



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Fashion as Myth, Spectacle, and Cultural Revolution

Musée Maillol?, 04.09.2026 [ENA]

At the Musée Maillol, the Gianni Versace Retrospective presents the Italian designer not merely as a maker of spectacular clothes, but as one of the defining visual architects of the late twentieth century. Through rare collector's pieces, iconic silhouettes, archival materials, and the cultural aura of the celebrities who wore them, the exhibition reconstructs Versace's world as a place where couture, classical antiquity, pop music, photography, celebrity, and sensuality converged. It is an exhibition that understands a crucial fact about Gianni Versace: his work was never only about fashion. It was about constructing a language of power, desire, confidence, and performance.

The first impression is one of energy. Versace's fashion does not ask to be viewed discreetly; it insists on attention. The colours are intense, the prints assertive, the silhouettes boldly cut, and the ornaments designed to signal abundance rather than restraint. Yet the exhibition makes clear that this exuberance was underpinned by a sophisticated intellectual vision. Versace drew deeply on the visual inheritance of classical Greece and Rome, most famously through the Medusa emblem, which became the house's central symbol. In his hands, antiquity was not a distant museum culture but a living source of glamour, eroticism, and provocation.

The Medusa is a particularly revealing emblem for Versace's imagination. Beautiful and dangerous, seductive and terrifying, she expresses the contradictions that animate his work. The designer's women are rarely presented as passive objects of the gaze. They are commanding presences: highly visible, sexually autonomous, and often armoured in metal mesh, leather, elaborate surface decoration, or strong tailoring. Versace transformed the female body into a site of theatrical self-possession. His clothes did not hide the body or soften its presence; they celebrated it as an instrument of identity and public performance.

The exhibition's selection of legendary looks demonstrates the extraordinary range of his design vocabulary. Baroque prints coexist with severe black tailoring; gold ornament sits beside minimalist line; denim, leather, latex, safety pins, and silk all become elements of a visual language that is simultaneously luxurious and aggressively modern. Versace could make a classical motif feel punk, turn a chain into a couture gesture, or translate the glamour of the red carpet into a new kind of public mythology. His work continually blurred the boundaries between high fashion and popular culture, between opera-like excess and street-level energy.

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One of the exhibition's greatest pleasures is its evocation of the people who gave these garments a second life through performance. Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, Kate Moss, Elizabeth Hurley, Prince, Elton John, George Michael, Sting, Tupac Shakur, Jon Bon Jovi, and Carla Bruni are among the cultural figures associated with the designer's creations. Their presence confirms that Versace helped redefine the relationship between fashion and celebrity. He did not simply dress famous people; he collaborated in the creation of their public images. The supermodel, the pop star, the actor, and the designer became part of the same cultural event.

This is why a Versace exhibition can never be solely a study of garments on mannequins. The clothes carry memories of music videos, catwalks, awards ceremonies, magazine covers, and performances. They recall a period when fashion became increasingly global, image-driven, and intertwined with the machinery of mass media. Versace understood this transformation earlier and more fully than many of his contemporaries. His runway shows were not quiet industry presentations but moments of choreography, sound, personality, and spectacle. They helped establish the fashion show as a cultural form in its own right.

The exhibition's scenography, designed by Nathalie Crinière with Tomoko Nishiki, embraces this theatrical dimension without reducing the clothes to visual noise. Crinière's experience with major exhibitions devoted to Dior and Yves Saint Laurent is apparent in the careful balance between immersion and legibility. The presentation gives the designs room to assert their sculptural and material presence, while its dramatic progression allows visitors to experience the full scale of Versace's imagination.

What emerges is a portrait of a designer whose legacy remains strikingly current. Versace's embrace of hybridity—classical and contemporary, masculine and feminine, elite and popular, refined and excessive—anticipates many of the questions that continue to shape fashion today. His work challenges the false opposition between decoration and intelligence. Ornament, in his hands, becomes argument: a declaration that beauty can be loud, that fashion can be historically informed without being nostalgic, and that glamour can carry cultural meaning.

The Gianni Versace Retrospective is therefore more than an exercise in 1990s nostalgia. It is a richly visual encounter with a designer who changed the grammar of modern luxury. Visitors leave with the sense that Versace did not simply create clothes for famous people; he created images that helped define an era—and whose brilliance, confidence, and unapologetic sensuality continue to resonate.

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