

Fashion designers have the gift of transformation, and on a sunny late afternoon, Giambattista Valli's studio, located on the Rue Boissy d'Anglas in Paris's 8th arrondissement, resembles a garden in full bloom. Hanging from rails that shoot through two connecting showrooms is a stunning display of silk faille, gazar, cady and tulle gowns, poplin blouses and long-line organza skirts that glimmer with mosaic-like patches of sequins. One ivory chiffon gown features a burst of hand-sewn wisteria-hued petals around the décolleté; another outfit has a vast, trailing skirt made from hand-tufted tulle tiers that ripple in a wave of sunflower yellow and ivory; while more modestly (if you can ever call haute couture modest), there is a waisted, sinewy dress in vivid green and yellow "daisy" macramé and embroidery. Every piece in this homage to botanical wonders aches with beauty. The atelier's *petites mains* have spent thousands of hours making the collection.

"On one side of the room is the show collection and on the other there are runway edits. It is editing that makes a strong movie, a collection, a life – it's true," says the Rome-born and raised Valli. Unlike his exuberant creations, the designer is anonymously dressed in a black sweater, jeans, clear-framed glasses and his signature string of "good luck" 17th-century Mughal pearls. It's the day after Valli presented his haute-couture collection, entitled simply No 7. "I don't like names, I prefer numbers. Each number is like a new chapter in the same story," he muses, while his young, platinum-haired male assistant Elia places down a cup of black tea. The novelty mug, which sits rather grandly on a napkin-covered saucer, features Miss Piggy – also in a string of pearls.

"The collection starts with memories or flashes of things that come to mind, and in this case it was the

Alhambra gardens for both their eclecticism of cultures and their atmosphere. Gardens and flowers are part of the ABC of Giambattista Valli – they just look so good on women," says Valli. He also drew inspiration from the gardens and masterfully depicted light in the work of Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923). There is an echo of Sorolla's era in the fishtail skirts, and a Moorish influence in the swooping, cape-backed black silk-cady gowns. "My woman, she's not a fashion icon or a fashion queen – she's a person, a human being. She's always in love, or near to love. I imagine her taking a morning walk in her lover's pyjama jacket and a ballgown skirt from the evening before. Three words: ageless, timeless, effortless – that's the DNA. I see this collection on friends and customers. It could be worn by Bianca Brandolini d'Adda, Eugenie Niarchos or Charlotte Casiraghi." In one flourish of open-ended sentences, Valli has framed himself as the romantic "poet", the astute brand director and a designer with a vision that appeals to a collective sentimental sweet spot.

From this Paris address, where his studio, showroom and boutique are located, Valli creates two haute-couture collections and two ready-to-wear collections, plus resort and pre-fall, handbags and shoes, every year. This week has also seen the Milan catwalk launch of a younger "sister" line called Giamba (the designer's nickname) that has been in the planning for 18 months. There are two main collections and two pre-collections, as well as accessories, and the maison has recently been extended to a fourth floor to accommodate the enlarged team.

The Giamba line (produced by Italian manufacturer BVM SpA and distributed by GBO, a firm established by Valli in partnership with entrepreneur Mario Bandiera, the founder of BVM) is about easy, eclectic, free-spirited everyday feminine pieces, and has a target of about 500 retailers globally. It promises to significantly boost the estimated €22m in wholesale revenues made by the Giambattista Valli and accessories collections from over 300 stockists (including Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman in the US). Every season has seen a growth in sales, and for autumn/winter 2014, ready-to-wear has

BUSINESS *is* BLOOMING

As owner, CEO and creative director of a fast-growing brand, Giambattista Valli is a rarity in the fashion world. As he launches a new fashion line, he talks to Harriet Quick about "flower explosion" party dresses and his need to stamp his mark on every aspect of the business. Portrait by Stephane Remael

Giambattista Valli at his Rue Boissy d'Anglas atelier in Paris. Couture evening dresses, from far left: silk cloqué embroidered with cotton daisies and leaves; silk tulle with daisies and leaves; silk faille with mimosas and leaves; silk-jacquard with magnolias and geraniums. All price on request





expected to do everything. You pass the pins and never disturb the master's work," says Robert Forrest, who was a consultant at the house at the time. Ungaro was so impressed by Valli's talent that he made him creative director of ready-to-wear in 2001. "Giambattista has always been very driven, and his work for Ungaro was light, fresh and young, all about colour, texture, fabric and luxuriousness – he totally got that. The stores loved what he did," says Forrest.

"It was a beautiful moment in Paris," reflects Valli. "John Galliano was at Dior, Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton, Alexander McQueen at Givenchy and Stella McCartney at Chloé. It was a 'super-genius' era. I think it's a British attitude, but everyone supported one another. Today, it is much more fragmented, with everyone in his or her tower."

At the same time, the late 1990s witnessed a sea change in fashion. A surge of new designers, including Nicolas Ghesquière at Balenciaga, ushered in a view of Parisian luxury that reflected urban life, style, culture and a savvy attitude. The staging of shows shifted from the tidy, polite atmosphere of the Carrousel auditorium underneath the Louvre to historic and industrial buildings where designers were able to project a "vision".

After Valli left Emanuel Ungaro, he set out on his own, showing his first autumn/winter collection in 2005. Italian manufacturer the Gilmar Group produced and distributed the line for the first five years. Valli's trademark of relaxed dress-up – cashmere sweaters with pouf skirts; ruched evening gowns with flourishes of lace and velvet; exaggerated embellishments – had a freshness and exuberance that hit a nerve. Retailers were lacking a new voice in what had become a staid occasionwear market. His "flower explosion" party dresses, volumes, kinetic ruffles and furls soon became moneymaking signatures. In 2007, he also became the designer of Moncler Gamme Rouge, the fashion-led collection launched by the Italian outerwear brand.

Shoe designer Charlotte Olympia Dellal worked as an intern for Valli, both at Ungaro and later at his own label in Paris, while she was a student at Cordwainers at the London College of Fashion. "He works incredibly hard and his attention to detail and craftsmanship is perfectionist," says Olympia Dellal, who owns several of his party dresses, jackets, pencil skirts and leopard-print pieces. "He loves to know that you had a good

time in a dress, even if it ended up being a little trashed after a fantastic night out – he'd much rather you did that than spend an evening sitting down trying to preserve it." Olympia Dellal called on Valli to make the wedding gown for her marriage to financier Maxim Crewe in 2010. "I thought I would be so controlling over what my wedding dress should be, but I handed it over to Giambattista and did not interfere."

What emerged was a grand design featuring a vast, cascading ruffled-tulle skirt tied at the waist with Valli's signature grosgrain ribbon. After the ceremony, Olympia Dellal stepped out of the skirt to reveal a "second" dress that exploded into a fishtail: "I wore minimal make-up and a silk flower in my hair – the dress was magical and felt like a second skin."

Fine art, pop culture, photography, erotica and sculpture are all part of Valli's world. He has a love for the work of Piero Manzoni and Alberto Burri, as well as the photography of Wolfgang Tillmans and the late Corinne Day, with whom he worked on haute-couture campaigns for Emanuel Ungaro. He calls Elia for the Rizzoli book and leafs through the pages with nimble fingers, flipping from a Louise Bourgeois sketch, to abstract work by Burri, to a portrait by a friend, Francesco Clemente, and through to images of his collections in the making. His illustrations are always on tall, long-legged, oval-faced figures that look a lot like Elia. "Maybe that's why I chose him," Valli jests. The book is a key to the Valli world and is 400 pages long.

The influence of Rome is explored in a brilliant short film that was on show at this year's *Glamour of Italian Fashion V&A* exhibition. Images of baroque architecture are spliced with clips of Antonioni and Fellini heroines, creating a collage that bounces to and fro between decadence and solemnity, bathos and grace. In the book and in the short film, you can witness Valli's vivid, sponge-like mind at work. He assimilates and "computes" at speed. When work is done, he closes the door and heads to his airy apartment, which also houses an impressive collection of art. "US *Vogue* shot my apartment – I had to take down the erotic work," he laughs.

His front rows always attract a cross-section of the *jeunesse dorée* – young, glossy heiresses, entrepreneurs, actresses and party girls who over the years have regularly included Bianca Brandolini d'Adda, Elena Perminova, Tatiana Santo Domingo and Eugenie Niarchos. In Valli's brightly coloured, flirtatious dresses and strappy heels, they exude a confident, fun-loving sense of glamour. His flounced skirts, feathers and ruffles are made for dancing.

"I always think that I'm still at the beginning – there's so much to do. What have been the main challenges? You know what – I did not stop to look at the problems, but have been running to resolve everything. The moment you stop taking risks is the moment you get old. When I started the business I was 38 and wanted to take that risk because I knew it would be now or never. I looked back when I did the book and really saw that what I have started is not finished at all. If it was 'done', I would want to change job."

At that point, Valli excuses himself. An Italian editor has arrived to view the collection, and the designer nimbly leaps up to continue his call of duty. ♦ Giambattista Valli, 30 Rue Boissy d'Anglas, 75008 Paris (+331-4017 0588; www.giambattistavalli.com) and branch and see Harvey Nichols and other stockists.

Clockwise from top left: textured silk-blend coat, price on request. Couture sequined-silk giant-bow dress, price on request. Cashmere jacket, about £1,980, mohair polo neck, about £710, and wool skirt, about £710. Felted-mohair dress, price on request. Couture embroidered-silk macramé geranium and leaves dress, price on request

