

American Fashion, Italian Style

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Keywords: Italian Fashion / Pucci / Sportswear / Valentino / Gianfranco Ferre

Abstract

Following World War II, the U.S. collaborated closely with the Italian textile industry, helping to rebuild a centuries-old tradition of designing and manufacturing fine fabrics. At the same time, the Italian fashion industry marketed its designers to the American consumer. Both countries had flourishing film industries, and exposure to Italian designers grew through Italian and U.S. films. Popular actresses like Elizabeth Taylor and Rita Hayworth wore Italian designs, and the American public followed suit. In particular, Italian designers helped develop the growing sportswear industry, inspiring contemporary American designers to create sporty and casual garments well suited to the American lifestyle.

Italian Fashion and WWII

Before American fashion could stand on its own, Italians designed the clothing worn by many American women. Women in the U.S. created the demand, and Italian designers supplied the goods. In combination with their firm grasp on the American consumer, Italians implemented effective marketing agendas to influence customers in the United States. Without the Italian fashion industry as a model from which to build its own, the American fashion industry would not be what it is today.

Before WWII, the American fashion industry operated with one eye consistently turned toward Europe. Although the United States was a worldwide leader in the production of factory-made clothing, clothing *designs* were almost never indigenous to the United States. It was the French influence that dominated in America, but the British, too, made a significant impact.

American department stores guided the European trends in the United States. Every season representatives from the major retailers, such as Lord and Taylor, would travel to Europe in order to view the collections and return with garments or sketches. Those department stores with an upper-class clientele would sell European-made fashions, but department stores with a more middle-class customer base would often knock off and sell the trends seen abroad.

Also attending the European collection viewings were representatives from American fashion magazines. Magazine pages promoted the looks coming across the Atlantic, and perpetuated the sale of European-inspired trends. The influence that publications such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* had that sparked the American desire for fashion was central to the sale of European-made goods in the United States (Welters and Cunningham).

After WWII, the Italian presence in American department stores and fashion magazines became much more pronounced. During the war, Paris fashions were no longer available in Italy. Consequently, the Italian upper class opted for Italian-made designs. During this time the Italian fashion industry grew stronger. Italian designers acquired a loyal customer base that continued to patronize their creations in the years following the war. This gave them the ability to establish a secure position to take advantage of the international market, primarily the United States (White). Italian fashions began appearing on the covers of important magazines and in the window displays of eminent department stores.

It was no mistake on the part of the Italian fashion industry that their goods were marketed to an American audience. The war brought the two countries together in unprecedented ways. The cultural contexts as they developed in Italy and in the United States differed in many ways, but several unifying factors launched the two in a similar fashion direction.

After WWII the United States was deeply involved in Italy's reconstruction and took a keen interest in the development of the Italian textile industry. The two countries worked together closely, and their economies became intimately intertwined. The war had left Italy with a broken economy. Inflation and unemployment were high. Output was one quarter that of pre-war levels. About one third of the country's wealth was lost. Housing, transportation, and industry had suffered greatly, and, not incidentally, the country was in need of a new government after the fall of fascism. Fortunately, the clothing and textile industry had experienced a less devastating loss; the million-lire industry only lost about five percent (White). Loss of its gold reserves made it difficult for Italy to buy raw materials, but with U.S. aid, factories were able to obtain the fuel and materials needed to reopen. Special attention was given to textile manufacturing factories and they received new machinery that made it possible to operate. The United States placed importance on assisting in the rebuilding of the Italian economy in order to facilitate trade and prolong the well-being of its own economy. Italy faithfully followed U.S. mandates, such as the Marshall Plan, and was known as "America's most faithful ally" (White).

Subsequently, Italy experienced an enormous economic boom. The late 1950s and early 1960s became known as the "economic miracle" (White) as Italy transformed from an agrarian society into a well-oiled industrial machine. Italy pulled ahead, taking its place alongside the United States, making American investment and technology no longer necessary. The reputation of the high-quality and innovative Italian textile industry was recognized worldwide. It was during this time that the United States fashion industry began its import of Italian fashion by adopting Italy's textile technologies and fabrics.

Textile manufacturers strongly promoted the Italian fashion industry. As the world of design and manufacturing merged, the Italian styles became increasingly popular in the United States. Americans saw Italian goods as an inexpensive alternative to French couture (Steele). Three factors explain the success of Italian clothing in America: (1) the Italians' successful marketing to department stores and fashion magazines; (2) the Italian

love for Hollywood; and (3) the close match between the wants of the Italian consumer and those of the American.

The Italian fashion industry heavily promoted its products in the United States. One example of the many well-planned efforts of the time is that of Guido Carli, then the Italian foreign minister. In 1958, he organized an Italian high-fashion tour of U.S. cities that were home to major American department stores. He brought Italian fashion to those most likely to sell it to an American audience. Likewise, Italian fashion was shared with the world by the Italian Fashion Center, a national fashion fair near Venice. In order to captivate a foreign audience, the fair was scheduled in concurrence with the famous Venetian Film Festival, which attracted a global fan base. The event aimed to “facilitate the task of fashion writers and buyers and would help establish them on the international fashion scene” (White).

Italy and Hollywood Promote Fashion

The Italian fashion industry was infatuated by the world of cinema – the Italian film industry as well as Hollywood. Designers made muses of American starlets. In turn, actors became strong advocates for Italian fashion. In the documentary, “Valentino, the Last Emperor,” Valentino discusses the moment in which he fell in love with fashion: when his older sister took him to the cinema to see an American movie and he was bewitched by the silver-screen beauties. Valentino grew up to design for the Hollywood “glamazon” that he fell in love with at such an early age. When filming the movie *Cleopatra* in Rome, Elizabeth Taylor became the first to discover Valentino. Audrey Hepburn, Rita Hayworth, Sophia Loren, Jessica Lange, and Sharon Stone also fall among the ranks of the great admirers of the Italian master and were frequently dressed by him (Morris). Not only were movie stars decked out in Italian-made clothing off-screen, but onscreen as well. Many films enlisted Italian designers to create the wardrobes that wowed and inspired American audiences.

Hollywood thus became a prominent medium used in the promotion of Italian fashion to the American public. Versace “understood fashion as an art of the media . . . public personalities, work in film, alliances with rock music, dance and performance . . . He envisioned fashion as if it were appearing in a movie or video” (Abrams, p.14). Such an understanding is central in marketing to a U.S. audience. Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham discuss the importance of Hollywood in their essay, *The Americanization of Fashion*, stating, “Hollywood movies have been a major source of style in the United States,” and that “popular culture – movies, television, music – is a vital part of the American scene” (p.5).

American movies made Italian fashion broadly visible, but would not have sufficed without the appeal of the designs themselves. The clothing had to fit American consumers’ taste to truly win their favor. For Italian designers, this requirement seemed to offer no challenge. The personalities of their creations were in congruence with American culture. Women wanted to appear glamorous, yet relaxed. In the glamour of

Italian designs, practicality was not forgotten. The less realistic approach to glamour, the *imagination* of glamour, was left to the French (Steele).

Designing for the Casual Lifestyle – Sportswear

A practical approach to clothing was no stranger in American fashion. Sportswear was, in fact, invented by Americans, but it was the Italians who perfected it. Rebecca J. Robinson states the nature of American sportswear in her thesis, *American Sportswear: A Study of the Origins and Women Designers from the 1930's to the 1960's* (pg. 16):

Women could swim in the bathing suits, live in the dresses, and weather any storm in coats of sportswear designers. So important were their designs and the category of sportswear that it became a way of life, the dress of American culture. While [French] couturiers provided the drama, sportswear designers imparted the practical, simple, and useful. Well-designed results were appealing, easy to live with, and attractive. Their beauty was in the design itself. Design had lost its way when clothing turned into pure art and function was left out of the equation. While good designers have always been able to combine form with function, American sportswear prompted a return to this philosophy. Styles were designed around the human body and the lifestyle of the American woman.

The way of life in the United States became increasingly sporty and casual, and Italian fashion houses took note. To the French designers, it was important to please themselves and their top clients, but to the Italian designers it was important to please themselves, their top clients, *and* their American clients. The U.S. fashion industry itself was not yet fully equipped to provide top-tier sportswear. Italians, whose strong suits in fashion catered to sportswear, saw this inadequacy in supply, and capitalized upon the opportunity. The Italian fashion house Missoni “reflect[ed] a love for [the] active, contemporary, dynamic, and relaxed lifestyle” of the United States and flourished when it dedicated itself to the production of sportswear (Casadio, pg. 42). The house’s knits embraced real life by using elementary relaxed structures, but held on to the sought-after glamour by incorporating luxury into the textile itself.

The development of sportswear allowed women to be more active, and it also created new ways for them to express their femininity. Women were developing what was previously conceived as a man’s way of life. New parameters for feminine expression were being established. Italian sportswear reflected the advancement of women in society by embracing the female body. Bare feet, legs with sandals and no stockings, and dresses without girdles or underwire brassieres showed off the female figure in new ways. Designers like Emilio Pucci liberated the body when he made stretch fabrics experimenting with synthetic materials. To give the body a larger range of movement, Pucci also eliminated linings and paddings from his designs to develop unstructured undergarments for the active American woman (Steele). Years later, during the 1960s, Alberta Ferretti, “whose creativity stems from a profound understanding of femininity,” (Mazza and Ferré) became famous for her slips. The garments, meant to be worn alone or as undergarments, were, “as liquid on the body as water” (Mazza and Ferré). Italians like Ferretti infused sportswear with the notion that the female body was no longer something to be covered up and restricted, but rather an asset that should be complemented and set free.

The series of innovations pioneered by Italian designers to liberate the female figure reveal a strong love for freedom. Their creations released women to embrace their sexuality, their self-expression, and their independence. Especially for American women, freedom was a value that became increasingly important as the 20th century progressed. Women's rights made enormous strides as women gained abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment was introduced, birth control became highly available, and the number of women in the workplace rose (Welters and Cunningham). A yearning to express a newfound freedom and independence through dress was highly sought after.

Americans have “often sought to distinguish themselves by revealing their belief in democracy and liberty through their clothing” (Welters and Cunningham, pg. 2). The Italian designer Gianfranco Ferré stated, “Women today can live and make decisions independently, following their own choices. In some way, they adapt fashion to their own needs” (Ferré and Mazza). Although he is known for his architectural creations (which might seem counterintuitive to the embodiment of freedom), the Italian Ferré is a designer obsessed with the notion of freedom. Expressing his love, Ferré proclaimed, “If I were asked what I would really like to have invented, I would reply without hesitation: denim. The great fashion invention of our century, a revolution, a symbol, a *conquest of freedom*” (Ferré and Mazza).

Italian designs nodded to freedom and independence for all women, free of discrimination. Whatever a female happened to be – housewife, actress, lawyer, or other – Italians offered her the clothing she needed to manifest her own identity. For the American it is essential to be able to communicate one's uniqueness. The United States is a country containing a multitude of races, ethnicities, and nationalities; thus, expression of one's self-image is pivotally important to the American citizen. “Since appearance is used to signify identity, fashion becomes an important tool to say who you are in America” (Welters and Cunningham, pg.4). In order to captivate the American market, it was key for Italian designers to possess a non-discriminatory attitude towards identity in fashion. Gianni Versace's “valorization of the prostitute was an exquisite choice, recognizing the independence and strength of the streetwalker not as an enslaved sex worker but as an autonomous, self defining figure” (Martin, p. 13).

Today, the American fashion industry has developed into a force all its own. After World War II, the American fashion industry continued to grow despite the prevalence of Italian fashion in the United States. Italian designers' understanding of the American fashion market provided an example for emerging American designers. Names such as Geoffrey Beene, Bill Blass, and Oscar de la Renta were not well known and underpriced; however, by utilizing department stores and magazines and continuing with sportswear the way the Italians had, they began to establish reputations that would one day become respected worldwide.

It was in the 1980's that the American fashion industry became a dominant force able to stand on its own two feet. Homegrown designers adopted the qualities of Italian sportswear and continued to develop the fashion genre. Narciso Rodriguez and Francisco Costa at Calvin Klein continually embrace and liberate the female form. Francisco Costa

“takes body-conscious clothing – most of it really flattering – to an art form,” while “Narciso Rodriguez has never met a curve he didn't love. Indeed, he has mastered the art of sculpting fabrics that accentuate exactly where a woman needs it and, also, wants it” (D’Souza). One could say that Vera Wang is today’s American Alberta Ferretti owing to the overwhelming sense of romance and feminine beauty present in her collections. In the spirit of the Italian influence, Nandini D’Souza of *Harper’s Bazaar* described Marc Jacob’s Fall 2010 collection as a, “lineup of unbelievably beautiful, simple, elegant, and wearable clothes.” Similarly, Donna Karan has thrived in the fashion world because of her Italian-inspired belief that a woman can have a functional *and* stylish wardrobe (D’Souza).

As the quality of American sportswear rose, department stores and magazines advocated for homegrown designers. Department stores promoted American designs with in-store boutiques and sophisticated advertising campaigns. “Bloomingdale’s CEO Marvin Traub, along with advertising aficionados Gordon Cooke and John Jay and fashion-buying legend Kal Rutenstein, brought their merchandising savvy into play, furthering the profiles of competing fashion giants such as Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren” (Scheips 210). *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and other publications increasingly covered American fashion, and smaller American magazines such as *Interview* and *Details* grew to acquire readers from around the globe (Scheips). Designers were smart and began to forge endorsement deals with spokespersons, supermodels, actors, and pop stars who would appear on magazine covers and pages clad in their designs. The brand identities of designers in the United States increased to all-time recognition levels. The year 1992, when the Council of Fashion Designers of America created and put on the first New York fashion week, marked a much-celebrated milestone for the American fashion industry. Many New York fashion weeks have followed since, and each year the event is attended and respected by fashion connoisseurs from around the world.

Conclusion

Today’s American fashion designers now have the ability to supply sportswear that expresses the ideals that are definitive of the American culture. In order for a garment to appeal to the American consumer, freedom, along with self-expression and independence, must be fundamental to the design. At first, the Italian fashion industry was better suited to provide sportswear that fulfilled such demands. Italian designers prepared the ground from which the American fashion industry sprouted. Contemporary American designers have now taken the reins to design for their own people, but are always looking back at the influences and the basis provided for them by the post-war Italian fashion industry.

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