



MARTIN'S PLACE

WITH AN ELEGANT ATELIER IN THE CHIC MARAIS DISTRICT OF PARIS, MARTIN GRANT IS PROBABLY THE MOST FAMOUS AUSTRALIAN DESIGNER YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF, WRITES JANE CORNWELL.

MARTIN GRANT WOULD LIKE TO SHOW ME his office, the hub of his quietly successful design empire here in the historic Marais district of Paris, but he can't because, well, Bette Midler is in there. He just went in to fetch his cigarettes and there she was, all merry-eyed and larger than life, waiting to pick up a jacket.

He sits his slender frame back down on the large hessian-covered rococo couch in his showroom, a sweeping space with antique lights, chevron parquet and two racks – just two – of beautiful, wearable clothes, and laughs. “I’m like, ‘Oh, hi, Bette! How are you?’”

The doorbell rings. It rings a lot at Grant’s atelier on rue Charlot, in a 17th-century building nestled between two courtyards and signposted by a simple brass plaque. The fingers requesting entry might well belong to a style icon such as Juliette Binoche, Cate Blanchett or Jacqueline Kennedy’s younger sister Lee Radziwill, all of whom are fans of Grant’s clean lines and unexpected details, his modern cuts and elegant silhouettes.

“People have to dare themselves to come in here,” says the Melbourne-born Grant, 46, his Australian accent untempered by more than two decades of European living. “But once they do, they love it; they see we’re very relaxed.”

Some of Grant’s older customers have been buying his pieces since 1996, when he opened his own boutique next to a falafel restaurant in a less salubrious part of the Marais. Others were alerted to his understated genius three years later when, tipped off by US *Vogue*’s then editor-at-large, André Leon Talley, Naomi Campbell strutted Grant’s stuff at a soirée in his salon, before a select audience of 15 leading fashion editors.

That Barneys in New York subsequently bought his entire collection for their flagship department store, and later commissioned Grant to design their in-house range, is indicative of a career that Grant has built organically, and not according to any forward plan. “André was just someone I met and had a connection with,” he says. “The same with Cate, who is more of a friend, though I see her less now she’s moved back to Australia.” Grant and the Paris-based Radziwill, 79, are in constant contact. “Lee and I have dinner each week. We go on holidays together.”

“I’ve done things gradually, in steps,” he continues as one of his staff, a sleek girl with a brown bob and red lipstick, brings me an espresso. “I didn’t want to take on more than I could handle. I certainly didn’t want to give up my independence.”

When venerable French fashion houses Céline

and Givenchy came knocking, he turned them down. “The small print wasn’t right. I don’t want to get eaten up by those large companies. And the politics!” He shudders. “Not interested.”

Grant’s own collections – he does four a year – are sold in major fashion stores and boutiques everywhere, from Beverly Hills to Vienna, Boston to Tokyo. Having just been chosen to design the new Qantas uniform and with no Australian stockists at present, Grant is probably the most famous Australian designer you’ve never heard of. Which is fine by him. “It’s difficult to do a solid job and do all the social networking as well. I did the frothy stuff the first time around.”

GRANT WAS JUST 16 WHEN HE LAUNCHED HIS FIRST ready-to-wear line in his studio in Melbourne’s Little Collins Street in 1982. The middle brother of two sisters born to a history professor father and housewife mother in leafy, suburban Blackburn, he’d been taught to sew by his seamstress grandmother when he started drawing dresses – just dresses – at kindergarten.

He grew up stitching, designing and dreaming; he was 13 when he befriended a 15-year-old from the local girls’ school that this writer attended – a self-contained girl called Melinda with a sheet of honey-blond hair – and for several years made her his muse. At 18, his outfits were being celebrated by *Vogue Australia*; just a few years later he was crowned Cointreau Young Designer of the Year in Sydney. Suddenly everyone wanted a piece of this skinny, blue-eyed wunderkind with the low-slung jeans and unassuming ways. For a while he tried running a business with three full-time staff, but the pressure got too much. He was sartorially spent, fashioned out.

He did a bit of landscape gardening, as he still does on the terrace of his flat around the corner from his atelier (“hardy stuff, since I’m away a lot”). He enrolled in a sculpture course at the Victorian College of the Arts but dropped out after two years; having spent much of his life moulding fabric onto a dummy, then drawing the design afterwards (most designers do the opposite), he realised he’d had a sculptor’s aesthetic all along.

He leaps up and fetches a black knife-pleated dress made from silk gazar, an old couture fabric, from the rack to our left. “This is very lightweight, very structural. I love it when pieces hold their own shape. It’s like a soft piece of armour.”

Reinvigorated by the epiphany that fashion and sculpture weren’t so different, Grant set his sights further afield: on London, where he learnt bespoke tailoring with designers including Japanese maverick Koji Tatsuno. Two years later, in 1992, he left for Paris, looking for adventure and inspiration, finding both, relishing a short period of blissful anonymity: “I couldn’t speak the language and I hardly knew anyone. I had this sense of absolute freedom.” A smile. “It’s a bit different now.”

With success has come homesickness, its bitterness intensified by the fact he can no longer just up and leave. “I love the idea of living back in Australia, even if it might never happen. I love the landscape, the light, the birdsong. I lap it up when I’m there. I even love the suburbs; Blackburn’s quite green and beautiful. I took two of the girls who work for me there once and they said, ‘This is the country, Martin!’”

Bette Midler probably wouldn’t be dropping by his atelier in Blackburn. “Bette Midler! I wonder if she’s still in there? I should have told her I loved her in *First Wives Club*.”

He pauses, his eyes dancing. “Back in a mo,” he says. “I’ll just go and see.” **GW**

NUMBER CRUNCH

BY JOHN S. CROUCHER*

52.2%
Proportion of surveyed singles in Australia who would sleep with someone on a first date; who look for casual sex: 25.2%

3

pence

Cost of riding a horse across the Sydney Harbour Bridge when it opened in March 1932; a car: 6 pence

16%

Proportion of Australian women who smoke during pregnancy

10%

Proportion of residential power consumption in Australia that is due to standby power; total cost in 2010: \$1.1 billion

74%

Proportion of surveyed brides in Australia who said they had gained weight six months after their wedding; lost weight: 13%; stayed the same: 12%



DICTIONARY
FOR THE MODERN WORLD

BY JACQUELINE MALEY

STARCHITECT

A celebrity architect who lends their design genius to new projects. Builders of hotel chains, universities and corporate premises know that hiring a Renzo Piano or a Glenn Murcutt will up their grooviness factor considerably.

SWISHING

The swapping of clothes, shoes or accessories between friends. Swishers attend parties where instead of throwing a key in a bowl, they give away an item and take one in return. It’s eco-fabulous!