

Ken Scott: How to Keep Flowers Alive

He was known as “the fashion gardener.” An August 1972 cover of *Il Milanese* magazine explains why. It captures him, dressed head to foot in pink, posed casually on the upper tier of his brilliantly blooming terrace garden in Milan.¹ Around him are climbing plants, clusters of rosebushes, oversized sunflowers, rows of gerberas, carnations and fuschias. Beneath him stands a bevy of beauties, as exotic as orchids in their Ken Scott dresses, coloured magenta, turquoise and violet. “La moda nasce su questa terrazza,” reads the title. “Fashion is born on this terrace”. Scott was a skilled gardener. But he was many other things too: a gifted painter, an experimental restaurateur, an ingenious textile artist and one of the most striking design savants of the twentieth century.

Scott lent his exuberant imagination to everything - from loungewear and luggage to silk scarves and swimsuits, often joyfully splashed with his trademark poppies, petunias and peonies. He designed the kind of vividly coloured graphic print that impresses itself on your retina and fills you with the warmth of an Italian summer. In 1968, *Time* magazine described his fashion shows as full of “models swirling in flower-print jersey” in every shade of pink from raspberry to bougainvillea.² On news of his death, *The New York Times* published an obituary, remembering his colour schemes with awe: “lemon yellow, pumpkin, hot pink and pepper green or mauve, purple, chalk white, electric pink and black.”³

Over four decades, Scott’s botanical vision blossomed like the flowers he loved, until his death in 1991. 30 years later, his legacy of bold and fearless flower prints bloomed again in the floral revival of Gucci’s 2021 Epilogue collection, this time under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele. So, what is it about Scott’s style that makes it so enduring? And how did someone who grew up in the American mid-West become such a mainstay of mid-60s Milanese design?

He was born George Kenneth Scott in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1919. His father, a photographer and travelling salesman, had died when Scott was 12 years old, leaving the family impoverished. The young Scott set to work, dressing shop windows after school. It was the modest start to what would be an illustrious artistic career. By the 50s, and throughout the 60s and 70s, he was dressing the most beautiful women of his time, from Jacqueline Onassis and Monica Vitti to Twiggy and Audrey Hepburn.

For her 1967 film, *Two for the Road*, Hepburn wore a Ken Scott dress in mauve, apple green and sunflower yellow, an abstract floral print, almost geometric in pattern. She called it the “Bird Dress”. Fashion photographer William Klein shot Hepburn on set, capturing the swinging bias cut of the dress, the daringly mid-thigh length and bell sleeves. Hepburn has cropped hair,

¹ *Il Milanese*, 6 August, 1972.

² “Fashion: Hippie Gypsy”, *Time*, Friday 29 November, 1968.

³ “Ken Scott, 72, Dies; A Fashion Designer Known for Fabrics”, *The New York Times*, 27 February, 1991.

arms raised above her head, and a leg kicked up into the air. In Scott's Bird Dress, she is liberated, mischievous and elegant.

How did an extraordinary dress like this come about? Scott started by studying at the Parsons School of Design in New York where he graduated in 1941. But the artistic orthodoxies of Parsons never suited his more adventurous impulses. He was more interested in the emergent culture of modern art, drawn to the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, the graphic style of Marc Chagall and the vivid expressionism of Paul Klee. He identified with those artists and their instinctive sense that colour could be a way of feeling, a way of capturing life.

He idolised Klee in particular, who had innovated colour wheels and developed a complementary colour theory based on a six-part rainbow. "Color possesses me," Klee once observed, "It will possess me always. Color and I are one."⁴ Color also possessed Scott. And it was fashion that enabled him to realise exactly what colour could do.

After Parsons, he found work as an upholsterer and textile designer, dressing shop windows and backdrops for photographers. Even in those early years of his career, floral decorations and fabric design were an integral part of his practice. His artistic vision refused to be deadly serious or dull when it could be bold, bright and irrepressibly fun instead. He moved to France in 1946, determined to be a painter, shuttling between Paris and the bohemia of the French Riviera. Marc Chagall and Peggy Guggenheim had been gamely championing his paintings when "one day I started designing fabrics", he explained, "and that was the end of my painting career."⁵

The sunlight and landscape of the Riviera seemed to capture his imagination, just as it had with the generation of artists who had roamed the south coast of France before him: Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne, and Scott's own contemporaries, Pierre Bonnard, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Scott shared with all of them that inheritance of luxurious warmth, the blazing light of the Mediterranean, red terracotta rooftops and thrilling blue skies. "It is so beautiful," Monet had observed, "so bright, so luminous. One swims in blue air and it is almost frightening."⁶

It was this heartfelt sense of what colour could do - how deeply it could be absorbed, how it could transform a person's sense of themselves and their environment - that makes itself apparent in all of Scott's work. In 1954, Christian Dior latched upon one of Scott's designs, adopting the print for his Spring-Summer haute couture collection. It seemed to precisely articulate the post-war mood, pointing to the new colours, shapes and forms of a young and bright future.

⁴ *Paul Klee: 1879-1940*, edited by Suzanne Partsch (Taschen: Cologne, 2003) p. 20.

⁵ See the Ken Scott website for a wealth of Scott archive and resources: <https://www.kenscott.it/en/home/>

⁶ *Claude Monet: Life and Work*, Virginia Spate (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) p. 191.

A year later in 1955, Scott moved to Milan, opening a studio and establishing, with Vittorio Fiorazzo, a high end textile brand called *Falconetto*. They took their name from Giovanni Maria Falconetto -the Venetian artist, famous at the turn of the 16th century for his eclectic interests and taste for colour. Scott could relate and emulated his style. The new Falconetto brand was dedicated to designing high quality textiles for interiors, the fabrics lavishly colour rich, full of amassed florals, fruits, playful geometric shapes and abstractions. The designs were informed by Scott's artistic training and inflected by something else -a certain élan, a flair, a wicked sense of humour that was quintessentially Ken Scott.⁷

Falconetto was warmly embraced by Milanese fashion houses. By 1957, the company had established their own manufacturing operations and by the 1960s, Ken Scott fabrics were situated firmly at the centre of Italian fashion. The move to Milan was important for Scott, but it was just as important for Milan, coming at a crucial moment in the city's fashion history. In the late 1960s, there was fierce competition between Italian fashion cities, with Rome surpassing Florence as the capital of Italian fashion. But the cultural codes of high fashion were rapidly changing too, marked by the emergence of ready-to-wear fashion markets which relied on the commercial production of high-quality design to meet consumer demand. Milan, with its proximity to the Como textile district, was equipped for this larger scale production and distribution. By the 70s, designers like Ken Scott -along with Walter Albini and Rosita Missoni - formed the fashion vanguard, settling in Milan and establishing it as the beating heart of Italian design.⁸

Yet this move was more than simply commercial. It was indicative of modernity, a shift from antiquated art cultures to radical design, underpinned by an implicitly democratic ideal: the notion that everyone deserved to dress well. More than anyone, Scott seemed to see this future: the decline of French haute couture and the dynamic rise of a more inclusive Italian aesthetic. In Milan, he could be innovative and expansive, presenting complete looks, from clothing to accessories and interiors. He had a comprehensive vision of what mid-century style could be. And he was daring in embracing new technologies, testing his designs on synthetic and artificial fabrics, experimenting with practical textiles that could be easily washed and dried, tossed unironed into luggage and pulled out pristine to wear wherever wanted. His boutique in Milan stocked silk jerseys to be thrown over body stockings, gypsy dresses, Indian tunics, bias-cut skirts, and Ban-Lon prints.

But it was his personality - a relaxed playfulness, a coolly ironic sense of humour - that give his work an inimitable quality. You can see it in the promotional images for his fashion line, developed through the 60s and 70s. There he poses in his own designs, wearing, in one

⁷ "Hoosier in Milan: Rollicking Textiles Used in Apparel by Ken Scott", *The New York Times*, May 29, 1964, p.3.

⁸ *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, edited by Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

photograph, a loud grapevine print jacket, accessorised with a silk handkerchief in his pocket and a Jack Russell dog on his shoulder.

Scott understood how creative design could inform casualwear too. He produced prints for the beach, sheer robes to be tugged on over a swimsuit, slouchy men's shirts for lounging and even an ingenious line of matching nightshirts for sleeping couples. The sleepwear collection was a collaboration with the Italian lingerie brand Imec in 1970. Scott, again, features in the campaign. Wearing a patterned nightshirt, he reclines casually against a mountain of plumped pillows, his eyes closed and his dog happily tucked in the crook of his arm. "Why does Ken Scott go to bed?" the advert asks, "Because girls should be as pretty in bed as they are in the daytime." The campaign is flirtatious, promising "new ways of dressing for the late hours."

Perhaps what's most interesting about the advert is the meticulous copy that accompanies it. It describes "infinite tones of red, red throbbing with black, flaming fire red, red exploding into carnage, audacious red, carnation red, red with shocks of pink, mysterious night red, red hot red clashing with yellow" and so on. And it describes the prints too, their hypnotic magnetism and the flowers "that live forever, asters blooming radiantly, morning delirium on bouquets of daisies, exotic flowers to freshen a hot afternoon." It's such a detailed understanding of his design that one suspects Scott had written it himself.

There's a cerebral quality to Scott's work - a sense of intellectual engagement with ideas of colour and form. But it is coupled, too, with an incorrigible sense of theatricality. His shows were spectacular entertainments, whether hosted under the giant crystal chandeliers of the Sala Bianca in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence or in the Palazzetto dello Sport - the domelike indoor sports arena in Rome - or even when under a circus tent with models parading in animal prints next to jugglers, acrobats and a llama. Scott could command magnificent sets and choreograph meticulous performances, attending to the smallest details. His was the complete vision: an unfurling of the wildest imagination.

In 1969, he opened a restaurant in Milan, called "Eats & Drinks", designing everything from the forks to the wall tiles. A year later, his spring summer collection for 1970 included dresses printed with watermelons, comically huge rigatoni, Swiss cheese and fried eggs: high fashion given a humorous pop art flavour.

Another way to describe this design aesthetic is camp. That is how the American critic, Susan Sontag, described the prevailing style of the time in her essay of 1964.⁹ Flowers were a crucial part of camp -not just real flowers, but also the flower forms of lighting fixtures in Tiffany lamps or the "cast iron orchid stalks" at the old art nouveau entrances to the Paris Metro. Camp art, Sontag observed, is decorative. It is characterized by a flamboyance, a relish for exaggeration and an instinct for the theatricalization of experience. It's easy to recognize

⁹ "Notes on Camp" (1964) in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin, 1983) pp. 105-121.

Scott's work in this mould. It embodies the central principle of camp. "Camp," Sontag explains, "is a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon." Above all, there is a generosity to camp style. It is about enjoyment and appreciation.

Scott's florals are deeply joyful. But in the context of the late 60s, they are also freighted with a different meaning. The rise of hippie culture began in America and caused ripples through the fashion industry that were felt in Europe too. Color TV captured the distinctive hippie style: the long hair, the beards, the headbands, the gypsy skirts - and the floral prints. Perhaps it is too simple to identify Scott's florals as a version of "flower power". Scott, as the fashion illustrator Joe Eula explained, was "doing psychedelic colorings before anyone even knew what psychedelia was all about."¹⁰ It was a look that was already part of Scott's fashion language. "Hippie gypsy" was how Scott described his 1968 show for the National Chamber of Italian Fashion. The collection included tiny bra tops under bolero jackets, Hungarian tunic blouses with tights, flowing skirts with head scarfs, and jewellery jangling everywhere.

A year later, in the August of 1969, 200,000 people gathered at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair. It was a landmark cultural moment - something entirely new under the sun. But Scott already knew the powerfully affective ways in which print and colour could express the new ideals of modernity: freedom and imagination. The "flower power" movement of the late 60s and early 70s was underpinned by serious ideas of passive resistance and nonviolence, specifically signalling opposition to the Vietnam War. The expression was coined by the American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, who advised that protesters distribute flowers to policemen, politicians and the general public as a gesture of peace. Hippies embraced the flower accordingly as their symbol, wearing flower embroidered clothes and pinning them to their hair.¹¹ But for Scott, the flower was more than a strategic political statement. His total commitment to it, the maximalism of his layered florals on florals - the skirts, the dresses, the bikinis, the sleepwear, the wallpapers, the upholstery, the luggage, the entire floral vision - signalled a much deeper, more powerful understanding.

There is something more subtle, more philosophical to Scott's florals too. The British novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, observed in 1970 that "People from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have such things about us."¹² Scott never took flowers for granted. He understood how profoundly they work upon human beings - how listless our lives are without them. Perhaps he knew the melancholy that flowers sometimes possess too. You can detect it in the faintly fetid, over-sweet scent of cut flowers particularly as they wilt towards their end. Think of the vase of forgotten roses that languish

¹⁰ "Fashion: Hippie Gypsy", *Time*, 29 November, 1968.

¹¹ "Flowers in the Art of Dress across the World", Peter McNeil in *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion: Global Perspectives*, edited by Joanne B. Eicher and Phyllis G. Tortora (Oxford: Berg, 2010) pp. 146-156.

¹² *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Iris Murdoch (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) p. 170.

on a dining table or the wilting carnations overlooked on a work desk. The simple truth is that flowers bloom quickly and they die continually, their bright illusion of life dispelled over the course of a week. Painters have always known this, so often capturing that moment of over-ripeness, the florid, blowsy display that comes just before the decay.¹³ When we look at centuries of still life painting, we see flowers, again and again: Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and Georgia O'Keefe's "Jimson Weed" are only the most well-known in a much longer tradition that reaches back to the seventeenth-century botanical paintings. There have been generations of painters filling their canvases with creamy daffodils, riotous red tulips, pink clematis, drooping sprigs of scilla, wilting anemones and curling marigolds.

But the question for these painters was always how to make flowers live - how to *keep* them alive. And Ken Scott knew the answer. His insistently joyful florals stay alive, his prints repeating them in infinite variety, filling every surface, so that we might never forget what flowers mean to us. Ken Scott called himself a "gardener". His own gardens - variously, a Milanese courtyard, the walled gardens of a villa in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the grounds of his house in Èze on the French Riviera - seem to have been verdant with trees, thick with orchids and agaves, towering asters and remorselessly beautiful roses. He knew how to care for them, how to make them thrive.

And like all good flowering plants, his prints are hardy. You can take a cutting from the stem and plant it in a different soil, tending it to it until its loveliness blooms again in a new place - like Gucci's Epilogue in 2021. Perhaps this is why Ken Scott's flowers endure. They remind us how colour and pattern work upon the human eye, how entangled they are with ideas of freedom and imagination, and how infinitely lucky we are to live on a planet where flowers blossom.
