



THE EMPORIO OF STYLE

MISTER ARMANI RARELY leaves 21, Via Borgonuovo. There is no need to.

It's a Milanese *palazzo*, its façade one of a series in grubby stone. But behind the heavy wooden doors, the old internal walls are shielded from view. Floor to ceiling panels, in neutral Armani shades like olive green and beige, completely disguise the stone interior and fresco-painted walls. Nothing like age or character is allowed to disturb the cool modernity, through which pad a succession of elegant assistants, and Mister Armani's five cats. The assistants always refer to him as *Mister Armani*.

This *palazzo* is the home of Giorgio Armani, the man. On the first floor is his recently refurbished apartment, overlooking a walled garden with a modernist gazebo, where he lunches in the summer.

But it is also the home of Giorgio Armani, the label. On the ground floor are the design studios where everything from ties to spectacles are created. And in the basement is the auditorium where, each season, his new designs are presented in carefully controlled conditions. Other designers go out to visit their stores, to show their clothes to the world's press, to meet people for lunch or to do business. But Mister Armani rarely leaves the Via Borgonuovo.

He walks briskly into his cool grey office, dressed in a blue crewneck sweater, beige chinos and oxblood loafers. His own assistants describe him as 'sober and taciturn', but in the flesh he is mobile, friendly and lively. It's only before a camera that his face freezes into the intense expression that he always wears in his photographs.

Everything about the Armani operation is understated, from the cut and colour of the clothes, through the decor of the offices and shops, to the publicity surrounding his actions. There was no opening party for his major new store in Los Angeles; parties are 'not Armani'. The designer does not make public appearances; 'Mister Armani is too busy.' And he is one of the few designers to remain completely detached from the circuit of shows, openings and parties. '*Troppo Beverley Hills*'.

Softly – and swiftly – Giorgio Armani has created an empire. After medical school, he joined La Rinas-

cente, Milan's equivalent of Harrods, as a buyer. In 1964, he started a six year period working for Cerruti as a designer and product developer, before he went freelance. Only in 1975 did he begin to design under his own name. In 13 years, he has quietly opened 22 Giorgio Armani shops around the world. He has trailed 78 Emporio Armani stores across Italy. And quietly but emphatically, he has made his mark on the traditionally reticent world of menswear.

The only thing which is not understated is the financial success of the Armani empire. Their worldwide sales in 1987 totalled some £266 million. And Armani is now the sole head of the company.

This month, Mister Armani is opening two new stores in London. One, for the prestigious Giorgio Armani label, will bring his top-flight designs to Sloane Street. And the other will house Emporio Armani, the range previously unavailable in England, which brings Armani's sense of style within the

The understated style of Giorgio Armani is now more successful than ever. From his home in Milan, he explains how he is about to restyle England

fiscal reach of the successful English man.

The Emporio Armani store in the Brompton Road will sell a range of products, from leather goods to suits, jeans to jackets. The products are younger, perhaps a little sportier, than the Giorgio Armani clothes. And there's one other difference. In the Giorgio Armani boutique in Milan, the prices look like takeover bids. In the Emporio Armani, they seem merely like house prices.

For once, seated behind the empty desk of a man in control, Mister Armani is prepared to talk; about England, about English style, and about this new range of affordable Armani menswear.

Armani has a strange relationship with English style. Twenty years ago, it was one of the most important influences on his early years as a designer. 'England was virtually the most important centre for inspiration,' he remembers. 'When I was working for

Il Rinascente we used to travel to London for the influences, to see the shops, to learn. I remember seeing some yellow cardigans in a small boutique, and bringing them to Il Rinascente – and everyone thought I was insane! Yellow cardigans were what the Duke of Windsor was about, they were not something for the average man. The entire *idea* of such clothing was so outré, so elitist . . . very, very English.' He smiles. 'I was considered to be very avant-garde. Fashion has gone full circle since then. Everything has been done, so we return to the classics, to the very roots of style.'

But with all the other Italian designers imitating the classic English look, Armani is determined to pursue his own sense of style. 'The English style is extremely easy to design and manufacture,' he believes, 'something which inevitably results in a static situation – everyone does it, and at all price ranges. All of us have a check cardigan in our cupboards, all of us have a navy blazer and grey flannels, we all have these things. Consequently, it becomes too common. And this is a great problem.'

Not, however, for Armani. His menswear is immediately recognisable; comfortable yet elegant, with distinctive but discreet fabrics, and with a particular touch of shaping in the blade of a tie, or the width of a lapel. Menswear was where he began under his own name, thirteen years ago, and it's there that his style still dominates.

Unlike a lot of designers, who simply license out their name to menswear manufacturers around the world, Mister Armani still insists on seeing everything that bears his name. 'Everything,' he stresses. 'Countless pieces. Millions. I have no factories that are independent of our decisions. Everything is delegated from this studio.'

And he is dismissive of the designers who create absurd clothes simply in order to be different. 'One sees horrific things in menswear ranges,' he agrees. 'When creativity is allowed to run loose, when the designs that are produced are for the sake of designing rather than for practicality, then things are created which are of no use to anyone.'

'It is difficult to be innovative with men's fashion, but with menswear, a small change can be so important. Even the smallest alteration, on a lapel or the shoulder, can be so far-reaching.' He claims he can tell to the season when he designed a suit, simply by looking at the proportion of the collar.

Now, he says, English men are ready for Armani. *Some* English men. 'I can envisage a *young* businessman wearing Armani,' he says, settling into his chair. 'Not an older man at all. The traditional English look will never die – the small shoulders, the trousers which narrow at the ankle – it is all so entrenched. But the young in England do not dress like the old. Or so I hope!'

The top-end Giorgio Armani shops are actually intended to dissuade the casual shopper. 'The shops are not designed to attract your average person,' says Armani, with Milanese *hauteur*. 'It's too sophisticated an atmosphere for the man off the street who simply wants to buy a shirt or a pair of trousers.' And so he

has no intention of opening more than one Giorgio Armani store in England. 'Those lines will always be exclusive, selective,' he insists. 'I have no wish to expand them. They are very much for the elite, not for the public.'

But the Emporio Armani line will be growing into a major chain over the next three years. The Brompton Road store will be the flagship for ten or more stores around the country. And if they follow the Italian model, they will bring Armani style to a wider market, without diluting the exclusivity of the Giorgio Armani name.

'The Emporio collection is based on classic Armani, so it is not terribly avant-garde. And the prices are lower. But,' he admits, 'no matter how inexpensive my clothes become, they will always be expensive. My clothes are not for *poor* young people – they are for the solvent.'

Each Emporio store is designed specifically for its own particular city. 'In London, I have tried to create a very British atmosphere,' he explains. 'A feeling of intimacy, not ostentatious, and certainly not grandiose. My style is neither of those things, and nor is London. The shops must always be tailored to the city, while retaining the Armani element.'

'For example, we're displaying the clothes on wood, rather than using "cold" materials like metal. But at the same time, I tried to steer clear of the "olde England" look, the sort of place where Apollo would place his trophies.'

'I didn't want to be anachronistic. I think there is another approach, something more contemporary, and yet profoundly English.'

Mister Armani does seem to understand the character of the English man and his peculiar sartorial reticence. He knows that his customer is likely to be 'the type of man who works in a creative way, rather than in a traditional, administrative way.'

Which English men will wear Armani? 'The type who work in a creative way, rather than in a traditional, administrative way,' he believes

'But I would like to think of my clients as businessmen, because businessmen always demand quality and excellence. They have high expectations.'

Since the death of his business partner, Mister Armani himself is as much a businessman as a designer, in sole control of his company. Apart from overseeing the garments and shops themselves, he also makes all of the corporate financial decisions. 'In certain cases, I enjoy it more than the actual designing,' he says of his financial role. 'It is fascinating to be able to turn creativity into profit – this is the metamorphosis.'

In the Via Borgonuovo, the address inside the million lire suits, design, business and marketing all seem to merge.

'The renunciation of huge profit for quality – in that balance lies the art,' says Mister Armani. Perhaps he really has got it all sewn up. □ *Paul Keers*