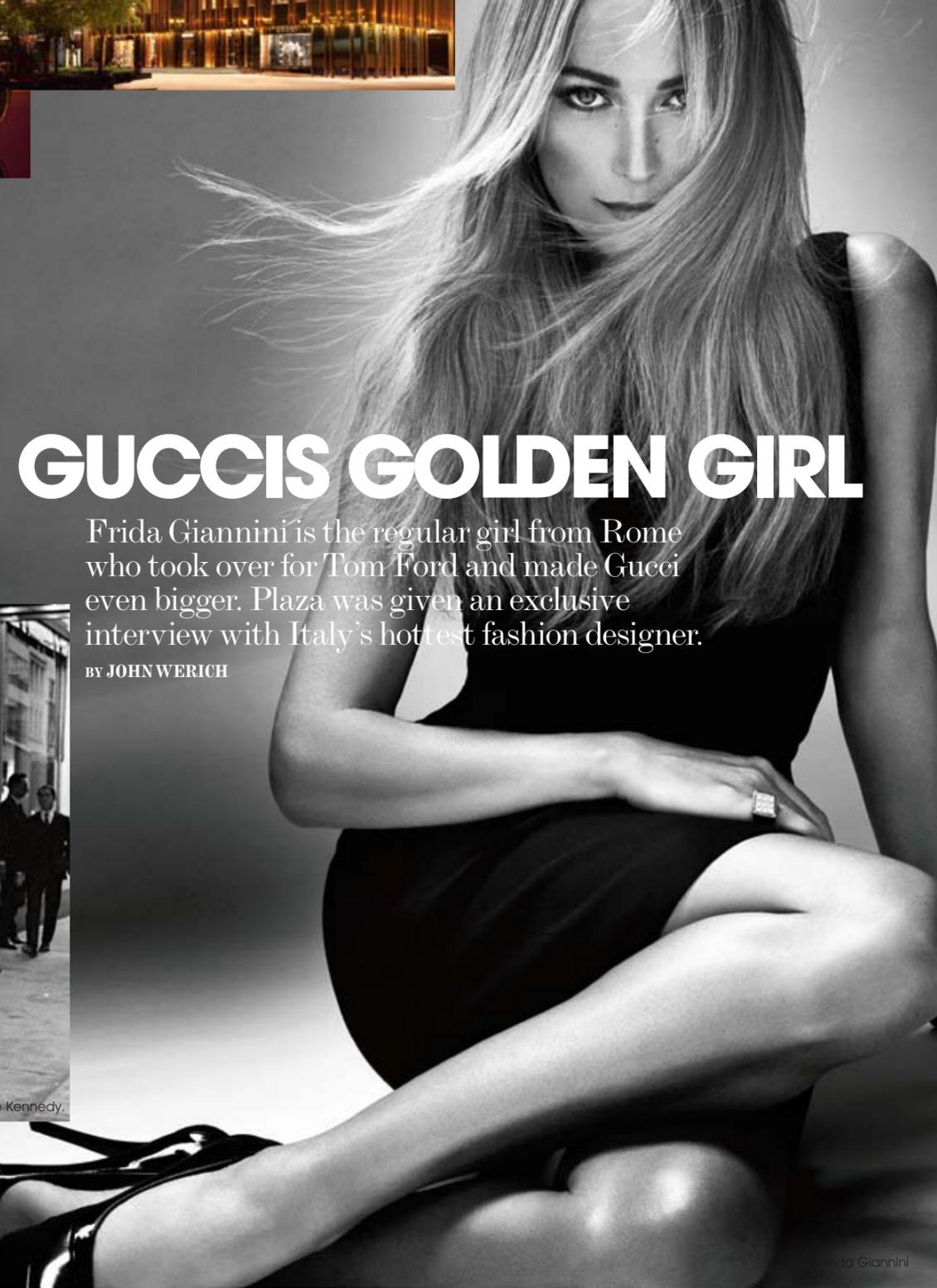


FASHION



GUCCIS GOLDEN GIRL

Frida Giannini is the regular girl from Rome who took over for Tom Ford and made Gucci even bigger. Plaza was given an exclusive interview with Italy's hottest fashion designer.

BY JOHN WERICH



Jackie Kennedy.



Gucci Store
Sloane Street,
London.



Ingrid Bergman in Naples, 1953.

PHOTO HILTON GETTY / TIME PICTURES



Sienna Miller.



Frida Giannini with James Franco.



PHOTO GETTY IMAGES

PHOTO FABIO LOVINO

WHEN FRIDA GIANNINI succeeded to the throne of Gucci after the departure of Tom Ford, the fashion world held its breath. Who would ever be worthy of succeeding the star fashion designer? Five years later, Frida has proved her worth and made Gucci more profitable than ever before. The next step is rumoured to be haute couture.

– My goal has always been the same: to show consideration for the house’s heritage and its history of high quality and craftsmanship, while at the same time introducing innovative techniques with a modern feel, she says.

– In 2011, Gucci will be celebrating its 90th anniversary, so it’ll be more important than ever.

After Tom Ford’s turbulent exit from Gucci in 2004, he was replaced by three design managers. The young and promising Alessandra Facchinetti was put in charge of women’s fashion, Scotsman John Ray continued as design manager for men’s fashion, and the completely unknown Frida Giannini – who was headhunted from Fendi by none other than Tom Ford to be Gucci’s bag designer in 2002 – was put in charge of accessories.

The fashion world was not convinced. Would they be able to bring Gucci into the future? While Facchinetti and Ray convulsively stuck with Ford’s fragrant sexiness, Frida explored Gucci’s archives. She returned with an exceptionally beautiful collection of shoes and bags, inspired by a scarf print designed for Grace Kelly in 1966.

The Flora collection was a huge success, and paved the way for Frida’s career at Gucci. In 2006, both Facchinetti and Ray were dropped after some weak reviews, to say the least. The only one left satading was the slender woman from Rome.

She was 34 years old at the time. Frida Giannini comes from a family of true art lovers. Her father is an architect and her mother is an art history professor. After graduating from Accademia di Costume e di Moda, she held internships at smaller fashion houses before she began working for Karl Lagerfeld at Fendi. This was in 1997. And although she didn’t invent Fendi’s legendary baguette, she managed to complete more than 400 versions of it before Tom Ford and Gucci snatched her.

FRIDA’S GREAT INTEREST in the archives meant that she spent a lot of time in Florence. It was there, at a club down by the River Arno, that she met her future husband Giovanni Battista Guida, a local web designer. They bought a large house in the hills near Piazzale Michelangelo, the town’s most expensive neighbourhood where celebrities like Roberto Cavalli live.

Back then, she still lived a fairly ordinary life. She went out to eat with her staff at the small trattorias on the back streets of Florence, preferably at the kitschy local restaurant Garga. These days she not only dresses the celebrity elite, she’s part of it. She is very reluctant to give interviews since she cares a lot about her image and her private life – and, not least, because she’s shy about her poor English.

Success has changed her, even though she wouldn’t admit it herself. The easygoing girl who came to work in riding boots

“The easy going girl who came to work in horse riding boots instead of stilettos is nowhere to be found.”

instead of stilettos is nowhere to be found. Always well-dressed, with perfect hair and impeccable make-up, she has a brutal schedule that leaves little time for non-work related engagements. Despite this, she looks younger every time you meet her.

Do you still find a lot of inspiration from the archives?

– I’ve spent countless hours in Gucci’s archives. They’re amazing. It’s like travelling back in time. You get amazed at how modern the earlier creations could be, and I’m constantly thinking about how I can incorporate this history into my creations.

Do you have any favourites?

– The Bamboo Bag. It’s an incredibly chic classic. It’s timeless and will never go out of fashion. I’ve just resurrected it for our spring and summer collections, so keep an eye out for “The New Bamboo”!

– It’s a great honour to work with a brand with such rich and extensive history. I don’t see the classical as something negative at all. Instead, Gucci’s tradition helps express the quality and craftsmanship that goes into all my creations.

In an historical perspective, Florence has always been Gucci’s home town. In the late nineties, Tom Ford moved Gucci’s main design office to London, a city where he simply felt more at home. Frida, however, did not.

– Gucci’s history began in Florence in 1921, and it’s still the place where all production is done. When I first started, I felt that Florence would be the best place for me and my staff to work. Here we would learn the company’s history, explore the archives and, most of all, get closer to the craftsmen, who have been familiar with the production for decades.

– I wanted everyone to live and breathe Gucci, including myself.

However, after less than four years in Florence they moved once again, this time to Frida’s home town of Rome. She got herself a place in the trendy Janiculum district, south of the Vatican. When Gucci announced that their main design office – which was located in a palazzo from 1359 at the Piazza della Signoria city square – was to be relocated after less than four years, the fashion world was more surprised than they had been the last time.

Moving to fashion capital Milan would be understandable. But Rome?

– We are a creative team and we constantly need to be stimulated and inspired. Unfortunately, Florence is a small town and after four years we had outgrown it, so I felt that we needed a new and dynamic environment. Rome isn’t just the city I grew up in; it’s a place full of energy, which makes each day uncomplicated and exciting. In fact, the entire team was enthusiastic about the move, and everyone came with us. I didn’t lose a single designer. Also, from a logistics perspective Rome is a much more international city, which makes things easier for me and my team when we travel.

How does Rome inspire you?

– Rome is bright and optimistic, and a great inspiration to my work. There’s something about Rome and its rich colours.

Frida’s greatest source of inspiration, however, is music. According to her, it’s her constant companion, whether she is working or not. She has a collection of 8,000 LPs, many of them inherited from her uncle Sam, who was a DJ. ♪



Frida and Mary J. Blige.

PHOTO: FARABOLINO

Paola di Legi. Poissy, 1964.

GUCCI ADVERTISEMENT FROM 1990



“In my opinion, commercial is not a bad word. It’s what we’re here to do: to sell clothes.”

– Music makes me happy and I’m often inspired by the artists’ styles – they’re much more imaginative than regular celebrities.

Many of Gucci’s advertising campaigns are fronted by celebrities such as James Franco, Claire Danes and Rihanna. Do you believe that celebrities are the new supermodels?

– I contacted these celebrities for their talent and artistic views rather than for their looks. It’s a privilege in my work to be able to collaborate with so many artists. It’s a very diverse crowd of people that you mentioned, but they share the same unique vision in their respective fields. They have all enriched my creative views and helped me keep the brand modern and progressive. But I still love the models, of course.

Frida’s special liking for music has also led to her latest design collaboration. Together with English-born musician Mark Ronson, Frida has launched a new collection of trainers that are sold exclusively in a temporary shop in SoHo, New York.

What inspires you? What is the first thing you think of when you start working on a new collection?

– Creativity is a never-ending process; it’s not something you can turn on or off. I always keep my eyes and ears open.

The people, places and objects that make an impression are usually what stimulate the creative process. It could be an amazing song, beautiful scenery or a new film. Throughout the year I collect pictures and ideas that inspire me creatively, and when it’s time to start thinking about a new collection, I lock myself in a room and spend a day or two with the material I’ve collected and start to come up with ideas.

She is often accused of being commercial, a perpetual insult in the fashion world. But Frida sees things differently.

– In my opinion, “commercial” is not a bad word. It’s what we’re here to do: to sell clothes. But I think it would be a mistake to label my collections as exclusively commercial. Each season has a completely new collection, and there’s a lot of technological research behind the clothes that makes them unique and innovative.

You have called yourself a control freak. What do you mean by that?

– I like to be well-organised, focused and determined. It can sometimes be exhausting to be in charge of not only the men’s and women’s collections, but also the accessories, four fashion shows a year, multiple advertising campaigns and shop interiors and at

“Rome is bright and optimistic, and a great inspiration. There’s something about the city and its rich colours.”

the same time be the face of Gucci. It’s a demanding job, and it never ends. Fortunately, I’m surrounded by skilled and talented colleagues. As time has passed, things have become easier as I’ve learnt how to organise my team to get the best possible results. But some degree of control is still necessary, of course.

How would you say that your success at Gucci has changed you as a person?

– I wouldn’t exactly use the word changed. Of course I have developed, both professionally and as a person. There are not enough hours in a day for me to find time for everything. I’ve had to reorganise my private life and organise my work schedule very precisely. On a positive note, I believe that all this work and constantly being surrounded with such talented people has stimulated my creativity and given me the opportunity to explore new areas and come up with new interesting ideas.

What do you treat yourself to?

– Spending an afternoon on horseback. I never have time to go riding these days, so it’s really great when I get a chance to.

How is your house decorated?

– I’m really fond of Art Déco furniture from the thirties and

forties. I like to mix modern with some more classical items. I bought many things in Paris, for example a fantastic Arne Jacobsen armchair, The Egg, in its original covering from 1948.

Frida’s fondness for Art Déco can also be seen in her shops’ interiors. She’s in the midst of eliminating the last traces of Tom Ford’s time at Gucci – in other words his dark, sexy, gentlemen’s club-like shop interiors. Steel, concrete and black fitted carpets have had to give way to smoked glass, marble, gold and brown velvet.

Gucci, with its soon-to-be 90 years in the business, is one of the oldest fashion houses in the world, with a history fit for the silver screen. Power struggles, conspiracies, imprisonment and murder are just some of the ingredients that have made its history a bestseller. And now, film director Ridley Scott has announced his plans to make a film based on the fashion house’s history and the murder of Maurizio Gucci.

– We’ve actually collaborated with Ridley Scott and his team when they did their research for the new film. He and his team visited the archives a little more than a year ago. It’ll be interesting to see what they make of it. ©