

EMILIO PUCCI (1914–1992)

For the May, 2017 Correnti della Storia article, I wish to look at another aspect of successful Italian design in addition to luxury automobiles and racing cars and their drivers. The world of clothing fashion and design has been and is representative of Italian creative genius as well. The first person we will consider is someone who brought Italian clothing design and manufacture to the forefront after the disaster of World War II and Mussolini's dictatorship. He is Emilio Pucci, who embodied in his lines of clothing the jet-set fashion and lifestyle glamor of post-war Italy. Multilingual (he was fluent in five languages), well-travelled, American-educated, an air force pilot, Olympic skier, politician, and aristocrat—he was a Renaissance man in every sense of the word. He was a man of elegant bearing whose artistic talent was self-taught and earned for him the nickname “divino marchese” (the divine marquis) because of his heavenly creations. He spent some of his formative years in the United States during the 1930s, attending the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, and Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where he received his MA in social science in 1937.



Emilio Pucci, Marchese di Barsento, was born on November 20, 1914 to one of Florence's oldest noble families that traced its ancestry back to the 13th Century. He would live and work in the Pucci Palace in Florence for much of his life. He was a keen sportsman, who swam, skied, fenced, played tennis, and raced cars.

At the age of 17, he traveled to Lake Placid, New York as part of the Italian team at the 1932 Winter Olympics, but he did not compete. After two years at the University of Milan, he studied agriculture at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, where he became a member of the Demosthenian Literary Society. In 1935, he won a skiing scholarship to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, and earned an MA in social science from Reed in 1937. He was awarded his doctorate (laurea) in political science from the University of Florence in 1941.

It was while he was at Reed that he began his creative fashion career that would lie dormant for several years because of World War II. While he was on Reed's ski team, he thought he could improve on the bulky clothing of the day by designing a new uniform. Ultimately, this clothing was manufactured by the Portland sports-wear firm, White Stag.

In 1938, he joined the Italian Air Force, and served as a S.M. 79 torpedo bomber pilot during World War II, rising to the rank of captain and decorated for valor by the time he resigned in 1952. During the war, he became a confidant of Benito Mussolini's eldest daughter, Edda. Pucci played a key role in the plan to save her husband, Mussolini's former Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano, who was on trial for his part in the removal of Mussolini from power in 1943. The plan involved delivering some of Ciano's papers (which were highly critical of Mussolini) to the Gestapo so that they could be bartered for Ciano's life. After Hitler vetoed the scheme, Pucci drove Edda to the Swiss border on January 9, 1944 and ensured her escape. Before escaping, Edda wrote last pleas to General Wilhelm Harster, SD commander in Italy, Hitler, and Mussolini; Pucci delivered these letters to an intermediary. He then attempted to flee to Switzerland himself, but was arrested and transported to San Vittore prison in Milan where he was tortured by the Gestapo in a futile attempt to extract information about Ciano. Pucci then managed to escape and reach Switzerland, where he remained until the end of the war.

Recovering from his torture wounds in Switzerland after the war, and with the Italian economy in ruins, Pucci made ends meet by teaching Italian and giving ski lessons in Zermatt. As noted above, his first clothing designs had been for the Reed ski team while he was at Reed in the mid-1930s. It was in 1947 that his work first garnered worldwide attention. Pucci designed a streamlined ski outfit for himself and some socialite female friends; the outfits were form-fitting, colorful but practical, and could be worn as fashionable clothes on the ski slopes. Photographer Toni Frissell, an employee of Harper's Bazaar, took pictures of Pucci and the women on the Zermatt ski slopes. These photographs were shown to the head buyer for Lord and Taylor Department Stores, Marjorie Griswold, and the fashion editor of Harper's Bazaar, Diana Vreeland. Ms. Vreeland asked Frissell to inquire if Pucci was willing to create skiwear for a European Winter Fashion story that subsequently appeared in the December, 1948 issue. Although there had been some experiments with stretch fabrics in Europe before the war, Pucci's sleek designs caused a sensation. Several were ordered for Lord and Taylor's New York store. This order was Pucci's first retail success in the United States and he received several offers from American manufacturers to produce more designs.



Pucci, however, needed additional financial security after World War II, and so he decided to market his designs on his own. With the return of peace, people were again traveling for pleasure. He astutely surmised that his boutique fashion line, which he named Emilio of Capri, and his casual, colorful resort fashions would be popular with the new visitors. His first boutique was located in the fashionable resort of *La Canzone del Mare* ("The Song of the Sea") on the island of Capri, even then a glamorous resort destination, where he developed wearable yet chic sportswear: "Capri" pants, sexy silk twill shirts with a masculine cut fitted to show off the female figure, open-toed sandals, and striped jersey tops, all in refreshingly vibrant colors that evoked the island's natural beauty. International jet-setters were frequent customers at his boutique. Diana Vreeland praised Pucci as "divinely Italian."

Although it was extremely unusual at that time for an aristocrat to be a shop owner and designer or dressmaker, Pucci enjoyed the creative process. He set up his design workshop in the Pucci family's grand palazzo in the heart of Florence, and began working closely with expert fabric manufacturers in Italy to pioneer and patent revolutionary stretch fabrics that avoided the heavy, rigid fabrics largely in circulation at that time. Contrary to his design contemporaries in other parts of the world, Pucci was driven by the desire to liberate women, granting them unprecedented freedom of movement. His stretch silk and cotton jerseys were weightless, unlined, and wrinkle-proof; precursors for a modern, travel-friendly wardrobe that captivated a new generation of modern, active women.

The next phase of Pucci's career began at the first fashion show of Italian designers, which was organized by Giovanni Battista Giorgini in 1951 and held in the Sala Bianca at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. Other Italian designers presented their work at the show in addition to Pucci. Major American stores like Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue sent their buyers, who brought Italian, postwar, ready-to-wear fashion back to the United States. Pucci's sleek, lightweight T-shirts, jersey dresses, silk shirts, and tapered pants made for an

exciting new style. His designs featured sensual, free-flowing lines that followed the natural curves of the body —effortlessly elegant clothing which took women from day to evening and from jet planes to seaside cocktail parties, perfectly complementing the lifestyle of the high-rolling, jet-set crowd. The collections had the allure of couture without the impracticality and cost of haute couture, heralding the novel concept of designer ready-to-wear which had a cascade effect throughout the fashion industry.



Initially he had used his knowledge of stretch fabrics to produce a swimwear line in 1949, but soon moved onto other items such as brightly colored, boldly patterned silk scarves. Stanley Marcus of Neiman Marcus encouraged him to use the designs in blouses and then a popular line of wrinkle-free printed silk dresses. Pucci added a boutique in Rome as business thrived, helped by Capri's role as a destination for the international jet-set. By the early 1950s, Pucci was achieving international recognition, receiving the Neiman-Marcus Award in Dallas and the Burdine's Sunshine Award in Miami.



It was during the 1950s that Pucci began developing his signature prints: graphic, abstract designs inspired by the world around him – Sicilian mosaics, heraldic banners, Bali Batiks, and African motifs. It was the first time that such pulsing geometric patterns had been incorporated into clothing and the effect was highly original, so much so that the international fashion press, impressed by his bold, radical approach, crowned him “The Prince of Prints.” Each print was like a work of art created on a silk canvas, framed with a decorative border and signed in the artist’s name—“Emilio.” (Marjorie Griswold of Lord and Taylor, Pucci’s major retail supporter, had already suggested that he sign his name in script within the print design because the motifs themselves could be copied. Hence, the authenticity of a Pucci garment can be verified when the signature “Emilio” is visible throughout the print. Pucci used his first name rather than his family name because it was considered shocking for a member of the Italian nobility to work as a dressmaker or tradesman instead of a diplomat or politician. He said, “I am the first member of my family to work in a thousand years.”)

He brought a luscious, bright color palette to these designs; as a colorist, he was unparalleled and drew inspiration primarily from the colors of natural landscapes of the Mediterranean, but also from the exotic locales to which he travelled. He boldly mixed espresso and azure, tangerine and fuchsia, lime and turquoise, plum, and many other shades. The result was a sophisticated fusion of color which became the hallmark of Emilio designs. Instantly recognizable, his glorious and joyful combinations exuded energy and emotion and allowed the designs of the clothes themselves to remain relatively simple.

Pucci became one of the first designers with a recognizable high-status label and signature style. He was a leading pioneer of diversification and paved the way for widespread fashion licensing. He designed various products from perfumes to accessories, including handbags, scarves, sunglasses, tights, and shoes. In 1959, he decided to create a lingerie line. He opted to develop the line abroad in order to avoid the difficulties he had experienced a decade earlier trying to match available fabrics to the patterns of his first swimwear line. As a result, he came to Chicago giving the lingerie contract to Formfit-Rogers mills. The venture proved to be successful, and he was made vice president in charge of design and merchandising for the company a year later.

Pucci's influence extended even to the moon! In 1971, he created the three bird motif for the design of the [1972 Apollo 15 Mission patch](#), although the crew replaced his blues and greens (*right*) with a more patriotic red, white, and blue (*far right*). In 1977, he even designed the interior of an automobile for a special edition of the Lincoln Continental Mark IV.



WORKING WITH BRANIFF AIRWAYS

In 1965, New York ad agency Jack Tinker and Associates was hired by Braniff International Airways to update their image. The agency's Mary Wells hired Alexander Girard to remodel the terminals, and Pucci to design new clothes for the flight attendants. As the ads put it, it was "The End of the Plain Plane."

Pucci would end up designing six complete collections for Braniff flight attendants, pilots, and ground crew between 1965 and 1974. (A mark of his impact was that by 1968 even Barbie had versions of all of his first four uniforms!) These avant-garde creations were designed as individual components to be added or removed as weather dictated. The uniforms included turtlenecks, T-shirts, crop-jackets, and culottes.



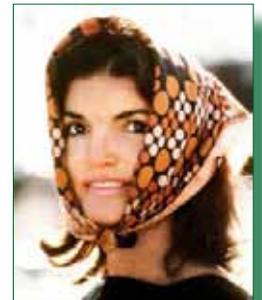
Among the more unusual innovations was a "bubble helmet"—a clear plastic hood worn by flight attendants between terminal buildings and aircraft to protect their hairdos from rain and the blast of jet engines. There were two designs of the "bubble helmet" both of which Braniff called "RainDome." Pucci called them "*Bola* and *Space Helmet* by Emilio Pucci." The *Bola* was a zippered version that ran down the center of the helmet; the *Space Helmet* was a snap together design in place of the zipper. In addition, Pucci incorporated Girard's "BI" logo into some of his prints.



By the 1960s, a dress in the distinctively patterned Pucci print, which used as many as 16 colors in a single design, was the uniform of fashionable women everywhere in the world. He became as famous as the women who wore his designs—a list that included Marilyn Monroe (*left*) (who was buried in a green Pucci dress),



Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Lauren Bacall, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (*right*), Grace Kelly, Barbara ("Babe") Paley, Gloria Guinness, Barbara Walters, Gloria Steinem, and many others. Helen Gurley Brown, the author and former editor of *Cosmopolitan*, said, "The dresses were spare, sexy, and liberating!"



Not to be outdone by fashionable women, men also wore wild and colorful Pucci ties, bowties, jackets, and beach attire.

In addition to his work in fashion during the 60's, Pucci entered politics. He contested the Florence–Pistoia district for the Italian Liberal Party (PLI) in the Italian election of April, 1963. He came second on the party's slate with 2,780 votes behind Vittorio Fossombroni, but the party only won one seat that year. However, he succeeded Fossombroni in the Italian Chamber of Deputies in August of that year. He retained his seat in the 1968 election, but lost it in the 1972 election, even though he was the district's top PLI candidate with 4,231 votes.

THE PUCCI REVIVAL



The wave of enthusiasm for Pucci's clothes known as "Puccimania" reached its height in 1967. Pucci's dresses became less popular in the 1970s as fashion trends changed, but the early 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in current Pucci styles and a blossoming market for vintage fashion— especially Puccis from the 1960s. Pucci collectors of the early 2000s included Madonna, Jennifer Lopez, Nicole Kidman, Julia Roberts, Paloma Picasso and Ivana Trump. Vintage Puccis were sold in specialty shops and at auctions around the world. Elizabeth Penberthy, the manager of the Pucci boutique in Manhattan expressed it well: "Few designers peak twice in fashion." Emilio Pucci was one of the few who were able to do so.

In February 1959, Pucci married Baronessa Cristina Nannini from Rome, about whom he later remarked, "I married a Botticelli." They had two children, Alessandro and Laudomia. Emilio Pucci died of a heart attack in a nursing home in Florence on Sunday morning, November 29, 1992. He was 78 years old. (His son, Alessandro, died in a car crash in 1998, six years after his father).



Following Emilio Pucci's death, his company continued under the guidance of his daughter, Laudomia (*left*). The rich archive of fabrics maintained in the Palazzo Pucci provided an ongoing source of fashions for the Pucci boutiques. As creative director, Laudomia Pucci hired talented designers to continue her father's concepts. In February, 2000 LVMH, the French luxury goods conglomerate headed by Bernard Arnault, purchased 67% of the Emilio Pucci SRL company, with the Pucci family retaining the rest of the business. With the influx of money from the sale, more Pucci boutiques, filled with Pucci products, were opened around the world, from Bangkok to Palm Beach.

The fashion editor Carrie Donovan summed up Emilio Pucci's illustrious career in an article in the *New York Times*, "He personified a moment, rather a long one, in history."

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: 1) Famous Fashion Designers website; 2) Love to Know: Beauty and Fashion website; 3) "In Memoriam-Emilio Pucci, MA '37", Reed College Magazine, February, 1993 on Reed College website; 4) Morris, Bernadine, "Emilio Pucci, Designer of Bright Prints, Dies at 78." Obituary in New York Times, December 1, 1992, pg. B12; 5) EmilioPucci.com website; and 6) Wikipedia.

