

ARCHIVING AND REACTIVATING MADE IN ITALY:

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS, MAPPING ACTIONS. THE RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AT THE IUAV UNIVERSITY OF VENICE

GABRIELE MONTI

Università IUAV di Venezia, Italy

monti@iuav.it

Orcid 0000-0002-0181-3674

Copyright: © Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.
Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3909

Abstract

The text reflects on the role of archives in defining the concept of Made in Italy, particularly through an analysis of the active role played by archives—in their dual material and immaterial nature—in reactivating the mechanisms of design and production that define the heritage and cultures of Italian fashion today. The text therefore presents part of the work carried out by the research unit at the IUAV University of Venice to map the Made in Italy system. The text uses a theoretical approach that productively combines curatorial considerations with historical-critical paradigms, within a cultural horizon that recognizes the central role of immaterial design actions, and aims to reflect on the operational definition of fashion heritage.

Keywords: *Fashion, Archive, Made in Italy, Exhibitions*

The RHITA project originated also from a series of initiatives linked to the work that the fashion research group at the IUAV University of Venice has been carrying out for some time. These initiatives have explored and continue to explore the Made in Italy dimension through a focus on the history of Italian fashion, understood as a complex system that brings together the creative and conceptual dimensions with the productive one. This text provides an opportunity to clarify the elements that form the basis of the IUAV research unit's work, and therefore the cultural premises for our university's contribution to the RHITA project. Research activities relating to archives involve their identification and exploration: a study that means recounting them and at the same time

reactivating them. The archives thus become the basis for imagining design actions, but above all they become fundamental – through the curatorial action of creating exhibitions – for focusing on an idea of Made in Italy that is effectively operational, capable of connecting with the past and projecting itself into the future.

Firstly, it should be noted that the discussion surrounding Made in Italy at the IUAV University of Venice is linked to the presence of the Pro Research in Integral Design Environment Laboratory (PRIDE.IT), which operates within IR.IDE (Integral Design Environment Research Infrastructure, established in 2018). The Pro Research Laboratory in Integral Design Environment (PRIDE) is dedicated to integral

design extending from the territory to the human body. In particular, starting from the relationship between heritage and innovation, the studies developed in the laboratory address from different points of view the need to express a more appropriate, non-standardized idea of Made in Italy. Within PRIDE, the *Habit, Archives and Body* section has promoted the development of research on fashion design and clothing cultures in relation to the body and the environment. The various actions have taken into account the complex dimension of the Italian fashion system between heritage and innovation. The study of Made in Italy is placed in relation to the rich productive fabric of the Veneto region and is accompanied by research into strategies for identifying and reactivating Italian fashion archives as places of memory and design research.

Within this laboratory, the placement of the disciplinary field that deals with fashion is neither obvious nor automatic. The workshop has promoted research activities that have skilfully combined theory and practice, continuously questioning fashion design practices, taking into account the complex nature of the Italian fashion system, a system that moves between heritage and innovation, giving rise to what we sometimes refer to, perhaps a little too automatically, as Made in Italy. In this sense, reflection on the Italian fashion project has allowed us to think, for example, about the definition and redefinition of the creative figure,¹ who confronts the reality of industrial production by bringing together conceptual reflection and practices that characterize the product.

The specific focus on Made in Italy, further enhanced by the proximity to the realities that animate the rich productive fabric of the Veneto region, has favored paths that have brought concrete experimentation in the areas of textiles, knitwear, and leather goods for the creation of clothing and accessories closer to the dimension of so-called immaterial design: research has also focused on the sectors of image production and fashion publishing. This line of research

1 See, for example, the seminar *Sintonie italiane*. Milano anni 80: laboratorio di idee e linguaggi (Italian Harmonies. Milan in the 1980s: a laboratory of ideas and languages) curated by Elena Fava and organized as part of the PRIDE Laboratory on May 28, 2021 [<https://www.iuav.it/DIPARTIMEN/IRIDE/EVENTI/2021/Alla-ricer/Sintonie-i/index.htm>].

was complemented by an investigation aimed at identifying strategies for reconstructing and connecting Italian fashion archives (both corporate and private) in order to enhance their value not only as places of memory but above all as places of research and design (fundamental in this sense for clarifying or creatively rethinking the identities of brands and companies).

The other important group that has enabled the development of a sophisticated reflection on Made in Italy at IUAV is the FLAIR (Fashion Lab Archive Industry Research) cluster.² The cluster brings together research carried out over time and enhances it. I am thinking in particular of projects such as the one that led us to produce the book and exhibition *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion 1971-2001* (Frisa et al., 2018): this is an important and complex outcome that has made explicit the necessary reflection on the concept of Made in Italy, its history and current relevance, and the qualities of Italian fashion. Thanks to this project, Made in Italy has become clear to us as a conceptual horizon that we have defined in comparison with the global production and communication system; at the same time, Made in Italy refers to the concept of the supply chain and the production capabilities of the districts scattered throughout our country. The exhibition and the book took the form of a sort of permanent laboratory for reflection and experimentation on the production practices that define Italian fashion products and their value. When we decided to embark on the research that led to the project, the working group wanted to identify certain elements that could account for those thirty years that saw the consolidation and international celebration of the relationship between fashion and Made in Italy. Maria Luisa Frisa and Stefano Tonchi write in the essay that opens the volume:

Italiana amounts to a sort of dystopian utopia. That of being able to give form and value—through facts, dreams, visions, creators, prima donnas, second leads, chance passersby—to a story of Italian fashion over those thirty seminal years that saw it define itself in a symbiotic relationship with the social, political and cultural history of our country and take on a leading role

2 See <https://sites.google.com/iuav.it/iuavclusterflair/flair>.

at an international level. In an exploration that proceeds by concepts and visions, the narration of *Italiana* aims to draw simultaneous attention to all the players who, in different ways, make up the vivid and many-voiced story of Italian fashion. It is a journey that the curators have made almost solo, so as not to let themselves be distracted, but in close contact with a team of scholars, journalists, writers and researchers who have contributed the many texts that in various formats compose the book—a work group characterized by sometimes contrasting viewpoints, but guided by the desire and determination to arrive at results all could agree on. The journey has not been an outing, an expedition or something of that kind: it has been an experience of interpretation and decipherment in which every new discovery interacted with the memories we carried with us or shook up our preconceived ideas. (Frisa & Tonchi, 2018, p. 7)

The group of researchers who worked on the project coincides with the people participating in the Flair cluster, and it is thanks to *Italiana* that the IR.IDE was able to focus on Made in Italy as a research topic, which the infrastructure intended to interpret as a conceptual horizon that moved from fashion towards and connected with other design disciplines that have animated IR.IDE's activities. This is because the operation carried out with *Italiana* aimed precisely to restore substance to the history of the international success of Made in Italy, going beyond the concreteness of objects and articulating design and production actions between materiality and immateriality. The meaning of the iconographic atlas that animated the volume and represented part of the research carried out to organize fashion was precisely to give substance to the visual culture of Made in Italy, through the explicit and extensive use of magazines, in the awareness of the role that periodicals played, throughout the 20th century and in its specific phases, in developing a visual narrative of fashion, as devices that simultaneously photograph and determine styles, through a mix of fashion, current events, cinema, television, art, and drawing on multiple registers (Monti, 2018). This atlas identified magazines as laboratories that consolidated the iconography of Italian fashion and established and disseminated a shared visual language that defined the characteristic elements

and atmospheres of Made in Italy.

In 2020, reflection on Made in Italy took on a new meaning, namely the possibility of connecting this conceptual horizon with an analysis of the state of Italian fashion studies. The exhibition *Memos: About Fashion in this Millennium*, curated by Maria Luisa Frisa and designed by Judith Clark at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, revived the seminal exhibition curated in 1980 by Grazietta Butazzi at the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana* (Butazzi, 1980), which I studied in depth thanks to materials recovered from the archives of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum and disseminated for the first time during my research (Monti, 2020). Recovering Butazzi's exhibition allows us today to raise central questions about the cultural status of fashion in relation to the exhibition machine and the museum, at the beginning of a decade, the 1980s, which was fundamental not only in the development of the fashion exhibition device, but above all in the definition of fashion itself as a discipline, through the attention paid to themes and issues such as the reconstruction of its history, the conservation of objects, and the problem of museum exhibition practices in relation to forms of commercial display. Recovering this exhibition means moving between the story of an important exhibition event and the analysis of its role within fashion studies, in years when, especially in Italy, awareness developed of the need to imagine devices and institutions capable of preserving and studying fashion. Looking at this exhibition today means reflecting first and foremost on the Italian situation, because even today one of the central issues in Italy is the absence of a precise cultural policy aimed at establishing a national fashion museum capable of competing on the international stage. Recovering fashion and Butazzi's work, also in relation to the intentions of the exhibition curated by Frisa, means addressing the state of Italian fashion studies and the cultural status of fashion as a discipline that is being developed in comparison with the museum and the practice of fashion curating. *Memos*, in the intentions of curator Frisa as expressed in Clark's exhibition design, appears today as a project that shares with Butazzi and his words an Italian interpretation of fashion studies, evoking these theoretical movements through a sophisticated curatorial project: the three-dimensional display seeks to take stock of contemporary fashion and its forms, but above all consciously reaffirms

the need to set up and articulate Italian fashion studies through devices and institutions capable of preserving, exhibiting, and studying fashion.

We must not forget the importance of exhibitions in reconstructing the history of Italian fashion. In its material and immaterial forms, ranging from objects to practices and processes, which are so difficult to define and “archive,” but which are nevertheless fundamental in defining the Italian qualities of our fashion design and our fashion system.

Last month I flew to Rome to attend the opening of a fashion exhibition at the Villa Medici. The single most ravishing dress on display was a ruby satin ball gown designed in 1950 by the great French couturier, Jacques Fath. Like everything in the exhibition, it came from the personal collection of Enrico Quinto and his partner Paolo Tinarelli. I met Enrico last year, while working on my FIT exhibition Fashion, Italian Style, to which he loaned a blue cocktail dress by Simonetta and a rare Walter Albini dress. Both of “my” dresses were once again on view in Rome, along with about 100 others, spanning the past century - from Paul Poiret to Yohji Yamamoto. Although the chronological organization was old-fashioned, the exhibition was innovative inasmuch as it unselfconsciously integrated Italian fashion into the history of twentieth-century dress. (Steele, 2004, p. 1)

In 2004, Valerie Steele began her *Letter from the Editor* in this way, opening the issue of the journal *Fashion Theory* (volume 8, issue 1). For us Italian fashion scholars, it was an important recognition of Italian fashion and its cultures, coming from the director of the FIT Museum and the most important journal for academic fashion studies. What was significant was the fact that an exhibition that restored Italian fashion to its rightful place on the international scene did not originate from a museum collection but from an extraordinary private collection, that of Enrico Quinto and Paolo Tinarelli, documented in detail in the book published on the occasion of the exhibition (Quinto

& Tinarelli, 2003).³ Without going into detail, Steele’s short text already pointed out in 2004 the importance of private collections in triggering the storytelling of Italian fashion, in a situation, the Italian one, that was quite anomalous, due to the evident absence of a museum institution dedicated to fashion capable of competing with the great international museum experiences (just think that in 2002, the MoMu in Antwerp had inaugurated its successful exhibition season).

Two projects in particular, which I had the opportunity to work on, confirmed the importance of private archives in reconstructing the history of Italian fashion. These two occasions highlight one of the lines of research that characterizes the aforementioned FLAIR research cluster, namely the focus on the forms that define Made in Italy. This research led us to produce the book and exhibition *Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968* in 2014 (Frisa et al., 2014), and the aforementioned book and exhibition *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion, 1971-2001* in 2018. These are two important and complex outcomes that have brought to light a reflection on the concept of Made in Italy and the qualities of Italian fashion. Thanks to these two projects, Made in Italy has become a conceptual horizon that we have defined in relation to the global production and communication system. At the same time, Made in Italy refers to the concept of the supply chain and the production capabilities of the districts scattered throughout our country. The exhibitions and books have taken the form of a sort of permanent laboratory for reflection and experimentation on the production practices that define Italian fashion products and their value. In both cases, it would not have been possible to achieve a satisfactory outcome without meticulous work mapping the valuable private archives scattered throughout the country. This was a complex task, which had to rely primarily on word of mouth and on identifying individuals within companies, often no longer in business, who, despite not having the necessary expertise, had been involved in building or at least sketching out an idea of an archive.

In the case of *Bellissima*, for example, in its edition at Villa Reale in Monza (photographically

³ See also the most recent project *Italian glamour: L'essenza della moda italiana dal dopoguerra al XXI secolo: la Collezione Enrico Quinto e Paolo Tinarelli* (2014).

documented in Frisa et al., 2016), a central role in the exhibition design was played by the corridor connecting all the rooms displaying the themes of the exhibition: this gallery housed a spectacular selection of materials testifying to the importance and centrality of our textile industry in the creation and promotion of Italian fashion, both yesterday and today. The relationship between Italian haute couture and the textile industry, in its most successful expressions such as daywear, became the key to understanding recent developments in fashion. Among the company archives involved in the project—the result of extensive research and systematization—were Agnona, Botto Giuseppe e Figli, Clerici Tessuto, Faliero Sarti, Filatura Fratelli Galfione, Fratelli Tallia di Delfino, Lanerossi, Lanificio Annibale Bozzalla, Lanificio Faudella, Lanificio di Pray, Lanificio Pria, Lanificio Rivetti, Lanificio Zignone, Luigi Verga, Marzotto Group, Taroni, Piacenza Cashmere, and Tessitura Serica Bedetti Pedraglio.⁴

In the case of *Italiana*, the visit to the Zamasport company was a key moment in explicitly understanding, through highly sophisticated results, the role of design in its relationship with production. The discovery at Zamasport of the Callaghan brand archive—built with almost museum-like awareness and capable of spanning all the styles of designers from Walter Albini to Gianni Versace, Angelo Tarlazzi, and Romeo Gigli—led the curatorial team to briefly consider that we could perhaps organize an exhibition on the Callaghan experience, instead of a choral and ambitious project such as *Italiana* (Danese, 2018).

These two experiences have in some way highlighted the importance of mapping private archives dedicated to Italian fashion, and at the IUAV University of Venice, this awareness has translated into a specific investigation aimed at identifying strategies to reconstruct and connect Italian fashion archives (both corporate and private), in order to enhance their value not only as places of memory, but above all as places of research and design: in this sense, fundamental for clarifying or rethinking in an inventive way the identities of brands and companies, as well as the identity and history of Italian fashion. The idea of

mapping goes beyond a purely historiographical project to tackle issues that investigate the dimension of production and, more generally, the Italian industrial system. In this sense, the research questions the archive not only as a place where the history of a company is preserved, but also as an active engine that contributes to building (and inventing) heritage and nurturing the value of production between material and immaterial aspects.

Reflecting on the history and current situation of Italian fashion studies, in relation to the need for a museum and cultural policies capable of competing with the actions of the most important international institutions dedicated to fashion and its forms, is a way of addressing the concept of Made in Italy, overcoming the banal automatism of associating this conceptual horizon with the labels that have carried Italian fashion around the world. In 1981, Grazietta Butazzi wrote:

At a time when fashion “consumption” is becoming frenetic, even in terms of theory and interpretation, a new book on fashion may seem redundant. It is precisely in terms of interpretation—or, more modestly, as a suggestion of some keys to interpretation—that, hopefully, it may not be. [...] The texts are not intended to present a history of fashion, but rather to propose some – and only some – ways of approaching this history: social symbols, the status of groups such as women or young people, the behavior of power in the face of fashion, the impact of political events and profound changes in customs, and cultural movements. (Butazzi, 1981, p. 5)⁵

This is an excerpt from the introduction to the book *Moda: Arte / storia / società (Fashion: Art / History / Society)*, which still stands today as a pioneering example of a manual that aims to recount fashion through time—without worrying about following a chronology—and recognizing its central role in the mechanisms of design and the functioning of society and culture. It is an extraordinary book, also in the way it uses and reassembles images, short-circuiting them, explicitly and inventively seeking new relationships between the formal qualities of the iconographic

⁴ This text refers to the installation at Villa Reale in Monza, the second stage of the exhibition *Bellissima*, documented photographically in Frisa et al., 2016.

⁵ Translated by the author.

materials used and the themes addressed in the critical texts. Butazzi's pioneering work (to which can be added his collaboration with Alessandra Mottola Molino on the series of volumes *Idee di moda* [*Fashion Ideas*] published by De Agostini between 1991 and 1992) allows us to reflect on the history and future of Italian fashion studies: it is a historical-critical perspective that today is capable of identifying new avenues for seeking an open and operational definition of Made in Italy.

REFERENCES

- Butazzi G. (Ed.). (1980). *1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana*. Exhibition catalog (Milan, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, December 5, 1980-March 25, 1981). Centro Di.
- Butazzi, G. (1981). Presentazione. In G. Butazzi, *Moda: Arte / storia / società* (p. 5). Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri.
- Danese E. (2018). Zamasport. In Frisa M. L., Monti G., & Tonchi S. (Eds.), *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion 1971-2001* (p. 194). Marsilio, 2018.
- Frisa M. L., Mattiolo A., & Tonchi S. (Eds.). (2014). *Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968*. Exhibition catalog (Rome, MAXXI, December 2, 2014-May 3, 2015). Milan/Rome: Electa/MAXXI.
- Frisa M. L., Monti G., & Tonchi S. (Eds.). (2016). *Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968: An Illustrated Catalog*. Bruno.
- Frisa M. L., Monti G., & Tonchi S. (Eds.). (2018). *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion 1971-2001*. Exhibition catalog (Milan, Palazzo Reale, February 22-May 6, 2018). Marsilio.
- Frisa M. L. & Tonchi S. (2018). *Useful Beauty*. In Frisa M. L., Monti G., & Tonchi S. (Eds.), *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion 1971-2001* (pp. 3-19). Marsilio.
- Monti G. (2018). Images on the page. In Frisa M. L., Monti G., & Tonchi S. (Eds.), *Italiana: Italy through the Lens of Fashion 1971-2001* (pp. 22-25). Marsilio.
- Monti G. (2020). An Exhibition to Define a Museum: "1922-1943: Vent'anni di moda italiana" at Poldi Pezzoli. In Frisa M. L. (Ed.), *Memos: On Fashion in This Millennium* (pp. 36-57). Exhibition catalog (Milan, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, February 21- May 4, 2020). Marsilio.
- Quinto E. & Tinarelli P. (Eds.). (2003). *Un secolo di moda: Creazioni e miti del XX secolo*. Exhibition catalog (Rome, Villa Medici, November 26, 2003-February 1, 2004). Federico Motta.
- Steele V. (2004). Letter from the Editor. *Fashion Theory*, 8(1), 1-2.