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Violence in Vanity Fair: The Versace Murder

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"I'd like to live forever." Thus reflected fashion designer extraordinaire Gianni Versace to a recent biographer. "If there's one thing I'm afraid of," he continued, "it's missing what will happen tomorrow."

These are strange thoughts for a man who lived so conspicuously for the present, and haunting words in light of Versace's brutal murder on July 15. With those fatal shots fired in South Beach, Versace moved into the front ranks of international celebrity. An icon of the homosexual culture and focus of adoration by the rich and famous who wore his custom clothing, Versace immediately entered the pantheon of martyred celebrities.

In so many ways, Versace was the bad boy of the fashion world. He made his reputation by adding glitter to the gutter. Richard Martin of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art put it this way: "Versace is so important because he put sexuality first. Designers have always looked to the street; he looked to the streetwalker." Sexuality was not merely first - with Versace it was first, last, and everything in between.

Unapologetic experiments with sexuality were his trademark. His 1992 collection featured a line of leather bondage dresses. The next year he extended his reach into sexual deviance with even more leather. "They said these clothes belonged only in a leather bar," he smirked. "And now, last night, there were 200 socialites in bondage."

Did this blatant and exultant sexuality limit Versace's client list? Not hardly. Famous clients included the Princess of Wales, along with the likes of Elton John and Madonna. Diana was even to have opened Versace's AIDS benefit in London, but pulled out after it was discovered that she would be surrounded by men wearing only their (minimal) underwear. This was too much, even for what's left of the House of Windsor.

Diana did attend Versace's funeral mass in Milan, as did Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, wife of John F. Kennedy, Jr. In death as in life, Versace was surrounded by celebrity. His opulent homes were visited by the rich, beautiful, and famous. He lived and died as a medieval prince - a modern Medici. His white-gloved personal servants were imported from Sri Lanka, following historic precedent. Like the Medicis, he surrounded himself with expensive art, masking power with beauty.

The world now knows of "Casa Casuarina," Versace's palace in Miami Beach and the site of his gruesome murder. With renovations, the house was estimated to have cost \$40-million - and it was only one of three palaces of hedonism he owned. Madonna, after spending the night as Versace's guest, described the breath-taking opulence of his villa on Italy's Lake Como (complete with naked male statues filling the bedrooms). Writing after Versace's death, Madonna admitted "I was envious of a person who had the courage to live so luxuriously. I'm too practical for that."

Leaving aside the interesting question of why it takes so much courage to live in luxury, one is struck by Madonna's missing sense of irony. The average American will get the joke. Anyone whose lifestyle leads Madonna to describe herself as "practical" is way over the edge.

Sensuality was central to Versace's empire and mystique. He built his reputation and style on blending classical patterns with sexual themes. His colors were bold, and his lifestyle fit his design styles. Richard Martin described Versace as "the great post-Freudian designer - one who had no guilt whatsoever. He created things about sensuality and sexuality. It was all unabashed."

As one London commentator explained, Versace “looked beyond the sensual and found the sexual instead - leather and latex, body harnesses and studded skirts, spike heels and thigh length boots.” Rachel Campbell-Johnson concluded: “By sheer force of personality, he forced the richest and loveliest women in the world to dress like whores.”

He was at the top of the homosexual culture - an “A-gay” on the international scene, part of the elite to which less famous homosexuals aspired. Versace was “in” and accepted. He talked weekly with Princess Diana and was well known as a courtier to the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Springsteen. Heterosexual celebrities wore his homoerotic designs. His parties were epic in scale, including a New Year’s bash at the Warsaw Ballroom, a prominent fixture in Miami Beach’s gay culture. Newsweek reported that some of Versace’s friends gathered last week to mourn him, and held a moment of silence, “just before the Amateur Strip Contest.”

Versace experienced a brush with mortality last year, when he was diagnosed with a rare cancer of the inner ear. Appearing to survive the cancer, Versace declared that “from now on - it’s my party.”

Interviewer Andrea Lee once asked Versace if he believed in God. “Yes,” he responded, “I believe in God, but I’m not the kind of religious person who goes to church, who believes in the fairy tale of Jesus born in the stable with the donkey. That, no - I’m not stupid. I can’t believe that God, with all the power that he has, had to have himself born in a stable. Non sarebbe stato comodo - it wouldn’t have been comfortable.”

In other words, Versace couldn’t believe in a God who wasn’t Versace, surrounded by his idea of beautiful things and beautiful people. The God of the Bible would not be a fitting patron of the Versace empire or a fitting deity for its religion.

The severed Medusa head symbol was Versace’s design trademark. With snakes for hair and death in the face, the Medusa head mocked convention while appearing classical. Few remember that in Greek mythology, the gorgon Medusa was a figure of petrifying death.

Versace is the perfect symbol of post-modern hedonism, and now a martyr for homosexual culture. His lifestyle and wealth made even rock stars blush, and yet they wore his clothes, bought his linens, and attended his parties. Apparently, his fame and sexuality also attracted his jealous murderer, who, in killing Versace, may have killed what he knew he could not become, an “A-gay.”

Whatever lessons may be learned are likely to be lost in the mythology of martyrdom. Morality is the one great question banned from the onset. Versace lived in defiance of traditional morality and refused to believe in a God who would humble himself in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

La Repubblica declared “he was killed like a prince laid low in his own blood, with one hand outstretched toward his oil paintings, his tapestries, his gold.” How sad. How very sad.

