sexual bravado and streetwalker style into the realm of high fashion. His designs composed of bondage-inspired leather and mesh, audacious head-to-toe patterns, and shiny surfaces were extravagant, extreme, and initially considered lewd, but were eventually embraced within the fashion world and popular culture. Donatella, too, unapologetically equates fashion with an aggressive sexuality, creating dresses with fearless low-plunging necklines and high-slit skirts. From its earliest years, Versace defied design conventions and middle-class values with conspicuously erotic, body-conscious designs for women, and notably exhibited the same sexual allure in the brand's innovative menswear designs.

As a luxury brand, Versace's Medusa logo appears on home furnishings, linens, accessories, eyewear, fragrances, and jewelry. The dazzling Palazzo Versace hotel, which opened on Australia's Gold Coast in 2000, was the first hotel branded by a luxury goods company and was joined by a sister site in Dubai in 2015.



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Versace, fall/winter 1990. Niall McInerney, Photographer © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

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