

Ralph Rucci: From Philadelphia to Paris

Marisa Iallouardo (October 15, 2009)



One of America's most prominent designers also has Italian roots

If we were to play that old word-association game—the one where I say a word and you say the first thing that comes to mind—"Italian fashion" would likely yield Gucci and Prada as answers. But what



if I were to say “Italian-American fashion?” or even “fashion by Italian-Americans?” That’s where things get trickier. A mall mainstay like Armani Exchange? Possibly Lady Gaga—the fashion-loving singer does have Italian roots. But it turns out there’s no need to

venture very far from the runway: Ralph Rucci, one of American’s most prominent designers and a nearly 30-year industry vet, also happens to be Italian-American.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, both Rucci’s paternal and maternal grandparents hail from Italy—Abruzzo and Calabria, respectively. His father, who worked as a butcher, and his mother taught him to dream big, that he could do whatever he set his mind to. He told the [South Philly Review](#) [2], “Ever since I was a kid, they just instilled this ambition and belief that the world is your oyster and you’re a fool if you don’t pick it up and eat it.”

And Rucci did just that. After his junior year studying philosophy at Temple University he high-tailed it to New York City. There, he worked for Halston, the iconic American designer who created, among other influential pieces, the pillbox hat Jackie Kennedy wore to her husband’s inauguration.

By 1994, the designer launched his own label, Chado Ralph Rucci. Chado is the name of a Japanese tea ceremony which, according to [New York](#) [3] magazine, “represents respect, tranquility, and integrity.” And the description isn’t far from the designs themselves. Rucci creates sophisticated, architectural pieces in luxury fabrics. “Mr. Rucci’s palette, his poeticism with cut, and his almost illicitly sumptuous employment of extraordinary fabric form a pronounced demonstration of comely grace,” wrote Iké Udé in *aRude* magazine. As a testament to his talent, in 2002, Rucci became the first American since the 1930’s to show and create a couture collection for Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris—a honor that thrust him into the international spotlight. And since then, he’s been twice nominated as Womenswear Fashion Designer of Year by the Council of Fashion Designers of America and has had museum exhibits center around his work.

His most important relationship, however, may be with the women who buy his creations. While many designers skew their collections young, Rucci caters to a more mature audience. Martha Stewart is one of his most famed clients (she even narrated a 2008 [documentary](#) [4] about him) and socialites like Deeda Blair are forever fans who don’t mind his high price tags. And Rucci’s admiration for them is mutual: “In a time when most shows are loaded with starlets, store buyers and media, you know a designer cares about his real end-customers when he saves them front row seats,” wrote Christina Binkley in the [Wall Street Journal](#) [5] of his most recent show at last month’s Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in New York.

It was there that he debuted his Spring 2010 collection, which came in a palette of white, tan and black with a few pops of gold and red and featured feminine skirts, gowns and suits created in light, structural silhouettes. Inspired by the late German dancer Pina Bausch and the sculptures of Lynn Chadwick, Rucci says in his notes on the show, “This season the idea of evolution makes a literal impact on the collection in the form of embroidery techniques that can be construed as stairways, or ladders, rising up from the hems of garments and literally becoming more refined as they climb.”

And while you might not find many of his pieces in mainstream magazine editorials, the press praised his spring collection, which received a standing ovation after its debut on the runway. “If Ralph Rucci attracts customers of a certain age, it’s partly because the clothes he designs, with their intricate handwork—the sheer paneling, the braided insets—are so very costly. But maybe it’s time for the celebrity stylists out there to take another look.” wrote Nicole Phelps on [style.com](#) [6] And blogger [Cheryl Shops](#) [7] wrote, “Have you ever seen clothes so beautiful, they make you cry? Maybe exhaustion had something to do with it, but during the grand finale of Ralph Rucci’s runway show, I was literally moved to tears.” And [SFLuxe](#) [8] put it most simply, “It was Rucci at his most original and stunning best.”

And—sorry Lady Gaga—but when asked about fashions by Italian Americans, those might be the best words to come to mind. Here, a few of looks from Rucci’s Spring 2010 collection.



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