When Rome Was Italy’s Film and Fashion Capital

Stefano Dominella (January 21, 2021)

From Florence on down, craftsmanship reigns. Up north is the reign of finance, industry, and media, with Milan at the helm. And at the center presides Rome, like a classy patrician, the ancient capital of Italian couture. Leading us on this first installment of a multipart trip to the heart of Made in Italy is a doyen of the fashion world.

Once upon a time, Rome was the capital of Italian fashion. In a certain sense it still is. Rome is the capital of haute couture. Even today, if you had to shoot a fashion video, you’d shoot it in **Piazza di Spagna** [2], because the global imagination links couture to the Eternal City. However, that video would be screened at a gala in Milan. That’s where major international prêt-à-porter buyers gather. That’s where the major ventures ruling the fashion industry reside. That’s where luxury Made in Italy

brands are broadcast. So is Milan the new capital of Italy? Many believe so. And the rivalry between the two cities is regularly rekindled in the media, in talk show polemics, and even among politicians. But what was Italy like before the industrial revolution altered the country's makeup? And why does the image of Rome as the country's capital still reign supreme in the international imagination long after its propulsive force has been exhausted? We'll begin here.

The Movie Industry Myth of Rome and Haute Couture

Our story begins at the end of World War II, after the allied troops disembarked in Sicily and the partisan groups mobilized in the center-north to liberate the country from the fascist regime. Italy exits the global conflict ravaged by bombs and reduced to shambles. But one of the industries to land on its feet was the citadel of cinema, Cinecittà, which was built by the fascists on the outskirts of Rome in the 1930s. (The regime was conscious of the importance of mass media, then-dominated by radio and film.) After the war, Cinecittà [3] managed to attract major international producers who helped the world discover the city, and Italy.

A key feature of Cinecittà was, on the one hand, its avant-garde facilities, and on the other its ability to employ craftsmen who had honed their skills in traditional artisanal workshops. An entire production fleet assembled around Cinecittà, from set designers to editors, which cost far less than Hollywood. International directors and producers recognized the convenience, Cinecittà earned the nickname "Hollywood on the Tiber," and Rome became an international beacon of the entertainment world.

Over the next two decades roughly forty American films were shot in Cinecittà, including historic works with huge budgets and thousands of extras, like King Vidor's War and Peace (1955), Robert Wise's Helen of Troy (1956) and William Wyler's Ben Hur (1959). But productions often left the citadel to infiltrate the city and manufacture Italian style dreams, like Wyler's Roman Holiday (1953), which launched the cinematographic myth of the city, a myth that would be cemented by Fellini in his multi-awarded winning film La Dolce Vita [4] (1960). As major production companies and international stars poured into Rome, followed by VIPs and paparazzi, the fashion ateliers grew larger and more sophisticated. The famous Sorelle Fontana atelier provided the designs for Luciano Emmer's film Three Girls from Rome. Fernando Gattinoni [5], who dressed the major stars on the sets and in private—such as Anna Magnani, Ingrid Bergman, Audrey Hepburn [6], Lana Turner, and Kim Novak—was nominated for an Oscar in costume design for War and Peace. Fashion and film were born and developed together. And all that could only have happened in Rome.

The Chinese Origins of Italian Fashion

But Cinecittà and haute couture have something else in common: they promoted not industrial but craft-based systems of production. They are rooted in small workshops and individual creativity, and combine artistic intuition with skilled labor. That is reflective of Italy in general, historically and culturally speaking. In the two decades after the war, the country's industrial failings, especially in the South, became, in a sense, the engine of development. Including in the field of fashion.

In the 1950s and 1960s, large American retailers like Saks, Neiman Marcus, **Bergdorf Goodman** [7], and Bloomingdales discovered Italy the same way we have discovered China today: as a supplier of good raw materials and quality craftsmanship at bargain prices. These retailers would purchase a design in Paris and have it reproduced in places like Carpi, in Emilia Romagna, and other small Italian cities from Umbria to Piedmont. Out of these rural areas with a long history of craftsmanship, small family businesses were born; while the head of the family worked for the railroad or in the fields, his wife and daughters would buy a loom and set to work for foreign fashion brands.

Several Italian clothing companies were created as a result of this travail à façon. Craft workshops were first transformed into small family-owned producers to avoid foreign job costs. Then the knowhow they acquired was used to produce their own collections. And when retailers came to pick up the goods they had ordered, these families would offer them their own collections! Those families that succeeded in launching their products would go on to create brands now famous around the world, like Ferretti, Iceberg, and MaxMara in Emilia Romagna, and Loropiana and Zegna in Piedmont.

The first Italian prêt-à-porter is born. But then…

That is how the first Italian prêt-à-porter was born. Paradoxically, the relationship with couture fashion, and therefore with Rome, was still crucial, even if the process developed in such a way as to

rob Rome of its standing as the capital of Italian fashion. The opening of the first boutiques was the harbinger of this shift. Before then, clothes were hand-stitched and tailor-made. The rich shopped in the big ateliers and everyone else resorted to their local tailor or the superintendent's wife or their grandmother. Boutiques changed all that. Now you could find very elegant, readymade clothes at a much lower price. **Luisa Spagnoli** [8]would buy from big couture labels like **Sorelle Fontana** [9], Gattinoni, and Schubert, and then produce two or three hundred articles of clothing for the boutiques.

But the real father of prêt-à-porter was Walter Albini, a tragic figure who died very young, though not before making an indelible mark on the history of Italian fashion. Albini, who studied at the Institute of Art, Design and Fashion in Turin, and began publishing his sketches for couture fashion shows in Rome and Paris at the age of 17, was the first Italian "stylist." As a stylist, he would abandon the atelier for the factory. It was Albini who, in the early 1970s, had the intuition to bring together various specialized craftsmen to work on a single stylistic project and create a unique collection with "two lines": the first a limited edition cutting-edge design, and the second, more affordable, destined for wider distribution. No less important, Albini presented some of his first collections not in Rome or Florence but in Milan, the heart of industrial Italy.

From Rome to Milan: The Industrialization of Fashion
In fact, back then Milan was the only place in Italy with the financing, production, and commercial capabilities needed to run a wide-scale operation. And it was in Milan where new talents like Armani, Versace, and Kizia began to concentrate. They were the industrial stylists who, in the 1970s and 80s, would use prêt-à-porter to launch the myth of Made in Italy worldwide. They were the ones who led Italian fashion—and the clothing industry in general—to make a splash not only on movie screens and in the villas of VIPs, but on the foreign mass market. If Rome was the aristocratic capital of high fashion that inspired the dreams of the masses, Milan was now the democratic capital of prêt-à-porter that dressed the masses.
It was a major marketing and advertising operation, a modern science that therefore spoke the language of the north, of business, of, in short, Milan. While Rome—where ateliers overwhelmed by mass production were closing shop—remained the leader of haute couture and spoke the language of art and craftsmanship, a warm, southern, and slightly traditional tongue. And that is why today, as I said at the beginning, a fashion video is shot in Piazza di Spagna yet screened at a gala for international buyers in Milan. The next stop on our trip will therefore pick up in Milan, today's industrial capital of Italy.

Meet Stefano Dominella
Guiding, Marketing and Managing Haute Couture

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinecittà
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