

# LEOPARD THE KING

ROBERTO CAVALLI (1940 - )  
WORDS ANNEMARIE LUCK

IF ROBERTO CAVALLI COULD PUT LEOPARD PRINT ON LEOPARDS, HE WOULD, SUCH IS HIS LOVE OF ANIMAL-INSPIRED MOTIFS AND INVENTING NEW WAYS OF PRESENTING HIS DESIGNS. BUT THE PIONEERING DESIGNER IS MORE THAN JUST A FASHION HOUND

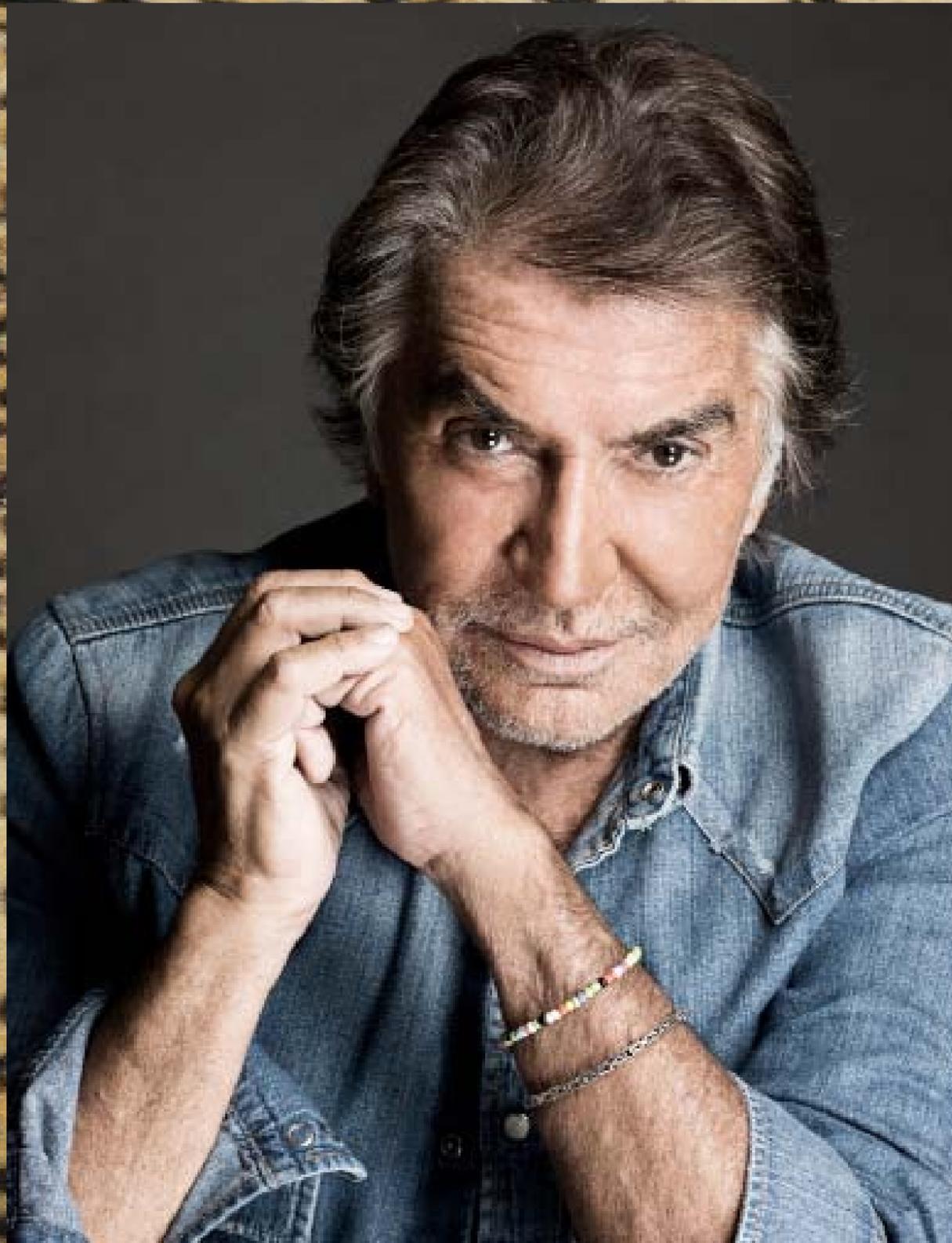
**R**oberto Cavalli sleeps naked under wolf fur. 'I am like Marilyn Monroe,' he says. 'I cannot sleep dressed. She said five drops of Chanel N°5; I say 10 drops of Roberto Cavalli fragrance.' When he wakes, at 9am, the designer greets his menagerie of pets, which includes his beloved German Shepherd, Lupo, along with his giant Persian cat, parakeets, iguana and exotic fish (he also used to have a tiger and a monkey). He might amble into the living room and feed his big blue-and-yellow parrot a piece of cake. Then he chooses what to wear: 'Cavalli panties, something zebra, leopard. Very tight'; one of his 50 pairs of Cavalli jeans; and one of his 40 pairs of Cavalli cowboy boots. As he leaves for work and drives through the gates of his 37-acre Florence hilltop estate in one of his three Ferraris, Lupo panting happily on the seat beside him, he might look into his rearview mirror and catch a glimpse of his 'iridescent' purple Eurocopter Écureuil helicopter and his equally iridescent tan.

[Cavalli] has a penchant for all things ridiculously opulent and sensual

such thing!' Perhaps the only object he owns that speaks of a more humble nature is his 'ancient' Nokia 9210 Communicator cellphone (although he did buy every last one on eBay). 'It's 20 years old and like a museum piece, but I cannot get through the day without it,' he says. And this is where the audacious man behind the brand gets more interesting. Because for all his extravagance, there are hints of his old-fashioned values and a need to stay grounded – his open dedication to his family, for example, and his proud affiliation with his roots, both of which he references when asked about his influences. 'The atmosphere and the artistic field of a city like Florence, where I [grew] up, are influences on my mind. On the other side, it is my family and my routine as a whole that [influences] me.'

The Florence in which Cavalli grew up was different to the paradise he presently enjoys. When he was born on 15 November 1940, World War II was raging. Although his grandfather, Giuseppe Rossi, was a renowned Impressionist painter who had his art exhibited in Florence's Uffizi Gallery, Cavalli's family was not wealthy. His mother, Marcella, was a seamstress and his father, Giorgio, was a mining-company surveyor. Then, in 1944, when Cavalli was just four years old, his father was murdered by Nazi soldiers after they rounded up 92 civilians in retaliation for an attack by Italian Resistance fighters. 'We never found his body,' says Cavalli. 'My mommy! No money to buy the small things in life, like bread, like water. Which is the reason she didn't have so much time to take care of me and my sister.'

Perhaps as a result of this trauma, young Cavalli developed a stutter, leaving him unable to express himself. This frustration, coupled with his intense loathing for all things dull, meant he failed at school and became rebellious. But when his despairing mother washed her hands of her teenage son and said he would have to steal to survive, he made a decision that would forge his future path. 'I told her, "I want to continue to study, but I want to [go to] art school."' He spent three years studying textile design at



"What is too much? There is no such thing!"



Clockwise from left The Cavalli family: Eva, Roberto, Rachele, Joseph and Robin at his restaurant disco-bar inauguration in Florence, December 2008; Cavalli with Cindy Crawford at his A/W show in Milan, March 2002; with Heidi Klum at the Roberto Cavalli 40th Anniversary Party at Les Beaux-Arts de Paris, September 2010; a view of Cavalli's home at Fiera Milano Rho, Milan.



ROBERTO CAVALLI AUTUMN/WINTER 2012/13

the Istituto d'Arte in Florence and although he stubbornly refused to take the final examinations ('I can be successful without a piece of paper!' he told the school's director), it was no waste of time. For it was here that Cavalli started to experiment with fabric-printing techniques. He began printing designs onto T-shirts and sweaters but then invented a process that allowed his designs to cover the whole garment. Soon he was taking orders from Italian fashion-and-lifestyle brand Krizia and French luxury house Hermès, and could afford his first Ferrari. This also meant he could finally impress the girl he wanted to marry, Silvanella Giannoni, the daughter of a wealthy Florentine who had not approved of Cavalli pre-Ferrari. 'I am the sort of person who loves love,' he says. 'I met a girl, the first girl I loved, and I married her with the first money I got,' he says. 'We first made love the night we married, after knowing each other for four years.' The couple's first child, Cristiana, was born nine months and 10 days later. 'I tried immediately to have a baby because I was so afraid not to have a baby in my life,' he says. 'For me, I would expect to have 10!' Cavalli and Silvanella only had one more child together, a boy named Tommaso. It seems the strain of Cavalli's increasing professional success and jet-set lifestyle took its toll on the marriage and the couple divorced in 1974 after 10 years.

**'I prefer to create for women,' says Cavalli. 'I think that women are more intelligent than men; that's why men have to be stronger'**

how to print flowers onto leather and visiting Valentino with the designs. He remembers Valentino's response: 'He said, "My God! It's fantastic!"'

In 1970, Cavalli showed his new leather line at the Salon du Prêt-à-Porter in Paris. 'I start[ed] to make some evening gowns in leather, a bathing suit in leather... Everybody [said], "Oh, my God, this man is crazy!" People like[d] it, but nobody [bought]. Because it was too new, too unusual.' So it was back to the drawing board, and what he came up with next caused a sensation: distressed denim and leather patchwork. He asked a prison in the US to send him their used jeans (these were the days before stonewashing) and stitched together pieces with scraps of leather. He debuted his patchwork range of pants, minidresses and maxicoats in 1972 at the Pitti Palace in Florence and received enormous praise. But although his work was revolutionary and garnered him worldwide publicity, it was also considered scandalous by some, because these fabrics were associated with the working class, unsavoury characters and prostitutes. Still, he made his first million, became a hit in the US and opened his first boutique in St Tropez where stars such as Brigitte Bardot and Sophia Loren were often seen shopping. When Bardot was pictured walking barefoot in one of his designs in St Tropez, the Cavalli brand exploded and the designer's love affair with celebrity endorsement began. He has long been dressing powerful women such as Beyoncé, Kate Moss, Gisele Bündchen, Sharon Stone and Jennifer Lopez. Stars like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Kylie Minogue call on him to design their tour costumes. 'I prefer to create for women,' says Cavalli. 'I think that women are more intelligent than men; that's why men have to be stronger.' He explains that the kind of woman he likes to dress is one 'with some personality and a strong femininity' and that his desire is to 'help a woman to be sexy. Sometimes women are afraid to be sexy and women should know that sometimes a dress can change her life.'

Of course not everyone is a fan of Cavalli's glitzy, over-the-top, exotic-print designs that inevitably include a plunging neckline, or back, or both. But with a fashion empire that's worth well over \$1-billion and the continuous praise he receives from the women who do wear his clothes, it's clear that, for many, his understanding of what women want is spot on. Model Heidi Klum says his

clothes 'make me feel like a rock star'. Cindy Crawford, who began wearing his clothes postpartum to feel sexy again, says, 'His clothes celebrate life.' One fashion writer for the *Independent Sunday* wrote, 'The Cavalli Cult includes not only every big rock, pop and rap star, from Madonna to Mary J Blige, and the entire cast of *Sex and the City*, but, strangely, on-fashion folk – traditionally the most resistant of all to bright, busy clothes.'

The only time Cavalli's signature style has been threatened during his 40-year career was in the Eighties, when minimalism blurred the lines between men and women's fashion. 'Minimalism was so ugly! It was a time when the woman started to say, "To feel powerful, a woman needs to look like a man,"' he says. 'For me, it was one of the most stupid things in the world. For me, a woman should be a woman.' So heavy was the impact of androgyny on his career that in the early Nineties he nearly retired from fashion altogether. By then he had married Eva Düringer and considered becoming a full-time father to their three children, Rachele, Daniele and Robin. (The couple had met in 1977 when Cavalli, then 37, was asked to be a judge at the Miss Universe pageant and 18-year-old Eva was a contestant.) But instead of admitting defeat, he simply invented something new: denim with Lycra. When Naomi Campbell wore a pair of the skintight jeans in his 1993 show, the rapturous applause declared his comeback. The following year he launched the first sandblasted denims and the ever-resilient designer was firmly back in business.

Today, Eva (who is also his business partner) and his children, bar Tommaso, work for the brand, which now includes a menswear line, a more affordable Just Cavalli line, a casual line called Freedom, and a children's range called Angel. Brand extensions include fragrances, a homeware line, restaurants and a chocolate factory in Florence. Who does he thank the most for his success? 'God, the creator of the animal print. He really was the most fantastic designer because, wow, women love it.' Fashion is in his DNA and he has no plans to retire, he says, but he also insists that fashion is not the most important thing to him: 'My autobiography [currently being published] stops in the year 2000 and I don't speak about fashion until the last 20 pages because there are other things in my life. There is emotion, there is love, I am a father. I was not put on earth to do one thing.' **mc**

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## Cavalli's controversy

Known for his polemical approach and outlandish comments, often made on his blog (*Robertocavalliblog.com*), *The Leopard King* is no stranger to hot water. Here are some of the trickiest situations he's survived

### 2002: CHARGED WITH TAX EVASION

For six years he was embroiled in a court case after being accused of putting a £1.8-million refurbishment of his home through his company's expenses. He received a suspended sentence of 14 months in prison, but the ruling was overturned by the Supreme Court and he was cleared of all charges.

### 2004: OFFENDED HINDUS BY FEATURING THEIR GODS AS MOTIFS

When Cavalli unveiled an underwear collection with images of Hindu gods, the Hindu Human Rights Association hit back: 'We cannot bear the insult to our religion. Our gods are revered by millions of Hindus. How can somebody use them for such purposes?' he swiftly pulled the blasphemous panties and apologized. 'We obviously didn't realize this would cause offence.'

### 2006: BACKED KATE MOSS AFTER HER DRUG SCANDAL

While Kate was fired from lucrative contracts after her infamous cocaine disgrace, he was the first designer to state he would continue to work with her. He responded to criticism: 'I am anti-drugs, but what can you do? As designers we have to trust the models' personality and professionalism. I don't want to know about their private lives.'

### 2012: INSULTED ANNA WINTOUR

When he was asked what advice he'd give to young designers, his response was 'create a new and different direction' but then added, 'Just look at [US] fashion... It's terrible... but it has been driven by a great journalist, Anna Wintour, who wants all women to be like her and dress the way she does.'

### 2012: CRITICIZED GIORGIO ARMANI'S NEW HOTEL IN MILAN

He commented in Italy's *La Repubblica* newspaper: 'Between Armani and me there is an abyss. Have you seen that new hotel? It looks like a psychiatric hospital.' Armani maintained a dignified silence, while Cavalli attempted to explain his outburst on his blog, saying, 'I foolishly fell into the journalist's trap with that comment!'

