

WORLD

High-End Design Houses Merge Substance, Style — and Discretion : Luxury? In Italy, It's a Way of Life

By JACKIE COOPERMAN and INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE MARCH 16, 2001

MILAN— With Milan's glittery fashion shows over and the economy less than encouraging of extravagant spending, many Italian companies are working to develop an understated niche: functional luxury, even if they prefer to give it another name.

"In Italian, the word 'luxury' has negative connotations. It implies excess, inaccessibility, something that is wasteful, superfluous and ostentatious," said Sergio Loro Piana, chairman of his family's cashmere and worsted wool textile business, Loro Piana.

"I believe that what I produce is not luxury. If you can't afford it, for you it's a luxury. But for me, it's just a question of high quality. A jet is very expensive, for many it's a luxury, but for those who have a jet, a plane, a boat and whatever else, it's just a way of life."

This is the way of life, with winters in San Moritz or Aspen, summers on Sardinia's Emerald Coast and closets full of handmade shoes and well-tailored clothing, that Italian houses like Loro Piana, Tod's and Bulgari so ardently hope to capture. This season they are introducing a variety of products in their trademark, high-end materials that are meant to merge substance and style and, in a shaky economic climate, be useful enough to justify rather steep prices.

Loro Piana, a major supplier of cashmere and fine wool like merino and vicuna, entered the luxury goods market in the 1990s, creating sumptuous men's and women's sweaters, shawls and a line of home accessories. Piana's friends and family began asking for specially made items, and the company produced the training jackets for the Italian equestrian team at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona.

"Some of our pieces were born for specific occasions in our own lives. I went hunting in Italy. It was hot, I made a coat for that. Then my brother-in-law invited me to go hunting in Austria, and we were dying of cold, so we made a coat," said Loro Piana, whose products retail from \$225 for a knit hat to about \$52,000 for a chinchilla blanket. "These are not the needs of a Boston fireman, who wouldn't wear a cashmere coat if you gave it to him, but needs that I have, that my customers have."

One of those needs, of course, is to maintain an elegant appearance, or what the Italians call *bella figura*, and so the company patented the Storm System, a membrane that renders its cashmere waterproof and windproof.

"It's so that our consumer, doing sports activities, doesn't have to look ugly or be surrounded by artificial fibers," said Loro Piana.

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THE company has created a cashmere Storm System ski jacket, called Icer, and a sailing jacket, made from New Zealand merino wool and created for the New Zealand team during last year's America's Cup. Some of the jackets have detachable sable and chinchilla collars or cashmere and cotton blend linings.

Now, he said, the company is working to add a membrane used on the roof and wings of airplanes, which allows heat and cold to travel quickly between solid and liquid states.

Like Loro Piana, other Italian companies repeat the words value and durability as they promote new collections.

"Today we all have a life that's pretty frenetic and we can't buy things that aren't useful. When the markets are a little nervous, people buy with more attention," said

Diego Dalle Valle, founder and chief executive of Tod's, a luxury shoe company that began producing a successful line of bags in the mid-1990s. It went public last year.

Known for using extremely high quality leathers and employing artisan shoemakers in the Marches region, Tod's just presented its latest bag, an as yet unnamed leather women's tote intended to store portable computers.

"I've seen so many well-dressed women, carrying pretty bags, but traveling with technical, ugly computer bags that are often not even that practical," said Della Valle.

After working for a year and a half with his design team, Della Valle selected a leather used 70 years ago for horse saddles — supple enough to be soft to the touch, but tough enough to support a computer. Inside, a pocket holds a flat, small purse that can be used as a clutch bag or with a shoulder strap. At \$2,300, it costs more than its predecessors, the D bag, which sells for \$1,600, and the Miki, priced at \$1,100

"We've always had practical designs," said Della Valle, whose next project is a line of carry-on travel luggage. "It's not that we're trying to acquire new consumers. We are looking to keep the ones we have, and to follow them in the evolution of their lives."

Bulgari, the Roman jeweler, is introducing gift items aimed at women on the move. Next month it will start selling its "logomania secret photo holder," targeted at frequent travelers. Packaged like a wallet, and covered in silk from Como with a kidskin leather flap, it opens to hold three 6 centimeter by 6 centimeter photographs and costs \$150

"We've only really had a significant accessory business since 2000," said Bulgari's chief executive, Francesco Trapani. He has led the house on an expansion kick that has broadened the range of sports watches and added leather bags, shawls and other travel accessories. "I think that people are increasingly informal, even in dressing, but they still want high quality," he added.

Another new accessory, the heel coin holder in kidskin leather, reinterprets a 1930s design. Intended to provide an elegant solution in time for the introduction of the euro coin, it costs from \$170 to \$190

"It's like luxury cars, which are now making off-road vehicles," Trapani said. "We're offering products that are somewhat sporty, but on the level of quality and finishing are luxury goods."

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