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# THE VISIONARY

Few people have had as much of an impact on Italian fashion as Flavio Lucchini, 91. Sarah Maisey meets him

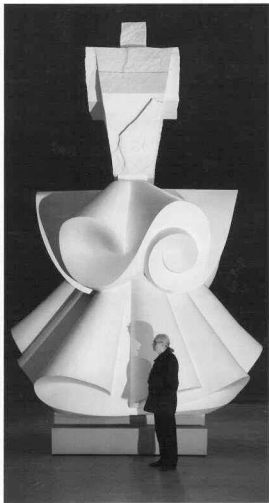
If you are reading this and are under the age of, say, 60, you will have probably never heard of Flavio Lucchini. But that's OK, because most of us are familiar with his work, without even realising it. Today, Lucchini is best known for his art, which deconstructs fashion and its influences. But prior to that, he was famous for helping shape the fashion world as we know it.

Now at the grand old age of 91, Lucchini can be best described as having lived two lives. Born in Mantua, Italy, in 1920, Lucchini originally studied architecture, but switched direction when he was hired as a graphic designer for the magazine *Avanti* in 1962. With a sharp eye for new ideas and a fresh way of presenting them, Lucchini quickly stood out. When the American company Condé Nast bought the Italian magazine *Novità* in 1965, it approached Lucchini to help revitalize it.

"There was nothing in the beginning in Italy: no fashions, no models, nothing," the designer explains in Italian, as his wife, Gisella Borchi, translates. "Fashion in Italy was really basic, but the Americans came twice a year to Rome to follow haute couture. We didn't have any magazines for couture, just basic magazines. Then Condé Nast bought *Novità* - which was mainly for rich women, not sophisticated fashion - and wanted it to be successful. I told them that if they wanted it to be a success, they had to transform it into [American]. And that was the beginning."

Following Lucchini's advice, the name of the magazine was changed to *Figue*, and armed with only his energy and vision, Lucchini set about transforming it into a rival of its American sister. "At that time, the most important photographers were [Richard] Avedon, Irving Penn and Guy Bourdin. But when I started on the first issue of *Figue*, in Italy, we didn't have this quality of photographer. So I started by keeping some pictures from *Figue America* and finding new photographers in Italy who could make images that were similar. I had to teach them how to shoot like Penn, like Avedon. For the first time, a magazine for women was not focusing on the house, food, children or career - it was focusing on fashion."

"The philosophy was to have the maximum, the best quality in writing, photography, models and clothes, and so the content had to be the best."



In 1968, Lucchini was tasked with launching its male counterpart, *L'Espresso Figue*. "All the new designers, like Armani and Versace, knew that only *Figue* could help their collections. They were starting out, and had very little money, so I tried to help them. At that time, Armani and Gisella were friends. He was the assistant of Nino Cerruti, but wasn't happy and wanted to start his own collection, so he came to see me, and I told him 'OK, then start for yourself.' But he didn't have any money, so I told him *Figue* would give him the advertising pages for free; he just had to pay us when he became rich. He didn't have a collection or any

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While *Figue* and *L'Espresso* both set the bar in Italy for cutting-edge fashion - the men's publication offered a more raw, revolutionary outlet that really connected with men. When Yves Saint Laurent launched his first men's collection in 1969, Lucchini persuaded

the reclusive designer to model his own collection in the magazine.

"*Figue* was the world of the new fashion, while *L'Espresso* was about the new society," Lucchini maintains. "The Vietnam War was just finished, and I sent [photographer] Oliviero Toscani to document the US military, as they offered many practical solutions, with pockets and haws. I showed the images to Armani, and said 'You must do this, because this is the new style.'"

Armani duly created a collection with a military slant and Lucchini wanted to photograph it at the local barracks. "I sent Gisella to the officials to ask, can we please come with our magazine? The big military colonel, with all these medals, told her, I know *L'Espresso Figue* because when I was young, I designed fashion. So, he opened the doors for us. We mixed models with soldiers and Armani was there dressing the military for the photos."

After 20 years, he left Condé Nast and moved to the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, where he launched more titles, namely *Duomo* and *Mondo Uomo*. At 60, when most people are looking forward to retirement, Lucchini decided to quit magazines and embark on the next phase of his life - as an artist. "I was looking around and saw that the internet was coming and I realised it was all going to go in another way. So I left fashion and decided to serve it differently. I have a deep understanding of fashion, so I think I have something to give, to discover. So for the last 30 years - I am over 90 now - this is what I have done."

That knowledge has been expressed via stylised totemic statues and quasi-cartoon figures. Works have been created in neon colours and in gold leaf, as well as monumental, vaguely tribal figures in rusted metal. What feels simplistic and almost naive at first glance is, instead, a deeply philosophical attempt to delve behind the artifice and glamour of fashion, and understand what it represents.

"The first time we went to see haute couture in Rome, the American journalists jumped up at the end of the Valentino show, clapping and shouting 'Diooo, diooo!' I was very impressed, because this had been our philosophy at *Figue*: to make the woman something almost sacred."

His *Divine series* is the result of that moment, now reduced to sketch-like dresses surrounded by floating figures. Elsewhere, he has created a church-style triptych to mirror what he sees as fashion being held up like "a kind of religion today, the idols of today. We adore fashion."

Today, the couple shuttle between homes in Italy and Dubai. "We came to Dubai in 2007. We love it here. It is always changing, it is always a new society. I am inspired by life, by people, and Dubai looks forward. We choose the future."