

Critical Shopper

Cintra Wilson

Indulging His Every Indulgence



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMEL TOPPIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

WILLIAM FAULKNER once said: "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again, since it is life."

When it comes to redoubling the reach of his own influence, Giorgio Armani seems to enjoy a tireless libido.

Mr. Armani was a child in Mussolini's Italy. From 1961 to 1970, he designed the Hitman label for Nino Cerruti. In 1974, with the support of a partner, Sergio Galeotti, Mr. Armani formed his own company. Sales, in 1975, totaled \$14,000.

In 1980, Mr. Armani designed Richard Gere's wardrobe for "American Gigolo." Overnight the Armani suit became the Ferrari of men's fashion — an internationally recognized symbol of success, which, by virtue of superlative engineering, was also the sexiest thing on wheels. His annual sales grew to \$100 million by 1985. Money, grace, respect and all the dirty glamour of Hollywood. What more could a designer want?

More.

Mr. Galeotti died in 1985, but in the next years, the brand exploded into labels to outfit nearly every demographic: Emporio Armani, Armani Jeans, Armani Collezioni, Armani Privé, Armani Casa, Armani Cosmetics. By 2004, the annual sales were close to \$2 billion.

Mr. Armani now enjoys the kind of papal infallibility that only auteurs like Kurosawa, Bergman or Fellini attain. He is at that gilded point in his career where he has the freedom and the power to indulge his whims and caprices. He can do whatever the hell he wants.

And fabulously enough, he did.

During the dark night of America's economic soul, he opened Armani/5th Avenue — a four-floor landmark that is part flagship, part restaurant, part architectural folly — and a whole family reunion of all the labels related to Armani.

In 2000, when Mr. Armani had a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral staircase must have impressed him: he has built a variation of it inside his store that quite possibly improves on the original. The Guggenheim resembles a collapsible camping cup; the Armani staircase looks like a Slinky made by unfurling a giant spiral-cut endive. It's wild, organic and throbbing, a veritable turbine generating the store's giddy atmosphere.

I started at the top floor, with the big modern restaurant — all shiny black floors and ceilings and backlit white walls embedded with LED's that dance in time to Brazilian casino jazz. Just outside, there's a dolci bar replete with black chocolates and shelves of fragrant, hatbox-size panettone.

Outside the food court, this floor houses posh-casual men's wear. All the Armani signatures abound: precise silhouettes in slate, pewter and shiitake; prohibitive cashmeres, leathers with the wet sheen of cake batter. Today's gigolo might enjoy a calf fur jacket, laser-cut into the pattern of a crocodile pelt (\$2,795), or perhaps a long mauve shearing "Super Fly" coat with a rabbit-fur lining, dyed to resemble chinchilla (no locatable price tag — a recurring theme).

Armani Casa occupies a corner of the second floor. These are unaffordable housewares in black lacquer, leather and chrome,

all of which belong in Mickey Rourke's apartment in "9½ Weeks." In that spirit, I hovered around an Art Deco tea set (teapot \$1,395; creamer, \$910) with the intention of beating up anyone capable of buying it.

Mr. Armani has always supported feminism in the form of power-mad C.F.O. wardrobes: swank haberdashery, chalk-stripe and pinstripe suits in fabrics generally reserved for the male. This season, the recurring shape is revamped from his own 1980s-redux-of-the-1940s designs: big shoulders, wide lapels, one button at the navel, big pleated skirts tapering at the knees.

At first, it looked like too direct a quotation from the '80s, but on closer inspection, it was more contoured at the waist and quite slick. I tried on a pinstripe version in silver wool-acetate — sharp as a bright scalpel; perfect for an economic hit woman. The skirt, apart from an unforgivable little panty-bow at the waist, had excellent geometry and felt very smart.

Strangely enough, this suit cut could be found throughout the store in different fabrics, at drastically different prices. The version of the jacket I tried was \$1,875. The Emporio version of virtually the same jacket, in a lighter fabric, was \$795. In the Giorgio section, the same jacket in blue velvet was \$4,150.

As usual, the women's accessories are covetable. I lusted after an asymmetric little

black beret with a built-in jaunty angle (\$315) and some patent leather driving gloves (\$595) — all very gothic Bonnie Parker. Or maybe Bonnie Jessica Parker. Either way, they went with bootleg Champagne and tommy guns.

I admired a cashmere cardigan in a snakeskin pattern (\$2,175), which I assumed, from the price, had been knitted by actual snakes.

I tried a very small, sparkly black suede motorcycle jacket, which had no price tag. The salesman, one of several adorable Italian boys in cigarette-leg suits with very tall hair, informed me that the

jacket was made exclusively for the store and was \$1,495.

You really have to suffer to find a price for the more expensive items; they are often well hidden or nonexistent. I wrestled open every pocket of a crocodile doctor bag and rummaged elbow-deep under the dust bag as if I had lost my keys before giving up.

I bought a bright orange lipstick (\$30) that promised "eight hour wear." The lighting was so dim I didn't realize how bright it was, but when I woke up the next morning, I was impressed with its longevity. I looked as if I'd spent the night kissing a freeway cone.

At the store's opening in February, Mr. Armani told The New York Times: "I live with my work. I make love to my work. You've seen this store. It is too important. And understand that the investments that I made in this store, I will probably not get back for 20 to 25 years, so how can you think that something can thrill me more than this?" In 25 years, Mr. Armani will be 100 years old. Profit, one suspects, was not his motive.

Unmuddied creative visions are relatively rare in the world. Rarer still is a personal vision so successfully and outlandishly realized. Armani/5th Avenue will likely survive as long as Fifth Avenue does. Like the Pyramids, it was built as an indelible valentine to the invisible worlds ahead.

Armani/5th Avenue

717 Fifth Avenue (56th Street);
(212) 339-3950.

ARE MANY A colossal new flagship carrying representative pieces from all the goods bearing the Armani signature, all swirling around a giant fantasy staircase that puts both Vegas and the sun to shame.

ARE MOD-Y The store is remarkably free of snooty retail shade: the staff members are as friendly and unimposing as they are easy on the eyes — and they all have super-fantastic Vespa-ready hairstyles.

ARE MONEY You can drop several thousand on stylish suits, or fork over \$85 in quarters to the kids working in the underwear section downstairs. The full spectrum of Fifth Avenue pedestrians is accounted for, as are their bank accounts.