THE CFMI – PITTI IMMAGINE : WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

THE CENTRO DI FIRENZE PER LA MODA ITALIANA – PITTI IMMAGINE : WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

The Birth of Italian Fashion – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini -
Florence truly is a home for artists and artisans, for whatever the reasons may be that this particular city has produced such a wealth of skill and creativity, what we do know is that it’s a story that has been centuries in the making. Evidence of the artisan traditions of craftsmanship and beauty produced with innovative practices and creativity can be found as far back as the Etruscan art of cast and engraved bronze sculptures and mirrors from 500 BC and this tradition of excellence in art hasn’t ceased since. The Renaissance and the great artists Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli and Giotto are all sparkling stars in Florence’s great history.

The Birth of Italian Fashion – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini -
In the more recent 1920s Florence was a city filled with ateliers, San Frediano, the OltreArno, Santa Croce were bustling with hundreds of artisans working with hand skill, capability, knowledge of materials, particularly of leather, that had been passed on through the years. It was in this time, 1922, that Giovanni Battista Giorgini began trading in these artisan crafts with America, opening his first office there in 1923 and selling to department stores such as Tiffany who bought from him silverware and jewellery.

In the post second world war period the work of the Artiginato Artistico was fundamental to the city of Florence’s economy and Giorgini was fully aware of the importance of an international trade. He had established a wide circle of connections with American buyers and with the administration that was actively involved in the reconstruction of Italy after the war under the Marshall Plan. In the spring of 1944 the Allied Army requested to use Giorgini’s home for their headquarters as it was situated in a strategic position on the BelloSguardo hill facing south and overlooking Porta Romana.

As a true entrepreneur, Giorgini immediately started collaborating with them and a year later he opened the first gift shop in Florence, in Via Calzaiooli and in the building now occupied by Coin. There he organised the store as a fair of sorts by giving the artisans stands where they were able, not only to sell their products but also, to work and show the buyers first-hand their craftsmanship, this was the first artisan market of its kind in Florence. It was not only in the interest of soldiers wishing to bring home gifts of Florentine leathers, bags, lace and straw boater hats, but as a strategic move of his own to help restart the economy. In turn this move led him to realise the importance of fashion in new postwar society and so Giovanni Battista Giorgini planned his greatest strategic move: to create and export Italian Fashion.

Departure of the USA Tour to promote Giorgini’s business. The Birth of Italian Fashion – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini -
We spoke to the grandson of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, Neri Fadigati, who in 1990 rediscovered his grandfather’s vast collection of photographs, papers and memorabilia from the very beginning with his first fashion show in Villa Torrigiani, that had been quietly stored away for twenty years in the home of his aunt. He immediately realised its cultural importance and, after making an agreement in 2005 with Archivio di Stato Firenze, they began to scan and catalogue the collection. Neri tells us there are still thousands of documents and photographs to sort through and catalogue.

In conversation with Mr Fadigati in the floral courtyard of his hotel Residenza Il Villino in Central Florence, he spoke affectionately about his grandfather and growing up in the beautiful and interesting environment he created at Villa Torrigiani.

“...everything was beautiful, his house; he was also an expert antique collector, this fashion world, the women, their elegant dresses and they had a lot of fun partying and organising those big balls. Still the atmosphere was very interesting, everything had to be perfect, this is something I remember very well everything has to be perfect plus it is very important to work hard to do what you have to do at your best but also to enjoy life to be nice to yourself to others it was a very positive environment.

My grandfather’s dream was to start a diplomatic career, to be a diplomat, but because of the war he couldn’t so he said ‘I will sell Italian products abroad and this is a way to be diplomatic’, and in fact he did that very very well ...he was very good in interacting with people and he also paid good attention to others … and probably this is one of the reasons he was so successful because of that so the people were always happy to come to Florence to come to his house to work with him because it was a pleasure.”
Thanks to his diplomatic ability Giorgini was able to gather together both emerging and known fashion designers such as Emilio Pucci, Sorelle Fontana, Emilio Schuberth, Simonetta Visconti, Jole Veneziani and Roberto Capucci, amongst others and set about organising Italy’s first commercial fashion show to be hosted in his own home Villa Torrigiani in February 1951.

“He realised that society was changing completely, he was a businessman first of all... his goal was to create business to generate wealth not only for himself but also for the others...and so as a businessman he realised that there was a huge new market opening up in the States, no more just high fashion and unique pieces made in France and Paris for going out at night but everyday fashion and he realised that ‘...is going to become a big business in the future and we can do this, we are good in it, we can produce ...’.
Although Paris never lost its position as the world's fashion capital, in the post-war period it was hindered by high production costs, selling its luxury collections when the average personal income rate had fallen dramatically and restrictive policies imposed by the Chambre Syndicale de la Mode Francais on the licensing, reproduction and exportation of French designs. This decline in the Parisian monopoly and haute-couture, coupled with an increasing demand for affordable, high quality fashion and day-wear, opened a window of opportunity for competitors and therein Giorgini find his chance to bring forth the Made In Italy brand.

“He saw there was this change and he thought... he used to sell to North American department stores, maglieria from Como, Lecco, Milan, the North Italy ...so customers used to come and say ‘This is beautiful, the quality is beautiful but we need to have a French name for this brand otherwise it won’t sell’. So some Italian producers used French names, he was mad about that he said: ‘No! We must produce under Italian names and if we will be able to sell fashion this will pull in everything else’, so he used Fashion to create Made In Italy as a brand he realised fashion was the only tool to be used to do that, just Fashion, he realized that Fashion had a leading role.

His goal was not just to launch Italian fashion, his goal was to make Made In Italy strong and big in order to sell everything, not just fashion…”
L’Europeo Newspaper showing a headline reading “The War of the Tailors” 01.01015 – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
Illustration drawn by the famous fashion show sketch artist Brunetta Marucelli – Linea Banjo “Banjo Line” from Capucci collection 1956 – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
Capucci – 1959 – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
Illustration drawn by the famous fashion show sketch artist Brunetta Marucelli – Linea Crisalide “Chrysalis Line” 1956 – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
So it was on February 12, 1951, in his home of Villa Torrigiani, that Giovanni Battista Giorgini held Italy’s first fashion show featuring 180 collections, several female buyers from elite North American department stores including Jessica Davis of Bergdorff Goodman, Gertrude Ziminsky of New York’s B. Altman and Stella Haniania of San Francisco’s I.Magnin, and a few international journalists.

Giorgini had used his connections and charm to convince these high profile buyers to attend his first show in Florence as they were already in Europe for the Paris collections. In the 1950’s, a journey from America to Europe was a long boat trip followed by a long train ride so Giorgini who was used to hosting international buyers in his home, invited his guests for elegant supper at his home and held grand evening balls to entertain his clients as much as to showcase the fine Italian fashion.

Despite the small number of designers and buyers, the event proved to be a great success. All the collections shown that evening were sold, the buyers contacted their stores to send more funds and the ateliers were inundated with orders.

The event gained extensive media coverage in international fashion magazines such as Fashion trade publication, Women’s Wear Daily’s follow-up headline: “Italian styles gain approval of US Buyers.”

Giorgini’s initiative had proven successful in introducing sophisticated Italian fashion, quality fabrics, skilled technical tailoring and many view this event as the official birth of Italian fashion.
After the success of this first fashion show, Giorgini quickly organised a second show in July, 1951. This time the event took place at the Grand Hotel in Florence, a bigger venue capable of hosting the growing attendance, there were around seventy buyers and journalists and included designers from Rome, Milan, Turin, as well as Florence. Ferragamo, made the shoes while Emilio Pucci presented his first full collection.
Tenth Italian High Fashion Show, Sala Bianca, July 1955 – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
In July 1952 in the beautiful Sala Bianca of Palazzo Pitti, Giorgini’s fourth fashion show was a pivotal event for his enterprise with nine fashion houses participating, along with sixteen houses showcasing boutique styles and sportswear, Florence became the place where all the major Italian fashion shows were held up until 1982 in the Sala Bianca in Palazzo Pitti.

In 1954 Giorgini and his collaborators realised it was necessary to organise this growing wave of fashion business and together they founded the Centro di Firenze per la Moda Italiana (CFMI) designed to promote the fashion events.

From then on, this organisation would promote all the fashion events. There were 500 buyers and 200 journalists at the 1955 shows, making “Pitti” the biggest fashion trade fair in Europe.

Now sixty years on the CFMI and Pitti Immagine, are still going strong and the Palazzo Pitti Fashion shows have grown to include Pitti Uomo in 1972 at the Hotel Villa Medici, Pitti Donna in ’75 at Palazzo Strozzi, Pitti Bimbo in ’75, Pitti Filati in ’77, Pitti Casual in ’78 and Pitti Maglia in ’82 devoted to Italian knitwear.

Italian fashion has influenced the world’s designers and fashion admirers, setting a standard of excellence in style and production that has withstood the threat of fast fashion, cheap counterfeiting, economic pressures and more.

With such a wealth of natural talent and innate style Italian designers such as Versace, Ferragamo, Gucci, Emilio Pucci, Cavalli etc. have deservedly become the stars of the fashion world and it’s difficult to talk about fashion without mentioning their influence so let’s also tip our hat to Count Giovanni Battista Giorgini, the great man who had the vision and charisma to create the international platform for Italian Fashion to stand proudly on.
Neri Fadigati with the original Capucci creation on display at his Hotel Villa – photo by Fashion Spyder
Special thanks to Neri Fadigati for his time and information. Neri, in collaboration with Raffaello Napoleone, chief executive of Pitti Immagine, have published some of the processed photographs and documents in the book The Sala Bianca: The Birth of Italian Fashion.

All photographs are copyright of Archivio Giorgini
All photos on this website are copyrighted material and all rights are reserved. This means you must have permission to use the photos in any way that does not fall under the limited rights granted by the “fair use” clause of the copyright law.

Giorgini’s little red book of buyers from Italy’s first High Fashion Show – All photos are copyright of Archivio Giorgini