

# G.B. Giorgini: Fashion, Florence and Diplomacy, 1950–55

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## Abstract

Three key factors contributed Florence's mid-century reign as Italy's premier fashion city. Chief among them was the active championing of Florence by fashion impresario, Giovanni Battista Giorgini (1898–1971) whose bi-annual fashion shows associated Florence with high style and confirmed Italy's reputation as a source for modish, high-quality clothing. Also crucial was the United States Government's support of the Italian fashion industry; in diplomatic circles, encouraging a flourishing fashion sector was part of an American political strategy to deter communism in Italy. Members of the United States Foreign Service advocated on behalf of the Florence fashion events as part of a wider effort to reestablish Italy as an American economic and political ally. A third factor was the seductive beauty and historic charm of Florence, which Giorgini used strategically to entice guests to his shows and further his aims. These three elements combined to make Florence Italy's one-time fashion capital, from Giorgini's first show in 1951 until Milan took center stage in the 1970s.

**Keywords:** Anti-Communism; Clothing; Diplomacy; Fashion; Florence.

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In Europe at the close of World War II, as materials and employees became more available and manufacturing resumed, the halting return to normalcy included the production and export of fashionable clothing. Paris, the pre-war epicenter of style, reclaimed its role as the capital of French fashion (Palmer 2001, Troy 2003, Wilcox 2008). Concurrently, London-based fashion houses continued to serve both their English clients as well as some international department stores (de la Hay and Ehrman 2015). In North America, New York was newly confident as a vibrant fashion center, thanks to the war-time manufacturing boom and a flowering of creative talent (Arnold 2009). At the war's end, a changing fashion system saw city planners and governments on both sides of the Atlantic begin to actively pursue fashion capital status and promote the benefits of its associated cultural economy (Wubs, Lavanga, Janssens, 2020).

The story of Italian fashion's emergence onto the international stage begins in 1950. Previously, Italy sat apart from the international fashion network. Despite the country's centuries-old textile industry and the skills of its talented dressmakers, Italian fashion houses relied primarily upon a regional clientele. The wardrobes of most Italians were made by hand, often by someone in their own family; a client from a wealthier household would patronize a local dressmaker (*sartoria*). Italy was little known outside its own borders for the fashion and accessories it produced, in large part because its fashion houses and couture ateliers were scattered around the country in cities hundreds of kilometers apart.

Rome claimed some notable couture houses; Milan benefited from proximity to Italy's northern manufacturing hub; Florence was a center of fashion-related handicrafts such as straw work and leather goods; and Turin had served as the official fashion capital for the war-time fascist regime. The multiplicity of and distance between Italy's regional fashion hubs made it difficult for would-be industry visitors from abroad to view and understand Italy's seasonal fashion offerings. The absence of a single Italian center of fashion and corresponding lack of a coordinated fashion calendar presented an opportunity for one city to take the lead and claim fashion capital status. In the post-war period, that city was Florence.

Today, artistic heritage is the prime Florentine currency. The birthplace of Dante, the seat of the Italian Renaissance, Florence attracts millions of tourists who admire Michelangelo's *David*, gaze upon the Ponte Vecchio and queue for hours in order to enter the Uffizi Gallery. Often forgotten is Florence's mid-century fashion function. From 1951, Florence served as the host city for Italy's first internationally attended fashion presentations of designer collections from across the country. Florence welcomed to Italy for the first time, journalists, retail buyers and clients from around the world for centralized, twice yearly fashion presentations.

This article will chronicle three key factors which facilitated Florence's temporary, mid-century reign as Italy's premier fashion city. Chief among them was the successful boosterism of Florentine entrepreneur turned fashion impresario, Giovanni Battista Giorgini (1898–1971). Giorgini's bi-annual Florence fashion shows equated that city with high fashion and, more broadly, established Italy's international reputation as a source for quality, fashionable clothing and accessories. (Merlo 2002 and 2008). Another contributing factor to Florence's fashion capital status was the support of the United States Government, which viewed a flourishing Italian fashion industry as part of its strategy to prevent Communism from taking hold in the country. American diplomats and foreign service operatives actively championed the Florence fashion shows as one aspect of a broader policy of reestablishing Italy as an American trading partner and ideological ally. A third supporting element was the city's seductive beauty and historic resonance. With its renaissance palazzi and views across the river Arno, Florence served as the picture-perfect backdrop for fashion. Constant reminders of its grand historic past beguiled jaded journalists and hard-bitten retail buyers alike.

The research for this article draws heavily upon the archive of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, held at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze. Giorgini's curatorial instincts and, after his death, the archival activities of his family, ensured that his extensive papers survive and are accessible. These papers include unpublished letters from journalists, retail buyers, the American diplomatic corps and Italian governmental agencies. Also referenced are American newspapers from the time, as well as Italian, British and American fashion periodicals. I would like to thank Neri Fadigati for his support of my research; I am also grateful to the helpful staff of the Archivio di Stato.

## The Boosterism of Giovanni Battista Giorgini

During World War II, Italy, as elsewhere, valued uniformity and self-sufficiency in production over creativity. From its headquarters in Turin, the Ente Nazionale della Moda, Italy's national governing body of fashion, aimed to monitor and control the country's textile and ready-made fashion production. The fascist regime viewed the regulation of fashion as one part of a wider effort to create a sense of nationhood and it promoted complete independence from the diktats of Paris (Gnoli 2000; Paulicelli 2004; Lupano and Vaccari 2009). The efforts of the Florentine entrepreneur Giovanni Battista Giorgini helped to transform Florence from regional player to fashion capital. Giorgini established his career in the 1920s and early 1930s as a buying agent connecting North American department stores to sources of Italian goods.

The war interrupted Giorgini's trade but at the war's end, with the return of North American buyers to Italy, Giorgini resumed his pre-war role as a commissaire for department stores and refreshed his US contacts (Pagliai 2011). He capitalized on his strong networks of specialist Italian artisans working with materials such as straw, leather, glass, ceramics and textiles. In 1948, Giorgini organized a small exhibition of a selection of these products at the Chicago showroom of interiors firm Watson and Boaler. This event facilitated Giorgini's involvement in a much larger project. *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today*, was an important exhibition of Italian handicrafts which toured to twelve major American museums from 1951 to 1953. One of the primary organizers of *Italy at Work*, Meyric Rogers, was the Art Institute of Chicago's Curator of Decorative Arts and would have been aware of Giorgini's Watson and Boaler project.<sup>1</sup> All the more reason for the *Italy at Work* selection jury to visit Giorgini on their trip to Italy. In the summer of 1950 Giorgini welcomed them to Florence and introduced them to the work of artisans he represented.

*Italy at Work* contained 2500 items of furniture, ceramics, glass, metalwork, straw goods, textiles, costume jewellery and fashion accessories and included objects made by some of the artisans represented by Giorgini. The exhibition opened at the Brooklyn Museum in November 1950 and then travelled to eleven other museums across the United States including the Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago and the Portland Art Museum in Oregon. The genesis of *Italy at Work* had a distinctly political dimension. The exhibition showcased the aims of the European Recovery Program (E.R.P.), or Marshall Plan, to modernize industry and stimulate economic growth in Europe. The *Italy at Work* selection jury's trip to Italy was directly supported by this program.<sup>2</sup> At the exhibition's launch at The Brooklyn Museum, the Italian Ambassador to the United States called the exhibition, "one of the results of friendship and cooperation that has been reestablished and developed to the present stage between our two countries in the last five years."<sup>3</sup>

Three months prior, Meyric Rogers and Giorgini had corresponded regarding the idea of orchestrating live presentations of Italian fashion within the exhibition. Surviving letters chronicle their attempts to plot out the logistics of staging these fashion shows in all the museums hosting the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> Visitors to *Italy at Work* never saw the fashion shows that Giorgini proposed. A lack of sponsorship funding

1. GBGA ALB 3/1. The introduction within a complimentary notebook given to guests by Giorgini at the July 1951 fashion shows included a history of Giorgini's family and his career. It also claims credit for the genesis of the *Italy at Work* exhibition with this statement, "Immediately after the war, with two consecutive exhibitions, held in the premises of Messrs. Watson and Boaler of Chicago, of modern arts and crafts, furniture, textiles, ceramics, glassware and sculptures, Signor Giorgini drew attention of the American market upon modern Italian productions, so much so as to give rise to the initiative of Mr. Rogers of the Museum of Modern Art in Chicago for the exhibition *Italy at Work*".

2. The Marshall Plan's on the ground organization, the European Cooperation Administration (E.C.A.) funded the *Italy At Work* scoping trips and provided administrative support. The exhibition's printed program pays tribute the officers of the E.C.A. Mission to Italy and stated, "No recent visitor to Italy can overlook the immediate effectiveness of the aid given by the Marshall Plan" (Rogers 1950, 14).

3. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Records of the Department of Public Information. Press releases, 1947–1952. 10–12/1950, 129.

4. On September 15, 1950 Giorgini wrote to Meyric Rogers, "Following upon my letter of August 29<sup>th</sup>, I am glad to be able to report to you that I have spoken with all the best dressmakers in Italy and that the response about the idea of the Fashion Show in America has been enthusiastic from all of them". GBGA, ALB 2/7.

was to blame. However, in the winter of 1950, Giorgini made alternative plans for a different kind of fashion event, one that would have a lasting impact. Giorgini contacted Italian fashion designers from around the country and invited them to come to Florence to show their collections. He simultaneously extended invitations to his North American department stores connections to join him in Florence to view the latest in Italian style. Relying on his own personal contacts and considerable charm, Giorgini successfully enticed international buyers and press to Italy to attend the first of what would become bi-annual showings of Italian designs in one city.

Giorgini's first fashion show took place in February 1951 at his family home in Villa Torrigiani on Florence's via dei Serragli. Giorgini's strong network of department store buyers ensured a small but formidable guest list of influential fashion industry protagonists. New York buyers in attendance were Julia Trissel and Ethel Frankau from Bergdorf Goodman as well as B. Altman's buyer Gertrude Ziminski. California's I. Magnin sent the head of their in-house couture salon Stella Hanonia, who often travelled to Europe for the company. Henry Morgan & Co of Montreal sent their buyer John Nixon. Reporter Mathilda Taylor from the fashion industry trade journal *Women's Wear Daily*, was also present. Altogether, several dozen people gathered in Giorgini's home to see the new season's collections (Stanfill 2018).

The gathered buyers and press saw designs by Carosa, Germana Marucelli, Noberasco, Emilio Pucci, Vanna, Jole Veneziani and Simonetta Visconti, among others. Some buyers placed orders, including New York-based Ann Roberts, who was clearly delighted with the reception her Italian imports received at a catwalk show she organized several weeks later in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Roberts wrote to Giorgini, "The Italian fashions were the outstanding event of the show. The wonderful reception which they got and the tremendous publicity was worth all the hard work and trouble we had in Italy getting them here."<sup>5</sup>

Following Giorgini's first event, the hum of excitement it generated is typified by a review in the *New York Herald*, which predicted, "Visiting fashion experts will be adding another stop, besides Paris, to their bi-annual treks to Europe. That stop is Florence Italy."<sup>6</sup> Carmel Snow, editor in chief of *Harper's Bazaar* from 1933 to 1957, wrote to Giorgini's wife in 1951 to express her regrets at not having attended, stating, "Dear Nella, I am so sorry not to be in Florence with you tonight. But I will be with you surely next Season."<sup>7</sup> Some of the initial enthusiasm about Italian fashion was linked to the perception that it represented a less expensive alternative to Paris. Retailers loved a stylish bargain, like Hector Escabosa, I. Magnin president, who told Giorgini, "Had we known what the Paris collections were going to show and what the Paris prices were going to be, we would have bought a lot more in Florence."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to journalists and buyers, Giorgini hoped to welcome members of the American diplomatic corps to his first fashion show. Through their support he stood to gain greater access to the American market. Giorgini extended a strategic invitation to James Clement Dunn, American Ambassador to Italy from 1947 to 1952, and his wife Mary. While awaiting their reply, Giorgini capitalized on the American Ambassador's potential attendance to encourage other guests to attend. In one communication he asserted, "We are going to have some Italian authorities, probably the American Ambassador Mr. Dunn and a presentation of the most exclusive and elegant of Italian society."<sup>9</sup> While a prior engagement prevented Ambassador Dunn from attending, Charles Reed, the American Consul General in Florence from 1950 to 1954, was present. He wrote to Giorgini afterwards:

I received your letter of May 31<sup>st</sup> enclosing three snapshots taken during the Fashion Show. I hasten to thank you for these souvenirs of a very enjoyable evening. Mrs. Reed and I are

5. GBGA, ALB 2/38. March 23, 1950. Roberts to Giorgini.

6. Eugenia Shepperd, *New York Herald Tribune*, March 28, 1951.

7. GBGA, ALB 2/94.

8. GBGA, ALB 3/100.1.

9. GBGA, ALB 2/13. January 15, 1951. Giorgini to Nixon.

looking forward to the next Fashion Show which will no doubt be as great, if not a greater success.<sup>10</sup>

Charles Reed became a crucial ally in promoting the Florence shows. His position obliged him to create links between Italian producers of all kinds of goods and American consumers. As news circulated of the Florence fashion shows, the attendance of American government officials like Reed lent them validation and prestige. Concurrently, firms within the Italian manufacturing sector, including artisanal producers like high fashion houses, were eager to gain access to the vast and affluent American market in which one department store order could launch a designer's career. In 1950 alone, the seven-store I. Magnin chain generated \$31 million in annual net sales and its flagship San Francisco store had months where sales totaled over one million dollars (Stanfill 2019, pp. 159–60).

## Fashion, Diplomacy and Anti-Communism

Giorgini's early fashion shows coincided with a period of American preoccupation with limiting communism's reach in Italy. By reducing the power of the Italian Communist Party, the United States hoped to deter a communist takeover. Keeping Italy outside of Moscow's orbit required focussed effort. With Moscow subsidizing every communist newspaper in Italy, then roughly 20% of the country's press, communism was a real political alternative in post-war Italy. The United States Government, through the European Cooperation Administration or E.C.A., aimed to discourage communism by restoring economic stability in Europe through by stimulating industrial production and international trade. American officials hoped that increasing American demand for Italian goods, including fashion, would strengthen an Italian American political and trade alliance.

The United States Government saw future economic growth as crucial to distancing the Italian populace from communism and believed that, in Italy's case, "the social pathologies of communism would disappear in an environment of economic well-being and liberal democracy."<sup>11</sup> The provision of financial investment to support the development of industry was a key component of the United States fight against communism. A cumulative total of nearly \$13 billion was used to rebuild European infrastructure and economies. From 1947 to 1951, Italy received \$1,500,000,000 of total E.C.A. disbursements. The Italian textile industry, while by no means the largest segment of Italian production, was one sector to receive E.C.A. attention and financial investment. (White 2000).

Giorgini's continuing correspondence with Italian-based American diplomats illustrates the dynamics at work. In the spring of 1951 Giorgini invited the Deputy Chief of the E.C.A, James Minotto to the second Florence showing, which took place in July in the ballroom of the Grand Hotel. Minotto, who had helped to facilitate the *Italy at Work* exhibition, would likely have known Giorgini or at least been aware of his involvement in that project. By the time Giorgini extended his invitation to the July 1951 show, however, Minotto had been transferred to a subsequent E.C.A. assignment in Portugal. Minotto wrote to Giorgini, "I appreciate your thoughtfulness in inviting me and assure you that had I been in Italy at the time, I would have accepted with the greatest pleasure."<sup>12</sup>

Giorgini's canny courting of E.C.A. officials like Minotto highlights their role as conduits to American commercial interests, facilitating important business connections and championing Italian products in the United States. Although E.C.A. officials were clearly aware of Giorgini's events, this author has not yet identified evidence that E.C.A. staff attended the Florence shows. However, Consul General Reed remained a steadfast supporter. In July 1951, he hosted a cocktail party for buyers, press and other guests in conjunction with the second Florentine event. Reed wrote to Giorgini, "Herewith are the invitations

10. GBGA, ALB 2/92.

11. James Harper, *America and the Reconstruction of Italy, 1945–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 10.

12. GBGA ALB 3/9. July 25, 1951. Minotto to Giorgini.

to the cocktail party, which Mrs. Reed and I are giving Friday, July 10<sup>th</sup>...I hope that a great number, if not all, will be able to come.”<sup>13</sup>

The second Florence event was a triumph and saw attendance surge to several hundred guests. The United State diplomatic corps took note. Reed wrote to Giorgini with compliments, stating, “I am sending my deep congratulations for the brilliant success of the Italian Fashion Show, a true manifestation of art and stylish atmosphere.”<sup>14</sup> Alice Mulhern, American Commercial Vice Consul, also wrote with high praise:

I thank you for giving me the possibility to see all events of the Italian Fashion Show. I wish to add my applause to the broad consensus that you have knowingly achieved the perfect organization of an initiative worthy of the most beautiful Florentine and Italian traditions.<sup>15</sup>

American diplomatic corps support of the Florentine shows continued throughout the next half decade. American Ambassador Dunn and his wife attended the third Florence fashion show, held in January 1952 again at The Grand Hotel. Upon Mrs. Dunn’s arrival, she was welcomed by fashion designer Micol Fontana, presented with the gift of a handbag, and seated in the place of honour next to Giorgini.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards, Ambassador Dunn wrote to Giorgini with enthusiasm, “We enjoyed it immensely” adding, “Please accept my warmest congratulations for having organized so well and so successfully this important contribution to the growing economic wellbeing of our country through export sales.”<sup>17</sup> Giorgini’s solicitous reply to Dunn stated:

Your kind expressions are my most earnest reward to my work. Please do not thank me but let me tell you again how grateful I am to you and Mrs. Dunn for having accepted my invitation to attend the Fashion Show. It really has been a great joy to have you both in Florence.<sup>18</sup>

American Ambassador Dunn continued to show support, attending the fourth event in July 1952 along with Vice Consul Mulhern, who wrote to Giorgini, “I’m really pleased that the Fourth Italian High Fashion Show has received the success it deserved, your initiative worthily crowned and characterized by exquisite finesse and good taste.”<sup>19</sup>

While Giorgini was courting American diplomats, United States-based Italian foreign service officials were monitoring the progress of the Florence fashion shows. In July 1952 The Commercial Office of the Italian General Consul to the United States circulated a memo to several Italian governmental offices including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Institute of Foreign Commerce, The Italian Fashion Ministry’s offices in both Florence and Rome and the Commercial Office of the Italian Embassy in Washington. The memo included a *Women’s Wear Daily* article about the recent Florence shows and read, “As a follow-up, please find attached an article in *Women’s Wear Daily*, relative to future fashion shows, in which are mentioned registered American buyers and representatives who are travelling to Europe for this occasion.”<sup>20</sup>

A month later, the Italian Consulate in Chicago wrote to Giorgini sending “highest congratulations for the Florentine fashion show which has had great resonance here. I hope that has also led to good, solid business.”<sup>21</sup> That same month, the Commercial Attaché of the Italian Consulate in New York, wrote to

13. GBGA, ALB 3/10, July 17, 1951. Reed to Giorgini.

14. GBGA, ALB 3/37, July 27, 1951. Reed to Giorgini.

15. GBGA, ALB 3/36, July 27, 1951. Mulhern to Giorgini.

16. Alice Perkins. “Italian Evening Gowns Win Buyers Praise,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, January 21, 1952.

17. GBGA, ALB Jan 18 to 22 1952/103. Undated. Dunn to Giorgini.

18. GBGA, ALB 5/187. Undated. Giorgini to Dunn.

19. GBGA, ALB 5/94. July 31, 1952. Mulhern to Giorgini.

20. GBGA, ALB 5/160.

21. GBGA, ALB 5/163. August 25, 1952. Penaglia to Giorgini.



Giorgini with similar sentiments, stating, “It has given me great pleasure to read in the local papers about the success of the Florence presentations, with their particularly atmospheric environment.”<sup>22</sup> Letters of congratulations also continued to arrive from American officials, including the new American Consul General in Florence, Elizabeth C Bouch as well as from the short-termed American Ambassador to Italy, Ellsworth Bunker, who served for one year after Dunn’s departure.<sup>23</sup>

With the election of President Eisenhower in 1952, the United States assumed a more overtly anti-communist stance. This included countenancing the possibility of using military force to prevent a Communist government from taking power in Italy (Del Pero 2004, 428). Eisenhower’s appointment of Clare Booth Luce put the first female Ambassador into the American Embassy in Rome and placed a particularly outspoken anti-communist American official onto the Italian peninsula. The fact that Luce was a woman was of interest to Italy’s fashion designers. She arrived in Rome to find a host of Italian designers vying to dress her. This frenzied fashion competition caused international comment. The *Detroit Times* reported:

Italy’s top designers of milady’s fashions are burning the proverbial midnight oil dreaming up what they plan to call “The Luce Look” in honour of Clare Booth Luce. Due to arrive late today as America’s first lady ambassador to a major power, Mrs. Luce can fairly be said to be almost all things to all people...in Italy.<sup>24</sup>

Ambassador Luce soon became embroiled in a tug-of-war between designers based in Florence and those based in Rome, with each camp wanting to proclaim their city the true Italian fashion capital. Another press report stated:

Ambassador Clare Booth Luce today found herself in the middle of an embarrassing fight between the designers of Rome and Florence for the title of Italy’s fashion capital. Delegations from the rival fashion associations pleaded with the American Embassy to be the umpire by sending Mrs. Luce to their showings this week. By her presence, they hoped to settle where Italy’s fashion capital really is. But Mrs. Luce cannot show favouritism, and the American Embassy neatly side-stepped the issued by scheduling Mrs. Luce to visit a textile factory which sells fabrics to all the fashion houses of Italy.<sup>25</sup>

This fashion industry tussle illustrates the Italian perception of American government officials as industry referees. Investing the American Ambassador with the power to arbitrate an Italian industry dispute hints at both the purchasing power of the American market and the soft-power agenda of the Marshall Plan. The episode also suggests that despite governmental and ambassadorial connections and praise from buyers and press, the success of Florence as a fashion capital was not secure. The Florence fashion shows were beset by desertions on the part of the Roman couture houses, some of whom defected starting with the July 1952 event, choosing to host presentations in their own couture salons. In response, Giorgini redoubled his hospitality, courting his international guests by offering elaborate entertainments and by relying on the charms of the city of Florence, a spectacular backdrop for fashion.

## Beguiled by Florence

Florence’s first flush of success as a fashion city was due in part to a calculated promotional strategy which emphasized the city’s Renaissance past. Giorgini’s early fashion press material highlighted his family’s Tuscan lineage while fashion show invitations featured printed reproductions of Botticelli portraits.<sup>26</sup> Giorgini even proposed showing modern day Italian fashions against a backdrop of historic

22. GBGA, ALB 5/97. August 12, 1952. Commercial Attaché (signature illegible) to Giorgini.

23. GBGA, ALB 6/65. January 23, 1953. Bunker to Giorgini.

24. GBG ALB 9/53. *Detroit Times*, April 22, 1953.

25. GBGA ALB 9/114. “Fashion Tug of War puts Clare Luce in the Middle,” *Detroit News*, July 23, 1953.

26. GBGA, ALB 3/1. “Signor Giovanni Battista Giorgini is of Florentine descent, and in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence there is the Giorgini family tomb, dating back to the 15th century”.

Medici family clothing.<sup>27</sup> From the earliest Florence fashion events, this modern marketing approach was ahead of its time (Belfanti 2015). What cemented the connection between the glories of historic Florence and modern-day Italian fashions, was a change of venue. From the fourth fashion event in July 1952, Giorgini negotiated the use of a building possessing impeccable Renaissance credentials, Palazzo Pitti. Dating to the mid-fifteenth century, this grand palace initially belonged to the Florentine banker Luca Pitti. The Medici family bought it in 1549 and it became the primary residence of the ruling families of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

In Palazzo Pitti, Giorgini identified the perfect Florentine stage set. Throughout the next decade, until his retirement in 1965, Giorgini presented the Florence fashion shows within the palace's majestic Sala Bianca or white hall. Guests could not have escaped knowledge of the palace's heritage. As they alighted from taxis on the building's grand curved drive and passed through its vast gates they would have been awed by the striking facade. Seated within the Sala Bianca, they would have watched models gliding past on the raised catwalk, lit by spectacular Murano glass chandeliers and dwarfed by the room's elegant proportions.

Further underlining the association between Florentine history and the modern-day fashion shows were invitations to splendid evening entertainments held in historically significant locations. Giorgini regularly organized balls and suppers for fashion show guests in Boboli Gardens, a grand garden adjacent to Palazzo Pitti, which offered panoramic views of the Tuscan capital. One notable event was the elaborate restaging of the reception given by the Medici family to honor the 1584 wedding between Princess Eleonora de' Medici and the Duke of Gonzaga. The reenactment took place in Palazzo Vecchio's historic Salone dei Cinquecento and included actors dressed in recreations of historic costume. This Renaissance-themed marketing scheme even extended to the refreshments: at one reception for the January 1953 fashion shows, guests nibbled on cake formed in the shape of Palazzo Vecchio and decorated with the Medici family's coat of arms.<sup>28</sup>

Furthering the allure associated with attending the Florentine shows was the fact that guests were given assistance with the mundane details of conducting business and arranging travel. Giorgini's office facilitated appointments between fashion houses and buyers. They also booked hotel rooms, secured tickets for flights in and out of Florence and even chartered special planes expressly for guests to travel on to fashion showings in other cities. Giorgini extended a variety of kindnesses to attendees, sending flowers, providing souvenirs and hosting suppers.

Travel weary retail buyers and fashion journalists appreciated this new kind of efficiency combined with typically Italian hospitality. Fashion editor Carmel Snow wrote to Giorgini, "Thank you for those lovely flowers. It was so charming of you to think of me."<sup>29</sup> Eleanor Reamer Smith of Kaufmann's department store in Pittsburgh, wrote, "The way you have done things has saved me a great deal of time in Italy." She went on to express a desire to, "thank you personally for your hospitality."<sup>30</sup> Miriam Lippencott, fashion director for the Chicago department store Carson Pirie Scott, wrote to Giorgini:

Thank you for your great assistance during my stay in Florence. I think you do an outstanding thing in getting the showings organized and making it so easy for us to see so many variations of what Italy has to offer in such a short time. I also appreciated the opportunity of going to the receptions and especially the ball that you gave. I saw so many things to purchase that I had to extend my stay in Florence.<sup>31</sup>

27. GBGA, ALB/2. When planning the hoped-for fashion shows to coincide with *Italy at Work*, Giorgini wrote to Meyric Rogers, "My idea would be to bring over some original dresses of the VIV, XVI and XVIII Centuries in order to make a background to the modern Fashion Show so that we could demonstrate how Italy has always been important through the centuries in this field. The splendor of the Medici family is well known".

28. GBGA, ALB 7/43.

29. GBGA, ALB 4/10. December 11, 1951. Snow to Giorgini.

30. GBGA, ALB 4/175. January 27, 1952. Smith to Giorgini.

31. GBGA, ALB 4/178. January 27, 1952. Lippencott to Giorgini.



*Life* magazine's fashion editor Sally Kirkland declared, "My most treasured memory is of our reunion in Florence...I wish all fashions could be enjoyed in the same way."<sup>32</sup>

The guests attending the Florence shows could have resented adding yet another city to their already full fashion calendars. Instead, they felt feted, even romanced, by the Florentine fashion experience. The associated events were carefully orchestrated to emphasize the city's illustrious past. The artful staging of the shows against an evocative backdrop of Renaissance grandeur was seductive. This intoxicating mix set Florence apart from other fashion cities in first half of the 1950s. Some of the usually jaded journalists and business-minded American buyers quite literally "fell in love" with Florence.

I. Magnin's Hector Escabosa wrote to Giorgini in January 1951, "Of all the cities in the world which we visited, yours is our favorite one."<sup>33</sup> Six months later Escabosa's wife Joan wrote to thank Giorgini for his warm hospitality, and to enthuse that, "the dinner and ball were superb."<sup>34</sup> Matilda Taylor of *Women's Wear Daily* wrote to Giorgini that same year, "I will never forget your wonderful beautiful city, nor your cordiality to me."<sup>35</sup> Carmel Snow wrote in an article in early 1953, "If there were no other reason to go to Florence...just when Spring begins to whisper, Italian fashion would fully justify our going."<sup>36</sup> In a country with fierce regional loyalties, perhaps the highest accolade came from Italy's national daily newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*. Acknowledging Florence's unique charm as a beguiling backdrop for fashion, it opined that "few cities in Italy, and certainly none in Europe, could present a showing like that which will take place tomorrow...and with a grace and luster that is unique to Florence."<sup>37</sup>

Although many who attended Giorgini's events wrote of the city's charms, the most emotive descriptions were surely penned by the *Los Angeles Times* fashion editor Fay Hammond. Hammond's expressive letters to Giorgini employ a vocabulary of emotion. She wrote, "I get so homesick for ITALY!"<sup>38</sup> She confessed to Giorgini a "very sincere love of your country."<sup>39</sup> Hammond's published articles contain vivid descriptions of the city and capture her experience of travelling there. In her reflections upon her July 1951 visit, this seasoned West Coast critic from a major American metropolis sounded overcome by the historic grandeur of it all. Hammond wrote of the evening ball, "never have I attended such a beautiful fête."<sup>40</sup> Her description of a formal evening gala held in conjunction with the July 1952 fashion shows reads like a love letter to the city of Florence:

Only incomparable Florence could offer such a setting for a party. This beautiful city seems carved out of the ancient hills of Tuscany. It is a flower bowl edged in living obelisks of black-green cypresses and age-old olive trees. To brush aside a few centuries and view the patina of the Middle Ages of the Renaissance seemed a simple and natural thing here. And it was done, just like that, to transport a thousand guests to this fabulous fête... No royal entertainment had surpassed this unforgettable scene.<sup>41</sup>

Hammond's attendance at the Florence fashion shows and fervent championing of Italian fashion coincided with the crucial early years of the Florentine presentations. Her active support resulted in official acknowledgement from the Italian government. In 1955, Italy awarded Hammond the Star of Solidarity in recognition for her contribution to Italian fashion. The honor was presented by Casilli d'Aragona, Consul of Italy and Vittorio Sanguinetti, Italian Trade Commissioner. The *Los Angeles Times* reported

32. GBGA, ALB 11/50. August 27, 1955. Kirkland to Giorgini.

33. GBGA, ALB 2/16. January 20, 1951. Escabosa to Giorgini.

34. GBGA, ALB 3/100A. Undated, probably July 1951. Escabosa to Giorgini.

35. GBGA, ALB 3/13. Undated. Taylor to Giorgini.

36. Carmel Snow, "Styles Stress Aristocratic Artistry," *New York Journal American*, February 16, 1953.

37. Author unknown, "Gli Americani a Palazzo Pitti per a Nuova Moda Italiana," *Corriere della Sera*, July 25, 1952.

38. GBGA, ALB 11/68. September 16, 1954. Hammond to Giorgini.

39. GBGA, ALB 3/109. August 7, 1951. Hammond to Giorgini.

40. GBGA, ALB 3/109. August 7, 1951. Hammond to Giorgini.

41. Fay Hammond, "Boboli Ball Attracts Fashion Press, Buyers and Society," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1952.

that Hammond was applauded at the presentation ceremony and credited by d'Aragona, "For her outstanding contribution to the knowledge, appreciation and success of the Italian high fashions and Italian design among the American public, thus fostering the development of trade relations between the two countries."<sup>42</sup>

Today, Florence continues to serve as an important site of fashion. The ongoing Florentine fashion legacy is multi-faceted, although the city was eclipsed by Milan as Italy's primary fashion capital from the 1970s (with continuing competition from Rome).<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, five years after Giorgini's first fashion show in Florence, the Made in Italy campaign was just visible on the horizon. Within a decade of the end of World War II, Italy had become synonymous in the minds of international consumers with a range of quality goods, and not just fashion. A 1956 advertisement in the *New York Times* titled 'The Fine Italian Hands' reminds the reader of the range of Italian quality products. The advertisement asserts, "In fabrics, fashions, handicrafts and furniture, the vision is exciting and provoking". Continuing this tradition, the city also hosts the influential Pitti Immagine's portfolio of fashion events, is the headquarters for a number of fashion brands and boasts a handful of museums dedicated to heritage fashion firms like Gucci and Ferragamo.

As this article has shown, the transformation of Florence into Italy's post-war fashion capital was the result of an interconnected triumvirate of forces. Giovanni Battista Giorgini's championing of the city of his birth; the conditional support of the American diplomatic corps; and the strategic emphasis on the city's renaissance past. The research conducted to make these points has relied heavily on Giorgini's own archive. To secure a more nuanced reading of Florence's evolution from a city of handicrafts producers to a fashion show powerhouse, more research is needed. To illuminate the contributions of a wider group of protagonists it would be of particular interest to explore a broader range of archives such as those of the American Consulate in Florence and the E.C.A., along with the historical archives of the city of Florence. An examination of the impact of Italian trade organizations and the influence exerted by the buyers and press outside of North America upon Italy's emerging fashion industry would also be fruitful. This additional archival research will extend our understanding of the forces which enabled Giovanni Battista Giorgini to transform Florence into Italy's post-war capital of fashion.

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42. Giorgio La Pira, "Times Reporter Awarded Italian Star of Solidarity," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1955.

43. The last coordinated fashion show in the Sala Bianca took place in 1982.

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