

The Elitist

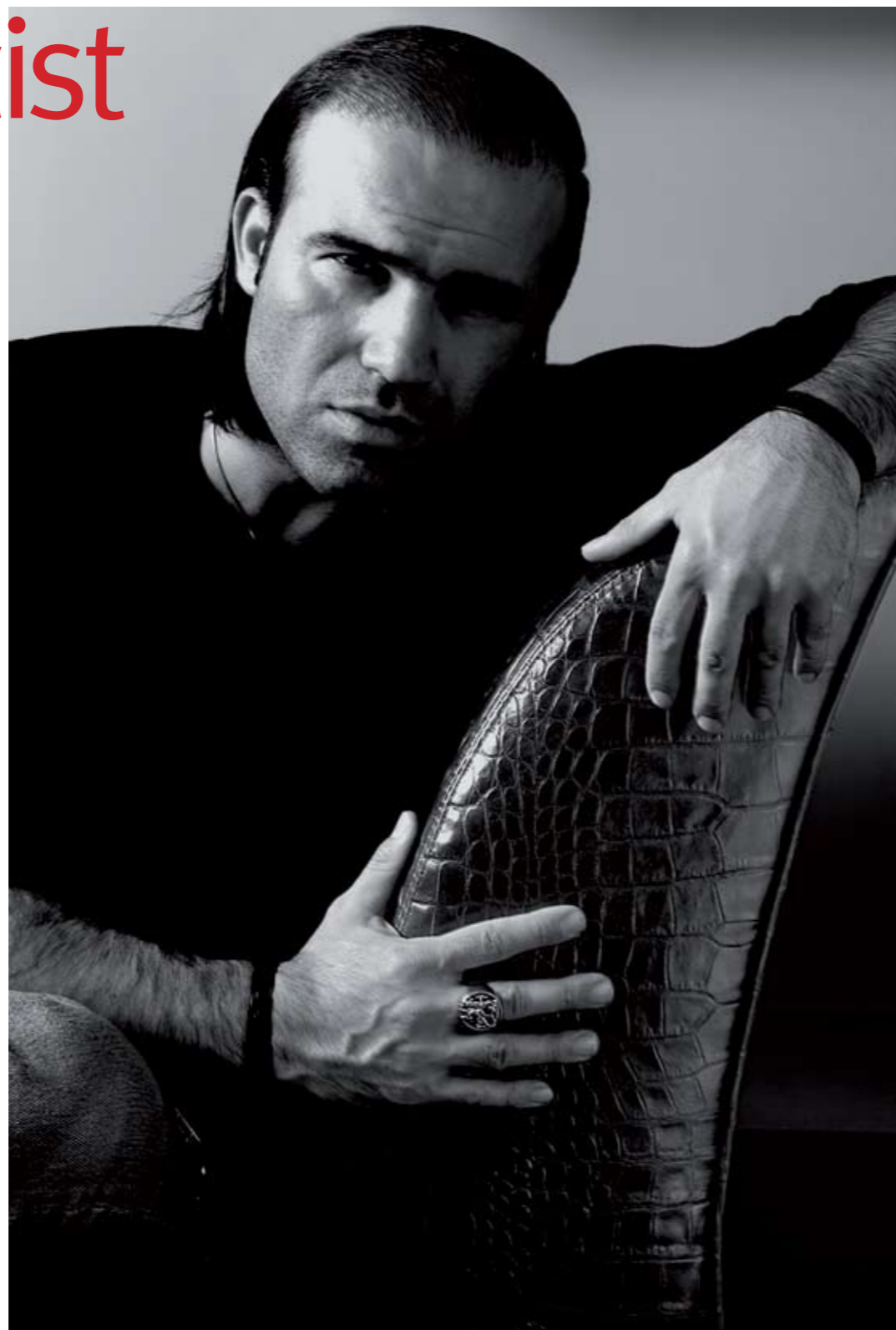
GARBIS DEVAR'S EXQUISITELY CRAFTED LEATHERS PROVE THAT BEAUTY IS SKIN DEEP – AND EXTRAVAGANTLY EXPENSIVE

RECENTLY A RUSSIAN businessman (who shall remain anonymous) was looking for a way to showcase half-a-dozen eight-carat diamonds in his possession. He found his solution in Paris, courtesy of Garbis Devar, a couturier whose fur and leather creations can hold their own against any rock. Devar will insert the stones as buttons on six made-to-measure jackets. Total value: nearly €8 million.

For the first jacket, a single-breasted blazer, Devar selected eight giant American alligator skins, looking for identical scale patterns. He cut and aligned the scales in perfect symmetry. The skins were sewn flush together to avoid any bulky overlap, and each one runs the length of the torso, so there are no horizontal seams. Devar treated and dyed them by hand, giving suppleness to a material he says was originally “as stiff as cardboard.” The patina was inspired by the colour of Bordeaux wine, applied in several layers to create lustre and shadow effects. The lining is a Lyonnais silk muslin brightly illustrated with images of a Jules Verne voyage. This one jacket represents a month of work and costs €300,000 (in addition to the €1 million diamond button).

Devar is obsessed by the ideal of luxury. Not mass-produced, overpriced status symbols plastered with logos, but rare, painstakingly crafted pieces that whisper their superiority. He explains that true luxury is not about money but about “culture, education and greatness of spirit.” That said, his creations are accessible to a privileged few with not only the artistic appreciation but also the cash to buy a jacket the price of a flat. To those who might find such exorbitance obscene, he retorts, “If Louis XIV had been modest, we wouldn't have Versailles today.”

But Devar came from modest beginnings, and made his name alone, as he says, “without money, without anything.” He was born 42 years ago to a bootmaker father and seamstress mother, Armenian immigrants who settled in Lyons. Despite his humble roots, he always had upscale tastes and started designing his own clothes because he couldn't afford what he wanted to wear. He says fur and leather appealed to him “because they endure the test



of time.” When he was 19, his father died and he became the family breadwinner, opening his own workshop and shopping his leather creations around to high-end boutiques in Saint-Tropez. At about that time, French singer-songwriter Bernard Lavilliers came into his workshop with a friend and snapped up seven jackets. Since then Devar has dressed celebrities from David Bowie to Charles Aznavour, as well as royalty and business moguls. Some of the biggest couture houses

in France now subcontract their high-end furs and leathers to him.

Considering himself an artist rather than a fashion designer, Devar disdains trends and makes pieces that will be just as wearable in 20 years as they are today. Most fit closely, like a second skin. His own style is relaxed chic with a hint of rock 'n' roll. He rides a Harley and wears jeans over custom-made ostrich skin cowboy boots from Mexico. A cross around his neck illustrates his fervent religious belief.

He feels his talent is heaven-sent and strives for God-like perfection in his work.

Drop in to Devar's atelier at 2am and you'll probably find him still at work. He compares his “maniacal” dedication to the craftsmanship of artisans working centuries ago. Consider the effort that goes into a three-quarter-length coat made of Astrakan Chaqmaki, a lamb from Afghanistan with a pelt of soft grey wool that grows in flat swirls and ripples. He studies up to 300 skins before choosing 70 with matching patterns, then cuts them along the curves and fits them together like a puzzle. From the outside, the finished

product resembles an exquisite piece of fabric, with variations of shading from steel grey to white and no apparent seams. On the inside, under the silk lining, it resembles a map, with stitches running in every direction.

Devar selects the best skins on the planet, from classic plonge lambskin to exotic leathers such as ostrich leg, diamond stingray and South American anaconda. His female clients tend to prefer his furs, including ermine, Barguzin sable, phantom beaver and mink that he shears to a 3mm thickness. The most expensive and rarest of his products is African crocodile, which he stocks up on annually

Jacket made from Mississippi alligator skin. Right: Blazer crafted from hide of the same species. Opposite: Garbis Devar, confidential perfectionist



from the extremely limited legal market. He says materials can represent 60 to 70 percent of his price tags.

For the past two years he's been working to develop the world's most elaborate belt buckle, which he plans to start selling this autumn. It's a 22-piece mechanism that's “built like a watch,” with a cartridge that spins and clicks like a gun. “I love the sound of a Smith & Wesson,” he explains. The sterling silver frame is embedded with a sheet of black diamonds, emeralds or rubies, with Viking dragons decorating either side. Combined with a stingray leather belt, it will go for close to €1 million.

A small ready-to-wear line is sold in Lyons, but couture is Devar's passion. To order one of his bespoke creations you must go to Paris, where his showroom is located at the foot of Avenue Montaigne (a nearby boutique is in the works), or else send a private plane to fetch him. His waiting list is two to three months long, and it could grow longer. For despite his star-studded client list, his name is still fairly confidential. Even his logo on an inside pocket is subtle, a tiny diamond enclosed in a platinum circle with his moniker so small you need a magnifying glass to read it. He says, “It's impossible to be popular when you create things that are elitist.” That's just the way he likes it. – Amy Serafin