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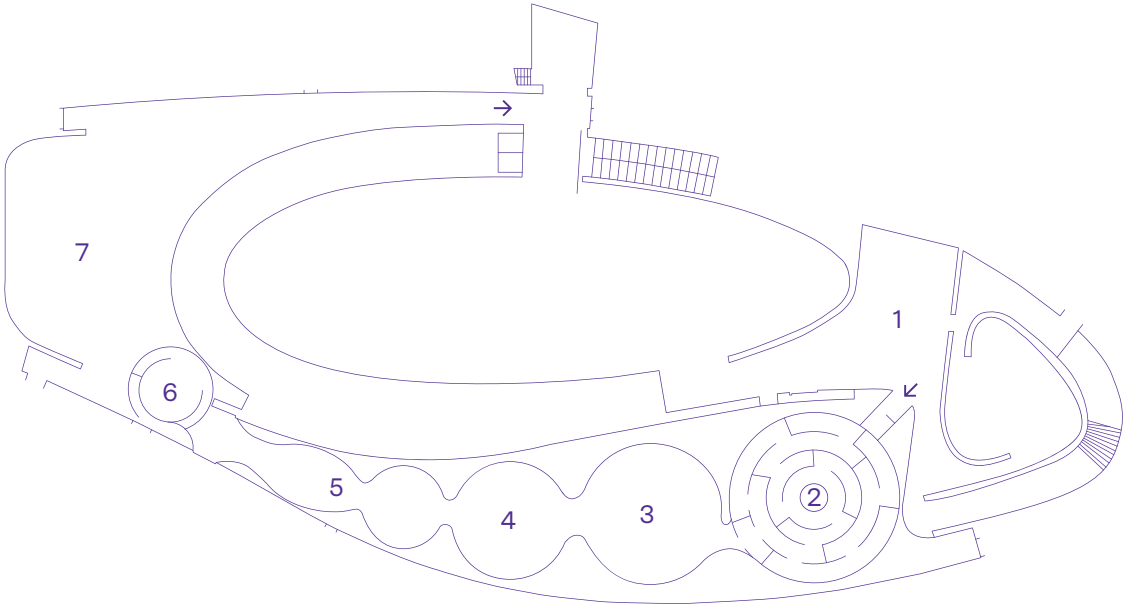
VENUS
Valentino Garavani through the eyes of Joana Vasconcelos

MAAT GALLERY

VENUS brings together works by Joana Vasconcelos and creations by Valentino Garavani, establishing a dialogue between the visual arts and haute couture centred on the many facets of femininity. The artist was invited to look into the designer's creative world in an exercise of rapprochement that sought connections, resonances and points of contact between two paths that are seemingly distant yet deeply akin. From this encounter emerged an exhibition where two distinct sensibilities converge, both equally committed to reflecting on the place of women in society and to the continuous reinvention of the forms through which this is manifested, questioned and reinvented.

Originally presented in early 2026 at PM23, the cultural space of the Fondazione Valentino Garavani e Giancarlo Giammetti in Rome, the exhibition now comes to MAAT in a new configuration and with a refreshed selection of works. Thirteen large-scale sculptures by Joana Vasconcelos and thirty-nine creations by Valentino Garavani establish an unprecedented dialogue within an immersive setting designed specifically for this exhibition. More than a mere juxtaposition of works, the project offers a journey in which sculpture and haute couture observe, complement and challenge one another, deliberately blurring the supposed boundaries between the symbolic and the utilitarian.

At the heart of this dialogue lies Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, a figure who serves as the starting point for a wide-ranging reflection on the challenges facing the female world in the contemporary era. Through a sophisticated fusion of historical references and popular culture, of archetypes and individuality, of humour and elegance, *VENUS* paints a multifaceted portrait of the contemporary woman. Inevitably complex and fluid, this portrait is a nexus where contrasting forces intersect, a field of tension where diverse female identities play out. By blending the vocabulary of contemporary sculpture with the virtuosity of haute couture, the exhibition creates a space in which female empowerment emerges not as an abstract concept, but as a visible, tangible, concrete experience that we are invited to witness.



1

VENUS (2025), part of the “Crochet Paintings” series, is a black-and-white work marked by a central “V” that dominates and unifies the entire composition. In its material and volumetry it challenges the independence of different artistic languages, calling into question the boundaries between painting and sculpture. Here, the piece is presented alongside a haute couture dress from Valentino’s Autumn–Winter 1989-1990 collection, inspired by Josef Hoffmann’s purist sensibility. An architect, designer and one of the founding figures of the Vienna Secession, Hoffmann was one of the leading exponents of the geometric strand of Art Nouveau, combining striking contrasts with precise lines. Both pieces pay homage to the Austrian artist’s legacy, at times through the overtly graphic nature of the compositions, at others through their chromatic and formal restraint.

With its layered fabrics, crochet, embroidery, ornaments, LED lights and steel cables stretching out like tentacles of fire, *Sacro Cuore* (2025) dominates the room. Paired with a strapless black shantung dress and a wide, red-lined overskirt, their encounter establishes a fascinating tableau, giving shape to the complexity of desire, where mind and heart, light and shadow, vulnerability and strength intertwine, affirming the transformative power of femininity.

2

Garden of Eden (2007-2026) creates a dreamlike and symbolically charged atmosphere, drawing a direct parallel with the biblical paradise, a place associated with both origin and transgression. Taking as its starting point the archetypal figure of Eve, the progenitor of all women, this space brings together multiple female archetypes: the heroic Valkyrie, the Sex Worker, the Phoenix, Cinderella, the Femme Fatale and the Sorceress. Vasconcelos reconfigures Eden as a synthesis, where these historically separated or hierarchised figures return to a common origin.

Eleven elongated black silhouettes populate the room, their reflective surfaces adorned with sequins, rhinestones and beads. The light that plays upon these figures creates a delicate tension between transparency and opacity, simultaneously suggesting and revealing the body underlying them. Low-tech mechanics, synthetic flora and the hum of hundreds of motors bring to the fore the processes that sustain the illusion, bringing the viewer face to face with the artifice. Enchantment and illusion merge, presenting a vision of femininity that is sensual, transformative and deeply rooted in our shared cultural imagination.

3

By stacking stainless steel pans and lids, Joana Vasconcelos creates a monumental sculpture comprising more than 300 hand-assembled elements. *Marilyn (AP)* (2011) transforms familiar household objects into symbols of glamour, challenging conventions about the many roles women play in society. The majestic shoes evoke cultural icons such as Marilyn Monroe, Cinderella and Betty Boop, whose stories are rooted not only in the symbolism of footwear, but also in the clash between two of the most enduring facets of femininity: the private domestic sphere and the public stage of identity performance.

Three evening gowns accompany the installation. At the centre stands a grey and silver Empire-style chiffon gown, embroidered with Art Nouveau floral motifs. Its flowing lines and delicate ornamentation evoke a feminine, organic elegance. Flanking it are a long dress entirely embroidered with silver and black beads and rhinestones, with a strap neckline, and a silver-grey laminated silk dress composed of intertwined elements, shimmering with an icy, luminous sheen. Together, the three gowns echo the sculptural forms and the installation's central themes of transformation.

4

In *Full Steam Ahead* (in three colours: red, green and yellow; each one from a different year: 2012, 2013, 2014), Joana Vasconcelos multiplies the common steam iron to create three sculptures that once again explore the domestic context, this time producing kinetic works. Although at first glance they may evoke the humanoid appearance of the *Transformers* (vehicles-cum-warriors whose strength correlates to size and prowess in combat), these pieces actually propose an entirely different form of transformation. Indeed, the lotus, a flower that rises immaculate from murky waters, becomes the antithesis of those

alien robots: not a symbol of domination, but of emergence, persistence and silent resilience. The sculptures are composed of hundreds of Bosch steam irons which, in a synchronised movement, blossom like luminous, mechanical flowers, creating a striking tension between femininity and industrialisation.

Two evening gowns extend the theme of the lotus flower as a symbol of unattainable beauty: their long black silhouettes, adorned with cascading jet beads and crowned with embroidered jabots, are striking examples of the sophistication of Valentino Garavani's creations. Evoking sombre, sinuous flowers, these pieces create a dynamic interplay with the sculptures between strength, delicacy and femininity.

5

The exterior surface of *Strangers in the Night* (2000) is covered with dozens of car lights that flicker to the rhythm of Frank Sinatra's song of the same name, while the interior, upholstered in padded, button-tufted white leather, creates an unexpectedly intimate refuge. Meanwhile, in *Flowers of My Desire* (1996-2010), the soft lilac-coloured feathers form a seductive, almost glamorous interior, with organic shapes evoking flowers, while the protruding handles on the reverse introduce a more hostile and unsettling presence. Together, these pieces heighten the contrast between the notions of love and sex, commitment and detachment, reflecting on the complexity of desire and on the paradoxical images that patriarchal society imposes on the female world.

Valentino's creations in this room continue to explore this duality: the medallion-shaped inlays and the lightness of the feathers on the short evening dress embody both restraint and luminosity. The long lilac satin dress, with its flowing cut and V-neckline, combines the liquid sheen of the fabric with the embroidery on the bodice. Both contribute to the overarching question raised by the room regarding femininity, its contradictions and its constant reinvention.

6

Red Independent Heart #3 (2008) is based on the traditional Portuguese Viana Hearts, the iconic filigree pieces here reinvented by the artist using almost 4,000 disposable plastic cutlery items, folded and interwoven. Suspended from a vertical axis, the work rotates continuously, accompanied by three evocative fados performed by Amália Rodrigues: *Estranha Forma de Vida* [Strange Way of Life], *Gaivota* [Seagull], *Maldição* [Curse]. By recreating a symbol of affection through an everyday object, the piece combines the domestic with memory, and tradition with contemporary expression. Beside it, a long red taffeta dress, hand-embroidered with cords, beads and rhinestones, mirrors the contrast between delicacy and strength that the sculpture emphasises, embodying sensuality and empowerment.

7

In Norse mythology, the Valkyries are minor goddesses who lead fallen warriors to Valhalla; in Joana Vasconcelos's work, they become guardians, each dedicated to

a woman whose legacy deserves renewed recognition. Here, Venus, the goddess of beauty, provides the conceptual anchor for a work conceived in dialogue with the world of Valentino. *Valkyrie Venus* (2025), created especially for this exhibition, is the result of a collaborative effort among the artist's studio, the PM23 and the Fondazione Valentino Garavani e Giancarlo Giammetti, and nine partner organisations that support women's empowerment, social inclusion, and combat gender-based violence. Stretching across the room, the sculpture, measuring thirteen metres in length, intertwines with ten creations by Valentino, leading visitors through a progression of colours, patterns, and textures that culminates in an exuberant finale of Klimtian inspiration.

Lilaea and *Bond Girl* (2017 and 2014) are part of the "Cement Sculptures" series, which reinterprets classical sculptures popularised through mass-produced statuary, traditionally used to decorate Italian gardens. Sensual and provocative, the figures are painted in a colour palette inspired by Disney, before being wrapped in delicate crochet. The works draw unexpected connections between high and popular culture, tradition and contemporaneity, reflecting the fluidity of cultural references and breaking down some of the most persistent artistic hierarchies.

Joana Vasconcelos (1971, Paris) is a Portuguese visual artist whose practice spans more than three decades and encompasses a wide range of media. Widely recognised for her monumental sculptures and immersive installations, she appropriates and transforms everyday objects, reactivating the arts and crafts tradition within a contemporary framework. Her work establishes a critical dialogue between the private and the public, popular culture and erudite references, addressing questions of gender, consumer society and collective identity with both conceptual rigour and an underlying sense of humour.

The artist gained international recognition in 2005 with the work *The Bride*, presented at the first Venice Biennale curated by women, an event to which she has returned on three other occasions. In 2013, she represented Portugal with *Trafaria Praia*, the first floating pavilion in the Biennale's history. The year prior, she became the first woman and youngest artist to have a solo exhibition at the Palace of Versailles – the most-visited show in France in over 50 years, attracting a record 1.6 million visitors. In 2018, she was the first Portuguese artist to hold a solo exhibition at Guggenheim Bilbao – the third most-visited show by a living artist in the museum's history. In 2023, she was invited to exhibit at the Uffizi Galleries and the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, placing her work in direct dialogue with the Western canon, from Leonardo da Vinci to Michelangelo and Caravaggio.

Joana Vasconcelos was awarded the title of Commander of the Order of Infante D. Henrique by the Portuguese Republic in 2009 and appointed Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture of France in 2022. In 2012, she established the Joana Vasconcelos Foundation, supporting social initiatives, awarding scholarships and promoting access to art.

Valentino Garavani (1932, Voghera – 2026, Rome) is one of the most influential figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fashion, whose work has profoundly shaped the language of Italian couture and contributed to the international recognition of *Made in Italy*. Across more than five decades, his practice has been defined by an uncompromising pursuit of beauty, precision and craftsmanship, establishing a distinctive aesthetic that transcends fashion and forms part of Italy's cultural heritage.

After moving from Paris to Rome in the early 1960s, Valentino established his first haute couture atelier, laying the foundations for an international fashion house. His landmark 1962 presentationat Palazzo Pitti in Florence marked an early recognition of his talent. In 1968, the "White Collection" introduced the maison's monogramas a prominent decorative element across garments and accessories, anticipating the visual language of contemporary branding and what would later be known as "logomania." During the following decades, Valentino played a pioneering role in the development of Italian prêt-à-porter, the international expansion of fashion boutiques and the evolution of fashion communication.

His work has been consistently recognised and interpreted within the broader context of art and culture. In 1982, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York presented a Valentino fashion show, while the *maison*'s 30th anniversary was celebrated through major exhibitions and publications in Rome and New York. A landmark retrospective at Rome's Ara Pacis in 2007 subsequently travelled to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, confirming the significance of his oeuvre within the history of fashion and decorative arts. In 2012, *Valentino: Master of Couture* at Somerset House in London presented more than 130 creations spanning his career.

Valentino's creative practice has extended beyond couture into cinema, theatre, ballet and the performing arts. The 2008 documentary *Valentino: The Last Emperor* further contributed to the documentation and interpretation of his creative world, while his projects for the Musikverein in Vienna and the New York City Ballet demonstrated the breadth of his artistic vision.

The preservation and transmission of this legacy are central to the work of the Fondazione Valentino Garavani and Giancarlo Giammetti. Through exhibitions, cultural initiatives and the digital preservation of the archive – including the Virtual Valentino Garavani Museum – the foundation continues to make his work accessible to new generations. Since its inauguration in Rome in 2025, PM23 has provided a dedicated cultural space for this ongoing dialogue between fashion, art, heritage and contemporary creativity.

VENUS - Valentino Garavani through the eyes of Joana Vasconcelos
inspired by PM23's original exhibition concept created for Fondazione Valentino Garavani e Giancarlo Giammetti

02/10/2026 → 22/02/2027

EXHIBITION

Artistic Concept
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Acknowledgements
Our most sincere gratitude to FVG Services srl, Fondazione Valentino Garavani e Giancarlo Giammetti and Maison Valentino for their support and collaboration in making this exhibition possible in Lisbon.

We extend this recognition to all the teams at FVG Services srl, Maison Valentino, and their archives, whose invaluable contribution, expertise, and dedication were crucial throughout the development and installation of the project.

A word of profound gratitude is owed to the team of seamstresses and tailors whose care, craftsmanship and commitment were essential to the installation and presentation of the Valentino creations in Lisbon.

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