

A LOOK FROM THE
DOLCE & GABBANA ALTA
MODA COLLECTION,
SHOT OUTSIDE
FLORENCE'S DUOMO.



RENAISSANCE MEN

*Dolce and Gabbana take over the city of Florence for a **maximalist** ode to Italian craftsmanship.* By Laura Rysman

Front Row

When most of the world had long since ceded style to sweatpants and staying home, Dolce & Gabbana's staunchest enthusiasts packed their suitcases with ball gowns and journeyed to Italy this September in pursuit of beauty. After a bad year for fashion, and for just about everything else, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana envisioned salvation in the post-lockdown resurrection of their over-the-top Alta Moda runway affair, a multi-day, socially distanced shindig dedicated to the city of Florence—the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance.

In the Four Seasons' Medici chapel, the designers sat on a brocade sofa, surrounded by golden sixteenth-century frescoes. "We know the situation. We know the problem," Dolce said. "We know everything," Gabbana added solemnly. "But we want to continue. We want to go on."

The pair's destination shows turn their locations—past sites have included Capri, Portofino, Lake Como, and Sicily—into inspiration for their collections and showcases for elaborate Italian artisanship. ("Craftsmanship is not trendy, and it's not cool. It's not fashion. It's forever," Gabbana said.) Italy's identity is deeply rooted in both the artisan and the artist—and in their union, which flowered most dazzlingly during the Renaissance, when understatement was not a respectable concept. In other words, perfect terrain for the duo's effusive inclinations.

"Why do you come to Florence? Not to see something modern," Dolce said. "This is a country of history." Fashion is forward-looking by definition, but in a nation so gut-punched by the COVID crisis, and after a long pause without much in the way of catwalks or parties or exuberance, there was a certain redemption in the designers' elegiac vision of Italy hitting the runway once again. "We are Italian, and we are very proud to be Italian," Gabbana said. "And through our job, we have discovered a lot of history." The two often finish each other's sentences, and Dolce chimed in with a proclamation: "History—true history—and true culture are never old."

In the stone citadel of Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of power in Florence for over seven centuries, the designers paraphrased the past for their Alta Sartoria runway show, with a Dolce & Gabbana Renaissance revival of more gold sequin pants, gilt-embroidered gloves, and gilded tunics than even the Medicis might have coveted. "A dream made of gold," one guest sighed. And that was just the men's collection.

Florence, empty of its customary crowds of tourists, needed a boost—this time, said the designers, with an emphasis on the city's finely crafted goods to replace its inundation of cheaply produced souvenirs. Thirty-eight Florentine workshops collaborated with the designers, inspiring them to new flights of fancy: a dressing-gown set of Seta Lisio silk depicting Giorgio Vasari's fifteenth-century grand battle murals; a cuirass with a repoussé sterling silver chest plate by Pampaloni; double silk organza sports jerseys rendered fantastical by Mazzanti Piume's embroidered overlay of feathers; a tabard emblazoned with a hand-embroidered cross by Fratelli Traversari. At the Alta Sartoria show, as the artisans joined the audience of a few hundred guests to watch their creations on the catwalk, Florence's mayor, beaming with local pride amid a fanfare of medieval trumpet players in striped pantaloons, dedicated the keys of the city to Dolce & Gabbana muse Monica Bellucci. He expressed hope that a new Florentine Renaissance would rise from this modern—and hopefully brief—Dark Age.



A LOOK FROM THE ALTA MODA SHOW.



AT ALTA MODA, A GOWN EMBROIDERED WITH ORGANZA AND VELVET HAND-PAINTED FLOWERS.

COURTESY OF DOLCE & GABBANA.

The afternoon had begun with the Alta Gioielleria presentation, held in the famed Officina Profumo-Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella, where frankincense wafted through the air as waiters in white tunics with black capes and medallion pendants (custom-designed for the high jewelry event) served aperitifs. Amid shelves of old apothecary jars and somber portraits of friars, finely wrought necklaces—gemstone extravaganzas, each one unique—gleamed on satin-covered busts with rubellite and Paraiba tourmalines as big as robin's eggs and marble-size South Sea pearls. There was even a baroque bib of diamonds worthy of a sovereign, whose matching tall tiara was fitted and photographed on many an eager client's head. "The high jewelry, it's...*come si dice?*...out of control," Gabbana said with a puckish grin.

But after all the literal fanfare, the pièce de résistance was still in the offing. Alta Moda is the fashion house's Mediterranean answer to haute couture, with opulent one-of-a-kind garments sold to a select high-wattage clientele for the approximate price of an Italian sports car—each piece requiring hundreds of hours on the part of specialized seamstresses

and craftspeople. (Dolce: "The value is not the hours. It's the concept. When you start to count how many hours, you kill the creativity.") The Florence women's collection was the first to be entirely fabricated in Dolce & Gabbana's own workshops with a young fleet of artisans—some trained at its own suite of schools, the Botteghe di Mestiere. The schools teach traditional skills at

risk of extinction to a new generation, who produce the kind of exquisite embroidery and precise tailoring required for the brand's Alta Moda line.

The runway show audience—wearing prior-season Alta Moda looks, a smattering of tiaras, and swaths of diamonds—gathered at the Villa Bardini, in a manicured garden overlooking the valley of Florence's

historic center. Set to the strains of Nino Rota's golden-age cinema soundtracks, the presentation, from its first look—a gown hand-painted with Florence's cityscape—turned the nostalgic, boom-era Cinecittà magnificence of Italy all the way up, in an ode to the 1951 Florence catwalk that launched the alta moda tradition in Italy.

With red lips and coquettish black lace veils, the models glided onto a terrace of roses and descended a stone staircase

"The high jewelry, it's...*come si dice?*...out of control."

HAND-WOVEN RAFFIA LOOKS FROM THE ALTA MODA SHOW.





THE OPENING LOOK AT THE ALTA MODA SHOW, FEATURING HAND-PAINTED FLORENTINE SCENES.

lined with fuchsia blooms of bougainvillea, languidly hip-switching past the crowd in clinging jacquard dresses and towering flowered headdresses; in opera capes and sweeping skirts with deftly embroidered fabric mosaics depicting the Duomo and other Florentine landmarks; and in Fellini-esque diva dresses whose bare shoulders and backs revealed black bras and mesh corsets. “Fashion is fantasy,” Gabbana mused as he leaned on the runway’s balustrade after a round of gold-toned fireworks wrapped up the show.

The days following the Alta Moda show were tightly booked with client appointments. Stella Aminova, a longtime devotee wearing the brand’s crochet crop top and matching skirt with high jewelry earrings featuring finger-size enamel eggplants, explained why she wouldn’t miss her chance with Stefano and Domenico’s creations. “It’s real love. It’s real

emotions,” she enthused. “They love life, they love Italy, they love women!”

Yet in a year without celebrations, when tribulations shut down life itself and made us all wonder about the point of getting dressed, wherefore the lavish, effervescent Alta Moda? Is a live show of such decadence an affront in this fraught moment? “When we have a show, you talk with the audience. It’s not just clothes,” Dolce said. “Some people think that if you are positive, you are stupid. No! We have to have the integrity to react, to recount history, to recount the talent of the artisan workshops.” Gabbana started to interrupt him, but Dolce leaned forward to circumvent him. “We need to try to encourage life,” he declared, his voice rising. “For the system, for the Italians, for fashion, for beauty. Beauty is like medicine for the world.” ■