



Artisan as a Maker or Artisan as a not Recognized Co-designer?

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Abstract. In Italy, craftsmanship has traditionally been associated with Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); these can be demonstrated in distinctive examples of excellence, but on the other hand of great weaknesses; However, Large companies have begun to understand the craftsmanship values, encompassing the role of artisans in their marketing strategies. The artisan's role of initiator and co-designer is seldom recognized by major brands, and many big companies actively conceal the contributions made by production excellence within SMEs. Maintaining this non-recognition—within the fashion community, between brand and producer—keeps consumers focused on the intangible value of the brand, rather than the tangible value contributed by traditions and innovations within production.

Keywords: Made in Italy · Craftsmanship · Knowhow · Co-design · Values

1 Introduction

In general, is possible to state that craftsmanship means knowing how to do things; this concept includes knowledge of the materials, manufacturing equipment, processes of transformation and making. Simplifying, we can say that the craftsman is the one who carries out an activity aimed at the production of goods through a substantially manual work, done in a workshop or in a shop and its activity is aimed at the production of objects made using simple tools which often the craftsman himself produces personally [1]. All of this heritage condenses in the Italian world saper fare that mainly relates the practices of working with traditional processes, and that can be considered as an integrated phenomenon into nowadays made in Italy manufacturing processes.

In Italy, craftsmanship has traditionally been associated with Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); on one side these can be demonstrated in distinctive examples of excellence, but on the other hand present great weaknesses; according to Stefano Micelli, “A small company structure enables a close-range quality control, yet it does not have the consistency to attract young distinguished researchers and to develop meritocratic processes” [2, 3].

Large corporations have begun to understand the craftsmanship values, including the role of artisans in their marketing strategies (e.g. 2013 Louis Vuitton advertising campaign; Gucci proposal of the Artisan Corner).

The “craftsman-spirit” can be integrated into larger, more-structured business processes, enabling artisans to interpret the ideas of fashion designers, figuring out “how-to” and sometimes “what to do” by working with and through samples. Apparently, the interest from luxury brands has improved the International consumers demand for high-end products, suggesting an only apparent admiration and respect for artisanal know-how.

However, this attitude tends to present a romantic view of artisanal saper fare as a fashionable form of “magic knowledge” [4, 5], never presenting the artisan as immersed in activities including tangible and intangible, or as a design leader in complex technological processes able to set a design-driven innovation in contemporary design scenario. In fact, the artisan part of Italian production system is focusing on transferring the initial idea of the design into an artefact, suggesting and collaborating in design implementation. Then the craftsmanship is not an artist but a design-driven technician, expert on materials and transformation processes.

2 Made in Italy: Design Thinking and Product Development

In Tuscany for example, as in other parts of Italy, it is common to find a concentration of saper fare that drives the choice of many of the main players of fashion to start productions in this area, where artisans develop the products that enable these brands to improve and differentiate their value chain in the global fashion market.

The craftsman is a subcontractor that often acts as a “problem solver” with the ability of implementing the “dreams” of designers. In fact, the SMEs it becomes crucial for designers to realize the first sample in the process of development of products for large companies (often part of global financial groups). Even if this process is recognized by brands, the craftsman is not considered part of the design process, but only a producer with a secondary role compared to the designer.

Although, in many cases, “the broader process of subjection (to the global brands) has had certain positive effects. For example, SMEs may create in-house “product development centers” able to host high-profile designers and managers, creating a sort of “temporary design think-tank” within the production company. Craftsmanship-based design centers combine the manufacturing tradition with the technologies of CAD/CAM

processes, rapid prototyping systems or ICT. When craftsmanship knowledge meets contemporary technologies, the saper fare absorbs the technology—within the tangible and intangible thought-in-action of the craftsman. This combination can be termed “advanced craftsmanship” [6–8].

In mechanical engineering domain for fashion accessories (e.g., metallic hardware for bags), the relationship between the supplier and fashion house is particularly relevant. The craftsman/manufacturing company meet directly with the brand manager and the design manager to define the development of collection, and whether designs need to be modified to facilitate crafting/manufacturing. In Fig. 1 it is possible to see an example of a product that was co-designed with the technical and creative expertise of “advanced craftsmen”: individuals able to incorporate tradition and innovation in their processes. This “evolved artisan” has the capacity of interpretate a design concept that may have been only expressed by sketches and mood-boards by the fashion designers. It is possible to notice that in this case the craftsman is not only executor but he becomes also a co-designer.

In a product sector such as apparel, the craftsmen often contribute with his creative and technical suggestions in order to realize the themes for the collections. Research centers on craft processes are important contributors to the apparel design sector, fashion craftsmanship archives, and historic or innovation foundations, which provide historical memories of craft and high-end production practices.

Unfortunately, still today the role of the artisan as initiator and co-designer is never recognized by major brands, and many big companies actively hide the contributions made by high-end manufacturers. All this would be particularly important today, that the world of fashion is moving towards a model of excessive consumption that drives designers to produce mass clothing at an alarming rate, eliminating processes for innovative thinking and human connection that are essential for a design sustainable success. Meantime, this non-recognition keeps consumers focused on the intangible value of the brand, rather than the tangible value represented by traditions and innovations within production. As with the Louis Vuitton’s campaign, the brand’s story-telling is an assertion of the artisan values but it doesn’t focus on the true saper fare: the evolving practices of traditional and advanced craftsmanship.

Luxury, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, used to be “a state of great comfort or elegance, especially when involving great expense.” Today’s luxuries are no less scarce, but more emotional than physical, and they don’t necessarily come at great expense.

In a world of abundance, where material possessions are no longer a measure of success, and the tech-fuelled pressures of work and life, give us few moments to be ourselves, the concept of luxury has changed. Luxury is more a state of mind, more an emotional than physical concept, more an experience than an object, and capturing the most valuable aspirations of people today. Also luxury fashion brands need to come to terms with this changing mindset.

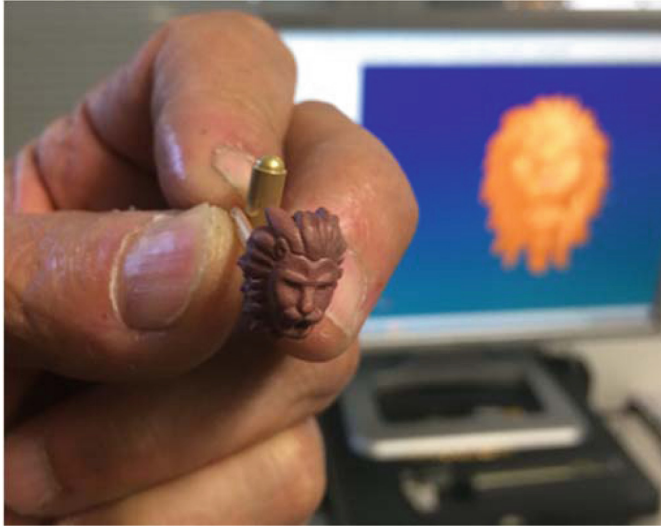


Fig. 1. “Cera persa” works (lost-wax casting) and CAD/CAM technologies for metal engineering within fashion accessories supply chain

A first significant example is represented by BB, a manufacturing group based in the northern Florence area composed by 6 different SMEs companies involved in metal components production for global fashion brands. BB case history represents a significant technology transfer process from automotive to fashion production. Whiting the re-branding and the new design strategy developed by brands as Gucci as the middle of 90's, the company became a crucial supplier within the brand subcontracting supply-chain. The high-technology background of the manufacturer became a centric element among the new Gucci design strategy: laser cutting and other high-precision works on metals defined a new creative guideline and new final finishing on fashion accessories. Within this intensive relation in between BB and the fashion brands, BB operated as a real co-designer and advanced engineering consulting in relation to the most important fashion designers from 90's to contemporary fashion system. Then BB became a real special “guest-house” for very famous designers who needed to make their concept as real artifacts, a string relation still working, playing a fundamental role in fashion supply chain (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Gianfranco Lotti leather works

Other significant example we can highlight among Tuscany fashion accessories supply chain is Gianfranco Lotti company¹. The company was born on 1968, starting from a craftsmanship workshop working on leather bags for the most famous fashion brands. The company is developing specific innovations within the production supply chain combining advanced machines works and traditional craft. The balance in between high-tech and traditional “rituals” of the craftsman are represented by the specific tools aiming at optimizing the work by hand, as a tutorial supporting the leather modeler in making the final quality. These tools are patented and saved with a special secrecy from the company. The “perfection” in technics and care of details is a distinguishing element of Gianfranco Lotti. Gianfranco Lotti is today an independent brand of luxury accessories and a very important subcontractor for very famous fashion brands.

3 Tuscany Manufacturing as a Model

The research takes Tuscany manufacturing system a model for made in Italy high-end manufacturing. Region of Tuscany (Italy) is characterized by some features similar to general panorama of Italian economy and by other factors much more pronounced in this area. It is a region heavily open to international trade, presenting an export percentage stabilized at around 7% of the total share of Italian exportation [5]. Fashion sector, represented mainly by the textile and leather areas, in conjunction with the engineering sector (in particular producing machinery for the fashion system), are the ones driving in exports. Tuscany’s international trade confirms the leadership of the fashion Tuscan leathers that, jointly to with yarns, fabrics, knitwear, clothing and

¹ www.gianfrancolotti.com.

footwear, cover about 30% of export products. Manufacturing processes of the districts are based on an articulated division of production between many small and medium companies (SMEs) specialized on a single activity (i.e. in textile sector: spinning, twisting, warping, weaving, finishing). The “work for third parties” (subcontracting) is the form of relationship more diffused in this area. Coordination of the production is done by SMEs who take care of the design of the sample, in conjunction with the various aspects of logistics and SMEs’ network organization [9].

The research on Tuscany manufacturing system has been done by mapping the companies’ districts in the territory – in touch with companies’ associations and Province of Florence - and by direct contact to the manufactures. The research focuses on Tuscany as a model of made in Italy manufacturing. Other Italian fashion production areas could be related to the same manufacturing model (especially in fashion system).

3.1 Emerging Interest for Manufacturing Values

“The economic and financial crisis is comparable to a cyclone. We’re just beginning. The cyclone will transform the socio-cultural paradigms orienting them towards an era of change leading to the explosion of communication and consumption models as we have known so far” [10]. If the systems of consumption and user-product interaction will change, as a consequence, the production system will suffer some setbacks. Therefore, the craftsmanship supply chain could present some significant changes and new business visions. High-range manufacturing processes could highlight the product quality to the customer, producing new product concepts and brand awareness strategy. Then, the economic situation is offering a new strategic perspective.

The return to the “substance”, as searching for tangible qualities, could be at the center of new user-centered project, highlighting the value of making quality. This phenomenon has accelerated strongly in recent years and it is primarily related to the objects of use, neo-craft attendances (often not in relationship with mass production) in everyday life. The skill and the technical component become the soul of creativity, defining contemporary meaning of the industrial product. The digital research is fascinated and “swallowed up” by this design dimension, through projects that are aiming at highlighting the values of making, the precision of craftsmanship, the time dedicated to the creation and the genius of those who create the artifacts.

We can highlight on two interesting projects that represent significant examples of how digital media and ecommerce market is embracing these emerging values of making fascination and intrinsic artisanal values.

E.craft project is the result of a three-years collaboration in between Luisaviaroma.com – one of the most important fashion ecommerce players in Europe – and DIDA Department of University of Florence (Fig. 3). The project consists in a special section within Luisaviaroma.com/home section focusing on craftsmanship processes that produced special exclusive and precious artifacts. The joint lab developed in between in company and University of Florence structured the information highlighting on product values and artifact intangible aspects. These information networks and following emotional processes are emerging from a fieldwork, selecting the best “made in Italy” artisanal case histories and expressing their tangible and intangible assets [9].

An additional interesting example is represented by Amazon/Made in Italy², a special section of Amazon portal dedicated to the most important masters of Italian craftsmanship. On 2015, Amazon launched this g-local section of their digital marketplace as first episode of an emotional travel via web among the most significant Italian craftsmen (Fig. 4).

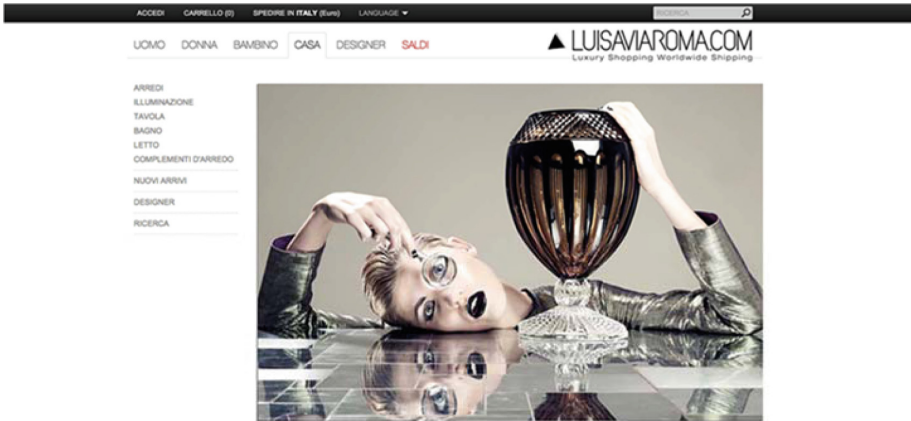


Fig. 3. Luisaviaroma.com Home, including e-craft project

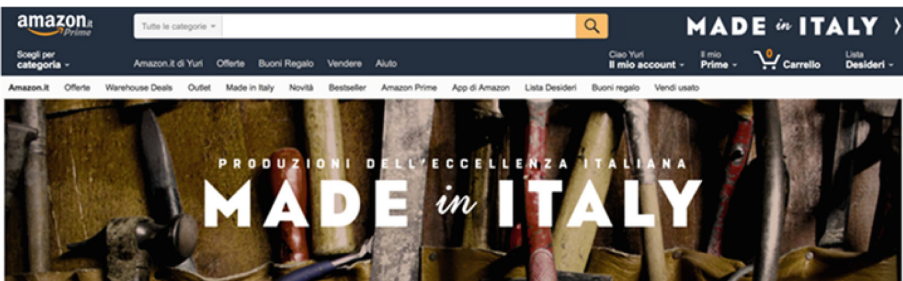


Fig. 4. Amazon/Made in Italy banner

3.2 Advanced Craftsmanship and Innovation Processes

Based on specific historic case studies, the research defines a paradigm of “invariants key points” of advanced craftsmanship [5]. These elements represent significant innovation action points able to make the manufacturing districts resilient and flexible to many markets requests and other external factors.

² <https://www.amazon.it/Raccontare-Italy-legame-cultura-manifattura/dp/8831721658>.

- A. *Technology transfer ability of SMEs.* This concept is, often, a phenomenon endogenous of the advanced craftsmanship, a dialectical relationship “transferor-transferee” between the operators of the production district for product development and production. Otherwise, actions of “productive transfers” from one sector to another allow the manufacturer to develop and to implement a particular technology in different product areas. These transfer processes lead to application of knowledge into new product areas with a “self-discipline” attitude of companies, without any industrial innovation plan previously defined.
- B. *Innovation cross-fertilization.* Processes of exchange and transfer of knowledge between different productive sectors, establishing new supply chain clusters and changing the traditional framework of the production chain.
- C. *The persistence of traditional “craft rituals” within advanced craftsmanship.* We can often find key elements of the supply chain arising as “invariants” elements of manufacturing process. These artisanal rites are since centuries immune from transformation and innovation of production systems. “Archetypal gestures” of craftsmanship.
- D. *Logistics innovation in the supply chain.* Innovation in production logistics and management of subcontracting in the area are strategic elements to make craftsmanship processes effective on the market. An additional invariant characteristic of the subcontracting SMEs relates to the relation in between the small medium companies and the global fashion brands:
- E. *Subcontractor SMEs “subjection” vs Fashion Holding and international fashion brands.* in spite of SMEs engineering design skills (in particular in production districts in Tuscany), this knowledge is often not supported and promoted by globalized fashion brands (main SMEs customers).

Among these relations – often not balanced-in between production chain and fashion holdings we can refer to the evaluation tool below [4] to interpret the complexity of made in Italy supply chain. We are defining three research areas:

1. Saper fare related to SMEs manufacturing sectors (especially about wearable product);
2. Sociological and cultural instances relating to the high-end product manufacturing, interpreting the contemporary consumer perceptions and identifying possible development scenarios of product values;
3. Advanced craftsmanship including advanced production technology (included in the production chain) and the ICT implementations on product (i.e. identification technologies as RFID or NFC – applied to the product as logistics optimization or certification of quality).

By analyzing the contemporary fashion system, we highlight a peculiar interest of the global fashion brands about high-end manufacturing companies values. The big corporations that include the most important fashion griffes are usually very interested not on all the points presented above. The brand is often very interested on the point 1 – saper fare and manufacturing skills of the craft-based SMEs – and on point 3 or the technological innovation involved within manufacturing processes. On the contrary, we notice a limited and superficial interest on the point 2, the sociological values, the

intrinsic values of craftsmanship and the cultural instances that make the artisanal districts still alive and prosper within contemporary global market.

Specific fashion events programs or advertising imaginary proposed from the most important fashion brands highlight on this distance in between fashion marketing and brand communication and real values of craftsmanship.

The events program “Artisan Corner” was created on 2010 from Gucci in the most important boutiques of the brand around the world. The most skilled artisans selected from Gucci subcontracting chain were invited to show their savoir faire at selected Gucci stores, to work first-hand on some of Gucci’s most iconic handbags. The artisans were like actors or celebrities for a day, dressing stylish working dresses and looking fancy and charming.

This theatre-inspired performance is representing how the big corporation aim at shaping a “romantic” idea of the craftsman, avoiding the real values and the complexity of cultural reason why of such important manufacturing heritage. Artisan Corner events presented the artisans as a museum providing very superficial information, maybe something fancy and extravagant that doesn’t give any information about history and characteristics of places, people and ethical values that make made in Italy skills so peculiar.

4 State-of-the-Art of Made in Italy Manufacturing and a Possible Development Scenarios

We can identify dynamic and innovative ways in which the savoir faire is alive and evolving: integrating new processes, materials and mind-sets into traditional knowledge. Anyway, this actual situation undervalues the craft skills and intellectual capacities of Italy’s skilled craftsmen. There is no doubt that a new made in Italy innovation-driven design praxis would revitalize a craft tradition that may be in danger of relegation to the supplier side of the GVC [11].

The technological transformations oriented to manufacturing 4.0 have triggered some reflections about phenomena of change in Italy. This research activity started with a background analysis of the concept of craftsmanship in the development of made in Italy products and in the relationship with design culture. As a result, researchers found the existence of a craftsmanship of the 21st century that uses various digital systems and tools. The research team worked with the introduction of “capsules of digital technology” placed in specific points of the various processes of the manufacturing system, with the conscious precise aim to not damage or change the artisan processing processes. The research team enhanced the historicized knowledge of the company and, through innovation, organize company “secrets”, skills and products to create a flexible and cutting-edge digital archive. Starting from the awareness that in Italy, when it comes to manufacturing, it becomes almost impossible to describe all the general organizational and production models as the only *modus operandi*, otherwise it can be done by talking about “supply chain” or contextualized production district, just focus the attention on a specific field such as the fashion sector. In our production facilities there are various skills and craftsmanship that, in turn, lead to the differentiation between artistic crafts, technological crafts and industrial crafts, which is the new model in place. This knowledge is connected and integrated, or rather differentiated by

time, phases and intellectual processes that lead the know-how, are intertwined in the supply-chain and lead to the final quality of the product. The role of the archive is therefore that of tracing and codifying forms and technical methodologies of conception and product development, but above all it is that of enhancing the “magical intertwining” of artistic knowledge and advanced processes typical of the “italian way” industrialization, synergy unique that has led made in Italy to act as a global reference.

We have identified dynamic and innovative ways in which know-how is alive and evolving: the integration of new processes, materials and mentalities in traditional knowledge. In any case, this current situation underestimates the artisanal skills and intellectual abilities of the skilled Italian artisans. There is no doubt that a new made in Italy design practice geared towards innovation would revitalize a craft tradition that could be in danger of relegation from the supplier side of the GVC.

4.1 Traceability System with RFID e NFC (IT4Fashion)

Some technologies highly developed within supply chain are digital micro-systems aiming at improving logistics in manufacturing and laser cutting technologies, aiming at defining high precision shapes in the artefact. Both technological areas represent today a crucial improvement in fashion manufacturing, and the stand as significant technology transfer from other business sectors. In examples, laser cutting was previously used in automotive and industrial machines supply chain, from the beginning of '90 we highlight the involvement of this technology in fashion production.

In this perspective, identification technologies based on RFID and NFC systems, high-end Italian fashion chain is undergoing a substantial transformation. Beyond the important improvements related to the time to market and quality control, the involvement identification technologies within the supply chain allows at defining new interaction and communication systems in between user and product. The user could know more information about the object, he could trace the origin and the production path, he could understand the intangible values of the artefact - often hidden or nor very clear - as the cultural relations between the manufacturing know-how and the identity and sociological matters related to a place where craftsmanship is based).

Moreover, we can highlight new possible scenarios about how the supply chain can develop in a medium term new user-centered service and new performances embedded in the artefact. In fact, if the RFID or NFC application stands as a technological “external” application on the final product, we can figure out that in the next future the technologies and scientific application already implemented in the production chain could develop new interactive system, by using and developing what they already do to get the final quality of product.

4.2 Laser Visual Effects as a Performance

In this context, the laser cutting technology and the high-precision engraving processes – used to create complex shapes and finishing on metals and other materials - could represent a very interesting field to set new artifact performances. Additional innovation transfers on cutting process by nano-precision tools (as photonics rays or high-precision laser transferred from optical engineering and research in physics) could

make new traceability system able to set visual performances or effect for the final user – as holographic effects created by optical diffraction on miniaturized system created within the manufacturing supply chain. Producing a product able to define a user-centered effect could allow at certifying by playful and fashionable effect the artefact authenticity and related intrinsic values.

5 Conclusions

According to this overview, Italian SMEs couldn't be considered only as a manufacturing cluster.

Taking into account the relations in between the companies part of fashion supply chain and the most famous fashion brands – as main clients – we can highlight how “made in Italy” clusters are ecoming as real innovation providers. If primarily the Italian SMEs stand as a strategic player about quality of the tangible artifacts, we can notice a possible development of these manufacturing companies as support for innovative services emerging from the high-tech advanced processes included in the production chain.

First of all, Italian manufacturing districts represent today a real cradle of design thinking, As described above the manufacturer is more than often a co-designer, able to implement a concept by a proper design vision, able to adjust and to optimize a tentative concept presented from a drawing – often not more than a general initial concept. Then, Made in Italy SMEs have to explore new branding strategies able to present their innovation cluster as a structured and organized system. According to the emerging interest on the high-quality manufacturing processes, we can figure out brand equity assets beyond traditional marketing operations.

Another significant frontier of made in Italy is presented by service design. As presented by IT4Fashion, one of the most significant fair in Europe about Identification technologies for fashion supply chain (please refer to Sect. 3.2), SMEs could develop not only new product but also new performance and user-centred services connected to the final artifact. The presented case studies of innovation on laser cutting by nanotechnologies or the user-centred performance developed by RFID and NFC technologies could represent the first step of this new path (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. In-store styling performances developed by Caen by RFID digital archive system

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