

Episode 0: Introduction

Transcript of the introductory episode “Gianfranco Ferré” of the podcast The Gianfranco Ferré Lesson. MOOC “Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré”, Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

This is “The Gianfranco Ferré Lesson”, a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center, dedicated to revisiting notes, lectures, and conference texts delivered by the designer throughout his career. Each episode explores a different theme through Gianfranco Ferré’s own words, enriched with references to books and writings that broaden the perspective, alongside a rich visual selection that transforms words into images and visual concepts.

In this introductory episode, the designer retraces the journey from the early days as an architecture student at the Politecnico di Milano to founding his brand, Gianfranco Ferré, in 1978, designing Ready-to-wear, Haute Couture, and accessories collections.

With great emotion, I find myself speaking to the students at the very school I attended many years ago, where I enrolled with rather unclear ideas, but with a strong passion for drawing. I left the School of Architecture at the Politecnico di Milano a bit more focused: paradoxically, with a clear certainty that I would not pursue architecture or interior design. I wouldn’t become an architect, but I can say with confidence that every one of my creations contains at least a trace – and often much more – of what I learned at the Politecnico di Milano.

My journey into the world of fashion began by chance – even before I finished my architecture studies. It started more as a pleasure in working with materials and creating something original that reflected my personal taste, rather than a conscious decision to become a fashion designer. And perhaps it’s no coincidence that this adventure began with bijoux. This isn’t some made-up legend, crafted after I gained fame just to add an interesting backstory. The lasting importance I still place on bijoux as fundamental elements that complement clothing and decorate the body is proof of that. I started in a small workshop, set up somewhat haphazardly in my family home in Legnano, amid the slightly skeptical but never hostile surprise of my family. Given their values and outlook on life, they couldn’t quite understand why I would settle for what they saw as “artisan ambitions” after earning a degree in architecture. This was the late 1960s. With the help of my brother – our family’s “technician” – I created my first fantasy bijoux: a few belts, unusual objects for the time, ahead of what you could find in magazines. It was genuine craftsmanship. Formal rigor and a strong sense of design were matched by hands-on work with materials like metal, leather, and even plastic.

I showed some of these pieces to friends, gave a few away – and eventually, they caught the attention of some industry professionals. They stood out, sparked curiosity, and got photographed. After some initial contacts and small orders, fashion journalist and talent scouts like Anna Piaggi and Anna Riva asked me to create something unique and eye-catching for their magazines: bijoux that

blended pop and hyperrealism – rhinestone and plastic hearts, brooches shaped like oversized fiery-red lips. Magazine features followed quickly, and soon my pieces even landed on the covers. Camilla Cederna, a legendary figure in Italian journalism, who covered fashion and current trends in her column for *L'Espresso*, started to notice me. I still remember the joy my whole family felt! Around that time, two visionary women in fashion retail, Ileana Pareto Spinola and Anne Sophie Benazzo, early advocates of ready-to-wear and cutting-edge design, took on the distribution of my work. My creations were shown to both Italian and international buyers and were considered quite interesting. That opened the door to my first collaborations designing accessories, first with Christiane Bailly, a French designer working in Italy, and, most importantly, with Walter Albini, one of the founding fathers of Italian ready-to-wear, and the first to bridge the gap between the atelier and the industrial world.

And it was from the fashion industry that another stroke of luck came my way. In 1973, Sangiorgio Impermeabili – a Genoa-based company and leader in outerwear – asked me to design my first clothing line, Ketch, which was entirely produced in India. In addition, 1973 brought another turning point: I met Franco Mattioli, who entrusted me with the creative direction of his luxury women's fashion line. Mattioli, a well-established entrepreneur from Bologna, offered me the opportunity to design for his brand Baila, a sophisticated and modern ready-to-wear label with a refined and innovative spirit. I made some sketches, something that already came naturally to me, both because of my training in architecture and my natural inclination toward methodology. In March the following year, my first Baila collection (Fall/Winter 1974–75) was released. It was a true success: on one hand, I received overwhelming praise; on the other, there was criticism for being too avant-garde. Some people wanted something more reassuring. Despite the mixed reactions, my collaboration with Mattioli continued.

The critiques and the growing sales of the following collections confirmed that we were on the right path. That key experience allowed me to fully develop my idea of luxury ready-to-wear, meaning a product that is refined and high-quality, but still industrially made. In May 1978, in partnership with Franco Mattioli, the Gianfranco Ferré company was founded. Later that October, I presented my first women's collection, and four years later, my first men's collection, followed by my accessory lines.

Sources

Transcription of the lecture "Composition and fashion". Milan, 14th March 1997, Politecnico di Milano. Seminar of the course in Theories and Techniques of Architecture titled "Composition in the Practice of Art".

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