

# The Global Reach of Italian Fashion: Biki's Cosmopolitan Legacy

Simona Segre Reinach\*

University of Bologna (Italy)

Published: October 27, 2021

## Abstract

The celebration of Giovanni Battista Giorgini's catwalk show in February 1951 aims to give the historical relevance of an event that wasn't just an episode, but the result of long and established relations, especially with America. It revealed also an international attitude expressed by Italian fashion practitioners long before Italian fashion was officially recognised. For this reason, some narratives around the different processes of "emancipation from Paris" deserve to be scrutinized in more nuanced narratives. The archive of seamstress and then couturière Elvira Leonardi Bouyeure (1906-1999), aka Biki, offers one of those narratives.

**Keywords:** Archives; Biki; Italian Fashion; Heritage; Sartorial.

---

\* ✉ [simona.segrereinach@unibo.it](mailto:simona.segrereinach@unibo.it)

## Introduction

Italians are great travellers. They have always been. Italian fashion itself started as a “traveling fashion” (Caratozzolo 2019) and has continued to be so. (Segre Reinach 2018) The celebration of Giovanni Battista Giorgini's catwalk show organized in Florence in February 1951 aims precisely to give the historical relevance of an event that wasn't just an episode, but the result of long and established relations, especially with America. It revealed also an international attitude expressed by Italian fashion practitioners long before Italian fashion was officially recognised. For this reason, some narratives around the different processes of “emancipation from Paris” deserve to be scrutinized, I will argue, in more nuanced narratives. The archive of seamstress and then couturière Elvira Leonardi Bouyeure (1906-1999), aka Biki, offers one of those narratives.

## Heritage and Fashion Archives

In fashion the concept of “heritage” is linked to a reappraisal of the archive materials of couturiers, fashion designers, and *maisons*, explicitly and justifiably understood to be the source of inspiration for design, as well as an integral part of the activity of the creative directors of many luxury brands. The archive is also an interesting source for a new anthropology and historiography of fashion, one that succeeds in including the voices of its protagonists in an immediate and direct manner. (Vaccari 2012). The documents that Elvira Leonardi Bouyeure -Biki- collected and preserved in over fifty years do not just describe the private biography of a major figure in Milanese and Italian fashion, but also reflect the intersecting points in the invention of Italian fashion in the twentieth century, from the mid-1930s, during the Fascist period, all the way to the 1980s, when the Made-in-Italy brand was first acknowledged around the world. It has now been known for some time that the network itself is an essential part of the immaterial heritage. Biki's legacy is made up of personal relationships with the already highly internationalized world of fashion – her memories cast light to the global dynamics of her career. From the archive the voice of Biki clearly emerges: made of statements, notes, travel memories, drawings, letters, photographs, newspaper clippings about her, or having something she was struck by, notes on her exchanges with members of the jet set, dress patterns, *croquis*, invitations to fashion shows, and correspondence with other dressmakers, designers, and couturiers from her day.

Such knowledge is unveiled thanks to the copiousness of Biki's social relations, scattered throughout various documents – from her correspondence with the main players of the nascent Italian fashion system, to the indirect testimonies of these relations. The documents describe Biki's life and opinions, and this gives rise to further questions about a period when Italian fashion was just getting started. What is described from a unique and privileged point of view is the life and career of a woman who was a member of the upper class living the high life between Italy and France. It also describes the various stages of Italian fashion that occurred before it was internationally acknowledged. Everything is represented there: from the reliance on the fashion city par excellence, Paris – which Biki elaborated in her very own personal way – to Fascist autarky, which she managed to stay away from amidst the many contradictions, restrictions, and rationing that were enforced due to the war, eventually managing to create a high fashion dressmakers' shop. As soon as Elvira Leonardi became Biki. France and US were both parts of her amazing story, and so it was Europe, and later Asia, Australia, South Africa, Canada and Japan. She signed the first joint-venture in Asia in the history of Italian fashion – with a Japanese company for prêt-à-porter (1969) – and before that she had also signed a licence agreement with Helena Rubinstein in 1957. Besides being the Milanese high society favourite, she designed clothes for an international élite, including Esther Williams, Farah Diba, Ira Fürsteneberg, Grace of Monaco, Lucia Bosè, Sophia Loren, Claudia Cardinale, and many others. She designed the famous black dress Monica Vittiwore in *La Notte by Antonioni*, a film which gained international fame. Apparently Marilyn Monroe bought a Biki dress in New York. But undoubtedly the most famous of all Biki's clients was the soprano Maria Callas, as we shall see.

I researched Biki's archive – which is kept at Università Statale of Milan (MIC Center) – for two years (2014-2017). The result is a book titled *Biki. French Visions for Italian Fashion*, published by Rizzoli

International in 2019. In writing this article I have drawn from my book, and from other information present in Biki's archive, focusing on the national and international network underlying her work.

## Biki's Sartorial Biography

Who was Elvira Leonardi Bouyeure? She was the (step) grand daughter of the Italian opera composer Giacomo Puccini who loved her tenderly. It was him who gave her the nickname Bicchi – from the Italian “birichina” – the mischievous one – which was later shortened in Bicchi. After grandfather Giacomo Puccini, came the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio who suggested the name of her first collection of sexy nightgowns, *Domina*, launched in 1934, and the name Biki, with an exotic K for her business. Biki kept it, only reverting to Bicchi for a short while under Mussolini autarkic rules. Among her clients of nightgowns, she had the future queen of Italy, Maria José of Belgium, and many actresses of the 1930s “Telefoni Bianchi” cinema, inspired by the Hollywood films of the time. A member of the upper class, Elvira Leonardi wanted a real career at a time when women of her social milieu did not work. She never missed a step. She wanted to work independently and especially into fashion.

After *Domina* she launched her own atelier in 1936 and in the same year she married the Frenchman Robert Bouyeure. Her wedding dress was made by Lucien Lelong, the famous *couturier* and President of the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. The dress was published in WWD magazine.

During the war, thanks to her husband, Biki continued to have contacts with French fashion – despite the fascist laws on the matter. In 1941 (the same year of the Autarkic Clothing Textile Show) Robert sent her many letters from France with a list of items, accessories, objects, and fabrics he was sending as supplies for her boutiques in Italy. In 1946 she showed in Zurich at the Grand Hotel Dolder and in Venice at the Lido Hotel, in a collective event aiming at presenting Italian fashion. But she also bought a lot of clothes from Paris – to copy, adapt, imitate, sell to her clients. Milano was unquestionably the city she loved the most, but Paris was her point of reference – and not only for fashion. I quote from her handwritten diary:

“In Paris I learned everything, to have a weak voice but one that could at times be provocative, a gaze that was directly appealing, supreme elegance of my gestures, walking, the refined movement of the fingers, the ability to show both warmth and aloofness, vulnerability and severity”. (Segre Reinach 2019: 43).

She ordered her furs from Jeanne Lanvin in Paris. More than 50% of her clothes came from Paris. She was close to Christian Dior – each time she went to Paris she visited him and attended his shows to select garments. Out of two hundred models that she presented in Italy, one hundred were purchased in Paris. Out of ten mannequins, eight were French. In 1951 Paris Match devoted three pages to Biki, as “La Biki. La meilleure cliente de la mode Française » a dress maker, they wrote, who buy more than the Americans, whose purchases, for a variety of reasons, the French complained, were dwindling. In the article Biki overstated the relevance of French fashion by declaring that “*La mode italienne n'existe pas. Il n'ya que la mode Biki*”. But despite this, Biki truly wanted to create an Italian style. In more than one context she underscored the need to do so and her desire to assert Italian fashion, to free it, like many other fashion houses, from the importation of French models, and the imitation of French creations.

The Sala Bianca event – although she did not participate in the first show – was to have an impact on her attitude very soon. She always stated the need to create an Italian Style. After the war, from the mid 1950s to the 1960s she consolidated a Milanese style, no longer imitating, or purchasing French haute couture.

French couture came to her, anyway, through her son-in-law, the couturier Alain Reynaud who worked in Paris with Jacques Fath, and in New York with Maurice Rentner. Biki met Alain Reynaud in Venice in occasion of the Beistegui Bal Oriental in 1951, aka the Bal of the Century. He was introduced to her by her close friend Jacques Fath, costumed as Sun King for the occasion. The costume party guests included Aga Khan III, Orson Welles, Cecil Beaton – who made photographic portraits of the party – Christian Dior, Salvador Dalí, King Farouk and many other global celebrities of the time.

Alain (1924-1982) left Maison Fath and Paris and married Roberta – Biki's daughter – in Milano in 1957. The wedding dress of Roberta Bouyeure-Reynaud was the last piece coming from the Maison Fath. It was designed by Genevieve Fath, as Jacques Fath had died in 1954. After his wedding with Roberta, Alain established himself in Milan and worked with/for Biki until his premature death in 1982.

Biki contributed to building Italian fashion: she did so by embodying the styles of two cities, Milan, and Paris, turning those styles into her personal style. Consolidating the links between the two cities, she also started yearning for New York. Her American dream was accomplished by testimonials, above all Maria Callas, frequent journeys in the United States and hard work.

## Cosmopolitan Testimonials

A great part of the global reach of *Maison* Biki came from Maria Callas. Callas and Biki met in 1951 at Toscanini's house in Milan. The story is well known – Maria Callas was an extremely gifted soprano, the celebrated director Luchino Visconti was a great fan of hers, but she was still quite overweight and casually dressed. Under Biki's advice and friendship, Callas completed her transformation. In the beginning it was her husband Giovanni Battista Meneghini who insisted on ordering dresses at Biki's *maison* – but soon Callas became greatly interested in dress, fashion, accessories, jewels – everything that reflected her transformation into the diva who changed the history of Opera. Callas's world tour in the 1950s contributed to reinforcing the fame of Biki. For the tour in the United States Biki made for Maria Callas 35 outfits. In 1954 Giovanni Battista Meneghini, Callas's husband, wrote a note to Biki, after his wife's performance in a grand concert in Philadelphia, commenting on her artistic success as well as her fame as a fashion icon. In 1958 Maria Callas won the "10 best-dressed women Golden Globe". In 1959 Biki and Alain designed the complete wardrobe to be donned during the infamous cruise in the Mediterranean on the Christina O. yacht, where Maria Callas and Aristoteles Onassis fell in love. Everything was carefully planned for the cruise; all outfits were established beforehand. If Maria was not sure of a detail in the dress of the day, she consulted Biki and Alain by sending telegrams to Milan. Photographed while boarding or stepping off an airplane, Maria Callas was wearing perfectly styled coats and chiffon evening gowns in many colours, always signed Biki, added to which were pearls and a turban, a sort of signature accessories for both of them.

## The American Market

Despite her cosmopolitan network and milieu, Biki, as for many other Italian fashion designers of her time, had to work hard to "conquer" the American market. It was not easy at all – as well documented in her archive. Biki's first trip to America was in 1952 in occasion of the first "April in Paris" ball at Waldorf Astoria, organized by Elsa Maxwell who was a close friend of hers. She travelled by plane to get there, and she returned first class on the *Queen Elizabeth*, sailing from New York to Dover. The trip was a huge success. She stayed a few months at the Gladstone Hotel and kept a detailed diary – on the Gladstone's headed letter paper – in which she jotted down every appointment: lunch with Dorothy Wallace (head of the Celanese Corporation of America), tea with Rita Hayworth, supper at Maud Chez Elle's, and so on and so forth. "What impressed you the most about New York?" she was asked during a radio broadcast in 1952. She mentioned three things: the city lights which were fabulous, as in a fairy tale; the women who were beautiful and knew how to put off getting old; the shop windows, the loveliest in the world. But the truth of the matter is that America was not an easy market, despite the enthusiasm Americans declared about Italian fashion. It took Biki a lot of hard work and many trips to the USA. But six years after her first trip, in 1958, Biki was on the cover of *WWDaily*. Starting from the 1960s, Biki's trips to America became more regular, more organized, and more successful. She would go to New York twice a year, in April and May, and then again in September and October – she started up a fur business with Ralph Kaufman of Sills and Company and was about to sign an agreement with Neiman Marcus, "American Biki Incorporated" that eventually did not come through. In 1967 she was in Washington and in Boston to present her collections. She participated in an award ceremony for Italian knitwear in New York for the Italian magazine "Amica". The 1960s were years of traveling and

intense activity involving the Italian car manufacturer FIAT, as well as the organization of fashion events in Greece, Sweden, Canada. She also travelled to Australia and Japan.

## Conclusions

Biki's legacy lies in having grasped and interpreted the essence of Italian style, that is, the measure and the sense of the proportions, often advocated to explain a natural inclination toward fashion. Her way of doing fashion in this open-minded context is part of her international success. It can be found in the gestures, the words, the beliefs that reflect her vision of the world, elite yet practical, worldly yet business oriented. It is visible in her relationships with her clients, in the way she travelled, in the way she set up her showroom, in the letters she wrote and received, in her circle of friends. Italian fashion is a question of style and it has been so from the outset, but it is also a question of relationships. Through her life and her work, Biki showed how exchanges with France and the United States led to the creation and the consolidation of an Italian sartorial identity, to be traced not just in its innovative side, which is always present, but perhaps even more in the subtle changes with which at a certain point Italian fashion subverted the style hierarchies, influencing European and international taste. Biki personified the ambivalences and complexities of the origins of Italian fashion, poised between the desire for emancipation from Paris, autarkic aspirations, and relations with other fashion systems. At the same time, Biki's work is an example of cultural cross-pollination and appropriation, the basic ingredients of a "new" national fashion. Biki's activity occurred at the very moment when Italian fashion was being founded, and although it borrowed from France, it was already looking toward America. It was precisely in the space between these two worlds, which Biki was fully aware of, that the foundations were laid for a recognizable and international Italian fashion. In truth, it was the triangle between three cities – Milan, Paris, New York – that produced a fashion system poised between a simplification of the codes of basic elegance, and the opening to the need for new markets and a new society.

## Bibliography

Caratozzolo, Vittoria C. “Reorienting Fashion: Italy’s Wayfinding after the Second World War”, in S. Stanfill (ed.), *The Glamour of Italian Fashion*, London, V&A Publishing, 2014, p. 46–57.

Reviewed by Emanuela Scarpellini (2021) Biki: French Visions for Italian Fashion, Fashion Theory. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2021.1903225>

Segre-Reinach, Simona. *Biki. French Visions for Italian Fashion*. Milano, Rizzoli 2019.

Segre-Reinach, Simona. “Stilisti viaggiatori. Un altrove molto italiano”, in ML. Frisa, G. Monti, S. Tonchi, *ITALIANA L’Italia vista dalla moda 1971-2001*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2018, p. 305–313.

Vaccari, Alessandra. *La moda nei discorsi dei designer*. Venice, Clueb, 2012.

**Simona Segre Reinach** – University of Bologna (Italy)

✉ [simona.segrereinach@unibo.it](mailto:simona.segrereinach@unibo.it)

Main interests and research: Sociology of Global Fashion, Fashion Theory, China Studies, Fashion Curation. Scientific Direction of Fashion Projects in Master Design and Technology for Fashion Communication. Editor of Zonemoda Journal. She sits in the Editorial Board of *Fashion Theory*, *Critical Studies in Fashion and Beauty*, *The International Journal of Fashion Studies*, *Dress Cultures* (Bloomsbury), *Fashion in Process* (Mandragora), *Dress and Visual Culture*, *China Matters* (Leuven University Press).