

HEADLINE: Elegance personified

SUBHEADLINE: Born in Trieste, Italy in 1924, Renato Balestra is one of the world's famous fashion designers. From the earliest days of his youth, he dedicated his time to music and painting and at first wanted to be an engineer until a bet between friends launched him into the world of fashion. Renato Balestra's private clients include prestigious names from all over the world. He has designed clothes for Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand, the Empress Farah Diba of Iran, the first ladies of the Philippines and Egypt, Saudi Arabian princesses, and leading celebrities of the international jet-set. His fashion kingdom extends into 42 lines of products, ranging from haute couture and ready-to-wear collections to men's wear, perfume and accessories. He was recently elected by Espresso magazine as 'The Most Social Person in Italy'. His book In Search of Lost Style, published four years ago, received two literary awards. Renato Balestra was in Bangkok a few days ago to present his Autumn Winter 2000-2001 high fashion collection at the Oriental Hotel in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. Despite mingling in the highest spheres of society, Renato Balestra has preserved a sense of modesty, open-heartedness, tact and refinement _ perhaps the definition of genuine elegance.

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

'I travel usually more than seven months a year so I have to make a distinction between the days spent away from my place and the days in my native Italy.

When I am in Rome, my life tends to fall under certain rules, more than when I am travelling.

I normally wake up around seven in the morning _ although I rarely sleep before 2 or 3 am _ and take my breakfast on the terrace. My apartment is located on the tip of a hill and is the highest building in the centre of the city; it gives me a chance to enjoy a 360-degree panoramic view.

My first activity of the day is to go to the gym for an hour or so. It is around 10 minutes walking distance from my home and on the way to my office. I go to work by walking as well; I enjoy this bit of exercise in the morning and it helps me avoid facing the bad traffic of the capital. The showroom under my name is located on Piasa d'Espana. It is there, amongst mirrors, carpets and flowers that my collections are taking shape.

Most of the day is spent in the office. I very rarely accept lunch invitations. I usually take a quick lunch at home, as it is close-by and I may take some 20 minutes or half an hour to sit back and read the newspaper. I go back to work until 6 or 7 pm.

Then starts my social life, which is something very important to me. I enjoy receiving friends at home for dinner, or a buffet when the number of guests exceeds 14. Twice a year, to mark the end of my two collections, I usually receive between 100 and 150 people at home.

If not, I am out. I love to go to the theatre, to attend a concert or a social event of some sort. Most of the time I go home at around 2 am and spare at least 10 minutes to read a book, before falling asleep.

On the weekend, I love to go to my country house on the outskirts of Rome to do some gardening and make the most of nature and the open air.

When I am travelling, it is another story. My lifestyle is then much more chaotic. In the past few weeks, I have been to the Middle East, to Egypt, to Venice, to Milan _ for the opening of the opera house, La Scala _ to Rome before coming to Bangkok and from here I go to the United States.

I am really fond of travelling, it is what I appreciate the most about my career. Travel brings us so much more than any number of books, at least if you don't do it blindly but nourish a sense of curiosity and open-mindedness; to learn more about other cultures, religions, society. I am very keen to better comprehend others and meet all kinds of people.

All over the world, I get to meet royalty, famous writers, movie stars, etc. This has been a very enriching experience, which helped me become more mature. I realised also that the most prominent people are not necessarily the most interesting; you might meet a very famous person who has no appeal, and meet a very simple person who has a lot to offer.

Travel comes with its share of press conferences, photo sessions, business meetings, fashion shows and whatever I have to do to fulfil my business engagements, besides trying to meet friends.

There are a few things I do when travelling which help me recuperate some strength and make me feel more comfortable and at home.

For example, although it might sound a bit odd, the first thing I like to do when entering a room, is to move around the furniture, if the setting bothers me. It is not only an aesthetical concern, but I believe that a room has certain coefficient 'vibrations', or magnetic waves and somehow intuitively, I might prefer something to be in one place rather than elsewhere.

I do it instinctively, not by thinking, otherwise it becomes more elaborate and might go against vibrations.

Then I try to keep to the little things I am used to at home, like going to the gym or reading, even if I have very little time for myself. But then it all depends on the country I am in. Coming to Thailand, I might enjoy having a massage to relax or go for a swim.

I really love Thailand and have had a strong feeling about the country since my first visit many years ago when I had just completed high school. As a gift for having worked hard and finishing high school one year earlier than usual, my father bought me a trip around the world. My second stopover after Greece was Thailand.

I immediately felt at home and made a few friends who I have remained close to. Many things in Thai culture appealed to me, the way of greeting people, the smile ...

It is funny that many years later, travelling in Venezuela, a science teacher at university level who pretended to be able to see in people's previous lives and who I had never met before, actually told me that I had been Thai in one of my previous lives _ even at a high-ranking position. ``I hope so," I answered jokingly, but it was quite a shocking experience because this person didn't know that I had already been here.

As for my busy schedule, I have a theory that time can be stretched if one knows how to handle it; 12 hours can be expanded into 24 hours ... I like to challenge myself and work in different fields, so there is always something for me to do.

Life is so marvellous. Squandering my time doing nothing is not my type of living.

But I must admit that in the meantime, I am also concerned that such a hectic life might take us away from the purpose of our lives, to be harmony with the nature. I find it a pity never to

go to sleep when the sun sets, nor wake up to see the dawn, nor take time to watch a flower blossom.

I think being able to contemplate the river passing by is also something very important. One never finishes the search for harmony and perfection."