



**Left:**  
Maria & Annabelle  
Fleri Soler, and  
**(below)** one of  
Annabelle's swimsuits





# Designing for Malta

**HIGHFLYER meets Maria and Annabelle Fleri**

**Soler, the mother and daughter team who helped  
put back the glamour into getting dressed up.**

**T**here is clothing, and then there is human plumage. Maria Fleri Soler undoubtedly makes the latter. She glances round her Valletta workroom-cum-boutique at the silks, satins, and chiffons, and says: "All these beautiful clothes - the problem is that there are so few events to wear them to".

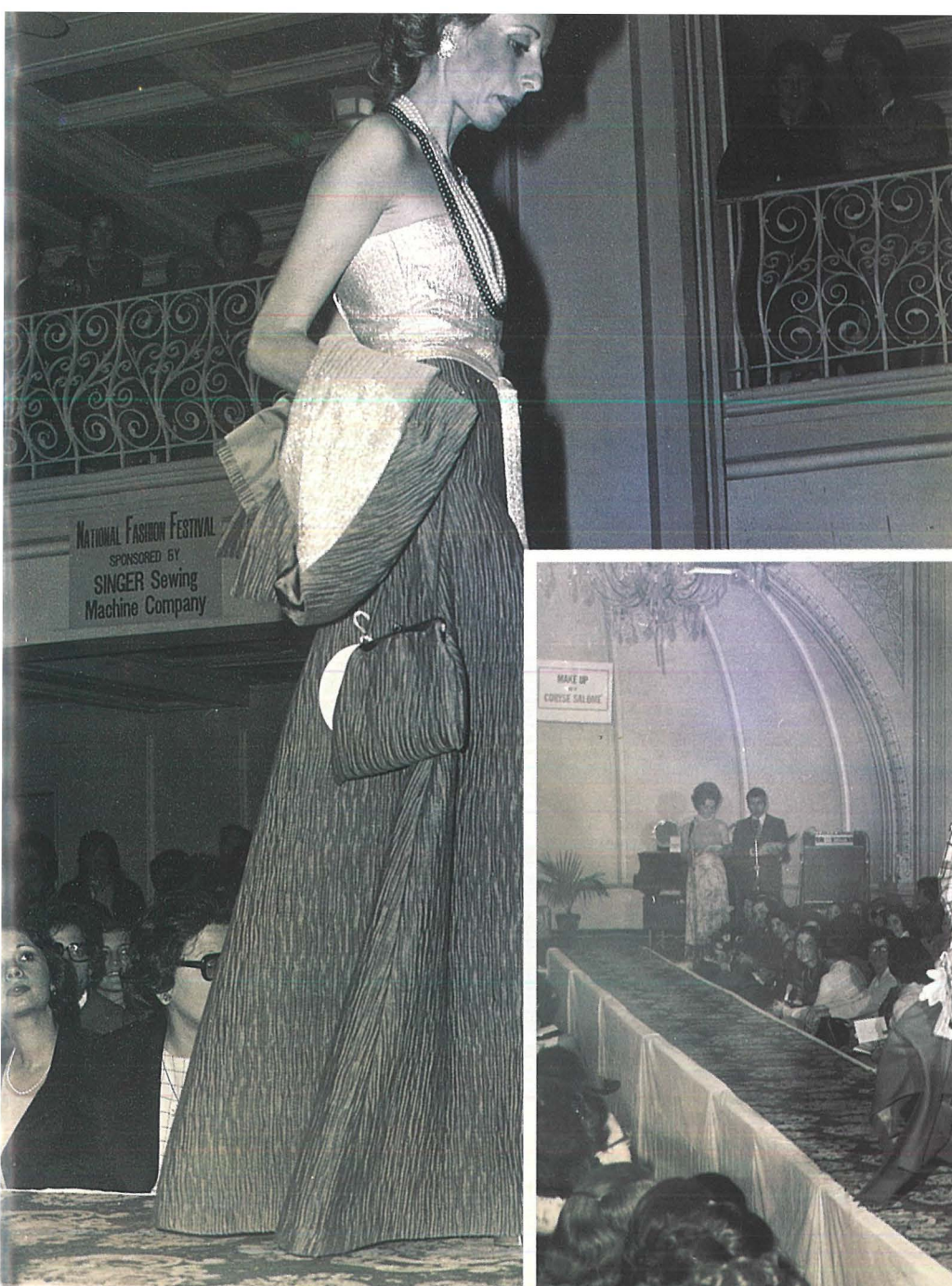
She's right. Maltese women dress well, but conservatively. They definitely do not like their chiffon transparent, long flowing pants and floor-skimming skirts are difficult because the average height is not great, and last year's satin was not a terrific success because "most of my clients associate that fabric with, well, the wrong sort of woman".

Yet Maria is still the *sine qua non* of the Maltese fashion scene. One could go further and say that she *is* the Maltese fashion scene. She certainly started it all, way back in 1974, with a brown and cream trouser suit that could still be worn today if it were not for the then ubiquitous trouser turn-ups. Looking at the photograph of her equally stylish sister, Pauline, modelling this outfit, it is easy to see why it caused such a stir in early 1970s Malta, when glamour was a word from outer space.

That suit won first prize in the National Fashion Festival, leaving the competition lagging far behind. It was in a class of its own, and Maria, who had until then sewed clothes and wedding dresses only for her family and close friends, was given the encouragement she needed to set herself up in business. Before long, people were practically battering her door down with requests for tailormade



**( left and below )** The two outfits that started it all in the 1970s



clothes and for her fabulously romantic bridal repertoires. She engaged two sewing assistants to help her in her work, and took on a workshop-cum-boutique in a Valletta basement with a beautiful and ancient arched ceiling. Her fashion shows became popular events on the social calendar, as they still are. More than 20 years on, she still keeps the designs coming twice a year, summer and winter.

For some years now, she has had the able assistance of her daughter, Annabelle, who studied at the London College of Fashion and Art. Annabelle's own particular forte is swimwear and knitwear. The market for the latter is limited, because very few people are willing to part with relatively large sums for a handmade sweater that is a work of art in wool. But not so with swimwear. Many women live in their beachclothes in the hot weather, and with a summer boutique right there on the water's edge at the

Reef Club in St. Julian's, Annabelle's bikinis and swimsuits are taken away almost as soon as they are (hand)made. This summer, she says she will bring back the cut-away swimsuit, that legacy of the late 1960s and early 1970s,

**“It is easy to see why it caused such a stir in early 1970s Malta, when glamour was a word from outer space”**





Maria & Annabelle with their models, at a recent show

though there will also be some sops to the current trend for bright lime and orange. The most popular 'colours' for swimwear are inevitably black and bronze.

and colour are quite obvious. "Look at this," she says, holding up a swirl of pale silk and satin. Her face lights up quite unself-consciously at the sight of that cascade of fabric.

**“More than 20 years on, she still keeps the designs coming twice a year, summer and winter.”**

**M**aria now works only towards her shows, and keeps a small circle of clients for whom she has worked for many years. Women still walk through the door asking if she makes clothes to order, but she turns them away. "If I stuck to that side of the business," she says, "I would be making lots of money. But that is not what I want to do. I feel I have to work at my own creations. I can't neglect the creative side". She is not interested in the dressmaker's trade, but in the designer's art. Her enthusiasm for fabric, line

Contemporaries who remember Maria Fleri Soler in her teens and early twenties say that she always stood out for her exceptional sense of *panache*. Even in the grey 1950s, when Malta was still struggling with post-war depression, rationing, and clothing coupons, her dash and creativity helped her get by without sacrificing her trademark elegance. Now a grandmother of four, she is still as glamorous as ever, with a petite figure and an impeccable sense of style which make the jeans-and-loafers generation look (and feel) oafish. She herself is what she calls "a trousers person", but few women succeed in making trousers look so good. **HF**