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## The Italian Reconstruction and Post-War Fashions

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The Italian Reconstruction and Post-War Fashions

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17 January 2012

Italian clothing today draws images of runways, boutiques, and a general air of *haute couture*, or high fashion. The industry's influences stretches across the globe, finding a particularly large audience in the United States, partly due to the country's wealth. However, many Americans also glorify Italian fashion as exotic, sophisticated, and romantic; wearing the now-famous brands of Prada, Gucci, and Versace demonstrates both prosperity and finesse. The Italian fashion industry emerged on a global scale in the late 1960s and 70s, but its beginnings are rooted in the Reconstruction era following the Second World War. The United States, emerging from the War wealthy and confident, instigated a series of political and economic reforms to aid Italy and other European countries back into their former prosperity. By urging a market based on capitalism onto Italy and ensuring Italian industry would succeed through the Marshall Plan, American policy makers played a critical role in the birth of Italian haute couture, allowing it to eventually develop into an independent industry.

Prior to World War Two, fashion was nearly singularly dominated by Parisian designers, specifically Christian Dior. Fashion showings in Paris drew journalists and buyers from across the globe, including hopeful designers from less significant fashion locations like Italy. Parisian clothing, though astronomically expensive, served as the main haute couture provider to all countries in the world, while its competitors, Italy, Germany, Japan, and Britain, would alter their designs into their own less expensive and less desirable copies.<sup>1</sup> When copying, each country would add its own unique style to the same general design. During this period, Italy was known for its high-quality fabrics and lively patterns. Italy's main industrial cities in the north, Florence, Milan, and Venice, produced the clothing, while individuals wealthy enough to purchase the designs lived in the political capital of Rome. At the War's end, Italy suffered not

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<sup>1</sup> White, Nicola. *Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry*. (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 6.

just from economic turmoil, but also a great political breakdown as the Allied forces removed the fascist regime and monitored a democratic election following the war. In addition to providing this political infrastructure, America also economically aided Italy through its plan of European aid, the Marshall Plan.

Following the Second World War, Italy's textile industry was able to emerge, thanks largely to aid from the United States, as a newly competitive and industrial market. Like much of Europe, Italy's economy was destroyed during the War; initial predictions claimed that Italy lost up to 30% of its total wealth.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the economic damage done to Italy, the textile industry remained uniquely virile. This occurred due to unique circumstances during the War. Italy's main industrial cities, Milan, Turin, and Genoa, located in the North of Italy, suffered little damage compared to the Roman capital and the surrounding southern cities. While the northern cities were indeed bombed by the Allied forces, they did not suffer the ground combat that the southern political capitals did.<sup>3</sup> By liberating the northern cities before the Allies arrived in Italy, the Italian partisans were able to preserve the larger factories that had survived the bomb attacks earlier in the War.<sup>4</sup> These textile factories, preserved from damage, provided for an astoundingly quick economic rebound from the effects of the war. Fabric meant for use as uniform material for Italy's standing army during the War was given to the mostly undamaged textile factories in an effort to reboot the Italian post-war economy.<sup>5</sup> The textile industry, in fact, was estimated to have suffered only a .5% damage, a statistic even more impressive when compared with the metal industry, which is estimated to have suffered 25% damage from the

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<sup>2</sup> White, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Spiller, Christina Nardi, *The Dynamics of the Price Structure and the Business Cycle: The Italian Evidence from 1945 to 2000* (Germany: Physica-Verlag Heidelberg, 2003), 2.

<sup>4</sup> White, 10.

<sup>5</sup> White, 20.

effects of the War.<sup>6</sup> The textile industry recovered so well that the Italian government correctly predicted in 1945 that textiles would have the highest output for any Italian industry during the year.<sup>7</sup> In fact, out of the three main Italian industries in the inter-war period, the textile industry was the only still competitive on the international market immediately following the war.<sup>8</sup> This remarkable resiliency allowed the Italian textile industry to take a forefront in the international market against their pre-war competitors. Italy's main competition, Germany, Japan, France, and Britain, struggled in the post-war period and were not able to recover from the war at the rate that Italy did.

Much of Italy's success in textile production was a direct result of the United State's post-war international aid dubbed the Marshall Plan. They sought to support the capitalist model of a free market, entering Northern Italy in April 1945 by importing raw material, promoting production, and strengthening political parties.<sup>9</sup> Under the Marshall Plan, the US loaned money and raw materials to the Italians, expecting compensation in Italian exports to America. According to a 1949 Venetian propaganda pamphlet in praise of the assistance, the US contributed approximately \$1000 per minute over the course of the Marshall Plan with three ships of supplies each day,<sup>10</sup> resulting in a total contribution of more than \$1.4 billion.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the rising communist threat, American officials worked especially hard to support the capitalist market in post-war Italy. America, though partly motivated by a moral duty to less fortunate countries, also contributed money to many European countries in order to gain favor

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<sup>6</sup> Woolf, S.J. (ed), *The Rebirth of Italy 1943-50* (London: Longman, 1972), 158.

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Spiller, 3.

<sup>9</sup> It is noted that initially after the end of the war, Americans also contributed used clothing the Italians, though this had no noticeable influence on the fashion industry or the post-war styles that Italy produced.

<sup>10</sup> Ellwood, David W., "Italy, Europe and the Cold War: Politics and Economics," in *Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture and Society 1948-58* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 34.

<sup>11</sup> De Long, J. Bradford & Barry Eichengreen, "The Marshall Plan: History's Most Successful Structural Adjustment Program," (Economics Open Papers, University of California at Berkeley, 1991), 14.

against the growing Russian threat. Italy, especially close to the communist nation of Yugoslavia, hence became specifically targeted.<sup>12</sup> In 1948, United States President Truman stated that America would “either have to provide a programme of interim aid relief...or the [government] of...Italy will fall [to Communism],<sup>13</sup>” Italy’s large communist population became an interest of the United States as early as 1945; US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius had said directly after the War’s end that America would need to “strengthen Italy economically and politically so that truly democratic elements of the country [could] withstand the forces within,<sup>14</sup>”. In an effort to promote the market, Stettinius mandated that 2/3 of all imports and contributions would directly aid Italian industry. To benefit the Milanese cotton industry, the Marshall Plan allotted Italy a \$25 million loan to pay for 150,000 bales of American cotton, a number that constituted 1/4 of the total American cotton loans to Europe.<sup>15</sup> Italy was expected to repay the loans from America in exports of finished cotton fabric.<sup>16</sup>

However, American officials recognized that it could not force its capitalist ideals onto Italy without the greater danger of disrupting the already delicate balance between capitalism and communism in Italy during the post-war period. In lieu of the severe reconstruction instituted in Germany, the US invested money in actively supporting the Marshall Plan throughout Italy in order to gain Italian support to subdue the communists.<sup>17</sup> Thus, United States policy makers also pursued propaganda efforts to gain Italian support of the Marshall Plan. The US Ambassador to

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<sup>12</sup> White, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Harry S. Truman, September 1948. Quoted in Chalres S. Maier (ed.), *The Origins of the Cold War and Contemporary Europe* (New York: Viewpoints, 1978), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., 1945. Quoted in Ginsborg, Paul, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-88* (London: Penguin, 1990), 40.

<sup>15</sup> Harper, John, *America and the Reconstruction of Italy 1945-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>16</sup> White, Nicola, 21. Some mark this exchange of goods as the beginning of the relationship between Italian clothing and US consumers. In 1949, Elisa Massai, an journalist for the American fashion magazine *Woman’s Wear Daily*, noted how Italian textile factories sent the same types of fabric to the Americans as they did to the Italians, but in a slightly different color palette.

<sup>17</sup> Hogan, Michael J., *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 443.

Rome, James Dunn, created an immense campaign to rally support for the Plan: every one hundredth ship to reach an Italian harbor was given a celebration<sup>18</sup>. As the first Italian election after the war reached its voting days, Dunn warned that should the communists win the election, every US aid program to Italy would immediately cease. Even Italian-American immigrants wrote letters to their families urging support of the Christian Democrat Party, in total more than one million communications.<sup>19</sup>

In turn, much of the Italian population, in need of America's political support and raw materials, actively pursued relationships with the United States. In particular, the Italian elite and aristocrats supported the aid from the Marshall Plan. These "educated elite," as historian Nicola White calls them, grew attached to the US free trade model because of its superior efficiency and productivity that allowed for mass consumption on an entirely new level.<sup>20</sup> In gratitude of Italy's support of the American economic system, the United States sent aid directly to the Christian Democratic Party during the 1948 election. As New York Cardinal to the Roman Catholic Church stated, "America...has done so much and stands ready and willing to do so much more,<sup>21</sup>". Italy became referred to as "America's most faithful ally" because of its strong economic and social ties to the United States. Additionally, due to its economic success, by July 1962, Italy had paid back the entirety of its Marshall Plan loans.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, the new capitalist market created by the US aid through the Marshall Plan helped to specialize the Italian market system. Italy had transformed from its pre-war state of peasant country into a major industrial nation by the 1960s. Those who made more money had the freedom to spend it on consumer

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<sup>18</sup> Ginsborg, Paul, 115.

<sup>19</sup> White, 16. White also notes that most immigrants sent money to their families in these letters, an act she believes created yet another economic tie between Italy and America. The money, as White sees it, contributed to the idea that America was prosperous, helpful, and ultimately good for the Italian purpose.

<sup>20</sup> White, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ginsborg, Paul, 158.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

products, and an increased economic output gave them more choices on what to consume. In a series of interviews, Italian native Natalia (born 1927) revealed how at the war's end in 1945, the dual economic boost of a shorter work year and higher pay allowed her to indulge in mass consumption. She states that she attended the movie theatre once a month and began to purchase her own books, which she previously had inherited from her older brothers to conserve money.<sup>23</sup> Historian Paul Ginsborg calls this social revolution an "economic miracle," that a country could go from being in the heart of war to in the heat of economic prosperity in less than a decade.<sup>24</sup>

The prosperity of the post-war Italian textile industry allowed Italian fashion to emerge into a unique and distinct style. After the War's end, the first benefactors to finance and support Italian fashion besides private investors were the prosperous post-war textile manufacturers. In 1953, Italian designer Gianni Ghinni arranged special sponsorships between textile manufacturers and clothing companies. These pairings included designer *Veneziani* to be paired with wool manufacturer *Lane Rivetti* and cotton manufacturer *Bemberg*, designer *Vanna* to be paired with wool manufacturer *Linea Lane* and cotton manufacturer *Val di Susa*, designer *Marucelli* to be paired with viscose manufacturer *Ital Viscosa*, and designer *Carosa* to be paired with silk manufacturer *Costa*.<sup>25</sup> As the relationship between designers and textiles strengthened, Italian fashion became characterized by Italy's unique and high quality fabric. By the late 1950s, all Italian designers seemed to want their fashion shows paired directly with Italian textile manufacturers. The draw was obvious. Textile companies, when paired with couture designers,

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<sup>23</sup> Forgacs, David & Stephen Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ginsborg, 212.

<sup>25</sup> White, 26.

paid for advertising, publicity, and editorial features in commercial magazines for Italian clothing.<sup>26</sup>

Soon, it became considered *haute couture*, or “high fashion” in Italy to wear the high-quality fabrics the country became famous for. Fashion magazines *Woman’s Wear Daily*, *Linea Italiana*, and *Bellezza* all featured articles blazoning the Italian emphasis on unique and high-quality textiles in their growing haute couture industry. Even before Ghinni’s official pairings, the relationship between the fashion and textile industries appears dramatic. In September 1950, a *Woman’s Wear Daily* article titled “Italian Dressmakers and Wool Firms in Joint Showing” recounts the various wool manufacturers whose fabrics appeared in the show.<sup>27</sup> *Linea Italiana*, a popular middle-class magazine, showed the increasingly close dependence between textiles and Italian design. After the war, the magazine was subtitled *I Tessili Nuovi*, or “new textiles,” showing fashion’s stress on the textile industry.<sup>28</sup> As early as 1949, *Linea Italiana* showed designs by Curiel and Galitzine that included illustrations about the fabrics used in the clothing.<sup>29</sup> Later, an advertisement in a 1955 edition of *Linea Italiana* demonstrates the importance of fabric quality.<sup>30</sup> The advertisement, featuring a gingham dress designed by *Pucci*, contains a text box reading, “JOLLY is a new Marzotto fabric launched to coincide with the Florence shows of Italian fashion.... It’s beautiful, fantastic, modern, and young.<sup>31</sup>” The bottom half of the advertisement is devoted to close-up pictures of gingham and plaid fabric swaths. The advertisement’s focus on the brand and quality of the fabric demonstrates how important Pucci thought it was to sell his designs. In this same spring 1955 edition, every fashion house

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Massai, Elisa. “Italian Dressmakers and Wool Firms in Joint Showing.” *Woman’s Wear Daily*, September 1950.

<sup>28</sup> White, Nicola, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 26. *Linea Italiana* was later subtitled *Moda Cosmo*, meaning “Cosmo Fashion,” by 1965, demonstrating the increased availability of Italian haute couture as the decade progressed.

<sup>29</sup> White, 26.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix, Figure 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Pucci Check Dress made in ‘Jolly’ Fabric.” *Linea Italiana*, Spring 1955, 28.

mentioned in the Florence Fashion Show was linked to a designer to a textile manufacturer.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, *Bellezza* magazine, established in 1941, became known for its annual silk predictions, using the fabric as a commercial attraction.<sup>33</sup>

The quality of Italian textiles soon became known to Italy's economic partner, the United States. In January 1947, the US editor for *Vogue* magazine wrote an article titled "The Fine Italian Hand," delineating the strong individual style of Italian wear and its lower prices compared to the expensive Parisian haute couture.<sup>34</sup> Despite the Parisian belief that floral wear that mimicked a more native style, was unfashionable, designers such as *Priovano*, *Cerri*, *Lelia*, and *Baruffaldi* began to show native embroidery on their new designs.<sup>35</sup> The designs, featured in *Linea Italiana*, show the separation between Parisian fashion and Italian fashion that came about with Italy's strengthened post-war textile industry and international buyers from the United States. By the 1950s, many designers sought to capture a uniquely Italian "style" by remembering their country's influences during the Italian Renaissance. A feature in *Linea Italiana*'s Summer 1954 issue, showing Antonelli's new evening gowns, shows a woman on a harbor in front of the Alps.<sup>36</sup> The use of natural background in the photoshoot demonstrates a growing Italian pride in their culture and history. In April 1949, Marucelli staged a fashion show inspired by the Renaissance, capturing Italy's historic and artistic heritage. Soon after, Teatro Pergola showed designs in Florence in May 1950 featuring mannequins with reproductions of famous Renaissance paintings. Designers also started to manufacture clothing specifically for the Italian climate, demonstrating a national pride and growing fashion audience. *Woman's Wear*

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<sup>32</sup> White, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Mannes, Marya. "The Fine Italian Hand." *Vogue*.

<sup>35</sup> White, 81.

<sup>36</sup> "Antonelli Evening Dress." *Linea Italiana*, Summer 1954, 35.

*Daily* journalist Elisa Mannes noted how, when visiting Rome, the fabrics sold were especially thin and seemed “particularly Italian, often because of the material,<sup>37</sup>”.

Due to its growing support from the United States, Italy’s fashion soon became known on an international level. The beginning of this international era was marked by Giorgini’s showing of collective fashion in Florence. On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1951, Giorgini showed a collection of Italian fashion that awakened the international eye to Italian couture. This showing was the first time an Italian designer had ever collaborated with other designers to make a show in Italy. In doing so, Giorgini set up direct competition with French fashion by splitting from their designs. Designer Micol Fontana, a participant in Giorgini’s first presentation of collaborative fashion, stated that Giorgini wanted to “sever [the] lifeline” between Italy and Paris.<sup>38</sup> Carla Strini, an economic advisor to Pucci, one of the designers in Giorgini’s show, noted in an interview with historian Nicola White that the bright blues and greens featured contrasted the Parisian style at the time, dominated by Dior’s “New Look.” Strini believed that this contrast expressed the creativity of Italian textile lines.<sup>39</sup> Particularly apparent in Giorgini’s show was the unique evening gowns shown by the featured designers. One of the dresses shown by designer Marucelli captured the audience particularly.<sup>40</sup> The dress, its color bright blue, features huge bell-sleeves, a high collar, and a wide skirt without definition at the waist. Marucelli described the dress as a “personal success” that drew influence from “neo classical imperialism” instead of the feminine styles put forth by Dior’s New Look.<sup>41</sup>

The July of 1951, Giorgini hosted his “Second Presentation of Italian High Fashion to the Americans” in Florence. The show was an astounding success, and its widespread acclaim turned

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<sup>37</sup> Mannes, Elisa. *Woman’s Wear Daily*, May 1950.

<sup>38</sup> White, 83.

<sup>39</sup> White, 86.

<sup>40</sup> See Appendix, Figure 2.

<sup>41</sup> White, 84.

many Americans to Italy for fashion. Influenced by both of Giorgini's fashion collectives, *Linea Italiana*'s Autumn 1951 called the show an "undeniable success," and revealed that 350 American buyers attended.<sup>42</sup> Giorgini planned to enrapture the international audience by drawing a sharp contrast between the Italian designers he promoted and the Parisian style so many bought into. Because of this, the fashion presented at the second show was uniquely Italian. Drawing on a combination of classical and imperial Italy, designers focused strongly on showing of the fabric of their clothing, augmenting simple cuts with bright colors and wild patterns. In July 1952, *Woman's Wear Daily* noted how designer Marucelli had shown an "independent creativeness" in his designs at Giorgini's showing.<sup>43</sup> *US Vogue* wrote that it was the color, not the cut, that made Italian fashion new and exciting in the world of haute couture.<sup>44</sup> Their style was characterized by attention to detail, use of surface decoration, texture, and pattern. Italian designers used patterned fabric to emphasize a dramatic effect rather than create a complicated cut.

By the mid-1950s, Italy had developed a unique and recognizable style that Americans clung to as a romantic and exotic alternative to Parisian haute couture. In the movie *Roman Holiday*, released in 1953, Audrey Hepburn travels through the rustic Italian countryside and city, finding love, changing her hairstyle, and escaping the fetters of her life at home. *Roman Holiday* caught the hearts of the American population; it was nominated for seven Academy Awards in 1953, and won three. Audrey Hepburn, winning Best Actress for her role as Princess Anne, in particular enraptured the Americans with her exotic lifestyle in the movie. The astoundingly positive critical reception of *Roman Holiday* demonstrates the American fascination with Italy as it grew to be an economic and artistic power in the world. It was viewed as a refreshing new alternative to the Parisian fashion monopoly, bringing an international audience, but especially

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<sup>42</sup> *Linea Italiana*, Autumn 1951.

<sup>43</sup> *Woman's Wear Daily*, July 1952.

<sup>44</sup> "The Good Word on Italy and Italian Fashion." *US Vogue*, April 1961.

an American audience, clothing that focused on national pride and skills rather than on selling. While some historians argue that Italian fashion did not truly reach an international market until the 1970s, when designers such as Prada, Gucci, Armani, and Versace became household names, the Italian fashion industry emerged first on the haute couture level before reaching a more mainstream audience. As the industry developed throughout the 50s and 60s, Italy eventually adopted the more American model of ready-to-wear clothing, making it much more accessible to a middle-class American audience and spreading its influence. Ultimately, Italian fashion acted as a catalyst for breaking away from the political constructs and economic dependence thrust onto it by World War Two, and turned to its own history and innovation to create a new image of Italy. Paradoxically, Italy's movement to the forefront of the fashion industry would have been miraculous without the foreign aid provided by the United States following the War. America's support of the capitalist system and protection of the Italian textile industry allowed fashion to flourish in a way impossible before the international support. Without the American market to finance Italy's designs and provide for its materials, it seems very likely that the clothing many consider the most expensive and unique in the world would constitute little more than a local's everyday outfit.

Appendix



Figure 1. Advertisement for Pucci, 1955<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> “Pucci Check Dress made in ‘Jolly’ Fabric.” Linea Italiana, Spring 1955, 28.



Figure 2. Marucelli Evening Gown, 1951<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> “Marucelli Evening Gown.” *Linea Italiana*, Autumn 1951, 51.

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