

ROBERTO CAVALLI



RENAISSANCE MAN

ROBERTO CAVALLI RAISES HORSES AND PARROTS, LOVES ART AND WOMEN, FLIES A HELICOPTER FOR INSPIRATION—AND STILL HAS TIME TO CREATE SOPHISTICATED CLOTHING.

BY DENISE WOHL AND SANDRA MARDENFELD



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PHOTO BY: RUDY FACCHIN VON STEIN

My philosophy was always to work hard and work well. If you did that, I thought, you would have success," said Roberto Cavalli, the designer known for his experimentation with leather, silk-screening, and jeans. "I never liked attending events that required black tie and I hated mingling with people I didn't like. In the past, I lost many opportunities because of my feelings. Today, designers are celebrities. This visibility I have never accepted because my designs, my styles, shouldn't be for the masses. You should have to look for them. Now I understand, though, that there are many channels to reach customers."

Roberto Cavalli spoke about his past, present, and his intent to increase his presence in America, over lunch recently at one of his favorite New York restaurants, Sophia's on 61st. Although the bulk of his business is currently in Europe, Roberto Cavalli is expanding his operations here, with plans to open a Madison Avenue store as well as an outlet in Miami's South Beach. "It's my favorite country," he said. "Americans love my creations, and I love America—especially New York which is the center of design."

Roberto Cavalli even owns an apartment in New York's Metropolitan Towers which he visits often and where he spends each Christmas holiday. "I love Christmas in New York, from the Christmas tree in Times Square to the lights on 57th Street," he said.

You could say design, or even more so art, is in Roberto Cavalli's blood. His maternal grandfather, Giuseppe Rossi, a famous Italian impressionist painter, who has two portraits on permanent exhibit in the Uffizi Gallery at Florence's Pitti Palace, inspired Roberto Cavalli to continue the family legacy and attend the Florence Art Academy. Even today, Roberto Cavalli often seems more fashion artist than designer given his distinct printing work. Many of the garments bearing his signature and a serial number are even collectors' items—just like fine art objects.



Roberto Cavalli began his career in the 60s. As a 22-year-old, he started painting on pullovers, selling enough to indulge in a showy convertible. "I had a great many friends in glamorous professions—photographers, model agency owners, and such. I, too, wanted to be in the limelight. I chose fashion as my forum." His clothing became even more popular—selling to companies like Hermes—when he started silk screening on fabric and leather. He began silk screening on leather after meeting Mario Valentino—the leather designer of the time—at a party in Florence.

"'What do you do?' he asked me," said Roberto Cavalli. "I told him I did silk screening on leather. Mario asked to see some samples, but I was bluffing. At that time, I only did sweaters. The next two days I went crazy trying to figure out how to silk screen on leather so I could show him some of my work. It came out beautifully."

Leather became Roberto Cavalli's signature material—his work on painted leatherware garnered much attention and was considered revolutionary (until then leather was used exclusively for sports jackets). Initially he showed his clothing in Paris. The line was a critical success, but a commercial failure. Afterward, his leather clothing went into storage. Loath to waste the material, Roberto Cavalli created leather patchwork—working with used jeans purchased from the U.S. This time, his collection was a smash.

From 1972-1977, he showed his clothes at the Pitti Palace's White Hall in Florence, as did many other designers who went on to international acclaim. "Like all Florentines, I did things my way and didn't join the forces moving on to Milan. So I missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime," he said. "It was profanity in a way, such says a lot about my wish to go against the stream and get fun out of working, too." Still, his collections gathered attention, especially for their innovative prints and original leatherwork.

Roberto Cavalli stayed in Florence where he experimented with materials: incising leather, shaving velvet, printing fabric and tricot, and producing collections for a small cadre of followers. "I've never experienced a crisis in my search for new types of basic materials from which to create fashion," said Roberto Cavalli. "There is still room for research and our capacity to propose new things. One must know how to renew oneself, and one must do so constantly."

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In 1994, The Italian National Fashion Chamber invited him to show his clothes in Milan. His collections, with their printed designs and unusual materials, were a huge success with both the buyers and the press.

Within three years, Roberto Cavalli became an international presence, showing his work in New York (1994 and 1995), and inaugurating showrooms in Dusseldorf, Germany (1995) and on Via della Spiga in Milan (which moved to a new 300-square meter space at Via Ges in 1997). He also opened a New York showroom in 1997.

Now, Roberto Cavalli controls a \$100 million empire with showroom locations in Germany, Milan, and New York, as well as freestanding boutiques in Paris, Venice, Porto Cervo, St. Tropez, St. Barts, and Crans Montana in Switzerland. The New York showroom services more than 30 top U.S. stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue. He also comes out with two collections each year.

Florence-born, Roberto Cavalli loathes boredom and banalities. Like the artist he is, he lives in a former 16th century renovated medieval castle on a Florentine hillside with his wife, Eva, and his three children Rachele, 14; Daniel, 11; and Robert Jr. 3 1/2. He met Eva after serving as a judge for a 70s Miss Universe Pageant. Eva, Miss Austria, became first runner-up. He invited her to Florence to model where they fell in love. Today they work side by side with Eva as Roberto Cavalli's head stylist. "When I'm in love, I can create more easily. I put the person I'm in love with on a pedestal and I think about how I can dress her and make her more beautiful and sexy," said Roberto Cavalli. "My wife Eva is both beautiful and talented."

Roberto Cavalli is inspired by women, all women, and said, "I get great pleasure from dressing them. I am offended by distasteful fashion. I think women should look sexy, but never, ever vulgar. My garments are suitable for women of any age, from the very young to older married women, and can be worn not only from day to day, but also on special occasions such as an evening in a disco. Fashion of the moment needs color. I think people are tired of black, black, black."

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Besides adoring clothing, Roberto Cavalli loves animals. "I live in a Noah's Ark situation," said Roberto Cavalli. "It's a safe feeling. A safe place. I have horses and a German Shepherd. Now I'm in love with parrots. They're such intelligent animals. They love you with no limits. They also love one person all their life. Sometimes they bite everyone except their master. I like that parrots have a bit of Florentine in them."

He has two children from a previous marriage: a 32-year-old daughter, Cristiana, and a 29-year-old son Tommaso, who runs Roberto Cavalli's breeding stables. Roberto Cavalli also rears racehorses for a hobby, producing several champions over the years. "Being a Tuscan thoroughbred, I admire loyalty. Animals reflect this quality to the extreme," said Roberto Cavalli. Coincidentally Roberto Cavalli means horse in Italian.

Roberto Cavalli loves excitement, which explains his joy in flying. He owns and pilots his own helicopter which he uses whenever possible. "I used to fly all around Europe-Milan, Paris, Rome," he said. "Now I'm a bit more careful, although I still to love to fly. Up there, I am alone with the sky, the sun. My love of beauty is the impetus behind my great love for life. Life, nature and all that surrounds us is so wonderful. I want to live every moment to the fullest."