

RUNWAY

Dolce & Gabbana Stage an Epic Alta Moda Show in Sicily's Valley of the Temples



JULY 6, 2019 6:24 PM
by HAMISH BOWLES

1 / 16



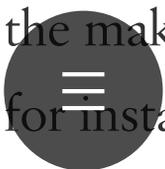
Photo: Courtesy of Dolce & Gabbana



Fresh from the wonders of ancient Rome and the Fendi show, the splendors of Magna Graecia beckoned with the Dolce & Gabbana Alta Moda collection, staged in the Valley of the Temples in the shadow of the Sicilian town of Agrigento.

Built some five centuries before Christ, the vast complex is considered the most complete outside the Parthenon, a breathtaking and widely spread out ensemble of remarkably preserved temples set on a mesa with distant views to the Mediterranean Sea.

The monument, of course, is a crown jewel in Italy's cultural patrimony, so the negotiations to showcase the Alta Moda collection here, in Dolce's native Sicily (where the collection was first launched in Taormina in 2012), were two years in the making and the preparations were extraordinarily elaborate. A wooden floor, for instance, had to be laid over a bed of sand so that the intrinsic structure of the



site—including the floor—wasn't touched in any way, but the models could walk through it. Helena Christensen (who wore a translucent black tulle ball gown scrolled with golden embroidery out of *The Leopard*) found the experience transporting. “I thought of all the powerful women who had walked here thousands of years ago,” she said.

“The Alta Moda is the best of the best,” said Domenico Dolce backstage before the show, as he explained the intricacies of technique that had been harnessed to each creation. “That’s a given, but more than that it is *amore*. Everything comes from the heart and the Alta Moda and the Alta Sartoria [Dolce and Stefano Gabbana’s luxurious, bespoke menswear line] are the ultimate expressions of that.” That love was literally expressed with a cupid dress complete with quiver and golden arrows, but more generally in the amazing workmanship lavished on these exuberant clothes.

The long lead time for the negotiations to secure the location meant that embroideries and some of the other astonishing techniques used in the vast collection of a staggering 125 looks could be put in production many months in advance. The collection naturally drew inspiration from the site, with ensembles inspired by—and named for—ancient Greek and Roman goddesses. One voluptuous fitted black gown, its plunging neckline clasped by a golden asp, took its cue from the earthly goddess Elizabeth Taylor in her 1963 movie vehicle *Cleopatra*.

1 / 15



Photo: Courtesy of Dolce & Gabbana



After seven years, Dolce and Gabbana really know their haute couture clients, and produce their collections in the mid-century way: with something for everyone,

from an ingénue ball gown with puff sleeves of clustered silk roses to a fitted Sophia Loren 1950s pencil-skirted day dress, its boat neckline showcasing a dazzling necklace of multicolor stones. Backstage, Dolce pointed out one dress with embroidery that, on very close inspection, combined ribbon flowers, tulle intarsia, macramé, and beading. The workmanship included needlepoint on fine silk net in imitation of the designs on ancient amphoras (or in one instance with a leopard's spots) and fringes of tiny bugle beads that meandered around a narrow skirt like the volutes of the ancient Greek meandros borders. There were cut velvets from Venice with real gold threading, reproductions of Jacques-Louis David's neoclassical paintings printed on loose woven silk gazar that resembled artists' canvas, hourglass jackets of white linen inset with lacis-work panels, and dresses shimmering with coral fronds—nearby town Sciacca is famed for its coral jewelry. Silk tulle was plaited into a cape like a fisherman's net, and a bodice was sequined like the capital of an Ionic column, its Empire skirts composed of a mille-feuille of sliced chiffon strips, sewn to create the illusion of a column's flutes that shimmered in the breeze as the model walked.

Echoes of Cinecittà's kitsch 1950s gladiator epics could be seen in one-shouldered toga gowns of intriguingly colored tulle (in such mixes as terracotta and sky blue, or plum with wine and tomato), and the motifs on a Greek vase were reproduced three-dimensionally with draped chiffon. There was droll Surrealism in the plaster statuary fragments as headdresses, and in ancient statuary worked in sequins and beadwork on an Empire gown's skirts.

An orchestra of women harpists dressed as Vestal Virgins set the scene as the show started promptly at 8 o'clock so that the golden light of dusk fell on the columned façade of the Temple of Concordia and caught the gilding of the gladiator sandals (all the shoes, as in ancient times, were flat) and the fine jewelry that had been showcased the night before. As the sky turned pink, a sequence of coral-color dresses appeared, and as they darkened and artificial lighting illuminated the scene, a bevy of gleaming white gowns was followed by a finale

group of ball gowns with skirts clouded with hand-painted organza. Longtime Dolce muse Marpessa Hennink, now the directrice of the Alta Moda, was surprised to be asked to walk the finale in trailing gilded white chiffon, more than three decades after she posed for a powerful early Dolce campaign on this very site for photographer Ferdinando Scianna (whose work is currently being celebrated at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Palermo).

Some of the girls ended their runway walk standing on plinths that had been set between the temple's columns, like living caryatids, and a quintet of ball-gowned beauties arranged themselves on the steps.

“It gives me the dream,” said Dolce after the spectacular show, “and it helps me to live through the next six months.” After the show the guests, too, had the opportunity to walk through the temple in a selfie frenzy on their way to a bucolic after-show dinner. Here, tables were set beneath the trees in an olive grove with views up the hill to the flood-lit Temple of Juno and back to the Temple of Concordia, now lit by a crescent moon—magic.