

A NEW ERA OF ITALIAN KNOW-HOW IN FASHION

EXPLORING THE (IM)POSSIBLE DIALOGUE OF
CRAFTSMANSHIP AND INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The growing availability of information about garments and their production processes has helped today's consumers to develop a deeper understanding and heightened sensitivity towards environmental, economic, cultural and social sustainability, as well as towards reputational factors such as product and brand recognizability. This has led to a renewed interest by consumers for local artisanal practices to better respond to sustainability issues, product authenticity and personalization-customization practices.

Framed within this scenario, this contribution illustrates the evolution of the concept of "know-how" within the Italian fashion system, and it explores the evolving relationship between fashion craftsmanship and industrial production in Italy. Furthermore, starting from the methods and strategies that merge local craftsmanship and industrial efficiency, the work proposes how education could build contemporary fashion design professionals, specifically describing what are the fundamental skills they need to get to incorporate traditional artisanal practices into industrial production. The paper made use of a desk research approach, combining texts about design, fashion cultures and Italian craftsmanship with more contemporary academic papers and industry reports, to align with the evolving fashion panorama and consumer issues.

Keywords: *Made in Italy; Craftsmanship; Customization; Sustainability; Artisan Designer*

INTRODUCTION

A significant number of European consumers – particularly those belonging to Gen-Z – are increasingly appreciating sustainable practices and are demanding fashion brands to be more responsible regarding social and environmental impacts, despite the challenges posed by price. (Granskog et al., 2020; European Commission, 2023; Euromonitor International, 2023).

Furthermore, to allow consumers to enhance their awareness when purchasing, the European Commission is proposing a "Digital Product Passport" that calls for transparency within the entire value chain of a product (European Commission, 2022). Taking such actions would enhance the relationship between brands and the supply chain, which in turn could facilitate the

development of data platforms (Hindarto et al, 2024; Damvakeraki et al, 2024; Rinaldi et al., 2022). For all these reasons, fashion consumers are regaining an interest in local craftsmanship – and so in the artisanal tradition –, seen as a model that adheres more faithfully to those needs of sustainability and authenticity previously mentioned. Particularly in Italy, which had developed a highly identity-oriented fashion craftsmanship model, this renowned interest can be the occasion to build a new productive model that can take the best from both craftsmanship and industry. On one hand, craftsmanship practices, rooted in local traditions, allow to produce distinct items that reflect the artisan's skill and creativity. In contrast, industrial production can constantly implement new technology to become more sustainable and it can

efficiently distribute products on a global scale. Fashion designers should exploit and valorize these elements to create products that retain cultural and local authenticity while distributing globally.

ON THE CONCEPT OF “KNOW-HOW”: BETWEEN TERRITORY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

The term “know-how” implies “knowing how to do things” and includes the arts of making, the ability to produce, the knowledge of materials, and the transformation processes linked to the territory (Goretti, 2017). To put it in De Fusco’s terms, it is based on specializations, processes, and components specifically linked to the original territory, which are founded on values and production techniques typical of historicized craftsmanship (2009).

This craftsmanship is also characterized by the artisan’s ability to autonomously intervene in the product, using hands and skills as tools for managing materials and producing artifacts (Sennett, 2009). What is called a “master craftsmen” are in fact capable of autonomously managing every production phase and they can develop a deep understanding of the world and territory through the constant fusion of abstract knowledge and experience (Buono, 2018). In this sense, the environment is an object of observation and study, from which they have developed techniques and skills to build products containing strong material and immaterial quality (Micelli, 2016; Cristallo, 2014). The territory therefore represents, as highlighted by Fry et al. (2016), an entire cultural world, rich in authenticity and values transmitted through artifacts.

By applying these considerations to the specific case of fashion, product quality becomes not simply related to the concept of “handmade”, but it also depends on craftsmen’s ability to transfer the connection with the territory in the final fashion item (Micelli, 2016).

THE REDISCOVERY OF LOCAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AMONG CONSUMERS AND THE RISE OF SLOW FASHION

At the end of the ‘60s, craftsmanship and its production models entered crisis (Merlotti, 2013), giving a way to what became a new paradigm in Italy: ready-to-wear. In fact, the industrialization

process – started after the second World War – gained a new shape thanks to Walter Albini. On the 27th of April 1971, He presented a collection that wasn’t artisanal produced: the clothing items were designed by him and industrially produced, similarly to what Cardin and Saint-Laurent previously did in France (Scarpellini, 2017). This was the first time in Italy a collection was produced, presented and distributed that way.

Although ready-to-wear was later recognized – as it still is today – as a distinctive feature of “Made in Italy”, during ‘80s and ‘90s, it faced increasing competition from emerging markets. The factors that determined this crisis were different and can be traced in a limited impact of technological factors and economies of scale, in the changes in the market and consumer tastes, in the growing competition from less developed countries operating with lower production costs and less protected labor, in the consequent widespread diffusion of fast fashion productions and brands. To remain competitive, brands like Benetton shifted towards mass production and outsourcing as well, leading to a decline in artisanal craftsmanship (Merlo, 2020). In addition to these, traditional techniques were often replaced by automated processes, negotiating the quality and tailoring of Italian garment tradition.

Another crucial point in the history of “Made in Italy” was the trend of a conspicuous delocalization of the production chain – or parts of it – towards foreign countries, at first in the East-European countries and then moving outside the EU (Nord Africa, Middle East or China). As a result, some portions of the Italian production line were scaled down or even lost (Prota and Viesti, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Pickles, and Smith, 2011).

All these changes, occurring over a few decades, ended up favoring a massified system of clothing, challenging both artisanal production – and all the cultural and technical heritage it carried – and the virtuous model of Italian ready-to-wear.

In recent years, particularly from the 2008 financial crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a notable resurgence in the appreciation of authenticity and uniqueness, coupled with a heightened emphasis on sustainability (Demichelis, 2015). This last issue has been evident after the tragic collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka on April 24th, 2013, pushing consumers to care more about the garment, both in the sense of material quality and of ethical production (Dicuonzo et al., 2020).

These crises have brought consumers to change their mind about fashion production and consumption, facilitating the reconsideration of short supply chains, small-scale production, and craftsmanship as more addressed to authenticity, sustainability, and production transparency (Testa, 2015; Amed and Berg, 2020).

Luckily, this can also be observed in Italy, as supporters of the productive system are trying to refund these artisans of the debt that Made in Italy – and more generally fashion as an economic but also cultural phenomenon – has contracted towards them (Muzzarelli, 2011).

As advised by Micelli (2011), this renowned attention to the artisanal dimension of “Made in Italy” it is not being desired as an idyllic return to the pre-industrial past, but it is meant instead the wish to retain the artisanal effort alive in the future, shaping it through the changes of a new economic and cultural environment. In a globalized world where mass production often leads to homogenization of customers and standardization of products, the celebration of artisanal craftsmanship stands as a reminder of the unique cultural heritage embodied in the Italian tradition.

The great leap forward is related to the fact that sustainability in fashion is no longer just seen on an environmental level but is also recognized at the economic, social, and cultural ones. Hence, for enterprises, it is essential to start to consider all these aspects of sustainability. This includes the development of new products, mitigation of environmental impact, and supply chain control, including respect for employees’ rights. Additionally, incorporating cultural sustainability involves developing the local expertise and preserving both material and immaterial craftsmanship heritage (Vacca et al., 2022).

All these considerations are the reasons why local companies and slow fashion brands are reevaluating sartorial and artisanal techniques but blending them with contemporary elements and innovative approaches to produce more emotional products. In particular, slow fashion – born as a reaction to the consequences of globalization – is the sign of a significant change in the market demands, referred mostly. Its way of thinking and producing is truly based on direct interaction between customers and the brand, by operating through a local activity based in a physical store. This allows customers to immediately assess each of their requests.

Consumers are thus finding in slow fashion brands a complete response to their needs. Thanks to

productions realized in tandem with local artisans, these brands can respect the environment and local realities involved in production processes, while considering customer experience and offer them products that combine aesthetics, quality, and customization. This is a fundamental aspect in fashion, Silvia Venturini Fendi points out that the strong desire of customization and exclusivity has brought the attention back to some ancient jobs and techniques as the only response to this unicity and individuality desire (Venturini Fendi, 2011). On the other hand, following the market opening towards men’s clothing, artisanal activities are re-proposing what were the two historic production models of artisanal “know-how”: made-to-measure and bespoke. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they present some significant differences, especially because the first one is about personalization, the other one is customization oriented.

Made-to-measure focuses on adapting existing options to suit the customer’s requirements, tastes and preferences. So, it is necessary to start with a pre-existing suit model, to personalize it in terms of measurements, fit, color, or other details to better align with the client’s preferences – such as fabric, buttons, pockets, etc (Nobile and Cantoni, 2023). It is indeed a semi-tailored model, which may involve mechanization of certain parts of the suit – such as sleeves – while assembly is done by hand. The result is a personalized suit that meets the customer’s requirements by a certain extent, but it allows for a lower investment of skills, resources, and time compared to bespoke (Bettiol, 2015).

It is instead possible to more closely meet consumer demands through bespoke production. In this process, customization practices are implemented to offer a freedom in design choices, allowing customers to choose fabric, style, cut, and embellishments to build a one-of-a-kind garment tailored to the customer’s specifications (Nobile and Cantoni, 2023). The ultimate expression of this production model is observable in formal men’s clothing. Indeed, unlike any other production model, the realization of men’s suits does not require the creation of a pattern: the tailor draws the traces of the suit parts directly on the fabric, which is then cut and tailored (Attanasio, 2015). As one can imagine, this practice is applied only by some businesses as it requires longer times and higher costs, resulting in less competitiveness compared to the made-to-measure model. Fundamentally, made-to-measure is about

personalization because it involves adapting existing options to meet individual preferences, while bespoke apply customization practices to design and produce an unique fashion product. These two practices are experiencing renewed success because, as previously mentioned, they can satisfy the premium personalization requests from customers, taking advantage of their craftsmanship approaches to ensure a “one of a kind” item. In fact, customers have become aware of what psychologist and engineer Donald Norman already foresaw in 2004 with this phrase:

Things do not become personal because we have selected some alternatives from a catalog of choices. To make something personal means expressing some sense of ownership, of pride. It means to have some individualistic touch. (p. 217)

People opt for customization practices since they have the possibility to obtain a different object from others, and this makes it possible to establish an emotional relationship between users and objects. In a more democratic and globalized world, in which everyone potentially can own the same object, the desire for customization is always appealing to the user.

All these approaches and references demonstrate why, after the celebration of fast fashion and the possibility it offered to own a large quantity of low-cost products, fashion consumers are focusing more on the quality and authenticity of products, and why brands are more respectful and interested in the conditions of workers. (Yidan, 2023; Apetrei et al., 2024).

THE (IM)POSSIBLE DIALOGUE: ENTERPRISE NETWORKS BETWEEN CRAFTSMANSHIP AND INDUSTRY

In Italy, as highlighted in the previous paragraph, fashion craftsmanship and the ready-to-wear industry had followed for decades different paths, living parallel lives. However, with the democratization, and moreover with the digitalization, the rigid boundaries between local-global and artisanal-industrial are gradually vanishing, enabling a dialogue that before could be seen as impossible (Bertola and Linfante, 2015). This dialogue is seen as the foundation of a new way of thinking, designing and producing, as demonstrated by the interest it gained from representatives of culture, economics and politics. In fact, as highlighted by Marco Belisario – Vice President of Confindustria

Chieti Pescara, it is necessary to revalue artisanal enterprises, which have assumed a fundamental importance in the high fashion landscape, by reintroducing their innovative production approaches (Belisario, 2013).

This interest is also demonstrated by the development of specific contractual, managerial, and production models that regulate the relationship between artisanal and industrial entities. The most virtuous example of this is represented by *reti d'impresa* (Enterprise Networks), which Di Diego and Micozzi describe as a stable and intermediate form of coordination between two or more companies. The main characteristic of this model lies in the willingness of these companies to jointly carry out one or more economic activities, with the common goal of enhancing each other's innovative capacity and increasing competitiveness in the market (Di Diego and Micozzi, 2013). This can be possible through the definition of common rules between companies, that can establish structured and joint projects, while remaining independent. It is therefore a matter of defining a real contract that can be used in the production, distribution, or coordination between production and distribution fields.

Today, this model appears to be a winning choice because the Italian entrepreneurial-industrial system, composed mainly of 95% micro and small enterprises, seems to no longer keep up with a constantly changing market.

Indeed, enterprise networks prove to be the only phenomenon in continuous growth, matching the success of industrial districts of the 1970s, yet ensuring the individuality and autonomy of the individual companies that join (Ibidem, 2013). This latter aspect is crucial for companies which operate in fashion sectors, as it allows them to be part of an industrial system through third-party production while maintaining their own production.

The characteristic that allows all this to happen is territorial proximity, as it enables direct interaction between the actors involved in the process. Despite the complexities, the results of this dialogue are excellent, especially when considering how the qualitative and cultural aspects of the territory are transferred into the product. This results in artifacts with strong symbolic aesthetic value that the final consumer will be able to perceive and appreciate (Morace and Lanzone, 2010).

This is the demonstration of how the balance between craftsmanship and industry is possible, also considering how many luxury brands are

relying on a spectacular application of craft technique within industrial production as a new tool for brand positioning (Tarquini et al., 2022). Among these, Bottega Veneta – renowned for its exquisite leather goods with the “intrecciato” technique – is one of the best. During the Fall 2022 ready-to-wear collection, the creative director Matthieu Blazy introduced a *trompe-l'oeil* denim that has been dyed and sewn to resemble faded denim. To reproduce the texture of jeans on nubuck leather, the process involves twelve color printing steps, and a series of brushing and sanding operations carried out using special machinery (Feroldi, 2023). This process perfectly represents the balance between craftsmanship and industry that this paper is dealing with, as it is based on industrial production whose management requires specific artisanal skills. In fact, professional craftsmen use their know-how to carry out and control all the production steps, unlike fashion factory workers who execute repetitive operations through machinery.

Approach as such not only challenges conventional thinking but shows the will to encourage consumers to reconsider their perception of everyday materials, showcasing at the same time the avant-garde expertise of (Italian) artisans and tailors.

CONCLUSIONS: DEVELOPING NEW FASHION DESIGN COMPETENCES

The context and experiences highlighted in the previous paragraphs have emphasized the necessity to redefine a new “Made in Italy” aimed to all the levels of sustainability and technological innovation, as well as individual customization, rather than global standardization (Calefato, 2015) – fashion indeed fulfill people’s desire to differentiate themselves and avoid conformity (Marchetti, 2011).

This renewed system must be built on the dialogue between a new generation of “artisans of making” and “artisan designers” (Testa and Rinaldi, 2017), who share their skills to revive the qualitative excellence of Made in Italy, and to tackle the challenges posed by the market and international competition.

Within this scenario, integrating management and business innovation is as crucial as creativity, since it ensures designers both to propose appealing products and to manage business operations to

sustainable success, and it allows the balance between novel ideas and practical solutions (Boyles, 2022; Hall, 2023).

Hence, the traditional idea of the fashion designer as a *deus ex machina* or solitary artist no longer aligns with this contemporary context. In this context, the intervention of fashion design education needs to be conducted in tandem with industries and local artisans, synergizing their efforts. Certainly, the classic fashion design skills – related to fundamentals of design, composition, and fabric manipulation – will still be important, but these must be accompanied with the expertises on technological innovation and the craftsmanship knowledge about materials and methods. The first one will be useful at industrial level to optimize production processes by improving efficiency and reducing waste, leading to better control over time and costs (McKinsey & Company, 2022); while the latter will prioritize the adoption of more sustainable practices driven by consumer desires, since artisans can establish a direct relationship with their clients (Sennett, 2009).

For these reasons, fashion design education must provide a comprehensive set of competencies necessary for translating intangible local heritage, cultural assets, and customer preferences into desirable products (Merlo, 2020). Additionally, it should facilitate the acquisition of logical reasoning skills, adaptability to industrial settings, teamwork, and emotional control (Ernawati et al., 2022).

These diverse hard and soft skills – which encompass the entire management of cultural, design, and production activities at both artisanal and industrial levels – can be categorized within the framework proposed by Perez (2016): types of thinking, knowledge (know what to do and why), skills (know-how), and attitudes (willingness to act). However, this categorization must also consider the invaluable craftsmanship skills required to preserve the quality and authenticity of products and meet customers’ demands. Therefore, this new set of skills and competencies must be closely linked to:

- Types of thinking: encouraging critical and strategic thinking to develop design approaches which can take into consideration consumers’ needs and emotions, by collaborating across disciplines, and communicating efficiently (Park and Lee, 2021; Knight et al., 2020).
- Knowledge: acquiring knowledge of the

historical and cultural aspects of the territory by studying traditions and learning how local production techniques are applied to fashion design; constantly updating the knowledge on new digital-industrial technologies, focusing on how they can help create value, not just speed up low-value-added activities such as pattern making and cutting.

- Know-how: applying the knowledge mentioned above to build distinctive, sustainable, and customizable products. This also should include the ability to integrate tailoring approaches and techniques within the industrial system, as exemplified by the case of Bottega Veneta.
- Attitudes: developing an attitude for working in interdisciplinary teams to integrate and share different approaches related to tailoring, fashion design, industrial production, management, and business innovation.
- Distribution and logistics management: understand the distribution and logistics management systems in the fashion industry. The goal is to improve product traceability, highlighting also the information related to the product's environmental impact and the area where it is produced.

By embracing these multifaceted skills, new professionals will develop the necessary tools to manage the Fashion system, rather than according to individual compartments. Hence, they can collaborate to propose items that resonate deeply with contemporary consumers, while giving value and preserving the cultural heritage of the territories.

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