

Verdura

Verudra is an American fine jeweller and specialty retailer founded by Duke Fulco di Verdura (1898-1978) in 1939 in New York. With European jewellery brands being out of reach during the Second World War (1939-1945), Verdura's bold designs attracted a number of clients among New York high society.

History

Fulco Santostefano della Cerda was born to an aristocratic family in Palermo, Sicily in 1898. The family home, Villa Niscemi, was surrounded by semi-tropical gardens and lavishly furnished rooms, where extravagant costume parties with high society guests from Europe and America were often held. As a child, he had pets including a pair of baboons and a camel named Momo. This exotic upbringing would later manifest itself in his whimsical animal jewellery designs¹. One example is this 1967 diamond and gem-set camel motif brooch made in platinum, a cultured black pearl, 170 full-cut round diamonds and a yellow sapphire.



Figure 1. A diamond and gem-set camel motif brooch, Verdura. Johan Moran Auctioneers. 22nd May 2013.

Although part of the nobility, Duke Fulco di Verdura's father, Giulio Santo Stefano della Cerda (1867-1923), squandered most of the family's fortunes, leaving little for Fulco di Verdura to inherit. In 1929, Duke Fulco di Verdura invited more than 300 of his friends including Cole Porter, Coco Chanel (1883-1971), and Elsa Maxwell (1883-1963), as well as princes and aristocrats from all over Italy to his "1779" costumed ball in Palermo at the Palazzo Verdura². Although he depleted what remained of his family's inheritance, this event cemented his standing in these circles, paving the way for the future success of his company and revival of his family fortunes.

In 1930, he began his career in jewellery by designing personal jewellery for Coco Chanel. On a holiday together, they visited the mosaic panel *The Empress Theodora and Retinue* in the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. Fulco was impressed by the sumptuous Byzantine art and architecture, especially the mosaics on the vaults and inlaid-stone pavements³. Soon, he created his very first Maltese cross design (fig. 3),

¹ Basel (2022)

² Verdura (2022)

³ Britannica (2022)

which would later become his signature.⁴ The use of gold and large multicolour semi-precious gemstones was revolutionary in the 1930s. In 1935, famed fashion editor Diana Vreeland (1903-1989) introduced Fulco to top American celebrity jeweller, Paul Flato (1900-1999), and he started creating pieces for Hollywood stars and celebrities. Cole Porter's wife, Linda was also one of his customers and favoured his spectacular aquamarine and ruby belt-designed necklace⁵.



Figure 2. Fulco di Verdura and Coco Chanel admiring a Maltese Cross cuff in 1937.
Photo by Lipnitzki/Getty



Figure 3. Maltese Cross Cuff⁶.

On the 1st September, 1939, Fulco opened his Fifth Avenue salon in New York with financial support from his friends, including Vincent Astor and Cole Porter. As most

⁴ Vassel (2022)

⁵ Verdura (2022)

⁶ Verdura (2022)

Americans were unable to travel to Europe during the war to purchase fine jewellery, Fulco's debut was a big success⁷.



Figure 4. Fifth Avenue salon in New York, Verdura, 1939

Fulco met Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), a Spanish surrealist artist and they collaborated on their first surrealist jewellery collection in 1940. Five miniature paintings by Dalí, encased in jewellery by Verdura, were exhibited and sold at the Museum of Modern Art in New York⁸. The collaboration blurred the boundaries of jewellery and art.



Figure 4. Gold, Morganite and Ruby “Medusa” Brooch, with Miniature Painting by Salvador Dalí, 1941. One of the five original jewels from the 1941 collaboration between Duke Fulco di Verdura and Salvador Dalí. Originally from the collection of Millicent Rogers. Photos ©David Behl, Courtesy of Verdura, LLC.

⁷ Verdura (2022)

⁸ Bejeweled Magazine (2022)

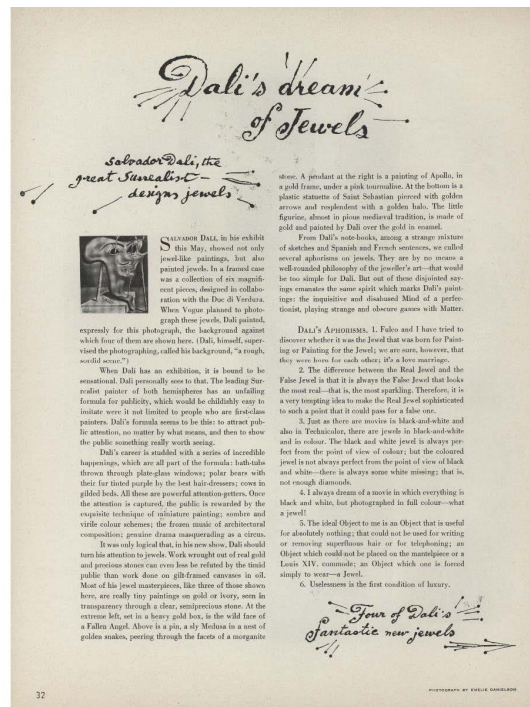


Figure 6. “Dali’s Dream of Jewels,” Vogue, July 15, 1941, pages 32-33. Credit: Salvador Dalí/Vogue, July 1941/Conde Nast

In 1973, Fulco retired and passed his business to his long-time associate, Joseph Alfano (1936-2007)⁹. Fulco published a memoir in 1976 titled *The Happy Summer Days: A Sicilian Childhood*, which helps us understand how Fulco’s childhood inspired him to become a legendary jeweller¹⁰. In 1978, Fulco died at the age of 79 and soon after, Alfano sold the business to Ward Landrigan, former head of jewellery at Sotheby’s New York. He bought the rights to the name of Verdura as well as the rights to almost 10,000 of the original jewellery designs. The Landrigan family continues to produce Fulco’s design for a new generation, some of whom are descendants of the same families who had been Fulco’s loyal customers¹¹.

⁹ Verdura (2022)

¹⁰ Good Reads (2022)

¹¹ Volandes (2019)



Figure 7. Ward Landrigan & Nico Landrigan, PATRICK MCMULLAN CO., 2010

In the Collection

Liang Yi Museum houses 5 compacts designed and produced by the Verdura Company in the 1930s to 1950s. The following compacts reflect the unique style of Verdura's vanities which are made with a combination of gold and multi-coloured large gemstones.



Figure 8. Compact, Maker: Verdura, c. 1950, Material:Turquoise, diamond, gold, Diameter: 7.9cm x Height: 2.13cm, Liang Yi Collection

This gold compact (fig. 8) is decorated by pave-set diamonds set in the form of stars and accented by turquoise shaped as a dove. The compact contains a mirror and a powder container. The star-shaped design is from the house's Stardust collection, which remains a popular design of Verdura's that is still available today¹². The Stardust collection first appeared in 1944 with a bracelet commissioned by Cole Porter's wife, Linda Lee Thomas (1883–1954). This compact also exemplifies Fulco's use of animal motifs as a testament to his love for animals.



Figure 9. Powder box, Maker: Verdura, c. 1950, Material: Gold, tourmaline, Diameter: 6.82cm x Height: 2.24cm, Liang Yi Collection

Introduced in the 1930s, the Byzantine collection juxtaposes a wide palette of semi-precious stones with gold. The surface of the compact (fig. 9) is surrounded by multicoloured tourmalines, reminiscent of mosaics, soon becoming another typical characteristic of Verdura's style. Tourmaline was imported to Europe from Sri Lanka in the early 18th century. The most valuable tourmaline varieties are rubellite, which has an intense raspberry-red hue. Another unique variety, "watermelon" tourmaline, which is also set on the compact, has unexpected colour gradations that range from red to green¹³.

¹² Verdura (2022)

¹³ Van Cleef & Arpels (2022)



Figure 10. Compact, Maker: Verdura, c. 1950, Material: Gold, diamond, pink sapphire, Length 7.7 x Width 6.2 x Height 2.1cm



Figure 11. Candy Ring in Rubellite and Pink Tourmaline.¹⁴

The third and final piece from our vanity collection is an oval compact in gold, (fig. 10) accented by pave-set pink sapphire and diamonds at the centre. The cutting method is extremely important when it comes to pink sapphires as it affects the amount of light and colour that shines through, which could enhance the beauty of the stone. Oval cushion cut and cushion cut, the most common types of cut to maximise the beauty of this stone, are found on the compact¹⁵. With the different cutting of the stones, the colour of the pink sapphire changes from lighter to darker shades of pink. The style of the compact is reminiscent of Verdura's 'Candy Ring' (fig. 11), first designed and made in 1942, one of Verdura's earliest and most classic designs.

¹⁴ Verdura (2022)

¹⁵ The Natural Sapphire Company (2022)

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