

# Giovanni Battista Giorgini: Designing the Future

Gian Luca Bauzano\*

RCS MEDIA GROUP

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## Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the history of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, “The Father of Italian Fashion”. Thanks to Giorgini, Italian Fashion becomes famous all over the world. Fashion journalist Elisa Vittoria Massai, one of the era’s most authoritative analysts of custom and economics and a guest at the 12 February 1951 Villa Torrigiani show, wrote: “By 1957, Italy was the leading European supplier of fabrics and clothing items to the U.S. Italy had surpassed both England and France. It is an absolute certainty that this would not have been possible had the Palazzo Pitti events, which were of incalculable promotional and advertising value, not been held with a seasonal cadence and had Giorgini’s professionalism as a commission agent and representative of the best-placed of the American stores not convinced competing agents and stores to jump in. The incredible success story, almost a fairy tale, of Italian fashion abroad comes clear in just a few numbers. Exports of wool and silk fabrics, for example, quintupled in six years; exports of knitwear products multiplied eightfold; knit outerwear alone about doubled. Womenswear sales jumped from a paltry 45 million lire in 1950 to one billion, 800 million in 1957. Leather footwear, from 208 million in 1950 to almost nineteen billion in 1957. Even Italian buttons rose in importance, with their two billion and change of 1957 over a value approaching zero in 1950.

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\* ✉ [gbauzano@rcs.it](mailto:gbauzano@rcs.it)

London exterior. Day. A crowd of international media waiting outside the Victoria & Albert Museum. The doors are about to open on the preview of *The Glamour of Italian Fashion, 1945-2014* held in April, 2014. The first exhibition room catapults visitors back in time to the Fifties and to the historic Sala Bianca in Florence's Palazzo Pitti. On the walls, huge blow-ups of period images transmit the magic of a muggy 22 July 1952. Fade. London exterior. Night. Red carpet for the exhibition's opening gala. A who's who of the Italian and world fashion systems is in attendance, stylists and entrepreneurs, top models and the wizards of the fashion photo shoot. From the kingdom of Elizabeth II, international recognition of Made in Italy's inescapable value. Not just a celebration of creativity. An exaltation of the wonders of Italian *saper fare* – knowhow – and of knowing how to do it well. A rapid-fire dialogue between manual skill and fine workmanship. A celebration of an Italian heritage. Not an abstract celebration of a concept. But of he who created that concept with his capillary work, his intuitions and his diplomacy: Marchese Giovanni Battista Giorgini. In 2014, in London, the spotlights came back up on the man who brought the Made in Italy epic to life. A year earlier, in 2013, as a member of the scientific committee for another exhibition with a title that is still extremely topical – *La Rinascita. Storie dell'Italia che ce l'ha fatta* – I had looked to Giorgini as the linchpin of the section devoted to Italian fashion. The specularity of the intents of this and the London project only points up Giorgini's value and his centrality. 'A smiling man with an elegant soul, and in his working life devoid of any venality,' was how Guido Vergani portrayed him with his illuminated pen after a meeting between the two.

The world thus resumed talking about Giorgini. It had been awhile: more than two decades since the last time. Since that 25 June 1992 when another exhibition-event opened at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence: *La Sala Bianca: nascita della moda italiana*. It celebrated the first fashion show held in the Sala Bianca, the immediate and triumphally-crossed finish line of the virtuous project launched just a year earlier by Giorgini, Bista to his friends, when he staged the real first runway show of Italian fashion on 12 February 1951 at Villa Torrigiani. The event we are celebrating today, at a respectful 70 years' distance in time. In its own time, it was nothing short of a renaissance. And Giorgini was its incarnation. He had a gift for weaving a storyline. And selling it. For example, to John B. Fairchild, witness to that first 1951 show. Recounted and celebrated in *Women's Wear Daily*, the Fairchild group's flagship trade journal. A gauntlet thrown down to challenge the supremacy of the Paris runways, thanks to Giorgini's capacity to centre the interest of the transatlantic buyers and media on Italy. Fairchild wrote that Giorgini more closely resembled a famous orchestra conductor than a fashion-industry mover; that he took fashion by the hand and led it into a new world where men and women in bright clothing rode on Vespas, clinging to each other, so seemingly young and sexy in their Italian apparel. And that, very soon, fashion fell in love with that elegance.

How did Giorgini manage to do all this in an Italy which in those years was clambering through the rubble left by World War II? The key lies in the words of Giorgini's daughter Matilde. Words that bring his personality and his accomplishments into finer focus. This Italianity, this faith of ours in basic virtues, intelligence, tradition, good workmanship, perfectly braided straw, the purity of embroidery, were the weapons my father used to win success in his trade. In the Twenties, when he began selling our image in the U.S., America associated Italy with gangsters and cardboard-suitcased immigrants. There were more slammed-in-your-face doors than open ones. Papa vowed to open them, to sell our products: ceramics and tablecloths, embroidered linens and articles made of straw. And also to contribute to shattering that other image and all the clichés. He did the same after the World War II, in an Italy that was broken and viewed suspiciously on the world stage.' Scion of a noble family, Giorgini was a blend of patriotic spirit and human generosity, an able and intuitive entrepreneur. From his native Versilia, in 1923, at age 24, after two years at his cousin's export office, he decided to strike out on his own. He was well aware of the potential of the export business and of the innate strength of Italian products. Made in Italy *ante litteram*. He zeroed in on high quality craftsmanship; he patiently visited the workshops of the artisans he courted and wanted to understand. In order to export a world in which technical knowhow, artistic creativity and manual skill were allies. Giorgini's edge lay in the fact that he never made a move thinking only of the short-term business result but rather, and probably primarily, always kept his sights on a larger goal: to valorise and publicise the excellences of our artisan production on the foreign markets. Excellences understood as the cultural legacy of a people. He scoured the entire

peninsula; he created a 'catalogue' listing the best of glass and of lace, of embroidery and ceramics. He took it to the States. First, disappointment; then a few nibbles; finally, success. Giorgini was not just a trade intermediary but an able brewer of synergies: he returned from his trips carrying drawings of the items his transatlantic clients wanted so that future Italian production could adapt. He rallied from the financial losses he suffered due to the 1929 Wall Street crash just as, later, he came through the tragedy that was World War II.

Giorgini returned to the fray in the post-war Forties, more determined than ever. He conceived of Italian fashion as a product, an image for export, a response to the ascendancy of French creativity – on which everyone, especially the U.S. market, seemed to depend. Fashion, and in particular its artisan components, became a propulsive force in our country's economy. For the show of Italian fashion in 1951, Marchese Giorgini installed a runway on the *piano nobile* of Villa Torrigiani and set up a display of knitwear, accessories and bijoux alongside it. Italian *saper fare*, all of it, was on stage. The event was not easy in the making. In the letter he sent to various Italian 'fashion houses' a few months prior to that fateful 12 February 1951, Giorgini placed the accent on the planning aspects of kick-starting a sector with such enormous potential. He started off saying: 'Since 1923 I have been in contact with the North American market and I represent many of the most prestigious importers of our art and artisan products. We have never spoken of fashion in a practical sense, since Paris, for them, is its vital centre. However, they have always had only high regard for our fashion accessories: bags, scarves, gloves, umbrellas, footwear and jewellery. Since in this moment the United States is so benevolent towards Italy, it seems to me that the time has come for us to attempt to establish our fashion on their market.' The curtain went up on 12 February 1951 inside the walls of the Villa Torrigiani aristocratic family home in Florence's Via de' Serragli 144. A group of illustrious Italian dressmaking houses presented their haute couture collections. Two days later, the same address hosted a gala ball and a show of evening dresses, a sumptuous send-off to the American buyers and foreign press. A triumph: the invitees were completely won over by that inimitable union of creativity and social graces, of elegance and art in hospitality, that is typical of the Italian style. Without forgetting the excellence of the fashion proposals. Nothing was left to chance. In his invitation, Giorgini even specified that since 'the purpose of the evening is to promote Italian fashion ... the ladies are sincerely requested to wear clothing of pure Italian inspiration'.

The success of the 'at home' debut was such that Giorgini was swamped by applications from ateliers all over Italy to participate in future events. Thus the second edition, in July of 1951, was held in the roomier spaces of Florence's Grand Hotel. On that occasion, besides his tenacity and his non-conformist streak, innate qualities on the strength of which he had so often been able to succeed where others had not, Giorgini showed off another of his precious skills: he was a talent scout extraordinaire with an open approach to young creatives. One such, whom Giorgini discovered and ushered to his debut, was Roberto Capucci, little more than twenty at the time and unknown. Capucci's telling of the story is compelling. '1951, and my atelier in Rome had been open for less than a year. Maria Foschini, a fashion journalist, had convinced me to do it. She had seen my drawings. Hundreds and hundreds. I had graduated the Liceo Artistico and for me drawing – understood as fashion design – was my life, as it still is. My mother was against the idea of the atelier. I did everything almost in secret. An attic in Via Sistina in Rome, a cutter and two others. It was 1950. Meanwhile, thanks to Giovan Battista Giorgini, Italian fashion had begun to come to life and was going to show in Florence. Bista, as he liked to be called, invited me after Maria Foschini had showed him my drawings, with which she'd fallen in love. No runway for me, though, since I was the new kid on the block and the big shots would have been miffed.' Capucci is talking about his future colleagues, from Carosa to Fabiani and Sorelle Fontana, from Simonetta to Marucelli, from Veneziani to Noberasco and Vanna, the top names at Giorgini's 'at home' show. 'It was July of 1951. I was supposed to present about thirty gowns during the ball at Villa Torrigiani on the closing night of the second edition of the Florence event. It was supposed to be a surprise. But the big shots learned about it and vetoed the idea, and me. But in the end, their move boomeranged. The next morning, Giorgini's home was full of photographers and journalists. He hadn't abandoned me; he had found a way to put my show on despite everything.' Capucci took the assemblage by storm and he sold out. 'I was twenty. I have never forgotten Giorgini, how he took me under his wing. Most vividly, what he said to that kid I was then: he advised me to work the way I wanted

to and to not let myself be influenced by market pressure or fear of working outside the mainstream of fashion. Basically, that was the advice I followed when I decided to leave the fashion system and present my collections only when I was ready, only where I decided. Paying no attention to the diktat that collections must be seasonal. It was like being reborn.' Today, the Roman couturier is universally known as the 'sculptor of silk' and for his marvellous plissé creations. He was invited to the 1995 Venice Biennale; one of his models resides in Florence at the Fondazione Giorgini, established 20 years ago to celebrate the half-century anniversary of the 1951 shows.

Giorgini was the artificer of Capucci's debut and his myth, but also of a complex and now-fundamental business system. It is estimated that by the time the second edition went dark, in July of 1951, the market for couture gowns and fashion accessories hovered at around one hundred million of that year's dollars. Bista saw a sterling opportunity and by the end of the summer had decided to 'export' Italy's creations to the States and to present them at fashion shows organised for the occasion by the great *department stores* of New York and Boston, Houston and Los Angeles. The result? Another triumph. In January, 1952, the third edition of the Florence shows toted up exponential increases in sales, licenses, and orders. Made in Italy fashion had grown into the role that Giorgini had wished for it. It had conquered the public and the markets. But, as always happens, the enormous success of the operation had triggered infighting, envy and grabs for the limelight. Giorgini did not lose heart and kept a firm hand on the tiller of the fashion system as he guided it through the storms of that early season. There was too much on the line. Made in Italy was no longer an abstract concept. It was a reality. Guido Vergani, who lived those years in the first person, wrote: 'A look at the books in early 1958 revealed just how abundant were the fruits of that lengthy and intelligent work, driven by cohesive and often stubborn tenacity, by infinite patience in the face of jibes and snubs, and above all by a modern understanding of advertising and the media, and of public relations as the capacity to create events, to capture the spotlights.' Translated into numbers, between 1950 and 1957 the turnover derived from the fledgling fashion system rose from eighty to 208 billion lire of the time. Fashion journalist Elisa Vittoria Massai, one of the era's most authoritative analysts of custom and economics and a guest at the 12 February 1951 Villa Torrigiani show, wrote: 'By 1957, Italy was the leading European supplier of fabrics and clothing items to the U.S. Italy had surpassed both England and France. It is an absolute certainty that this would not have been possible had the Palazzo Pitti events, which were of incalculable promotional and advertising value, not been held with a seasonal cadence and had Giorgini's professionalism as a commission agent and representative of the best-placed of the American stores not convinced competing agents and stores to jump in. The incredible success story, almost a fairy tale, of Italian fashion abroad comes clear in just a few numbers. Exports of wool and silk fabrics, for example, quintupled in six years; exports of knitwear products multiplied eightfold; knit outerwear alone about doubled. Womenswear sales jumped from a paltry 45 million lire in 1950 to one billion, 800 million in 1957. Leather footwear, from 208 million in 1950 to almost nineteen billion in 1957. Even Italian buttons rose in importance, with their two billion and change of 1957 over a value approaching zero in 1950.'

In a very few years, Italian style had set out from Florence, gone abroad and conquered the globe. Even Paris. Although the haute couture that starred at the Florence fashion shows was reserved for a fortunate few, it was publicised by the actresses. And the photographs of the stars of the silver screen in the glossy magazines became points of reference for all the women of the age; many who saw the stars of the silver screen in the women's magazines longed to dress like them, like the starring 'antagonists' Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida, in models by Schuberth or Simonetta. Or like the platinum Marilyn Monroe, who mixed and matched fashion and accessories by Capucci, Pucci and Ferragamo. Italy's women drew their inspiration from Italian as well as foreign actresses. Hollywood moved to the Tiber. *Roman Holiday*, with Audrey Hepburn, was shot in Rome in 1953. The costumes, by Edith Head, queen of the Hollywood costumers, won the Oscar; the movie made Italian style a planet-wide household word. Made in Italy did not reign solely in Rome. To the style espoused by Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Via Veneto, Milan responded with its preferred stage, the foyer of the Teatro alla Scala, as a 'runway' for the creations of Germana Marucelli, Gigliola Curie and Jole Veneziani – and Elvira Leonardi Bouyeure, "Biki", who invented the 'Callas style', to whom the soprano turned to become *La Divina*. It was Biki, Callas' trusted friend and adviser of 25 years' standing, who created the costumes for Callas' Paris debut

on 19 December 1958. For the concert at the Opéra, transmitted live on Eurovision to twelve countries and an audience of several hundred million viewers. Yves Saint Laurent praised the red gown worn by Maria Callas.

The “Sistema Giorgini” sailed before the wind into the Sixties. At edition after edition, Giorgini filled the Florence runway with high fashion – and then knitwear, infantswear and furs. Junior fashion was next, then intimate apparel and, in 1963, men’s fashion. The Sixties were also the years of the ‘ordination’ of Valentino Garavani. As with Capucci, Giorgini’s intuition about Valentino was unerring. Valentino showed his first collection at the end of the Fifties. But his true anointing came in 1961 at Rome’s Palazzo Barberini, where he presented his fall/winter haute couture collection, closing the show with 12 white satin gowns with large capes. He drew his inspiration from Jacqueline Kennedy, the new international icon of elegance and style. In 1962, over a decade after the first Sala Bianca event, Giorgini agreed to host the young Valentino in Florence. To show his fall/winter haute couture collection. The scheduling was abysmal: the last hour of the last day. But a spell not unlike that woven around Capucci in 1951 transformed the evening of 19 July 1962 from a catastrophe waiting to happen into a triumphal event.

Society continued to change. The fashion sector protagonists demanded that the Sistema Giorgini also change, and radically. In 1965, Giovanni Battista Giorgini terminated his adventure and left the helm of his creation to others. Florence adopted a different look. Prêt-à-porter gained more and more ground; haute couture retreated to Rome. Then came 1968. Horrified by the rise of ready-to-wear fashion, of the prêt-à-porter wardrobe, Balenciaga closed his atelier. In January, however, Valentino’s haute couture summer collection had been hailed as unprecedented: it was white, completely white. And in December, even the Teatro alla Scala foyer disappeared as Milan’s elective runway for that Italian style that had gained renown and favour worldwide thanks to Giorgini. Verdi’s *Don Carlo* was on the Scala stage on December 7th, but all the attention was on the square, on the violent student protest led by Mario Capanna and the rotten eggs and persimmons and cans of paint that rained down on the exclusive fashions and furs of the theatre-goers. Three years later, in 1971, Giorgini died. A statement by the ‘father of Italian fashion’, made while he was still king of the Sala Bianca, encapsulates his precious legacy. ‘Our task is therefore to start things moving, to attempt to invigorate them with unreserved dedication. Because we must think of the young people who, tomorrow, will have to substantiate this work of ours and feel encouraged to improve upon it. If we embrace this thought, the wounds inflicted by small disappointments and false personal allegations will remain superficial, incapable of shaking that deep trust that gave us the strength to begin it all and, we hope, will give them the strength to persevere so long as it will be right to do so.’

**Gian Luca Bauzano** – RCS MEDIA GROUP

✉ [gbauzano@rcs.it](mailto:gbauzano@rcs.it)

He is Modern Arts graduate, professional journalist specialising in social customs, fashion and the performing arts in all their guises. Has for years followed the world of fashion and classical music. After a decade writing for *Il Giornale* and two seasons on the radio (live reportage from the Scala and other national and international theatres for Rai Radio Tre Suite) and television (Mediaset & Sky), he now works at the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and his weekly magazine *Sette*. Has managed international exhibitions, articles and books on fashion, musical themes and lifestyle and organized conferences, coordinated debates and book presentations on these same topics.