

GRANDE DAME
Designer Gabriella Crespi in her family home by marriage, the Palazzo Crespi in Milan, surrounded by pieces from her new collection with Sergio Rossi. The models with butterfly shapes are inspired by her 'Farfalla' necklaces; the golden shoes on the floor by her 'Gocce Oro' chandelier; and the ones on the sofa by her 'Elettropiù' necklace

GOLDEN YEARS

Why Gabriella Crespi's classic 1960s and 1970s designs are the perfect fit for a new Sergio Rossi collection

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Gabriella Crespi would be a wonderful subject for a Hollywood biopic. The artist, sculptor, designer, socialite and muse to many a fashion house, not least Dior in the 1960s, is not only one of the most sought-after and important figures of 20th-century Italian design, but her glamorous life is as well-suited to celluloid as any producer with an eye for aesthetics could wish for. Whether or not Crespi would countenance such a treatment is another matter.

A few years ago, given she was somewhere up the Himalayan mountains and somewhere through a 25-year spiritual journey and periodic vow of silence, the answer would almost certainly have been no. But now Crespi is back in Italy. And while she remains devoted to her spiritual path, she is also far better positioned to entertain new ideas concerning her designs and legacy. And she has quite a back catalogue to work with.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Crespi was the creative force behind some 1,500 pieces of furniture and accessories. Among her devoted private clients were Elizabeth Arden, Gunther Sachs, Princess Grace and the Shah of Iran. Her coffee tables, sculptures, lamps, silverware and jewellery took pride of place in some of the most elegant houses in the world – they were highly collectible then and are even more so now, only very rarely coming onto the market.

What makes Crespi's work so compelling is the balance of opposite forces. They are grand and luxurious in one extreme and minimal, almost humble in another. Her glossy, contemporary forms are most often juxtaposed against ornate and gilded surroundings, spaces she deliberately designed for. The perfect lines, the pure geometries were never machine made; Crespi preferred her prototypes and final pieces to be produced by a fine woodworker or metalsmith working from her drawings.

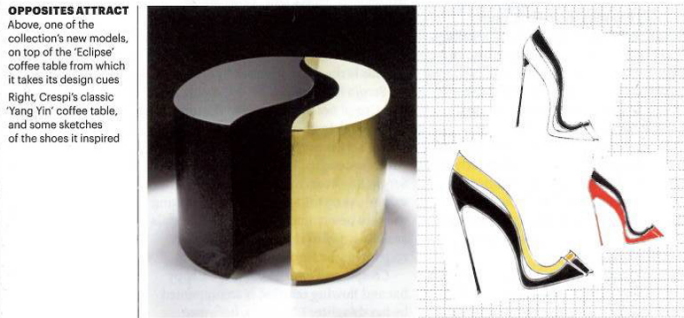
She married into one of the richest families in Italy (the Crespis built a huge textile empire and owned the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*), and has been described as 'Bond girl meets Jackie O'. Yet despite the high living, Crespi was always pulled towards nature, solitude and reflection. And like her 'Yang Yin' table, one of the last pieces she designed before she left for India, hers is a life of two halves.

Today, in Milan's Palazzo Crespi, she sits surrounded by the results of the first collaboration she has agreed to since returning from India. It is a collection by Sergio Rossi inspired by Crespi's >>

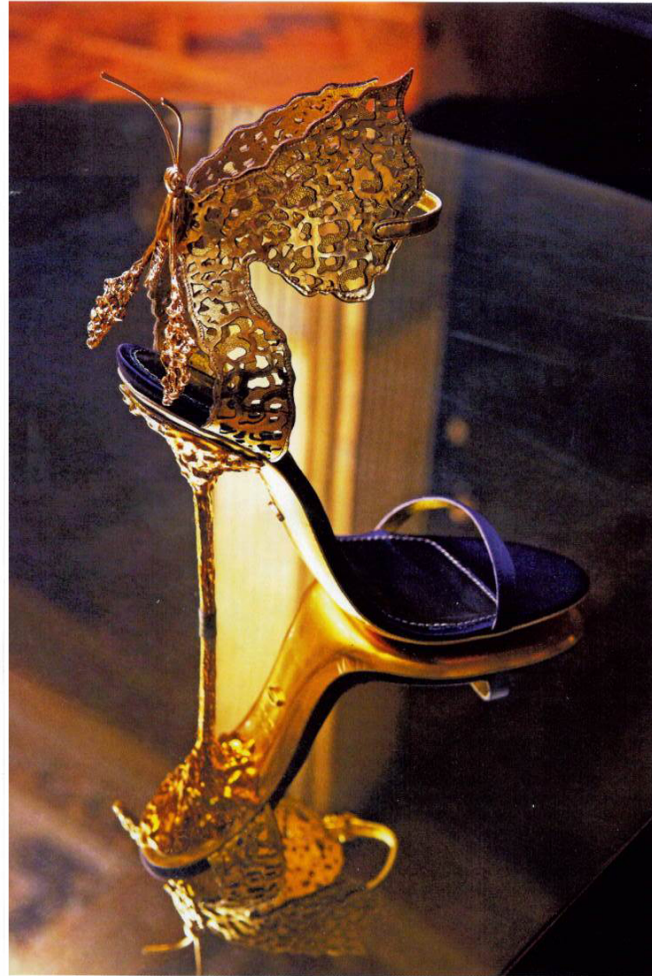
OPPOSITES ATTRACT

Above, one of the collection's new models, on top of the 'Eclipse' coffee table from which it takes its design cues

Right, Crespi's classic 'Yang Yin' coffee table, and some sketches of the shoes it inspired



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designs. Created by the house's new collections and design director Angelo Ruggeri, the ten shoe designs and one evening bag take their design cues from Crespi's art, furniture and jewellery.

Appropriately, it is also split into two segments: day and evening wear. 'The first segment is inspired by Gabriella Crespi's iconic elements: lacquers and moons,' says Christophe Mélard, president of Sergio Rossi. It features curved shapes and contrasting colours – particularly red, white and black – used in combination with brass and steel. The 'Yang Yin' table itself translates into a pair of iconic Sergio Rossi stilettos in patent and metallic leather.

The second segment of the collection is inspired by Crespi's showstopping filigree jewellery. 'For several collections we have

been working on this idea of the golden heel,' explains Mélard. 'Here they evoke her famous "Gocce Oro" candelabras.' The designer's butterfly motif is wrapped around heels and appears to fly off the arch of the foot.

This is the first collection by Ruggeri for Sergio Rossi, and it's to his credit that Crespi not only agreed to the idea, but also made no changes to his sketches. 'It was very important that she was happy with the designs,' he says. 'I tried to put Sergio Rossi together with her production values – everything is made in Italy, using the very best craftsmanship and materials available, and designed with complete respect for the furniture.'

Crespi, resplendent in a large floppy hat and flowing textiles, is accompanied by her daughter Elisabetta, her voice



STAR LIGHT

Above, Crespi with two of her Plexiglas obelisk lamps in the 1970s. Photography: courtesy of Gabriella Crespi. Left, the intricate butterfly motif was inspired by Crespi's 'Farfalla' filigree pendant necklace

during our interview, who says she agrees with Ruggeri: 'When she saw the sketches she thought her designs were perfectly interpreted. She was very impressed. This is why she decided that this would be a good collaboration.'

This co-mingling of fashion and art with design was even more in evidence than usual during this year's Salone with, among others, Prada, Salvatore Ferragamo and Bulgari all hosting events. In many ways Crespi predicted such a fusion, always refusing to accept fashion, art and design as distinct practices. What does she make of the new generation of designers? 'She is very aware of the energy in design at the moment,' says Elisabetta. 'But there's so much going on, she feels it's very hard for young designers when there is so much noise.'

Crespi's creative journey still serves as inspiration for the current generation of artists however. Like many midcentury designs, her pieces look strikingly contemporary today. The forms are truly original, beautifully articulated using mechanisms she designed (and patented), making the simplest shapes gloriously multifunctional and theatrical as they transform and extend, open and close.

Mélard explains that the idea for this initiative came during a dinner Sergio Rossi held to mark the launch of its Memphis-inspired spring summer 2013 collection. 'What most interests me is expressing the unique creativity of Italy,' he says. 'This collection could not be made anywhere else in the world, it epitomises the Italian lifestyle – la dolce vita. Like Gabriella it represents the very luxurious jet set spirit yet it is not fleeting. It is born from a great respect for processes and craftsmanship. These are all ideas we are starting to explore, and which we will expand on for the next collection – this is a starting point.' ★

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