

Searching for Super Mario

Two Valentino's vie for space and recognition in the world of Italian fashion. Their contrasting visions and fortunes reveal hypocrisy throughout the whole industry. But which one's for real?



It's a fickle world, fashion. Names and reputations seem to rise and fall almost at the drop of a proverbial glove. This has never been more true than in these economically uncertain times, a period in which technology has also changed the game and its rules. Asia (especially China) has become a major and still expanding market for the luxury goods sector, and Covid19 has forever skewered the traditional high street experience.

Historically of course, rise and fall in fashion has always been part of the game – it's what makes the runway shows such reputation-makers and breakers after all: someone's outrageously good collection is someone else's wave goodbye, darling. For every up and up [*Off-White* or *Coach*] there is an inevitable *Pier Cardin* or, more recently, *Marc Jacobs*.

Of course, unlike success, many fashion failures (especially – quietly now – *financial* failures) tend to get dealt with by a brand's holding company or a patient bank. *Alexander McQueen* is still one of the most forward-facing names in town, but its losses have generally been consolidated by holding company *Kering*. Likewise, when everyone thought *Burberry* had lost its way, they were able to rethink, rebrand and go to greater heights in the mid-2000s.

In short, success is not just a case of having a great designer with a good eye (although that helps immeasurably), but also a matter of good marketing and promotion, refining the algorithm, and having the right backing through good and bad spells. Without these, you set up a much smaller shop.



[Valentino Printed Cady Dress](#)

Mario Valentino isn't a brand that will be on many people's radar in relation to upward and downward fashion trends. Unlike the 'other' more renowned *Valentino Garavani* (MG – the brand of poppy-red-dress fame and ongoing marquee status) the *Mario Valentino* [MV] brand has had to play bridesmaid for the better part of a quarter of a century, and is now precariously balanced (and struggling) in the hyper-competitive premium sector.

Reputations in luxury and premium are tenuous these days (*Hugo Boss* and *Dolce&Gabbana* are just two other names that have taken a hit due to bad PR and a heavy social media scouring) and MV has largely suffered a fate common to aged brands without major backing.

The fall of a relatively smaller multi-nationals like MV is not surprising, and the additional criticisms of its designs are not without reason. Mainly (from *Valentino Garavani's* perspective) the issue is one of misappropriation. Essentially, MV's cheaper premium stuff can be mistaken for MG's expensive luxury stuff and MV [or rather *Yarch Capital* who own the brand] seem intent on sustaining the illusion.

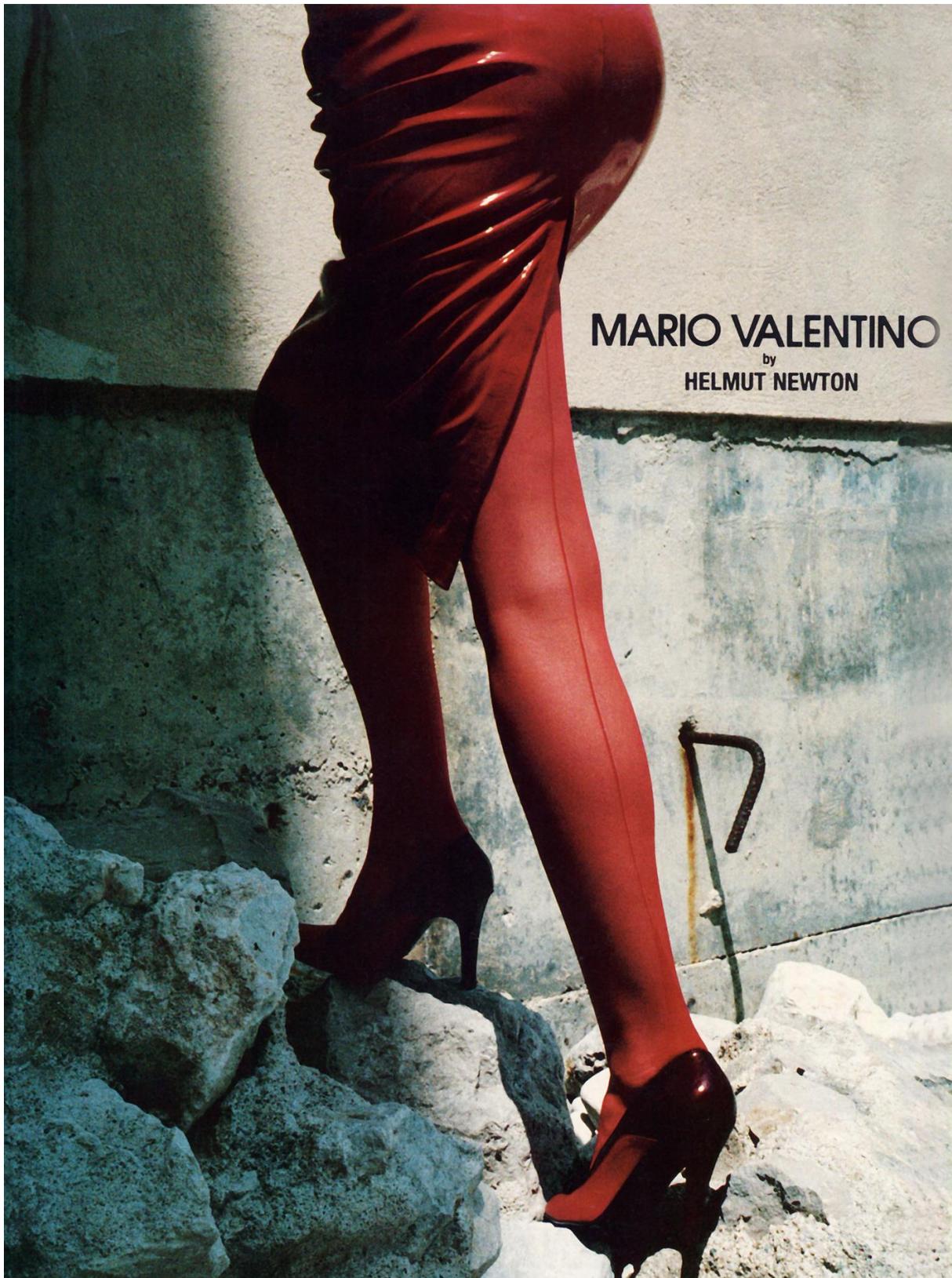
If someone thinks they're buying a genuine Valentino bag for £200 or less, they probably don't deserve to know any differently.

Imitation is the greatest form of flattery after all. Of course, you could also argue that VG's patented [Rockstud Bag](#) has a similar aesthetic to [Givenchy's Antigona bag](#). You could also question how much it really matters – if someone walks into a shop and thinks they're buying a genuine, new MG bag for £200 or less, they probably don't need (or deserve!) to know any differently. And if they *do* know the difference but still want to pay £200 then a quick internet search will take them to the booming world of [fake bags](#). MV and *Yarch Capital's* biggest mistake in all this is in not clearly differentiating between their limited range of quite good items they sell directly through their own website and their premium goods that – if anything – seem to be light lunching off the better stuff and their once sound name.

Of course, with many millions potentially at stake, someone has to keep an eye on this sort of thing. So *Mario Valentino* has been deemed a derivative of the luxury brand and charged with using the *real* Valentino name and reputation to leverage their own, whilst at the same time producing goods that are allegedly neither of great quality or particularly original. The question is, in a fashion war where fingernails and handbags are flaying every which way, what is *Mario Valentino's* rightful place in the fashion canon? To answer this question, we have to go back to the beginning.

Mario Valentino began producing quality leather goods in 1952. Early products were [as they still are] functional by design, sturdy and well made, but without much of the additional flourishes or technical attributes that we've since come to associate with luxury brands in general and also *Valentino Garavani*. Spike heels and moccasins were the designer's stock in trade, but it was the [coral sandal](#) (a simple leather base construct with colourful pearl-effect strapping and flourishes) that really caught the world's attention. Early advertorials demonstrate the emphasis: luxury as attainable glamour and – in the case of the sandal – associated with the jet set brigade as they boarded yachts and traversed Italy's beaches in search of *relassamento*. This is the kind of slant

now promoted (with a bigger marketing budget) by *Michael Kors* and other conservative premium brands, but 'luxury' was a relative novelty to the aspiring classes at the time; the post war revival of Italian fashion coinciding with a European 'awakening' of liberated individualism that saw the expression of and beautification of self as something to achieve.



It's also worth mentioning *Mario Valentino's* beginnings and long-time base in working class Naples; not a fashion or cultural hub like Milan or Rome, and perhaps accounting for at least some of the fashion world's general disdain for the company. (By way of contrast, Valentino Garavani was born in the wealthy Lombardi region and established *his* Valentino in fashionable Rome].

The ideal of female sexual power reached a creative zenith in the early eighties, and would give rise to the supermodel concept.

Shoes have remained the *Mario Valentino's* stock in trade through the years, although classic clothing items can be located by searching vintage clothing websites like [Vestiaire Collective](#). Strongly constructed and minimally decorated womenswear (still found in their [jackets and leather skirts](#)) mirror the output from the designer's peak years (the late seventies and early eighties) when the ideal of female sexual power reached a creative zenith (and would help give rise to the supermodel concept, itself a proto-Italian principle that at once made women (not girls) both completely feminine and completely strong.

Helmut Newton's work for the brand in the 80's especially emphasizes an overtly heavy, noir tone that draws sharp afternoon lines (but no sweat) to its untouchable models, but that also honours rough working class or seaside backdrops in homage to the fashion designer's origins. This is not the realm of fancy and carefree design experimentation or complicated fabric interplay.

The likes of [Karl Lagerfeld](#) added design flourishes and *Armani* the inverted V-structure to the MV silhouette during their brief liaisons with the company, but whether you're currently looking to turn back the clock via vintage items, or with new but classically constructed shoes or a [heavy duty coat](#), or want to aspire cheekily with a [studded belt bag](#) or more formally with a [faux leather bag](#), then the choice is ultimately yours. This is a principle of female empowerment that both Valentino's promoted and helped to progress in their relative heydays. On this they would both surely agree, regardless of whether they're now perched in fashion heaven or are consigned to purgatory for their sins.