

WORLD

# Young Designers Give Artisan Traditions a Sassy Spin

By JACKIE COOPERMAN and INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE FEB. 23, 2000

**MILAN**— Marco Mazzocchi, the model of a modern businessman, sits in a Milan showroom extolling the virtues of mink hotpants.

"We're trying to adapt fur to new needs. Women in their 30s and 40s are no longer necessarily tied to classic design, and even a 'classic' woman wants to reinterpret her style," says Mazzocchi, 34, owner of Mazzocchi Pellicce, his family's Pavia-based fur company.

And so he has reinvigorated the collection, which started two generations ago as fine fur coats for upper-class matrons. The accessory line, launched in 1998, includes rabbit fur miniskirts, azure python skin handbags, and an apt symbol of zeitgeist indulgence — the black mink bag with a mobile phone pocket.

"We've seen designers turning to fur again, daring to put it back on the catwalk," says Mazzocchi, who sells exclusively in his Pavia store. "But the houses using fur now don't have the history of artisan production the way that we do."

Mazzocchi is one of a trio of 30-something Italian designers bringing modern savvy and an irreverent twist to their country's storied crafts of bag, shoe and fur production. While citing inspiration from sources as diverse as the markets of Hong Kong and the early songs of John Lennon, these emerging designers all base their collections on a distinctly traditional Italian concept: artisan craftsmanship.

They find flexibility in relatively small production, allowing them to take classic luxury materials — mink, pony skin and suede — and adorn them with Asian animal symbols, tiny mirrors and glass beads.

Nicolo and Francesca Jori, the brother and sister design team behind Jorando clothes and accessories, appropriate styles from Bali, where they spend five months each year, and adapt them to Western tastes.

"I'm really interested in all the artisan work that doesn't exist anymore in the large ready-to-wear lines," says Francesca Jori, 33, from her Rome workshop. "The major fashion houses don't do this kind of work, this research into the past."

The Jori siblings started humbly, hand-beading slippers similar to a pair of 18th-century Sumatran wedding shoes that Nicolo discovered during a trip to Indonesia in 1986. Working out of a garage in their country home near Rome, the Joris sold 15,000 pairs when they created the company in 1990.

Last September, they started selling overseas, moving their clothes and accessories into Henry Bendel in New York, Harrods in London and Joyce in Hong Kong.

Despite this broader distribution, Francesca Jori vows to maintain her handmade approach and sense of whimsy. Clothes in the autumn-winter 2001 collection include a skirt inspired by a 17th-century Sumatran tapestry: Beaded fish on colored mohair thread swim amid sequined seaweed stalks, and delicate silver circle beads form their air bubbles.

Jori has just introduced a new line of T-shirts, brightly colored in shades of cerise and forest green, decorated with glass beads and sequins, and hand-screened with architectural images, such as the frieze of a Balinese temple.

Jorando pieces thrive on a tumult of influences. Jori researches materials in Italy, then pieces together embroidered chiffon from Japan, silk from China and beads from Hong Kong. Workers in Jorando's Indonesian workshop assemble hand-beaded and laced pieces sent from China and the Apulia and Calabria regions in Italy.

"It's a bit complicated, but I like to mix and match," she says. Indeed, next winter's line includes a cashmere cardigan, adorned with beaded elbow patches, as a throw over a formal evening tulle dress showered in reflecting, "hologram" paillettes.

Like Mazzocchi's fur accessories, which seem an irreverent postmodern reference to Meret Oppenheim's tea cup, Jorando accessories play with audacious details and blur distinctions between cheap and chic. A pair of gray suede-soled sandals from the spring-summer 2000 collection features crisscrossing, hand-embroidered satin bra straps covered with meticulously applied, small metallic squares.

Similarly, unusual material choices show up in shoes by Laura Spaletra, 32, who made her debut as the lead designer for Manufacture d'Essai with the spring-summer 2000 collection. Like Jori, Spaletra is an adventurer, injecting the

shoes and bags with elements of her own youthful wanderlust.

"It's really important to travel," says Spaletra, whose most recent trip to New York yielded a fashionably delayed reaction.

"I didn't do any drawing there, but the minute I came back to Italy, I sat down and immediately designed five pairs of shoes. My travels are like vibrations, and they create new ideas."

Softer silhouettes and playful details inform Spaletra's designs. "I'm trying to bring femininity to the Manufacture d'Essai shoes, which have traditionally been very male," she says. "And I want to combine ethnic looks with technology."

Spaletra merges sumptuous materials like naturally dyed, nonchemically treated calf skin and pony skin with technological research into the soles and structures of the shoes. In her spring-summer 2000 collection, lavender sandals feature a network of the same tiles often found in bathrooms, fused together and then melded onto the leather using a heat-based technology.

Spaletra, who studied fashion design at Florence's Istituto Politecnico Internazionale della Moda, says her background in textiles strongly influences her

approach.

"For me, it's inevitable to think about texture," she says. "My process is a bit the inverse of the typical one: I start with the fabrics."

For winter 2001, Spaletra is creating shoes with gabardine and tweed details.

"I want wool, tweed, but we'll use it sparingly," she says. "There will be a very traditional salt and pepper gabardine. We're readapting classic fabrics, and waterproofing them."

Luxurious-looking fuchsia pony skin moccasins harbor some hidden deconstruction.

"We worked with the pony skin and I wanted to present a shoe that was really deconstructed and softer," Spaletra says. "We took away any interior cardboard, so that shoe is extremely soft and very light."

Spaletra is also mixing her interest in ethnic and tech with a bag collection featuring rabbit fur and shearling skins and long rubber handles.

That kind of serendipitous *mélange*, says Mazzocchi, is the key to successful design. In addition to the rabbit fur dressing gowns, pony skin bags and scanty mink bikinis hanging alongside traditional coats in his store, he has begun selling fur pillows.

All of his creations can be ordered in a full spectrum of colors and furs, ranging from rabbit and weasel to precious sable and mink.

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