

Mr. Armani and the Deconstruction of the Suit

The Armani revolution began with the jacket, especially the men's blazer and suit jacket. The designer eliminated differences between opposites, or else combined or fused the two: youthful/mature, masculine/feminine, rich/poor, high/low, old/young, exotic/traditional. In particular, Giorgio Armani (b. 1934) says he wanted to impart a sense of gentleness to men's clothes and of strength to women's clothes. This was perfectly in tune with the changing roles and relationships of men and women in the 1970s; and yet, instead of either a dull sameness, or a perpetual *avant garde*, it achieved a new classicism.

With his very first collection in 1975, just as the dynamic center of global fashion was beginning to pass from haute couture to *prête-à-porter*, Armani started out by literally "deconstructing" the traditional jacket. He took the traditional Savile Row suit jacket and altered it in novel ways. He removed the lining, or the interlining. He repositioned the buttons. He changed the proportions of the lapels. He took out padding and stiff seams in the shoulders. As a result, he claims, the Armani jacket falls so naturally on the shoulders, and allows the body to move so easily, that it is "as comfortable as a shirt." Or (others have said) pajamas.

Armani believes that there are masculine and feminine "components" in every human being. And his designs are often characterized by a minimalist aesthetic. But his primary goal has not been unisex clothing, or uniformity of any kind. On the contrary, he has tried to have his clothes express individuality. "I wanted to personalize the jacket," he says, "to make it more closely attuned to its wearer. How? By removing the structure. Making it into a sort of second skin."

Perhaps Armani's dislike of uniformity, and his unhappiness with binary oppositions, has something to do with his family's experience of World War II. His father was complicit in fascism in Italy; his elder brother fought in the Italian Army. After the War, both father and son suffered for their earlier politics. As an innocent young child during the war, Giorgio was bombed and machine-gunned by Allied planes. After the war, the family struggled. Young Giorgio wore hand-me-down clothes from his brother. But his mother provided a model of natural elegance that has inspired him all his life. He remembers that "she had a way of living with a great deal of dignity, even without money." Rejecting ostentatious luxury became a matter of good style. Also, before the War she wore a lot of gray: a very "Armani" color!

As a young boy, Armani thought of becoming a surgeon. He would make a doll out of clay and insert a coffee bean in it. Then he would "operate" on it to remove the bean. He gave himself a score each time, on a scale from 1 to 10, based on how