

Moda italiana: Storia di un'industria italiana dall'Ottocento a oggi. [Italian Fashion: The Story of an Italian Industry from the Eighteenth Century to Today]. By *Elisabetta Merlo*. Venice: Marsilio, 2003. 159 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Paper, €90. ISBN: 88-317-8273-8.

Reviewed by Giuseppe Berta

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, fashion has emerged as a leading branch of Italian industry. In addition to helping the country's trade balance, the fashion industry has given a boost to the national economy. Since 1980, the appearance of the phrase "made in Italy" on a label has carried its own cachet.

Thus, it is surprising that, until the appearance of this book by Elisabetta Merlo, nobody has attempted to write a historical profile of the Italian fashion industry. In this brief account, she introduces new material, mainly in two areas: First, she recounts the entrepreneurial background of the Italian fashion system, detailing the qualities of skilled craftsmanship, efficient manufacturing, and sophisticated commercial skills that have built the Italian fashion system. Second, she presents, in a lively, enjoyable style, an accurate synthesis of the industry's economic evolution. Another helpful feature of the book is its chronology of the general economy that parallels the emergence of the fashion industry and clarifies how the sector fits within the national context.

Merlo divides the industry's history into three distinct periods, beginning with the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Italy experienced a strong phase of industrial growth and a general rise in income. Changes in consumption occurred as the once diffuse textile craft trades were being subsumed within an industrial structure. Trademarks (reproduced in the book) applied by the first cotton industries marked the beginning of a new relationship between production and the marketplace, leading to the birth of the fashion industry and its evolution over the next fifty years.

The industrial basis of the business began in World War I and continued into the 1970s. Initially, the pressure of war demands led to clothing production becoming more standardized. The military factories that produced fabrics increasingly coordinated their

operations with the activities of the women temporarily engaged in sewing uniforms and knitting soldiers' underwear in their own homes.

The arrival of fascism and its imposition of autarchic policies during the interwar years accelerated the production of artificial and synthetic materials and spurred attempts to manufacture ready-made clothing.

During the 1950s and 1960s, large firms that specialized in the production and distribution of men's clothing—women still preferred custom-made garments—emerged and Italy became transformed into an industrialized country. In order to accomplish the task of modernizing production and acquiring technological knowledge, Italy looked to the United States as a model. However, Italian firms adopted their own system of sizing to accommodate their distinctive physical features, which were different from those of Americans.

In the 1970s, a third phase was precipitated by a crisis, brought on by a sharp increase in costs and the appearance on the scene of new styles of dress that responded to the younger generation's rejection of standardization. This crisis fueled a reorganization of the manufacturing process and led to the adoption of higher-quality fabrics, resulting in distinctive new forms of production. Specialized industrial districts that were willing to adapt their operations in order to form partnerships with fashion designers—who emerged as the interpreters of the new metropolitan and cosmopolitan culture of dress—became the most distinctive feature of Italian clothing production.

The international standing of Italian fashion in the 1990s revived the country's economic image abroad. Yet, as the troubled histories of some of the most famous firms—Gucci, Versace, Gruppo Finanziario Tessile e Ittiere—show, many problems remain to be solved.

Merlo closes her historical overview by highlighting the industry's main challenges: will it be able to triumph over the new competitors that operate with the advantages of low production costs, and will it be able to come up with creative solutions for establishing and managing new retailing channels? Moreover, the industry's ability to retain the leadership role it held at the end of the twentieth century depends on the outcome of shifts currently taking place in the Italian economy.

*Moda Italiana* is an ideal introduction to one of the most distinctive—and difficult to understand—sectors of the Italian economy. Certainly, it suggests topics for further research in order to understand why some fashion companies succeed while others fail and to predict the future course of the industry.

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