

Renaissance and Made in Italy: History as an Intangible Asset for the Fashion Business

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Introduction

There is now a copious, consolidated body of work that illustrates the success of goods labelled 'Made in Italy' on the international market, where that label has become a synonym for good taste, careful manufacture and attention to detail. The specific characteristics of a production system, (based both on small and medium sized businesses and on the industrial districts), which was able to bring on and to best exploit the catchment areas of craft skills, the propensity to innovation and the existing organisational ability have all been amply analysed. All of these factors, beyond any doubt, were fundamental to the success of products 'Made in Italy', but it is also necessary to understand how the reputation of Italian products on the international market was first formed and then consolidated. The quality of the product itself was certainly important, but the excellence of the manufactured article was not enough alone. We need therefore to investigate how the image that accompanies the idea of 'Made in Italy' abroad was created.

The elements that have contributed to the construction of the aforesaid image, which are supposed to identify the distinctive traits of Italian creativity, often derive from a simplistic representation of Italian culture and society and from a superficial reconstruction of the historical development of the country. In the majority these are stereotypes and commonplaces, often lacking foundation, reiterated in an a-critical manner: thus, for example, those which have been considered the typical aspects of the Italian character – represented, but also ridiculed, by literature and cinema – have been combined with the recognition of an innate sense of good taste, made manifest both through the continual stylistic research incorporated in the products labelled 'Made in Italy'. History, however, seems to offer less vague references to explain the genesis of Italian good taste, both in production and in consumption. A centuries old tradition of refined craftsmanship and an infinite history of excellence in the artistic field, whose products have made of Italy a species of great museum that 'educated' the population to a 'sense of the beautiful' through constant contact with works of art: these are the ideas most frequently adopted to explain the inexhaustible Italian creative vein. The historical period which more than any other was destined to forge Italian good taste in an irreversible manner was the Renaissance. Among the various production sectors that

make up the variegated galaxy known as ‘Made in Italy’, that of fashion was probably the first to establish itself at international level and the first to appropriate the Renaissance as an ‘intangible asset’. From the nineteen-fifties to today, the period involved in the increasing international success of the ‘Made in Italy’ label, in the rhetoric of entrepreneurs, managers and marketing experts the Renaissance has become almost an integral part of the DNA of Italian fashion, itself at times represented as the direct descendant and legitimate heir of the excellence of Renaissance taste. This is a link, now taken for granted, for which a term was even coined, “The Renaissance Effect”. Although the term has enjoyed a certain success, there are, however, only vague definitions of it such as the following: “Beyond beauty, beyond well-made: the expression ‘beautiful and well-made’ indicates, besides the purely aesthetic, the ability to work- and to ennoble- the material first and foremost at the planning level. From this point of view Italian ‘know-how’ owes much to the workshops and the guild corporations that arose in Renaissance Italy.” The fundamental argument which supports the so-called “Renaissance effect” is in fact that of the continuity between the craftsmanship of the Renaissance age and today’s fashion houses. A continuity, however, which has been elaborated through ‘manipulations’ of history which are in part simplistic and in part distorted, for in reality, such continuity between Renaissance craftsmanship and Italian fashion, considered, as we have seen from the text quoted above, as a sort of certification of noble ancestry by entrepreneurs and manager in the sector, does not exist: it was instead an ‘invention’, as intelligent as it was effective, but historically unfounded, which today, however, has become a species of ‘conventional wisdom’. The author of this happy ‘invention’ was Giovanni Battista Giorgini, the promoter of the successful debut of Italian fashion in the Fifties, who had clearly understood the concept that connecting fashion creativity to the Italian artistic heritage would, besides offering the interesting opportunity to attract the numerous wealthy foreign visitors to the artistic treasures of Italy as clients, also endow the Italian product with an extraordinary cultural legitimisation, placing it directly in the centre of a well-known, appreciated tradition of ‘good taste’: that of the Renaissance. Connecting Italian fashion with Renaissance Italy meant in fact introducing a kind of *ante litteram* guarantee of provenance – a ‘country branding’ - recognised throughout the world, which, at the same time, evoked the splendour of a period in which Italian taste was a model to follow and imitate: as two experts in marketing of Made in Italy state, “purchasing an Italian product means purchasing not only an article of fashion but also the key to access to a community which finds its cohesion in what is beautiful and in good taste. These are the emotional and social benefits that justify the premium price. The association with history, art and culture favours a non-commercial perception of Italian products, distant from the exploitation of emotions typical of traditional marketing strategies.”

The studies on the history of the Italian fashion business have accepted the association of Italian fashion with Renaissance tradition as an element to take for granted, without inquiring into the historical legitimacy of such a coupling, neither in the way in which it was produced nor why it had an important role. These questions are central to this paper, whose aim is to reconstruct the process that led to the appropriation of history – of a particular historical period, the Renaissance – as an intangible asset in the promotion of Italian fashion on the international market: a successful process that led to Italian fashion becoming the fiercest rival of French *Haute Couture* and which, precisely because of this importance, must be studied in such a manner as to eliminate the consistent rhetorical sedimentation with which it is encrusted. Until 1950 Italian fashion did not exist: there were of course able tailors and creative designers, who, however, were known only as individuals and not as part of a wider movement which identified it in a specific Italian style. Despite the existence of advanced skills able to give birth to an Italian fashion, there was no cultural identity to act as neither a coagulating factor nor an international legitimisation that would allow the new form to compete with the dominant Parisian *Haute Couture*. The recovery – the invention - of the Renaissance as an intangible asset was the fundamental instrument by which this double lack was filled and it therefore became a key factor in the international success of Italian fashion. It was, however, only between 1951 and 1954 that such a process finally reached completion- thanks to the initiative of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, ‘the creator’ of Italian fashion, who was the first to know how to use the Renaissance as a conscious, intelligent mode of qualifying the Italian product, inventing what we may call ‘the myth of continuity’.

In search of an identity

It was the second half of the nineteenth century that began to emerge the first, timid signs of a renewed interest in revitalizing the creative energy of the country, inspired by the Renaissance as the age in which Italian good taste had laid down the canons for aesthetic merit. It was in the sphere of fashion that such new aspirations were particularly felt: the international fame and the prestige of Parisian *Haute Couture* had made of fashion a form of art and therefore recalling the Renaissance represented a prestigious and authoritative point of reference for the nascent Italian fashion business, which could be accredited as the legitimate heir of the age of artistic splendour. In other words, *Haute Couture* had the strength of a consolidated international image constructed around a ‘patrimony’ of knowledge and taste in which aspects such as the reminders of the antique splendours of the court at Versailles and the more recent fascination of the brilliant cultural life of Paris were combined most effectively. As a consequence, to compete with *Haute Couture* – or at least to enfranchise itself from it – it was necessary for Italian fashion to counter French status with

a 'patrimony' equally rich in history and loaded with significance, which was, of course, that of the Renaissance.

There had been a few nationalistic impulses in the clothing sector around the middle of the nineteenth century when the fervour of the Risorgimento was extended to fashion, to the point of expressing the desire for a 'national costume': this was, however, essentially an attempt to include dress in the new forms of communication used in the context of the political struggle. The key figure in the change was instead that of Rosa Genoni (1867-1954), an able dressmaker, but also a profound scholar of Italian art history and a prominent figure in the movement for female emancipation. In the age in which the dominion of Parisian high fashion was undisputed, Rosa Genoni was distinguished as having promoted the idea of creating an Italian style, independent and self-determining in respect of the luxury Parisian *Haute Couture*. The greater simplicity of form which she advocated was meant to be inspired by the excellence in taste achieved by the Italian Renaissance artists. In 1906 Rosa Genoni presented a group of designs at the Milan International Exhibition which recalled precisely the style of some of the Grand Masters of Italian art such as Pisanello and Botticelli. In 1908, speaking at the National Congress of Italian Women, she expressed her ideals with great clarity, underlining that "the sense of art and of beauty is the traditional hallmark of Italian talent and flair". The success obtained on that occasion and her untiring and incessant work of promotion led in 1909 to the creation of a committee for a "Pure Art Italian Fashion", chaired by Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone. In the same period came international fame, sanctioned by the attention dedicated to her creations in the pages of the *New York Herald*. Rosa Genoni was probably the first to express an outline of the theory of continuity between Renaissance craft tradition and the potential growth of Italian fashion since, "in her view, Italy already had a distinct artistic tradition in clothing and textile, as well as other arts that harked back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance". There are two elements that characterise her pioneering initiatives: on one hand, the attempt to give new impetus to Italian sartorial creativity, freeing it from its subjection to Parisian *Haute Couture*, with the aim of conferring on it its own originality, and, on the other, the link with Renaissance art, a link that was able to ennoble the operation from the cultural point of view, endowing it moreover with a label that had certain drawing power at an international level.

The road to the construction of a national fashion, independent of the Parisian stylistic features, continued under Fascism, taking on however significantly diverse characteristics from those introduced by Rosa Genoni, herself not by chance sidelined by a regime to which she was not aligned. Fascism included fashion in fact within its propaganda strategies, supporting it with the creation of institutions destined expressly to promote Italian sartorial creativity, such as the Ente

Nazionale della Moda (The National Body of Fashion), while there was no follow up to the attempt to connect fashion to Renaissance taste: the interaction between fashion and art was rather with Modernism under the influence of the Futurist movement, indubitably much closer to the regime.

The reconstruction years, in the immediate aftermath of the War, saw the recovery of economic activity which benefited in a consistent manner from the United States aid programme. The textile industry took advantage of the American support and the recovery of the sector laid the foundations for the development of the fashion industry in the following decades. Intensification of economic relations with the United States represented however also a great opportunity to accede to the vast American market. From 1947 rich Americans had begun to increment an growing flow of tourism towards Italy, attracted by the easier transatlantic crossings, by the low cost of life, and, above all, by the natural and artistic beauty. They went home with their luggage full of the cheap but delightful fashion articles bought in the Italian stores. The American *buyers* had already recommenced looking to Italy for supplies of articles of high level craftsmanship in the late Forties, with particular regard to the sector of fashion. In 1947 *Vogue* dedicated an article to the Italian fashion houses which had a significant title, “The Fine Italian Hand”, which dealt with the vivacity of Italian sportswear, as well as its extremely competitive prices.

The image of Italian creativity had been re-launched in the same year (1947), when Salvatore Ferragamo won the prestigious *Neiman Marcus Award*. Salvatore Ferragamo (1898-1960) was well known in the USA, having emigrated from his native village in Southern Italy in 1914. After some experience working in shoe factories, he moved to California, establishing himself as the shoemaker to the stars of the nascent cinema industry. In 1927 Ferragamo returned to Italy and settled in Florence, where he opened his own workshop, continuing to have enormous international success, which won him, as has been said, the *Neiman Marcus Award* in 1947, but which also continued in the decades which followed. Another important historic company in Italian fashion was also active in Florence from the nineteen-twenties: the leather making workshop founded by Guccio Gucci had begun producing leather bags and suitcases in 1921, opening a store in Rome, in the prestigious Via Condotti, in 1938, and then rapidly reaching international fame.

It was however probably Emilio Pucci who emerged as the best-known and appreciated of the Italian *designers* in the U.S.A. ‘Discovered’ in 1947 at Zermatt by a photographer from *Harper’s Bazaar* who admired a ski outfit that he had created for a female friend, he was brought to the notice of the American public by an article which appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1948. His designs were produced by the sportswear company *White Stag* for Lord and Taylor; and the aristocratic Florentine designer then definitively conquered the American public with his brightly coloured printed silks and his design for tightly fitting trousers.

In the panorama of Italian fashion immediately after the war there were also some tailoring houses that had reached a significant visibility across the Atlantic. In January 1947 *Vogue America* dedicated a two page spread to the fashion house “*Simonetta*” owned by the Roman aristocrat Simonetta Visconti. In March 1950 *Women’s Wear Daily* reviewed the presentation of the collection created by Germana Marucelli, underlining its originality, and, above all, its stylistic independence from the Parisian models. From 1946 the Roman studios at Cinecittà had begun hosting American cinema productions – the so-called “Hollywood on the Tiber” – and so Hollywood actresses arrived in Rome and began to know and appreciate the ability and the taste of the Roman fashion houses, first among which was that of the Fontana Sisters.

Whether we can talk of ‘continuity’ between the golden age of Renaissance craftsmanship and the birth of Italian fashion is extremely doubtful; it has instead been demonstrated that the examples quoted here – of Ferragamo, Gucci, Pucci, the Fontana sisters ... and others might be added – show how from the first half of the twentieth century creative competence and ability were present within the country and were already, at least in part, known abroad, lacking only a favourable context to reach complete maturity. The *exploit* of Italian fashion in the early Fifties did not directly descend therefore from the Renaissance but was the fruit of an apprenticeship started decades before, to which probably different factors had contributed : from the pioneering work of Rosa Genoni in creating a new sensibility to the nationalistic ideology, from the search for new materials due to the shortage of raw materials during the war (Ferragamo and Gucci) and including - why not - the genuine creative vein of able designers.

This apprenticeship prepared the ground for the historic initiative by Giovanni Battista Giorgini who launched the Florentine fashion shows in 1951, adopting Rosa Genoni’s insight, that of connecting fashion and art under the aegis of the Renaissance, and inventing the myth of continuity. In this matter Giorgini had shown he able in heightening an appreciation that was already noticeable in the American media. In an article on Italy published in 1947 *Fortune* reported: “Today the inventive, productive tradition is still lively. It may once again bring rebirth to land of the Renaissance.” There had already been some attempts in that direction. In 1949 Germana Marucelli had presented a collection of clothing inspired by Renaissance art in Milan and in 1950 an exhibition held at the Pergola theatre in Florence had exhibited designs that came from reproductions of famous Renaissance paintings. Then came Giorgini, who understood how the combination between craft skills and an image as the home of good taste would be an intangible but winning asset for Italian fashion.

The Beginning

The event which is generally considered to hail the birth of Italian fashion was the work of Giovanni Battista Giorgini. He came originally from Versilia, later moving to Florence, where he began his professional training in the sector of high quality craftsmanship during the Twenties. His work consisted, in fact, in seeking out and enhancing the accumulation of craft excellence already existent in the country to then present the best products to the American market through the outlet of the great department stores. The range of products that Giorgini offered included ceramics, glass, lace, embroidery and articles made in straw. The war interrupted his promotional activity, but he remained firm in his conviction that 'Made in Italy' had great potential on the international market and, as soon as the war was over, he set his hand to the project once more, relying chiefly on fashion. In the immediate post war period Giorgini, who had opened a gift shop for the Allied troops in Florence, renewed his contacts with the United States and planned a presentation of Italian designs to be shown at the Brooklyn Museum, suggesting to the directors of the great New York department store B. Altman & Co. that they sponsor the event. The idea was that of creating an exhibition that associated the presentation of the historic models of the Renaissance with the showing of the models of the Italian fashion houses. It had been discussed with Meyric Rogers of the Art Institute of Chicago, who wrote: "My idea would be to bring over some original dresses of the XIV, XVI and XVIII centuries in order to make a background to the modern fashion show, so that we could demonstrate how Italy has always been important through the centuries in this field. The splendor of the Medici family is well known and also that Catherine brought it to the Paris court." The idea received a positive response from the director of the Brooklyn Museum, Charles Nagel: "May I say at once that I think this is a splendid idea – to present a fashion show which would contain at the same time both contemporary fashion and the great tradition of craftsmanship back of them." Right from the first both Giorgini's plan to root the launching of Italian fashion in the recovery of the Renaissance tradition and the sensibility shown by the Americans towards this proposal are evident. The costs however were judged to be excessively high and the project was set aside, though the idea of bringing Italian fashion into the international spotlight, recast in a more 'homely' version in its actual implementation, albeit no less ambitious in scope, remained valid.

Giorgini then decided to invite the buyers and the specialist American press, already in Europe to attend the presentation of the Parisian collections, to prolong their stay to include a trip to Florence, where, indeed, they could attend a fashion show of Italian designs. Although notably simplified in regard to the original project, the initiative had however to overcome considerable obstacles before reaching completion: the two most important of these were, on the one hand, the need to overcome the perplexity of the Americans regarding the proposal of travelling all the way

from Paris to see a collection which could not boast any great credentials, and, on the other hand, to obtain the collaboration of the Italian fashion houses, who had trouble in comprehending the sense of the event. In the end, thanks to his far flung, excellent personal contacts, Giorgini managed to convince a goodly representation of the Americans and to overcome the diffidence of the majority of the most important fashion houses, to whom he had addressed an invitation that hit the right note: “Given that in this moment the United States is so benevolent towards Italy, it seems to me that the time has come for us to attempt to establish our fashion on their market. And, to this end, since the Paris collections are shown to the American buyers in the first week of February and of August, we must organise so as to be able to show our own collections in the same period (...). In the interests of the houses themselves, there is an explicit condition, that the models to be shown be of pure and exclusive Italian inspiration”.

The first appointment was set for Florence on the 12th February 1951, at Villa Torrigiani, Giorgini’s own home. The concept was once again underlined on the invitation card for the final evening: “The aim of the evening is to enhance the value of our fashion. Ladies are therefore kindly requested to wear clothing of purely Italian inspiration.” The fashion houses that brought their creations to be shown at Villa Torrigiani were: Carosa, Fabiani, Simonetta Visconti, Emilio Schuberth, the Fontana Sisters, Jole Veneziani, Vanna, Noberasko and Germana Marucelli for designer fashion and Emilio Pucci, Avolio, La Tessitrice dell’Isola e Mirsa for the boutiques, a total of 180 designs. In the end there were four Italian journalists plus Elisa Massai, as the special envoy of the authoritative American publication *Women’s Wear Daily*, present at this first Italian fashion show but, most of all, there were important American buyers representing B. Altman & Co., Bergdorf Goodman, I. Magnin, Henry Morgan and Leto Cohn.

Giorgini knew how to exploit the Florentine context to the full in order to set the event in firmly in the mould of Renaissance tradition: in the material distributed to the journalists and to the *buyers* invited to the first showing it was explicitly stated that “the Italian collections, for the first time brought to the attention of the world, recall in their line, in their cut, and in their ease of wear the legacy of the artistic tradition of the Renaissance”. But the presentation brochure for the Florentine show went beyond that, illustrating quite clearly the ‘project’ of cultural legitimisation that Giorgini aimed to follow: “First Italian High Fashion Show organized and sponsored by G.B. Giorgini for Foreign Firms. During the first centuries Italian fashion was simple in line, but bright in colours. In the Renaissance along with the new train of life they become rich and elaborate. Italy was at that time the centre of elegance and commercial activity: manikin dolls, dressed in the latest models, were sent all over Europe. Noble women, famous for their charm and culture, had their gowns designed by well known artists. A court of the Sforza’s Leonardo ad Vinci sketched various models

for Beatrice and tradition says that Michelangelo created the costumes still worn by the Swiss Papal Guards. Caterina de' Medici made Italian fashion popular at the court of France when she became Queen of that country. She was the first to introduce boned waists which were worn up to the 20th century (...). Nowadays Italian fashion organizations have created the most modern application of their heritage of art, which has found its zenith in the design, cut and practicability of Italian high fashion design." The Renaissance was presented not only as the golden age of the Italian economy, but also as the period in which artistic genius placed itself at the service of elegance, thus allowing Italy to dictate to Europe in terms of fashion. The fashion houses which took part in the show were none other than the heirs of such supremacy. Giorgini therefore offered an idea of continuity far more ambitious than that referring to craft know-how or to the artistic tradition: he in fact was suggesting that Italian fashion descended from a Renaissance culture of fashion that had been dominant and that was the product of artists of the calibre of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. A statement which contained only a minimum of historic truth, but which was to be revealed as an extremely effective tool from the marketing point of view.

The show was a success: the creative freshness and the relatively low prices – the designs cost half the price of the articles presented in Paris – led the foreign buyers to purchase everything offered. It was not therefore difficult for Giorgini to suggest a repetition of the event at the beginning of the summer: the following July the show was held at the Grand Hotel and this time even the big names of the American specialist press, like Bettina Ballard from *Vogue* and Carmel Snow from *Harper's Bazaar* took the trouble to come and later raved over Italian fashion. Applause and enthusiastic comments which were repeated at the January 1952 showing: according to the *New York Times* there was no "doubt that Florence was about to replace Paris". The time was now right to set the presentation of Italian fashion in an appropriate setting: in July 1952, in fact, the event was transferred to the prestigious Sala Bianca in the Medici palace of Palazzo Pitti. Italian fashion had become an international reality and Florence was its capital.

The shows in the following years further reinforced the ties between Renaissance taste and Italian fashion, beginning with transferring the showing to the stupendous Sala Bianca in Palazzo Pitti. Furthermore, Giorgini was involved in the organisation of a series of manifestations around the main event, which evoked the splendours of the Renaissance. Within the framework of the showings held in July 1952 there was also the institution of the *Giglio d'oro* award, consisting in "a medal symbolizing the glory and brilliancy of the Renaissance period when Italian fashion was the only important one in Europe. This award, instituted with this show and continuing for each successive show, will be given to the firm presenting the most outstanding and best received high fashion designer." On the occasion of the fashion show in January 1953 there was the re-enactment

the marriage of Eleonora de' Medici to Francesco Gonzaga celebrated in 1584. Giorgini thus explained the aim of the event, whose scope was, once more, to recall the splendours of the craft tradition, but, above all, to reassert the primacy of Italian Renaissance: "In order to give a hearty welcome to our foreign guests and to demonstrate to them the city's sense of hospitality we organised a great ball at the Grand Hotel for the evening of Saturday 24th January and a reception at Palazzo Vecchio on the evening of the 25th; during the reception in Palazzo Vecchio the celebrations offered by the Grand Duke Francesco I dei Medici on the occasion of the marriage of his daughter Eleonora to Vincenzo Gonzaga prince of Mantua were re-enacted. In the magnificent setting of the Salone dei Cinquecento, were gathered nearly a hundred representatives of the best society coming from various Italian cities and all wearing costume of the period. With the presentation of the gifts to the bride we wanted to underline the great impulse given to the craft by the Medici and how, with the presentation of antique brocades Italian cloth of great value, the Medici initiated that fashion that lent its splendour to the major European courts. This historic re-enactment, as well as having the aim of impressing the foreign visitors with the splendours of the Medici period, has also the intention of interesting the best society of the diverse Italian cities in our efforts to give greater value to Italian fashion enhancing its position."

Another argument used by Giorgini to promote Italian fashion which affected the American public was the reference to the exclusive taste of the Italian aristocracy, which, sustained by centuries of precisely this good taste, was pointed out as the indisputable "*arbiter elegantiarum*", as he wrote in the press release for the July 1952 show: "The fashion world is always eager for the fresh, exciting originals that the Italian market offers today. This demand has led to the rise of a new group of Italian designers, heretofore known only to the Italian aristocracy and fashion-wise foreigners visiting Europe, whose export collection will debut at the July showings."

A Successful Invention

Giorgini had retrieved the idea that the Renaissance, the golden age of Italian creativity, had been reincarnated in Italian fashion of the Fifties, consolidating this myth by means of the argument that the union between art and fashion had already led to the domination of Italian creative genius at that time. But what impact did his invention have? Analysis of the reaction of the international press, above all in the U.S.A., whose market was particularly important for Italian fashion, allows us to evaluate how far Giorgini's strategy hit the mark.

«*Je ne suis nullement soucieux que nôtre soeur latine, l'Italie, au tempérament si proche du nôtre, au folklore si riche de traditions, au climat merveilleux, où l'enfant dès qu'il ouvre les yeux apprend l'histoire de l'art en même temps que la vie, cherche à s'exprimer dans cet art appliqué qu'est la Mode* ». The anonymous editor, hidden behind the pseudonym of "*chasseur d'images*",

thus wrote from the front page of an important Paris magazine, commenting the success obtained by Italian fashion on its debut on the international scene on the occasion of the first showings held in Florence in 1951. The title of the article – “*La guerre des modes*”- recalled a title already published in *Samedi Soir* the previous August, but the authoritative comment by “*chasseur d’images*” in fact limited itself to listing some commonplaces regarding Italy, proffered and repeated in much of foreign literature from the advent of the *Grand Tour*: the stupendous climate, the picturesque folklore, the curious traditions and, naturally, the artistic beauties, seen as a ‘context’ which was sufficient to legitimise Italian aspiration to successfully try their hand at fashion, understood as an applied art. All as if to say that the Parisian *Haute Couture* did not in any way fear the Italian competition.

More interesting – and more disinterested – were the comments which appeared in the English- speaking press, which began to cover the Florentine fashion shows from July 1951. *Life*, for example, wrote of the Florentine fashion shows, underlining the fact that the context was that of the “little [*sic!*] museum city of Florence”. Effectively, Giorgini had counted on Florence’s ability to attract tourists to convince the first group of journalists and buyers to come to Italy before returning to the U.S.A. after the Paris fashion shows. The *New York Times* too had immediately given the news of the second fashion show, reporting on its success. Among the most enthusiastic admirers of Italian fashion – especially of its descent from the Renaissance – was Fay Hammond of the *Los Angeles Times*, who, with her colourful reporting from Florence, became the most convinced popularizer of Giorgini’s “invention”. Her story from the second fashion show (July 1951) evoked all the most discounted commonplaces of Renaissance rhetoric: “Mounted in a ring of ancient hills that blend the dark and the light greens of cypress and olive trees this celebrated city has given so much art and genius to the world is a jewel in the heart of Italy. Dante, Machiavelli, Brunelleschi and Michelangelo lived and breathed here in the magnificent blending of the grandeur of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. (...) There are no crinoline skirts overflowing the sides of the bright blue, red, green and yellow carriages that wait below for riders. It’s hot, and tourists are dressed for comfort as they start out to see and touch the Florentine monuments and art treasures. But fashion plays a vital part in every era and reflects both past and future in the knowing eye”. And the concluding ball in the gardens of Villa Torrigiani truly represented the final touch of mastery of a knowledgeable director: “To arrive in an open, horse-drawn carriage at the loggia of this centuries old villa was to feel oneself a part of a pageantry of another era.”

It should not surprise us therefore is even the minor press reproduced the same lie-motif, linking it to folklore and costume parties: “It seemed to me that both in their color and style the

Italian designers were relying to a great degree upon traditions handed down to them from the 15th and the 16th centuries. Some of the inspiration was obviously derived from the historic pageants which are part of Italy's yearly life, the Palio at Siena, the Calcio at Florence, and the scores of other annual medieval festivals that take place in little cities up and down the country." Similar tones can be found in an article by Sylvia Murlin, whose title is quite explicit - "History Repeats Itself" – and by the inevitable historical distortion: "As I gaze into my crystal ball of fashion I see what was happened and could happen again. Is history repeating itself? Are we to have a second Italian Renaissance? (...) It was here that the Renaissance was born, the change from Medieval Church to home meant fine art, architecture and fashions replacing the austere conditions under which France and England were still living. It was only when Charles VIII and his army passed through Italy in 1494 on their way to Naples that the invention of fashions and personal ornamentation, luxury and grandeur of great ladies such as Isabella D'Este and Beatrice became known (...) It was in this same century that ear-rings and lace became the most aristocratic of personal adornment; gloves, shoes, chemises and petticoats were made of fine laces. To be individual, outstanding women of culture created their own fashions according to their talents."

However the most inspired articles concerning the evocative Florentine setting of the fashion shows were always those by Fay Hammond. Thus begins her report on the July 1952 show which took place in the Sala Bianca in Palazzo Pitti: "This illustrious city, that spreads its incomparable monuments of art works along both banks of the winding Arno, is host to hundreds of buyers and press representatives as the Haute Couture of Italy unveils its fall and winter fashions for the market of the world." At Palazzo Pitti "Saluting our approach to the Palazzo Pitti, where the collections are being showed, (...) colorful Florentine Guards are lined up at the entrance. They wear their 16th century uniforms designed by Michelangelo, their plumed, steel helmets, armor and lances by Benvenuto Cellini. They are poignant reminders of the great names and original genius that has flourished here through the centuries." But Palazzo Pitti merited a further, particular description, which reminded the reader of how those rooms had always been the home of elegance: "In this picturesque city of Medieval and Renaissance culture that traces its proud italic civilization back to the 10th century BC, the modern fashion arts and allied handicrafts of present-day Italy find an impressive and appropriate setting for exhibition (...). In the magnificent Sala Bianca (white ballroom) of the world renowned Pitti Palace, the majestic residence of Luca Pitti that was planned by Brunelleschi in 1440, and where later the Medici grand dukes and the kings of Italy lived in princely elegance, the new fashions for fall and winter were launched. It was a thrilling experience to imagine the great functions of royal entertainment and the richly gowned women that attended them in this crystal-and-white room of ancient echoes. Flags of all nations greeted us at the entrance

of this most impressive of all Florentine palaces which now houses the art treasures of the Palatine gallery, the Silver Museum and overlooks the astonishing beauty of the Boboli Gardens.”

The Rome correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* reported of the re-enactment of the marriage of Eleonora de Medici e Vincenzo Gonzaga, which had made the Fashion Show of January 1953, in a decidedly less enchanted tone than his American colleagues: Florence “has a fine tradition of stuff, handweaving, jewellery, and dressmaking, perhaps the finest in Italy, and displayed all this in a final evening parade to re-celebrate in pageant form the wedding of the Duke Vincenzo of Mantua and Monserrat to Eleanor of Medici, daughter of Francis I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, in 1584. This was not the happiest period of Italian Renaissance dress. For one thing elaboration had taken the place of colour and line. But the entire aristocracy of Italy was marshaled for this display and as far as possible the Medicis and Gonzaga, the Orsini and Caracciolo, Frescobaldi and Patrizi, Spaletti, Visconti and Ubaldesca were all represented by their descendants. Gone were the unattainably slim and willowy figures of the day’s mannequins: here were living men and women of all heights and sizes, looking perhaps a little pained, often arch and very self-consciously ducal and lordly. The world’s buyers were taken by surprise. Few had read about the great days of Florence and Pisa, Milan and Siena, Naples and Mantua. So this was where the tradition came from? Once again the appetite was whetted for this piece of brocade or that flash of velvet, or the astonishing lace and the beautiful chains and ornaments, all of which were (and still are) made just round the corner from the Palazzo Vecchio, where this pageant took place.”

After the success of the first two Fashion Shows, Giorgini went to the United States at the end of 1951 to promote the next events and the press did not fail to recall the link which bound Italian fashion to the Renaissance, even if their reports became increasingly more anecdotes than journalism. Thus, for example, while Giorgini was in Houston as a guest of Sakowitz Bros., the *Houston Chronicle* reported: “Imbued with a zealous patriotic spirit, Mr. Giorgini helped organize the Italian fashion designers who are handicapped by being scattered in Rome, Florence, and Turin, instead of being centralized as the French couturiers are in Paris. After a long struggle with the designers, the dynamic Italian finally succeeded in getting them to prepare their collections two months earlier than usual so that the prospective American market could become a reality. And, like the now universally accepted and appreciated straight pin invented by Katherine (*sic!*) de Medici, the collections were enthusiastically received by the Americans.”

Some of the articles in the American press centred on another theme constantly evoked by Giorgini that is the connection between the Italian aristocracy and good taste, which had a double aspect. On the one hand, the articles produced by the Italian fashion houses were already, and had been for some time, the first choice of the country’s nobility, while on the other, several designers

themselves came from noble families: their creations were, therefore, made more precious by the added value of exclusive taste. The first of the two aspects – which took up a statement made by Giorgini - was offered once more by the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “A group of Italian designers, heretofore known only to the Italian aristocracy and travellers visiting Europe, are now making clothes designed especially for export, particularly for America.” The second was instead written up by Costance Wibaut in *The Houston Chronicle*: “Most of these designers stem from the old Italian nobility, and they conceive their collection with the lives and ways of their social circle in mind.” Both the arguments were then sagely combined in an article published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “The rise of Italian fashion is one of the most striking postwar phenomena and it is a mystery how anything of such refinement and beauty could have emerged from the havoc of war. An interesting feature of the Italian fashion industry is that it attained international stature and became independent from Paris not through the work of professional designers but through aristocrats turned designers, who, before the war, had entered fashion salons only as customers.” It was as if good taste was the fruit of a connoisseurship which was activated first by the consumer, when the aristocrat was the client, to then be re-activated on the side of creation when the aristocrat became the designer: a double channel that guaranteed Italian fashion a truly exclusive taste.

The specialized press represented the boom in Italian fashion in more sober tones, without however failing to give way to the “myth of continuity”. On the day following the second fashion show the authoritative voice of Carmel Snow commented: “But after all there is another very simple explanation for this tremendous vitality and inventiveness. They might well be due to the fact that the Italian people have such a rich heritage of visual beauty. What goes to make up the life of this lovely land seems to have been handed down from generation to generation and the habit of living in beautiful surroundings tends to give every Italian an instinctive talent for harmonious design.” An element which the more attentive journalists underlined with increasing emphasis was the felicitous period that Italian creativity was going through as a whole, connecting the exploit of Fifties Italian fashion and its reminder of the Renaissance to the economic boom the country was experiencing after the dark decades of Fascism and the War. The image evoked in many American periodicals of the period is in fact that of a ‘second Renaissance’. Thus, for example, *Vogue* compared Italy to a phoenix, reborn from its own ashes, which was living through “the latest of the Italian Renaissances”. *Women’s Wear Daily* reported an exhibition for the presentation of Italian products by Macy’s in New York City, illustrating it as a review of “Second Renaissance Italian Craftmanship”. This prospective was taken up by *Time* a few months later, in February 1952, with the article “Italy’s Renaissance”, reporting the fashion show created by Giorgini and introducing the word Renaissance to indicate the prolific creative moment not only for Italian fashion but for the

country itself: “Not only in Florence, but in Rome, Milan and other major cities the Italian Renaissance of fashion is in full swing.” In 1952 too Florence de Santis wrote an article for *Fashions of Italy Today*, whose title recalled commonplace themes “After Four Centuries Italy Is Back in Fashion”, but which was integrated by a more interesting subtitle “Alta Moda Shares in Italian Post-War Renaissance”. Finally, in 1954 *Vogue* dedicated a six page spread to the boom in Italian creativity, without however renouncing the stereotype of continuity: “These six pages chronicle an extraordinary and exciting development: the influence of post war Italian design (...). Its influence has steadily grown and strengthened (...) Italy’s architects and designers, backed by the centuries-old skills of Italian craftsmen and artisans have attacked with brio the designing of everything from a teaspoon to an office building, somehow combining a crisply modern approach with the warmth and richness of Italy’s past.” From the Renaissance to the ‘second Renaissance’, which in effect did not involve only the fashion sector but more generally all the spheres in which Italian creativity was expressed, linked once more to the tradition of Renaissance good taste.

Despite the success that the Florentine fashion shows had had with the buyers and the international press, internally there was no lack of rivalry and other cities aspired to taking Florence’s place. A lively debate was in progress, summed up thus by Elisa Vittoria Massai: “There has been much discussion in the last two years over whether to keep this event in Florence or transplant it to Milan or Rome. There are notable pros and cons for each city: Milan is a great business centre, the centre also for important producers of fashion, textiles and accessories; Rome may count on those tailoring skills that have made themselves known abroad, both through its contacts with the diplomatic world and with the stars of the cinema. While Florence indubitably has a special charm, it is more intimate, more apt to concentrate on an event and to make the warmth of its interest felt. Moreover, Florence is the moral seat of Italian craftsmanship, the seat of the offices of the most important buyers from foreign fashion houses in Italy; therefore it has many points in its favour.” Effectively, the image creating strategy thought up by Giorgini to launch Italian fashion had – at least for the time being – made of Florence a unique context.

From the mid 1950s the role of Florence as the capital of Italian fashion came under ever increasing discussion - and with it the role of Giorgini himself -, but the process that Giorgini had set off in Florence in 1951 was by then irreversible: the image of Italian fashion – and , by extension, in general of the ‘Made in Italy’ label – was indissolubly linked to the Renaissance, as is demonstrated by the fact that entrepreneurs of the sector and marketing experts still speak today of the “Renaissance Effect”. However there is also another consistent proof which comes from the definitive ‘consecration’ of Giorgini’s most brilliant invention, which even led to fashion’s being defined as a constituent element of Western civilisation and to setting its origins precisely in

Florence, in the past the cradle of Renaissance culture and now the scene of the baptism of the infant Italian fashion industry. It was one of the protagonists of the birth – or rebirth – of Italian fashion. Emilio Pucci who ‘ruled’, after the 1968 youth revolution seemed to have eliminated fashion, that nonetheless: “Fashion is back with style and elegance, the symbols of the modern civilisation, first established in Florence at the time of the Renaissance.” The words of Pucci are echoed in those of one of the major authorities on fashion history, Valerie Steele, who wrote in recent times: “Can we say that Italian fashion began in the Renaissance? Certainly, Italian city-states, such as Florence and Venice, played a vital role in the emergence of modern fashion during the Renaissance.”

“Authenticity: Is It Real or Is It Marketing?” Concluding Remarks

The Renaissance – or rather the myth of the Renaissance constructed in the course of the nineteenth century - had given Italian fashion a powerful instrument for commercial promotion and, at the same time, a cultural legitimization at international level. Italian fashion was born in 1951 and it could not count on the authority in the field of good taste that Parisian *Haute Couture* had acquired world wide, and which represented the principal competitor to challenge. Parisian *Haute Couture* boasted of a centuries old heritage of prestige in fashion: although created around the mid nineteenth century, it set itself up as the natural heir to the primacy in fashion held by seventeenth century France. Italy certainly had able craftsmen available, but did not have any form of intangible cultural heritage to balance against the capital of appreciation that shrouded *Haute Couture*. The Italy which in the centuries of French splendour (17th and 18th centuries) had slipped to the margins of European economy and culture and which, in more recent times, had been identified with a dictatorship that shared responsibility for the Second World War, had to find a source of cultural reputation at international level and could do no less than hark back to the Renaissance: the period that had produced a ‘material’ artistic heritage and a correlated ‘intangible’ cultural patrimony known and admired all over the world.

Giovanni Battista Giorgini made the insight of Rosa Genoni and the others who had preceded him his own, ably combining them with the fascination that Florence had exercised for centuries – from the age of the *Grand Tour* – first on the European élite and later on that of America, and launched Italian fashion as the fruit of a creativity that descended directly from the Renaissance. Buyers and journalists invited to view the first Florentine fashion shows were attracted by the efficacy of this message, which could be offered to the final consumer, in his/her turn flattered by the idea of being able to purchase, as it were, a product of the Italian Renaissance. Giorgini’s was a brilliant ‘invention’ which led to the elaboration of the “myth of continuity”: Italian fashion descended directly from the Renaissance, an age in which the interaction amongst the most able

craftsmen, the most genial artists and the most elegant aristocrats had produced a historic event, the birth of fashion, which had then been spread throughout Europe. As Bruce Weidrich observed, “It’s not uncommon for purportedly authentic marketing campaigns to be based on a history that never really existed (...). Marketing tactics designed to project authenticity do not an authentic company make. As a historian, I’ll be the first to admit that such campaigns worked surprisingly well in the era of the one-way communication (print, radio and television).” And Giorgini’s invention did effectively function.

Today, in these times of globalisation and, above all of, delocalization, the combination ‘Renaissance-Made in Italy’ seems to have lost that prominence which it had in the Fifties and Sixties, but the Italian fashion business is so well established as to no longer need to be given credence. The successful Italian designers of the Seventies and Eighties – Armani, Valentino, Versace and Ferré – are the heirs of the artist-*couturiers* of the golden age of Parisian *Haute Couture* and are also by now considered on the same level as other artists. On the other hand, the identity of the ‘Made in Italy’ today appears to be much more tied to the design characteristics incorporated in the product than to the country of origin: we are dealing by now, as has been written, with a “metabrand”. However, history – or the myth - still matters in the international image of Italian fashion, as Valerie Steele wrote: “But the success of Italian fashion is no myth. The significance of Italian cultural history – including, perhaps, a special feeling for elegance and sensuality – should not be minimized.”

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