

Fashion through History

Fashion through History:

*Costumes, Symbols,
Communication
(Volume II)*

Edited by

Giovanna Motta and Antonello Biagini

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0345-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0345-8

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CHAPTER TEN

FASHION AND ECONOMY

BEFORE ITALIAN FASHION: TEXTILE CRAFTSMANSHIP IN ITALY (1861–1911)

MANUELA SOLDI

These brief notes are part of a wider research project carried out at the Graduate School of Art History and Performing Arts, University of Parma. The aim is to reconstruct the discussion that developed during the first fifty years of Italian unity on the recovery and promotion of Italian textile handicrafts and the possibility of considering this production as the basis of a fashion system that liberated Italy from French cultural dominance.

Various elements lie at the heart of this phenomenon. Firstly, the economic factor—at the start of the period the so-called *piccola industria* was still seen as an accessory to major industry with its economic power and large number of workers. Secondly, the variety of local production highlights the wealth of Italian material culture at a time when historians and intellectuals began to be interested in minor and popular production. Finally, both industrial and artisanal textile manufacture aroused the interest of women's associations; this was due to the large number of women employed in the sector and the habit of women working at home in the production and upkeep of textile artifacts. Growing mechanization impacted on female occupations and gradually on homemade production—this changed and diminished with the spread of sewing machines and other devices, influencing and changing production processes and traditional, inherited methods. The more moderate wings of the feminist movements supported a return to these. Women could work at home without neglecting the family, or in small workshops which avoided the public promiscuity of the factory. Conservative solutions combined women's need for financial emancipation with the safeguarding of crafts which were soon to be swept away by technological advancement. Their reactivation connected to the idea of developing Italian fashion as a creative process and mode of production able to execute all the stages of manufacture.

On the other hand, the origins of Italian fashion as we know it today—as an industry and design phenomenon—seems far removed from the period analyzed in this study. The development of a concept of our own fashion appears older, part of a broader plan to create a sense of national feeling. Episodes preceding the unity of Italy and dating to the first half of the century in which the concept of national fashion began to emerge (Pisetzky 1969, 401–407; Buttazzi 1992, 493–514) include: Italian models and the *Annunzio per la Moda di Milano* (January 23, 1819), which appeared in Carolina Lattanzi's *Corriere delle Dame*; the 1848 intrusion by a group of young people dressed in Italian style at a ball at the Milan Philharmonic Academy in Milan—a costume in dark velvet crowned by a hat *all'Ernani* (or *alla Calabrese*); publication in 1854 of *Storia delle mode*, in book form as a supplement to the *Corriere delle Dame* and with a chapter in the appendix specially dedicated to Italian fashion, from the Etruscans to the eighteenth century. These initiatives were fruitless from the point of view of production, especially since there being no Italian state, there was no chance of economic unity.

It was no coincidence that one of the first tasks of the Italian government was a national exhibition that allowed a first census of production in the country. As regards textile manufacture, grouped under the heading *Vestimenta*, they were “meanly represented and are practiced in feeble proportions in Italy, tributaries of France, England and Germany” (La Direzione 1867, 384). There was, however, a widespread awareness that Italy had once been a leader in the textile sector.

In the 1860s, Michelangelo Jesurum started his business of traditional bobbin lacemaking, typical of the Venetian Lagoon and particularly of Pellestrina. He was helped by the elderly lacemaker Giustina Coja and Paulo Fambri. In 1875, Jesurum introduced multicolor lace, winning a gold medal for it in Paris in 1878. His success led to the opening of a school and seven workshops in Venice, Burano, Murano, Chioggia, and Pellestrina, where a private museum opened in 1906.

A certain interest in the subject was becoming apparent and in Florence the first *Esposizione nazionale dei lavori femminili* was held in 1871.¹ This involved all sectors of female work—the words *lavori femminili* covering the classic crafts of embroidery, lacemaking and sewing, and are still associated with the phrase today. Among the main players was Conte Carlo Demetrio Finocchietti, initially an official representative of the Kingdom of Sardinia, and later Italy, who helped organize a large number of exhibitions and worked

¹ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Fondo Ministero Istruzione Pubblica, Divisione Antichità e Belle Arti, Serie Esposizioni congressi mostre e conferenze 1860-1894, busta 6, fasc. Esposizione Nazionale dei Lavori Femminili in Firenze.

with various academies. Attention came from Vienna, in the shape of director and founder of the *Österreiches Museum für Kunst und Industrie*, Rudolph Eitelberger Von Edelberg, charged by the emperor to arrange a similar exhibition (the only record of the fact comes from Finocchietti himself; however there was a female section at the Vienna Expo of 1873). Nevertheless the exhibition made considerable financial losses, making it impossible for the committee to realize their future plans of organizing an international exhibition on the subject and bringing out a periodical. The idea of a national museum for female crafts lasted for a few months however, as we see from the correspondence between Finocchietti and the Education Minister Cesare Correnti, who requested a feasibility report, which, unfortunately, was not found convincing. The report shows the connection between the development of *lavori femminili* in its strict sense and the idea of Italian fashion.

Founded at almost the same time was the Burano Scuola dei Merletti, a lacemaking school that revitalized a sector of production that had not quite disappeared. It was the first in a series of similar initiatives all over the country defined not as charity, in the form of bread, but as work, by Elisa Ricci, the foremost contemporary observer of the world of textile manufacture who recognized its particular connection to the women's movement.

The immediate cause was the terrible famine brought about by the harsh winter of 1871–72 on the island of Burano near Venice where the population's main livelihood was fishing. Senator Paulo Fambri and Contessa Andriana Zon Marcello, a lady at the court of Margherita di Savoia, from whom she managed to obtain patronage, helped to set up the project. The husband of Andriana, Alessandro Marcello, had already tried unsuccessfully to relaunch the craft in the 1850s. The two main figures in this tale were the daughter of the mayor of Burano, Anna d'Este, and the elderly expert lacemaker Cencia Scarpariola, who taught her the craft. The school's production was inspired by the various types of sixteenth-century Venetian lacemaking and by the Flemish and French methods that dominated the market in the following centuries. From the beginning it was clear how important it was to make the school fit into a centuries-old tradition. It only takes a quick glance at the list of exhibits in Florence in 1871 to realize that the need to cherish traditions was not generally so keenly felt in other places as it was in Venice. Therefore, as Elisa Ricci points out the care taken by the school to publicize itself, with its quality of production initially uncertain, is significant. Indeed, although Italian participation at the 1873 Exhibition of Vienna, on the whole, was poor, the Burano School was there. The 1878 exhibition in Paris, on the other hand, saw the publication of a booklet on the

history of Venetian lace—*Origines de la dentelle de Venise et l'Ecole du Point de Burano* by Victor Ceresole. Other lace-makers began, timidly at first, to show their wares in the same section and eleven of them, out of a total of thirteen, received awards. What is more, in the catalogue *Arte e industria a Parigi 1878* by Hoepli, which contained a selection of the best European homemade and mechanical handicrafts, only lace appears among the Italian articles.

The school became a model for promoting the Italian manufactures run by the most culturally and morally vulnerable sectors of the population, in particular, women. A basic theme was beginning to emerge where a local Cencia Scarpariola-like figure passed on their know-how, which otherwise would have been lost to future generations.

Soon to become honorary president of the school of Burano, Queen Margherita regularly loaned the school examples of antique lace and supported the teaching of drawing. Evidence of this connection is the bridal veil given to her daughter-in-law, Elena of Montenegro, on the occasion of her marriage, and the parasol given to the princess herself by the school on the same occasion.²

Margherita commissioned many works around Italy and her name, in fact, occurs regularly where the work of women has been fostered. This was partly to be expected from the first lady and first queen of Italy. A number of factors were at work here: economic interests related to the development of women's manufactures, also reflected sometimes in the choice of materials for their rich toilettes (for which Margherita and her court also turned to Worth and French products); the need to focus national feeling through rediscovery of Italian folk traditions; and, ultimately, a personal inclination for embroidery and lace, which was shared by many women of the time. Also significant was the fact that the catalogue published by the Industrie Femminili Italiane cooperative (IFI) during the Simplon Exhibition of 1906 (IFI 1906) began with lines inviting us to consider the work of the hands as an expression of the heart. It was signed by Margherita, who had become more of a patron of these disciplines than her daughter-in-law.

During the 1870s lace production began to change from a forgotten and neglected industry into the standard bearer for Italian artistry. The same period was marked by debate over the question as to whether a national fashion was in the making. Talk began again about producing Italian fashion plates during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) when it was not possible to access the French market. The enthusiasm was palpable on the pages of

² See photographic albums in the Burano Lace School Archive, currently preserved at the Palazzo Mocenigo Museum and Centre for Studies of the History of Textiles and Costumes.

magazines such as *La moda italiana. Giornale dei lavori femminil*, whose goal was to give fashion events a national character all of their own, which was defined as “one of the most pressing needs of the world of Italian elegance, to be met by turning to the innate artistic intellect of the Italians, and to our glorious traditions” (La Direzione 1871, 1-2). To fulfill the project required the combined commitment of entrepreneurs, seamstresses and artists. Francesco Dal’Ongaro, who wrote for the magazine, drafted a long appeal (Dall’Ongaro 1872). He was not new to analyzing the question of fashion—in *L’arte italiana a Parigi* (1869), after having fully examined clothes (*vestimenta*) in the applied arts sector, he posed the question of how Italian textile manufactures might be able to regain their rightful position of supremacy.

In 1872, the Società per l’emancipazione delle mode italiane (Society for the emancipation of Italian fashion) opened in Rome. It grouped artisans together close to the Royal House and published the monthly magazine *L’emancipazione italiana. Giornale delle mode*, which shortly afterwards became the three-monthly *Il risorgimento delle mode*. Its aim was to improve Italian production with models and technical advice.

A promoter of Italian fashion during the same period was Emilia Bossi, a business woman in the prêt-à-porter sector, owner of stores in Florence and Rome, and a supplier to the royal household. In 1874, to mark the exhibition on Michelangelo, she designed and launched the Michelangelo hat, made in Paris and inspired by the artist’s own hat. At the same time her company published two very different pamphlets. The first, *La moda ai tempi di Michelangelo*, was initially intended as an analysis of costumes at the time of the artist, but became little more than a few suggestions for further reading. It showed, however, an interesting cross section of nineteenth-century studies on clothing styles. The second was a short literary text written for the occasion and entitled *Di palo in frasca* (Jumping from one subject to another), which was described as a record of a conversation overheard in the salon of one of the company’s important customers.

In this imagined scene, ladies and unidentified intellectuals were chatting amiably in a salon—some of the personages were clearly closely associated with the royal family—and their conversation touched on the subject of the Italianness of fashion. In actual fact, the advertising for the celebratory hat, warmly recommended only in the last few pages, became an opportunity for an analysis of contemporary costume and a criticism of the tendency to seek security in French fashions. It became a critique of the national nature of fashion, the necessity of its relationship with art and history and, in closure, mused on the time when “it will be the turn of our artists and manufacturers to supply materials for the grooming of ladies” (*Di palo in frasca* 1874, 30).

Emilia Bossi also supported a national exhibition of all genres relating to fashion, with regard to women's clothing,³ in Florence. This time, gender characterization was removed from the exhibitors' admission criteria and applied to the buyer. The text that illustrates the project observes the changing conditions since unification, and refers to the crisis in textile production—a sector that had previously allowed Italy to occupy a leading position in Europe. Yet, some production of good quality managed to endure, despite lacking in design and visibility. Before achieving an Italian fashion in terms of design, it was therefore necessary for industry and textile manufacturers to join together to create Italian apparel. This is why Emilia Bossi's proposal contemplates the possibility of presenting women's clothing on the Paris model as a first step in a process that, once the Italian textile industry was ready, would add details to clothes that the French and English modistes did not and therefore to create an original fashion—many centuries of division prevented manufacturers from influencing one another and engaging positively in terms of originality.

In the late 1880s and 90s, the revival of Venetian lace was an established fact, serving as a model for similar situations. While the Renaissance became an archetype for architectural styles and many of the applied arts in united Italy, another trend was emerging that looked to the people for national character, and a multifaceted popular culture was investigated from all possible perspectives, including ways of dressing. The attention to traditions and folk crafts materialized in the Ethnographic Exhibition held at the Milan Expo in 1881; in 1892 Giuseppe Pitrè organized a Sicilian event at the Exposition of Palermo; in 1898, at the Turin National Exposition, special displays were held of the small industries of the Aosta Valley, Valsesia, and Sardinia. At the invitation of the government minister Martini, Italian ethnographer Lamberto Loria organized an important ethnographic exhibition, held in Rome in 1911, which included a section on costume.

Divergences and points of contact between more refined models and those of folk arts are easily visible in the work of Elisa Ricci, who investigated both the aristocratic tradition of needle lace and pattern books—taking part in the exhibition *Ornamento femminile* in Rome (1908), which was mainly dedicated to the reconstruction of the costumes of the élite—as well as peasant art. She recalls, for example, how in Italy the relationship between needle lace and bobbin lace can be compared to literary language and dialects: “needle lace speaks Italian, though with a Venetian accent, bobbin lace speaks in dialect” (Ricci 1908, 218-19). Elisa Ricci dealt with

³ ACS, Ministero di Agricoltura Industria e Commercio, Divisione Industria e Commercio, I° versamento, busta 116B, fasc. Esposizione campionaria di prodotti nazionali per l'abbigliamento femminile in Firenze 1876.

rustic arts in several articles appearing in *Emporium*, and particularly in a long essay for *Peasant Art in Italy* (1913), a monograph published by *The Studio*, a British magazine closely connected to the Arts & Crafts movement.

Initiatives aimed at training artisans through schools and museums also began to mature in the 1890s. In Rome there was an exhibition of fabrics and antique lace in 1887, part of a comprehensive program of exhibitions on the applied arts organized by the Industrial Art Museum (Museo artistico industriale) in Rome (Erculei 1887). Defined as both retrospective and contemporary, the purpose of these exhibitions was to present a detailed overview of past production alongside major contemporary Italian output. These were composite exhibitions in an organic program that involved crafts and manufacturing as a whole and were devoid of any reference to gender.

Meanwhile, among the associations a large number of women were becoming interested in these issues. In 1890, a new exhibition of women's work was held in Florence, as part of the celebrations for the sixth centenary of the death of Beatrice Portinari. The main actor was Professor Angelo de Gubernatis, best known for his literary works and his activities as an Orientalist and magazine publisher. In this case, despite the controversy caused by the name of the exhibition, the gender aspect prevailed again. The exhibition was an important occasion for Italian supporters of the female cause, many of whom belonged to local committees. International initiatives, which were already more advanced elsewhere when compared to Italy, go back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, and reached their zenith in Chicago in 1893, when the World's Congress of Representative Women, organized by the International Council of Women (ICW), was held. Delegates from thirty countries, including fourteen European ones, gave a truly international character to an organization that until then had been primarily American. Cora Slocomb of Brazzà represented Italy. Besides already establishing some of the lace-making schools described in her speech, the Contessa di Brazzà, with her sisters Maria Pasolini Ponti and Antonia Suardi Ponti, belonged to the Società per l'Esposizione Artistico Industriale (Society for the exhibition of industrial art), which had held exhibitions in Rome for the first time in 1891, identified by the IFI as the first step in a process that would lead to its constitution.

Of even greater significance today is the influence of the event organized in 1893 by Cora di Brazzà and her companions, which occupied the entire Italian wing of the Women's Building at the Chicago exhibition (Slocomb di Brazzà 1893). This was the first major exhibition of Italian women's work abroad, and presented their work as of recognized excellence, fit to be used for the benefit of the national image in an international context. An increasingly tight knot was being tied, meanwhile, between the struggle for

the emancipation and promotion of handicrafts, in both manufacturing and domestic contexts, to allow less well-off women to support themselves. The exhibition *Operosità femminile* of 1902 provided the opportunity for an initial survey and coordination of existing laboratories nationwide and was the direct cause of the foundation of the *Industrie Femminili Italiane* cooperative in 1903 (Amadori 1902). Among its purposes was the recognition of the economic value of craftsmanship and advocacy for reform of the aesthetics of craft products inspired by folk heritage and national art through association with artists, as well as a unified effort to sell and promote articles. The same year saw the founding of the National Council of Italian Women (*Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane*). The official organ for both was *Vita femminile italiana*, a magazine started in 1907 and directed by Sofia Bisi Albini, the aim of which was to create a bridge between the two organizations.

The participation of the IFI at the Simplon Exhibition of 1906 was certainly one of the highlights of the cooperative. Most of the Italian regions were represented at the exhibition and its impact resonated clearly in the words of the famous critic Ugo Ojetti, who at the time considered the IFI proposal to be the possible answer to the question of defining a national Italian style. Twenty years later, Elisa Ricci was to remember it as the happiest time for Italian women's work, spoilt only by a disastrous fire that destroyed the Pavilion of Decorative Arts. The cooperative expressly asked for examples of work with the typical markers of the exhibitors' place of origin, and the photos that accompanied these works were published in the catalogue, showing an ethnological-anthropological interest in the local contexts from which these products originated.

Next to the IFI section, in the same pavilion, a member of the Rosa

Genoni cooperative was displaying examples of pure Italian art made with Italian materials—a first response to more than forty years of critical and powerful commitment to the revival of Italian textile traditions and the inception of the Italian fashion concept. The construction of a productive and creative system able to make these dreams a reality would come about only later.

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