

‘Renaissance and Made in Italy’

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There is now a copious, consolidated body of work that illustrates the success of goods labelled ‘Made in Italy’ on the international market, where that label has become a synonym for good taste, careful manufacture and attention to detail. The quality of the product itself was certainly important, but it is evident that the excellence of the manufactured article was not enough alone. We need therefore to investigate how the image that accompanies the idea of ‘Made in Italy’ abroad was created.

The elements that have contributed to the construction of the aforesaid image, which are supposed to identify the distinctive traits of Italian creativity, often derive from a simplistic representation of Italian culture and society and from a superficial reconstruction of the historical development of the country. A centuries old tradition of refined craftsmanship and an infinite history of excellence in the artistic field, whose products have made of Italy a species of great museum that ‘educated’ the population to a ‘sense of the beautiful’ through constant contact with works of art: these are the ideas most frequently adopted to explain the inexhaustible Italian creative vein. The historical period which more than any other was destined to forge Italian good taste in an irreversible manner was without any doubt the Renaissance. Among the various production sectors that make up the variegated galaxy known as ‘Made in Italy’, that of fashion was probably the first to establish itself at international level and the first to appropriate the Renaissance as an ‘intangible asset’. From the nineteen-fifties to today, the period involved in the increasing international success of the ‘Made in Italy’ label, in the rhetoric of entrepreneurs, managers and marketing experts the Renaissance has become almost an integral part of the DNA of Italian fashion, itself at times represented as the direct descendant and legitimate heir of the excellence of Renaissance taste. This is a link, now taken for granted, for which a term was even coined, “The Renaissance Effect”. The fundamental argument which supports the so-called “Renaissance effect” is in fact that of the continuity between the craftsmanship of the Renaissance age and today’s fashion houses. A continuity, however, which has been elaborated through ‘manipulations’ of history which are in part simplistic and in part distorted because such continuity between Renaissance craftsmanship and Italian fashion, considered, as we have seen from the text quoted above, as a sort of certification of noble ancestry by entrepreneurs and manager in the sector, does not exist: it was instead an ‘invention’, as intelligent as it was effective, but historically unfounded, which today, however, has become a species of ‘conventional wisdom’. The author of this happy ‘invention’ was Giovanni Battista Giorgini, the promoter of the successful debut of Italian fashion in the Fifties, who had clearly understood the concept that connecting fashion creativity to the Italian artistic heritage would, besides offering the interesting opportunity to attract the numerous wealthy foreign visitors to the artistic treasures of Italy as clients, also endow the Italian product with an extraordinary cultural legitimisation, placing it directly in the centre of a well-known, appreciated, not to say indisputable, tradition of ‘good taste’: that of the Renaissance. Connecting Italian fashion with Renaissance Italy meant in fact introducing a kind of *ante litteram* guarantee of provenance – a ‘country branding’ - recognised throughout the world, which, at the same time, evoked the splendour of a period in which Italian taste was a model to follow and imitate.

The studies on the history of the Italian fashion business have accepted the association of Italian fashion with Renaissance tradition as an element to take for granted, without inquiring into the historical legitimacy of such a coupling, neither in the way in which it was produced nor why it had an important role. These questions are central to this article, whose aim is to reconstruct the process that led to the appropriation of history – of a particular historical period, the Renaissance – as an intangible asset in the promotion of Italian fashion on the international market: a successful process that led to Italian fashion becoming the fiercest rival of French *Haute Couture* and which, precisely because of this importance, must be studied in such a manner as to eliminate the consistent rhetorical sedimentation with which it is encrusted.

Until 1950 Italian fashion did not exist: there were of course able tailors and creative designers, who, however, were known only as individuals and not as part of a wider movement which identified it in a specific Italian style. Despite the existence of advanced skills able to give birth to an Italian fashion, there was no cultural identity to act as neither a coagulating factor nor an international legitimisation that would allow the new form to compete with the dominant Parisian *Haute Couture*. The recovery – the invention - of the Renaissance as an intangible asset was the fundamental instrument by which this double lack was filled and it therefore became a key factor in the international success of Italian fashion.