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The Race between Italy and France for the American Market in Fashion

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the main initiatives undertaken in the fashion sector in Italy and France between the Fifties and the Sixties of the twentieth century. Moreover, this concerning the high Italian fashion shows organized in Florence starting in February 1951 by Giovanni Battista Giorgini. Indeed, they marked the affirmation of Italy at an international level by registering a considerable interest on the part of American buyers. In this context, the role of Paris as the unique capital of fashion in the world is challenged for the first time. In this regard, Italian fashion and, in a more particular way, Florence became the leading competitor in conquering the American market for the fashion sector during the second post-war period. In particular, the text traces the public and private intervention plans for the coordination and promotion of the fashion system in both countries.

Keywords: Fashion Shows; Florence; Paris; American Market; Contemporary History.

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The “Bomb” of Florence on Fashion

The fashion shows organized by Giovanni Battista Giorgini in 1951, celebrated during the International conference *Giovanni Battista Giorgini, from Artistic Craftsmanship to High Fashion, Italian Soft Power*, on February 12, 2021, marked the international affirmation of Italy by recording considerable interest by the American market. Furthermore, his *Italian High Fashion Shows* contributed definitively to affirming the idea of Italian fashion and its emancipation from French fashion.¹ The success of these events is due to Giorgini’s vision and expertise. The Tuscan entrepreneur is a profound knower of the United States thanks to his travels and business relationships since 1924 as a promoter of Italian craftsmanship in North America.² After World War II, his experience supports his awareness of the American market’s strategic role for Italian creations and the promotion of the Made in Italy brand.³

Furthermore, it is thanks to Giorgini’s efforts and skills that the role of Paris as the world’s exclusive fashion capital was challenged for the first time and, more precisely, when Florence and Italian fashion became the first competitor in the post-war race for the American market. Indeed, one of Giorgini’s most significant merits is placing high fashion, unique pieces on the catwalk, together with the Boutique fashion, handcrafted garments, made in small series,⁴ probably considered a lesser production, but a perfect response to American taste.

Alongside the style and suitability of the models presented in Florence, the purpose was to emphasize Italy’s cultural heritage by hosting events with references to Florentine history in celebrating the splendor of the Renaissance courts, making the creations on display more appealing to foreign buyers.⁵ As a result, Florence and the garments presented at Villa Torrigiani became new players in the international fashion scenario. An absolute blast for Paris, as the French newspapers headlined in the summer of 1951, calling this event the bomb of Florence. The newspapers titled: *La Bombe de Florence a ébranlé les salons*.⁶

The Italian issue was so prominent that it was brought to the attention of the Paris City Council at its meeting on November 26 1951.⁷ The councilors’ warning was highlighted in an article published in “Les Echos” on October 12 1951: “Italian haute couture has launched a huge offensive against the competitors, taking advantage of the difficulties of the Parisian Maisons and aiming to take their place on the American market.”⁸

French observers were worried about the activities of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, defined as “the man who introduced Vermouth and Italian straw hats to the United States and who has become the number one enemy of Parisian fashion.”⁹ According to French newspapers, Giorgini has been able to attract the attention of the American market and the most influential American journalists such as Carmel Snow and Bettina Ballard. The presentations of the winter collections held in Florence put in danger the French tailors’ exclusive power.¹⁰ Italian creations began to attract the attention of French public opinion and put Italy as a true competitor in the international fashion market.

1. See Elisabetta Merlo, *Moda italiana. Storia di un'industria dall'Ottocento a oggi*, (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), 72.
2. See Neri Fadigati, “Giovanni Battista Giorgini, la famiglia, il contributo alla nascita del Made in Italy, le fonti archivistiche,” *ZoneModa Journal* Vol. 8 (July 2018): 5.
3. See Fadigati, 7.
4. See Ivan Paris, *Oggetti cuciti. L'abbigliamento pronto in Italia dal primo dopoguerra agli anni Settanta*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006), 183.
5. Cf. ASF, AMIGBG, Album 23.
6. Cf. *Paris-press l'intransigent*, (August 5-6, 1951).
7. Cf. BMO, December 3, 1951, Paris City council, meeting of November 26, 1951.
8. See “Contre la haute couture parisienne, l'Italie a lancé à Florence l'offensive des ‘trois journées’”, *Les Echos*, (October 12, 1951): 4.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

Giorgini's presentations were part of the actions in the field of fashion that began with the end of the war in both Italy and France. They led to the birth of an Italian fashion on the one hand and saw at the same time the defense of the French haute couture tradition on the other with a program of public and private interventions. Moreover, we can consider these actions relevant events that outlined the definition of the respective fashion systems, defining the new boundaries of the fashion sector, a sector of considerable importance and interest from an economic, political and cultural point of view.¹¹

The Fifties can be considered a pivotal period, above all in Italy, during which they are laid the foundations for creating a veritable national market, which was the prelude to the country's rise to the highest levels of manufacturing productivity in the world.¹² In Paris, at the beginning of the Fifties, there was a swinging return to the haute couture industry with the start of a system of public grants. At the same time in Italy, many feats are launched in different cities from North to South. Therefore, an interest in fashion was evident, especially in Florence, which was able to achieve an international success that other Italian cities had not reached until then. This context made Florence the capital of Italian fashion, at that time, particularly concerning the United States, incorporated in its process of imperialistic modernity.¹³

Italian Initiatives

However, it must be underlined that despite the doubtless Florentine success, Italian fashion was still fragile. Since the end of the war, there has been a kind of Italian competition, typical of the contrasting model of development of the Italian nation and which compromised unified management of fashion at a central level, as emerges from the analysis of the sources.¹⁴ A multiplication of trade organizations with the intention of filling the institutional void was created by the abolition in 1946 of the *Ente Nazionale della Moda* (National Fashion Board) and created by Mussolini in 1932.¹⁵

For instance, after 1951, there were up to thirteen fashion organizations in Italy, from Venice to Palermo.¹⁶ All these various and sometimes mutually contradictory moves could put the country's fashion industry management in a difficult position in the eyes of American buyers. As Marcello Egidi, the commercial officer of the Italian Consulate in New York, stated in his report of October 26 1951:

...the multitude of uncoordinated actions, the creation of conflicts or jealousies, could only create confusion or a sense of loss of confidence in American business circles and seriously damage the goodwill achieved for Italian creations. Nevertheless, on the other hand, all this would be to the benefit of French fashion.¹⁷

In this competition mood between the various interventions for fashion in Italy, Giorgini's events required official acknowledgment from the public sphere. Support for this came from the city's local authorities, such as the Provincial Tourist Board and the Florence City Council.¹⁸

11. See Gianluigi Di Giangirolamo, *Istituzioni per la moda. Interventi tra pubblico e privato in Italia e Francia (1945-1965)*, (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2019).

12. Guido Melis, *Fare lo Stato per fare gli italiani. Ricerche di storia delle istituzioni dell'Italia unita*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 9.

13. See Daniela Calanca, " 'New York is Everybody's Town.' Itinerari della moda tra Europa e Stati Uniti in età contemporanea," in *Moda, Metropoli e Modernità*, ed. Daniela Baroncini, (Milano: Mimesis, 2018), 85.

14. See Melis, 10.

15. See Daniela Calanca, *Storia sociale della moda contemporanea*, (Bologna: BUP, 2014), 115-220.

16. See Valeria Pinchera and Diego Rinallo, "The emergence of Italy as a fashion country: Nation branding and collective meaning creation at Florence's fashion shows (1951-1965)," *Business History*, Vol. 61, (June 2017); Guido Vergani, *La sala bianca la nascita della Moda Italiana*, (Milano: Electa, 1992), 66.

17. Cf. ASF, AMIGBG, Album 23.

18. Cf. ASF, AMIGBG, Album 10.

Among the examples is the concession of the communal spaces of Palazzo Vecchio or the support in the requests to the superintendence of monuments such as the Boboli Gardens or the Belvedere Fortress, which were the scenario for galas and banquet events dedicated to buyers and journalists. The city authorities also intervene in Giorgini's request at the *Belle Arti* bureau to transfer the presentations of the summer of 1952 to the Sala Bianca of Palazzo Pitti.¹⁹ The place emblem of the birth of Italian fashion.

The first official acknowledgment was given in 1953 when the Italian High Fashion Show received the patronage of the *Ente Italiano della Moda (Italian Fashion Board)*, based in Turin.²⁰ This was a form of recognition by the institution in the fashion sector in Italy at that time. The only organization that had a close link with the government as a State accredited body for fashion. The patronage gave Giorgini's events a primacy and a form of official status by creating an executive committee.

However, the complete formalization of the Florence events took place with the establishment of the *Centro di Firenze per la Moda Italiana* (Florence Centre for Italian fashion) in 1954. An initiative promoted by Giorgini with the local authorities of the town.²¹

According to its statute, this organization aimed to promote and enhance Italian fashion in all its aspects, with particular regard to events and presentations for international buyers.²² The City of Florence, the Chamber of Commerce, the Industrial Association, and the Tourist Board all participate in the establishment of the Centre. The body was set up mainly for the organization of the presentations at Palazzo Pitti. However, it is also a formalization, through the support of the local public bodies, of what has been achieved in previous years on a national but especially international level.

In the meanwhile, a pluralism of institutions was going on in Italy. The case of Rome is significant. The local authorities of the Italian capital, determined in the success of the events held in their city and aware of the importance of haute couture for the local economy, set up a new organization, the *Centro Romano per l'Alta Moda Italiana (Roman Centre for Italian High Fashion)*.²³ Founded On 12 November 1954, this Centre would play an important role, together with the Florence Centre, in laying the foundations of the *Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana* (National Chamber of Italian Fashion). The initiative was born with the support of the Chamber of Commerce, the Provincial Administration, the Provincial Tourism Board, the Municipality of Rome, and the Roman Italian Union Trade of High Fashion.²⁴

The following institutional step took place in the Italian capital, at the end of the 1950s, with the first proposal for an agreement between the centers of Florence and Rome. The two organizations aimed to establish a unified front on the model of the Parisian *Chambre Syndicale*. This led to the creation of the *Camera Sindacale della Moda Italiana* (Italian Fashion Trade Association) in 1958.²⁵

The founding act of the association was signed by the haute couture houses of Rome, Florence, and Milan: such as Roberto Capucci, Alberto Fabiani, Cesare Guidi, Emilio Schuberth, Simonetta Colonna, Jole Veneziani. The representatives of the two centers, Giovanni Battista Giorgini, Pietro Parisio, and Francesco Borrello, were appointed by statute as President, Vice President, and Secretary, respectively.²⁶ The association was born by the will of the centers of Rome and Florence, with the support of the *Centro Mediterraneo della Moda e dell'Artigianato* (Mediterranean Center of Fashion and Craftsmanship)

19. Ibid.

20. See Cinzia Capalbo, *Storia della moda a Roma: sarti, culture e stili di una capitale dal 1871 a oggi*, (Roma: Donzelli, 2012), 145.

21. See Pinchera and Rinallo, 11.

22. See Valeria Pinchera, "Firenze e la nascita della moda italiana: dai drappi alla Sala Bianca," in *Annali di storia dell'impresa 19/2008 Prima del made in Italy*, ed. Marco Belfanti (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), 183.

23. See Capalbo, 147.

24. See ACS, PCM '55-'58, *Manifestazioni romane di Alta Moda italiana 20, 21, 22,23 gennaio 1955*.

25. See Capalbo, 149.

26. See ASCNMI, B. 1 f. 1, *Atto Costitutivo della Associazione "Camera Sindacale della Moda Italiana" Roma, 11 giugno 1958*.

in Naples,²⁷ in order to achieve the governance and coordination of the broad fashion sector for the first time in Italy.²⁸

The new organization's goal was: "to defend, protect, enhance and manage the Italian fashion sector and to coordinate fashion events, both in Italy and abroad."²⁹ This project nevertheless remained at a standstill for a few years. At the beginning of the 1960s, Paris became a center of attraction for some of the most famous Italian fashion designers such as Capucci, Simonetta, and Fabiani, who decided to leave Italy to present their creations across the Alps. This escape, Called *Capriccio Francese* by "Espresso" magazine, caused some concern, both from a political point of view and from the two centers of Rome and Florence, as well as filling the pages of the major newspapers and specialized magazines for several months.³⁰

This phenomenon has undoubtedly made public opinion and institutions aware of the problems of Italian fashion, in particular the need for an institution to protect the sector and for the Italian government to play a substantial role.

In the spring of 1962, the leading players in the Italian fashion industry, including Giorgini, were involved in defining a National Chamber, starting a founding process restoring the project of *Camera Sindacale della Moda Italiana* founded in 1958. In this way, the task of setting up a National chamber is officially entrusted to the Centres of Rome, Florence, Milan, and Naples, together with the respective Chambers of Commerce, in anticipation of later extending participation to other interested institutions.³¹

The formal constitution of the *Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana* takes place on September 29 1962, giving birth at the association, which is still now a day the first point of reference for all fashion initiatives in Italy.

The then-new established *Camera Nazionale* can undoubtedly be considered to have actively attracted the attention of the Italian government to fashion issues.³² One of the objectives promoted and affirmed in the institution's documents was to promote an "Italian fashion policy."³³ Furthermore, this marks the start of a collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Trade to promote Italian fashion abroad and set up relevant advertising campaigns.³⁴

French Initiatives

At the beginning of the 1960s, the Italian *Camera Nazionale* set up an organized system to promote fashion abroad. Similarly, for its French sister organization, it was essential to increase and develop the volume of exports to the outside world. This is why it has already been working for a few years to enhance relations and promotion in the United States in particular.³⁵

27. See Ornella Cirillo "Fashion and Tourism in Campania in the Middle of the Twentieth Century: a Story with Many Protagonists," *Almatourism*, S.I. *Fashion between Heritage and Tourism*, Vol. 9, (December 2018): 36.

28. See Paris, 231.

29. See ASCNMI B. 1 f. 1, *Scopi della Camera Sindacale*.

30. See ASCNMI B.4, f.1, *Trasferimento delle case di alta moda Fabiani - Simonetta - Capucci a Parigi*.

31. Ibid.

32. See Di Giangiolamo, 77–94.

33. Cf. ASCNMI B. 4 f. 2, *Relazione unica predisposta dal gruppo di lavoro per il coordinamento delle comunicazioni fatte al convegno nella seduta del 10 luglio 1963*.

34. See Elisabetta Merlo and Maria Natalina Trivisano (Eds.), *Lo stile italiano nelle carte*, (Roma: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Direzione Generale Archivi, 2018), 114.

35. See Di Giangiolamo, 101–103

With this strategy in mind, on September 13, 1957, the board of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* (*Parisian Couture Trade Association*) decided to entrust the New York office of Gottlieb with an accurate survey on the American market.

The study of this report, drawn up in four volumes, and the conclusions outlined by the Gottlieb agency, led the *Chambre Syndicale* to the decision to open its own office in New York. This institutional location in the United States had the task of defending the interests of Parisian couture on the ground and taking the necessary actions to increase sales of French models on the American market.³⁶

Jacques Heim, the former president of the *Chambre Syndicale*, organized a journey to New York from September 17 to 25, 1958,³⁷ together with two collaborators in order to personally establish contacts that were indispensable for the coordination of promotional activities in the United States. During this mission, numerous meetings took place with the managers of the major retail stores, representatives of the most crucial garment companies, journalists, and personalities such as the lawyer Gotshal, a specialist in artistic property, and the commercial counselor at the French Embassy. Thanks to these exchanges, the French organization put in place a series of promotional projects, such as organizing a seasonal package trip in Paris to introduce French couture to American buyers. Among the various promotional campaigns, a color television program was also planned to present the new creations from Paris to the American public.³⁸

On the commercial side, the *Chambre Syndicale* created a *passeport-couture* for the use of buyers with the aim to strengthen relations between French couture and its American customers, or at least to facilitate relations between buyers and couturiers. In addition, the 1959 budget for promotional activities included the financing of the *Chambre Syndicale's* representative office in New York, participation in foreign trade fairs, interventions in foreign universities through conferences, scholarships, and contests, promotional events abroad, the production of promotional short films, and finally, intensive actions for the international defense of copyright.

Jacques Heim can undoubtedly be considered one of the key players in planning promotional efforts in the United States. For 1960, he presented a proposal for numerous Parisian couture events in the “key cities” of the American market.³⁹ The aim is to directly show its products to the American public and strengthen the name of French couture as a leader in international fashion.

The events called *Manifestations Parisienne en Amérique* were organized with the support of the Gottlieb Institute. In this regard, the company had the task of selecting a group of high-level personalities to involve them in the organization of social events such as, for example, charity balls during Parisian fashion shows. In collaboration with representatives of the French government, the agency in each city had to be in contact with the most influential personalities in the fashion world. In order for the events to reach a booming resonance, the various actors in the area had to be involved, from the owners of the most well-known boutiques to the media. In Paris, the *Chambre Syndicale* had, instead, the task of selecting the best clothes and models for the presentations. In addition, particular attention had to be paid to the choice of the presenter of the show, who had to be known in the fashion world and able to speak in the name of Parisian couture during interviews with the press. From the very beginning, four cities were chosen to set up the events: Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Cincinnati. The new aim for the Gottlieb agency was to be ordered to organize events in New York, Houston, and San Francisco as well.⁴⁰

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the origins of the Italian fashion system can be placed in the process of democratization of the country and a process of international endorsement of the Italian

36. Cf. CAEF B0008409/1 FEPTHCP (1958-1959) *Rapport sur les activités aux Etats Unis*.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Cf. CAEF B0008409/1 FEPTHCP (1959-1961) *Bureau de New York*.

40. Cf. CAEF B0008409/1 FEPTHCP (1959-1961) *Projet de “Manifestations de la couture parisienne” dans les ville-clefs du marche americain*.

product and the international recognition of an Italian style. Moreover, this also thanks to work carried out by Giorgini. He put the primary role played for quite a long time by Paris under warning – and for the first time under review – particularly from the point of view of competition on the foreign market and, more precisely, on the US market. For the first time, this condition imposed on Paris the need to look at Italy as a real competitor in the organization of measures aimed at taking over that significant segment of the international market that was the United States.

List of Abbreviations

ACS: Archivio Centrale dello Stato
(*Central State Archive*)

AMIGBG: Archivio della Moda Italiana di Giovanni Battista Giorgini
(*Giovanni Battista Giorgini's Italian Fashion Archive*)

ASCNMI: Archivio Storico della Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana
(*Historic Archive of the National Chamber of Italian Fashion*)

ASF: Archivio di Stato di Firenze
(*Florence State Archive*)

B: *Series*

BMO: Bulletin Municipal Officiel de la Ville de Paris
(*Official Municipal Bulletin of the City of Paris*)

CAEF: Centre des Archives Économique et Financiers
(*Centre of Economic and Financial Archives*)

f.: *File*

FEPTHCP: Fonds d'encouragement à la production textile à la Haute Couture Parisienne
(*Fund to Encourage Textile Production for Parisian Haute Couture*)

PCM: Fondo Gabinetto Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.
(*Cabinet Fund of the Prime Minister's Office*)

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