

# CREATIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ITALIAN FASHION SYSTEM:

## INSIGHTS FROM THE LEATHER GOODS AND TANNING SUPPLY CHAIN

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## Abstract

The international competitiveness of the Italian fashion system today no longer depends on cost containment, but on its ability to integrate production specialization, sustainable innovation, and shared cultural values. The analysis of the leather goods supply chain, a strategic sector for Made in Italy and fundamental to the economies of the regions involved in the RHITA project. The persistence of tannery districts in Veneto, Tuscany, and Campania remains distinctive: cooperation among firms, concentrated expertise, and artisanal knowledge support advanced and traceable industrial processes. Within these local systems, new global pressures are increasingly intertwined. The entry of international groups, growing demands for transparency on environmental impacts, and the need to optimize resources are leading companies towards more circular models. In this context, stylistic choices influence the measurability of impacts and the durability of products. This transformation concerns not only production but also the forms that creativity takes. Innovation no longer resides exclusively in the designer's act but emerges from the daily interaction among diverse roles within the supply chain. Rethinking the Italian fashion system therefore means recognizing the relational value of this network of competencies. It is precisely from this industrial scenario that the educational context can draw decisive insights. The university becomes a place where tensions can be recomposed, sectoral contradictions interpreted, and an ethical awareness of design cultivated. Bringing students and companies closer together thus creates the conditions to imagine a future in which creativity and sustainability converge in the process of reshaping the Italian fashion system.

**Keywords:** *Fashion, Leather-goods, Tannery, University, Made in Italy*

## LEATHER GOODS AS AN INTERPRETIVE AGENT OF MADE IN ITALY

Made in Italy is a synthetic and relational concept, emerging from the interaction between the intangible dimensions of design and the material qualities of products and their modes of production. It operates as a *meta-brand* (Barile, 2007), whose meaning is neither fixed nor univocal. Originally functioning as a label of origin, it has progressively accumulated multiple meanings in order to adapt to the changing needs of the global fashion system—a system structurally driven by

constant transformation<sup>1</sup>. Over time, the imagery associated with Italian fashion has shifted from that of the family to that of the clan and, more recently, to that of the community. Yet it has consistently retained a collective and polyphonic character, as highlighted by numerous Italian scholars, including those involved in the research and publications developed within the Fashion Programme of the Università Iuav di Venezia (Brunello & Fava, 2024;

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<sup>1</sup> As Leopoldina Fortunati notes: “fashion is an emblem of postmodernity, also because, together with information, it manages contemporaneity by giving rhythm to social life and by marking—even at a superficial level—the passing of time through the continuous introduction of change. In this sense, fashion and information give individuals the illusion of keeping pace with the movement of the world” (Fortunati & Danese, 2005, p. 20).

Fava & Brunello, 2020; Frisa, Monti, & Tonchi, 2018; Frisa, Tonchi, & Mattiolo, 2014).

Within this framework, the leather goods sector is investigated here as an interpretive agent of the fashion system. Its supply chain encompasses a wide range of productive activities, from the transformation of raw materials, such as leather and metals, to the manufacturing of bags and accessories. This makes leather goods a particularly effective lens through which to examine the concrete existence of Made in Italy, understood both as a production system, still active in many industrial districts across the Italian peninsula, and as a cultural and commercial construct that continues to be communicated by brands and recognized by consumers. The communicative power of accessories labeled *Made in Italy* plays a crucial role in the turnover of luxury brands. In some cases, handbags account for up to 91% of total revenues (Chitrakorn, 2018), and they represent the best-selling category on online vintage fashion platforms (Shulman, 2017). These dynamics directly affect the Italian productive landscape. The leather goods manufacturing industry in Italy is a widespread and highly articulated sector organized in districts, employing approximately 760,000 people across more than 30,000 firms<sup>2</sup>.

In recent years, the notion of Made in Italy has also become a central object of debate within design studies, fashion theory, and economic geography. Scholars have increasingly pointed out that national labels of origin cannot be understood simply as markers of place but must be analysed as complex socio-technical assemblages composed of people, skills, infrastructures, institutions, and narratives. From this perspective, Made in Italy functions less as a static guarantee of quality and more as a dynamic device that organizes expectations, coordinates production, and shapes consumer imaginaries. The leather goods sector, with its dense interweaving of material processes, symbolic value, and territorial embeddedness, offers a particularly fertile terrain for investigating how such a device operates in practice. By focusing on this segment of the fashion system, this paper seeks to move beyond abstract definitions of national branding and instead examine how Made in Italy is continuously enacted, negotiated, and transformed

through everyday production activities.

Although often treated as a secondary field within fashion studies, leather goods are anything but marginal in the construction of the idea of the Italian product. The analysis of this supply chain therefore provides a valuable opportunity to observe both structural transformations and enduring features of the fashion system and of the values it conveys.

The continued presence of a segmented, highly specialized, and flexible supply chain is a key factor in the attractiveness of Italian production. These characteristics closely align with brands' seasonal cycles of product renewal, in which the integration of artisanal skills and industrialized processes is frequently required. New stylistic demands constantly challenge established modes of production, prompting both the development and optimization of industrial machinery and the reinterpretation of artisanal techniques. Yet, in brand communication, technological innovation and the creative intelligence embedded in production processes are often downplayed, while emphasis is placed on a generalized notion of craftsmanship that does not necessarily reflect the high levels of technology and invention actually involved. The capacity to combine industrialization and craftsmanship is a defining feature of Italian manufacturing. Today, Italy's competitive advantage no longer lies in low-cost labor but in a segmented, differentiated, and highly specialized organization of production. An analysis of the territorial distribution of ATECO codes 15.1—“preparation and tanning of leather; manufacture of travel goods, handbags, leather goods and saddlery; dressing and dyeing of fur”—and 15.2—“manufacture of footwear”—reveals a strong geographical concentration of firms and workers in a limited number of Italian regions. In 2018, out of 35,723 active companies in the sector, 25.2% were located in Tuscany, with 9,019 firms, followed by Lombardy (15.6%), Marche (13.3%), and Veneto (13.1%). Slightly lower shares were recorded in Campania (10.2%) and Emilia-Romagna (6.7%). However, the number of firms does not correspond proportionally to the number of employees. In the same year, total employment in the sector amounted to 407,273 workers, with Campania alone accounting for 139,764 employees—over 34% of the national total—followed, in descending order, by Tuscany, Veneto, Lombardy,

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<sup>2</sup> Data processed by Unioncamere Veneto based on Infocamere data (2018). ATECO codes 15.1 and 15.2 refer to tanning activities and to the manufacture of leather goods, including footwear and handbags.

Marche, and Emilia-Romagna (Brunello, 2022). Although the available data do not allow a precise reconstruction of district boundaries, it is clear that certain segments of the supply chain tend to cluster geographically for technical and logistical reasons. This is the case, for instance, with wastewater recovery systems in Italian tanning districts such as Santa Croce sull'Arno in Tuscany, Arzignano in Veneto, and Solofra in Campania. District-based organization enables systemic waste management and facilitates the traceability of production processes. Other segments of the chain, such as handbag manufacturing, are instead characterized by fluctuating production volumes and therefore rely on networks of flexible and highly specialized subcontractors. This gives rise to production systems that can involve firms located at considerable distances from one another.

Labor costs remain a decisive factor in the overall cost structure of any product or process that requires skilled work. The concentration of employees in specific territorial basins demonstrates how the availability of specialized labor continues to anchor firms to circumscribed geographical areas. At the same time, the possibility of maintaining close economic relationships between different segments of the same supply chain reinforces the persistence of the district-based model.

Industrial districts play a crucial role not only in fostering innovation but also in preserving tacit, craft-based knowledge, which underpins Italy's international competitiveness (Bettiol, 2015, pp. 35–36). As economists Alberto Quadrio Curzio and Marco Fortis argue, districts pursue goals that go beyond purely economic objectives:

*“The goals of growth and profit, which remain valid regardless of the organizational structure of the firm itself, are not the ultimate purpose of industrial districts. Within them there is also another objective, more or less explicit but clearly evident in certain district-based historical and social contexts: namely, the intergenerational continuation of the district community as a self-organized system.” (Quadrio Curzio & Fortis, 2002, pp. 21-22).*

The rootedness of each district within a specific “local society” defines a form of capitalism characterized by autonomous specialized firms,

their mutual interconnections, and by “a shared equilibrium of knowledge and responsibility across the socio-economic groups that constitute the district” (Becattini & Bellandi, 2002, pp. 82–83).

The Italian competitive advantage no longer derives from low-cost labor but from a segmented and differentiated organization of the production process. In 1990, the American economist Michael Porter defined the notion of competitive advantage and proposed a particularly clear interpretation of the Italian economic system:

*“The case of Italy is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Italy is not generally known as a nation whose firms have competitive advantage in many industries. Its image is more of chaotic government, poor telephone and other public services, inefficient state-owned enterprises, and pervasive subsidy. Italy is also yet another important nation with few advantages in inherited factors of production. It imports most of its energy and raw materials and is even a net importer of food. Yet Italy developed a remarkable dynamism and a capacity to successfully upgrade competitive advantage in industries. In the early postwar period, Italy was a nation where most industries had competitive advantage based on low-cost labor. By the early 1980s, many Italian industries achieved advantage based on segmentation, differentiation, and process innovation. The Italian case, like that of Japan, illustrates the power of a growing alignment between national circumstances and the shifting demands of modern global competition” (Porter, 1990, p. 421).*

Innovation processes can thus be attributed to the specialization of firms in specific phases of production, a characteristic feature of industrial systems operating within global markets where output is no longer oriented solely toward domestic demand. From this perspective, the integrity of the supply chain becomes a fundamental condition of productive competitiveness. In Italy, the district-based configuration of the fashion system began to take shape in the 1960s. During this period, large-scale industrial actors were already present (Garofoli, 1991, p. 91), yet the role of small firms became increasingly central. These enterprises were highly autonomous and strongly oriented toward

innovation. Their growing importance made it possible for production activities to be relocated and reorganized across different territories.

## **CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE, DIFFUSE CREATIVITY, AND THE ROLE OF THE CONSUMER**

In the economic literature, cooperation and competition are identified as the foundations of what Giacomo Becattini conceptualized in the late 1990s as *contextual knowledge*, formulated in *Distretti industriali e Made in Italy* (Becattini, 1998). Within this framework, the community-based circulation and preservation of knowledge inside a specific industrial district has significant implications not only for production, but also for creativity.

The sociologist Paolo Volonté, in *La creatività diffusa* (2003), argues that creativity, an attribute strongly sought after in fashion production, operates as a distributed system, spread across the entire spectrum of social positions and roles that make up the fashion system. As he writes:

*“The industrialization of clothing in Italy after the Second World War led to a diffusion of the creative component that does not concern only the stylistic segments of the supply chain, but is highly significant across all stages of the industrial production process (pattern making, garment construction, quality control, distribution, and so on). In recent years, this creative dimension has extended as far as the consumer, who becomes an ‘active spectator’ in the fashion game” (Volonté, 2003, p. 12)*

This understanding of creativity as a distributed and collective phenomenon has important implications for how the fashion system is analysed and taught. If creative agency is not confined to designers alone, but extends across modelling, manufacturing, quality control, logistics, and even consumption, then the boundaries between design, production, and use become porous. In this sense, the supply chain is not merely a technical infrastructure, but a cultural and cognitive environment in which meanings, values, and forms are continuously co-produced. The growing visibility of consumers as evaluators of sustainability, ethics, and material quality further amplifies this dynamic. Their judgments feed back into the system, influencing both design

decisions and industrial strategies. As a result, creativity today operates as a form of systemic intelligence that links aesthetic innovation to social and environmental responsibility. The role of the consumer, and, more specifically, consumer perception, has changed substantially in the contemporary fashion system. In the past, the value of a product was primarily anchored in its symbolic dimension, and therefore in ideas of status, belonging, and aspiration. Today, however, value is increasingly associated with the supply chain that produced the object. Demands for transparency, traceability, and environmental and ethical responsibility no longer originate only from regulatory bodies or niche groups of conscious consumers. They are now spreading across the global fashion market and directly influencing brands’ design and production strategies.

Within Italian industrial districts, these new global pressures intersect with productive structures historically based on specialization and proximity. The entry of international groups into key nodes of the supply chain, the adoption of environmental reporting systems, and the growing need to optimize the use of resources are pushing firms toward increasingly circular models. In these models, waste reduction, by-product recovery, and the traceability of material flows become strategic factors of competitiveness. In this context, even seemingly minor design decisions, such as the choice of a type of leather, a lining, an assembly technique, or a finishing process, acquire systemic relevance. These choices affect not only the product’s aesthetic qualities, but also its durability, its potential for repair, recycling, or reuse, and the measurability of its environmental impact across its entire life cycle. Creativity, therefore, no longer operates solely at the level of form, but increasingly as the capacity to negotiate technological, environmental, and productive constraints within the supply chain.

From this perspective, leather goods emerge as a privileged observatory of the transformations currently under way. It is a sector in which the symbolic value of the object, the materiality of the process, and responsibility toward both the consumer and the territory are recomposed into new projectual configurations. Bringing examples of industrial innovation and best practices in production management into a fashion design university context makes it possible to show

how stylistic choices generate tangible effects throughout the entire product development process and shape the reproducibility of products over time. A small but telling example can be found in a brand's decision to standardize zipper pullers across different bag lines and collections. Such a choice allows the optimization of resource use and the identification of the least energy-intensive production process for a small but highly distinctive component that must maintain its functional and aesthetic qualities over time in relation to product durability.

Introducing these discussions into the relatively open and protected environment of education makes it possible to address sustainability in a direct and tangible way, while also confronting the contradictions inherent in industrial production. The university is, in this sense, the place where an ethical awareness of creative practice must be cultivated, grounded in a concrete understanding of the production system. Promoting connections between different actors within the fashion system, from production to education, and acknowledging that fashion design addresses a global community of consumers makes it possible to think in terms of the common good. This approach establishes collective well-being as a central objective, while opening up new interpretations of the role of creativity within the fashion production chain.

## **EDUCATION, DESIGN, AND RESPONSIBILITY: THE RHITA CASE**

The theoretical reflections developed in this contribution find concrete application in a series of pilot projects carried out within the research programme RHITA – *ResHaping Made in Italy*, funded by the National Research Programme (PNR). RHITA is conceived as an interdisciplinary and multi-sited research platform, designed to bring together different academic perspectives on fashion, design, and applied social sciences. The project involves five Italian public universities that are active in these fields: the University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, Politecnico di Milano, the University of Florence, the University of Siena, and the Università Iuav di Venezia. Through this institutional network, RHITA operates as a shared space for experimentation, comparison, and methodological exchange.

The project pursues a twofold objective. On the one hand, it aims to test new models of integration between different forms of education and research,

encouraging dialogue between design-oriented, technical, and theoretical disciplines. On the other hand, it seeks to investigate, document, and valorize circular and sustainable models of Italian manufacturing. In this sense, Italian *saper fare* is understood not as a generic notion of craftsmanship, but as a complex system composed of human skills, technologies, tacit knowledge, and territorially embedded resources located in the regions involved in the project.

Within the RHITA framework, the Università Iuav di Venezia developed a cycle of teaching and design activities in close collaboration with three companies that represent different segments of the leather goods supply chain: Monde, a manufacturer of metal accessories based in the Vicenza area; BCN Concerie, a historic tannery located in the Santa Croce sull'Arno district; and Mabi International, a leather goods manufacturing company based in San Daniele del Friuli. These firms were selected not only for their industrial relevance, but also for their strategic position within the supply chain—accessories, raw material, and manufacturing—and for their inclusion in different industrial configurations, ranging from well-established district-based companies to firms integrated into international corporate groups. This configuration made it possible to analyse the development of handbags as a whole, highlighting roles, interdependencies, and critical issues along the value chain.

Following a series of meetings, company visits, and moments of exchange with the industrial partners, a group of undergraduate students in Fashion Design developed individual bachelor's thesis projects structured as design-based case studies. These projects were grounded in a *learning by doing* approach and in the logic of situated design. In particular, the projects by Sergio Ricchitelli, developed in collaboration with BCN Concerie [Fig. 01], and by Emma Di Bagno and Matilde Siena, developed in collaboration with Monde [Fig. 02] and [Fig. 03], were selected for their ability to make explicit the relationships between stylistic decisions, production constraints, and sustainability objectives.

In the first case, the project originated from the analysis of a batch of hides that had initially been intended for sampling and had not been selected for industrial production. Through a process



Fig. 01

of design reinterpretation and the application of specific surface treatments, this material was reintegrated into a new value cycle. The project thus demonstrated how reuse can be incorporated as a structural design strategy rather than as a residual or secondary solution. Both chromatic definition and object design were guided by the need to ensure compatibility between the material and existing aesthetic, functional, and production requirements. In this way, an industrial constraint was transformed into a creative lever.

In the case of Emma Di Bagno and Matilde Siena, their work focused on the development of a brass closure designed in close collaboration with Monde's technical department. This process required continuous negotiation between the students and company technicians in order to reconcile formal ambitions, technological feasibility, and the durability of the component. Their projects show how even an apparently minor element can in fact constitute a critical node within the supply chain, one that directly affects reparability, replaceability, and the overall lifespan of the product. Monde subsequently provided

the students with data derived from Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) analyses of the component. This made it possible to integrate quantitative evaluation tools into the design process and to make the effects of design choices measurable.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that design in the leather goods sector cannot be understood as an isolated act. Rather, it must be seen as a practice of mediation between aesthetic intentions, production constraints, industrial logics, and environmental objectives. Only through a deep understanding of materials and manufacturing processes is it possible to meaningfully address the formal qualities of the final designed object. From this perspective, teaching activities acquire the value of research. They help to make visible dynamics that are often implicit within the supply chain and provide critical tools for educating designers who are aware of the productive contexts in which they operate.

The relational dimension of design that emerges from these pilot projects resonates with the reflections of Gabriele Monti, former coordinator of the Bachelor's degree in Fashion Design and Multimedia Arts at the Università Iuav di Venezia, who states:

*“The academic activity carried out at Iuav also provides an active and concrete opportunity to reflect on the nature of the relationship between teaching, research, and fashion, within a community-based dimension in which both faculty and students are actively involved in a process that can be described in every respect as a ‘relational process.’ In the university context, the teaching and learning of fashion design can become a central space for reflecting on the relationship between practice and theory in fashion, and on the status of fashion itself in relation to academic research” (Monti, 2020, p. 99).*

This perspective connects with Paola Colaiacomo's interpretation, according to which innovation in Made in Italy emerges when a system is ramified, permeable, and capable of continuously redefining its processes and goals through the work of a community (Colaiacomo, 2007). In the district-based contexts and in the university–industry collaborations activated by RHITA, this condition takes the form of the possibility to experiment,

hybridize, and challenge established solutions during phases of prototyping and material testing. It is in these moments that, as Richard Sennett observes, technical intelligence and imagination intertwine: the use of imperfect tools and materials stimulates the ability to repair, adapt, and improvise, turning design into an open-ended process in which form, function, and meaning are constructed simultaneously (Sennet, 2021). Within this tension between knowledge and *know-how*, between tradition and experimentation, a fertile space emerges for a renewed interpretation of Made in Italy, capable of combining productive heritage, innovation, and social responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical analyses and case studies discussed in this contribution show that the strength of contemporary Made in Italy no longer lies in cost reduction or in the purely symbolic power of branding. Rather, it resides in the capacity of firms to respond in a flexible, competent, and responsible

manner to the demands of an increasingly complex and demanding global market. In the leather goods sector in particular, competitiveness is grounded in the ability to adapt quickly to change, in the quality of material transformation, in the optimization of production times, and in the adoption of manufacturing practices oriented toward environmental and social sustainability. These practices range from the reduction of waste to its revalorization as both a design and an economic resource.

In a country that is structurally poor in raw materials, such as Italy, value is not generated through extraction, but through transformation. It is through processing, through the combination of different forms of knowledge, and through the continuous reinterpretation of materials and technologies that the fashion supply chain builds its competitive advantage. Leather goods, with their integration of chemical, mechanical, and artisanal processes, constitute in this sense an advanced paradigm of how Made in Italy produces value



Fig. 02



Fig. 03

through the intelligence of processes rather than through the mere availability of resources.

In this scenario, globalization has undoubtedly expanded opportunities, but it has also intensified inequalities and competition among territories, firms, and individuals. For this reason, the role of educational institutions and applied research initiatives, such as the RHITA project, becomes central in promoting an ethical form of competition based not on the extraction of value, but on its circulation and sharing. When university education is intertwined with the productive supply chain, it can generate spaces of cooperation in which design becomes a tool for connecting skills, interests, and responsibilities.

From this perspective, the concept of care takes on a concrete and operational meaning: care for materials, for processes, for people, and for territories. Designing in fashion increasingly means being able to listen—to the needs of production, to the expectations of consumers, and

to environmental constraints—and to translate this listening into formal and technical solutions. It is within the continuous exchange between embodied forms of knowledge and design visions that Made in Italy can continue to renew itself as a living system of relations, capable of combining creativity, sustainability, and shared value.

## CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Sergio Ricitelli, BA final project developed in collaboration with BCN Concerie/ph: Ilaria Toma/

[Fig. 02] Matilde Siena, BA final project developed in collaboration with BCN Concerie and MONDE Metal-on-demand/ph: Alessia Perina Aquilera/

[Fig. 03] Emma di Bagno, BA final project developed in collaboration with MONDE Metal-on-demand/ph: Chiara Pontiglione/

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