

The Made-to-Measure Approach: The Example of Rome Today

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It so happens that local, regional or national particularities are generally linked to the historical and contemporary way of producing and acquiring garments. As such, a particular point in space, such as a city, can produce a diachronic series. So my study will concentrate on the city of Rome – where I was resident at the Villa Médicis in fashion design for a year – on the political, legal and diplomatic heart of Italy with a high population of politicians, government employees, lawyers and diplomats. In today's world, these professions require suits and shirts that correspond to very precise codes and are worn by a multitude of working men. So Rome has developed a local system of made-to-measure men's shirts and suits in addition to the international ready-to-wear system. In 2010 over 230 such places were listed¹ which means a large swathe of the male population have retained a taste for bespoke garments. Far from carrying out a complete analysis of a local fashion micro system, this paper will cover the point of view of one particular way of approaching fashion and clothes with regard to heritage-based particularities.

How can fashion design renew itself inside this relatively restrictive Roman framework?

On a historical level, when we observe the contemporary western fashion system, it tends to mainly valorise the aesthetic and the creative. Throughout the 19th century, the fashion system relied on a direct relationship between the client and the manufacturer: local seamstresses abounded along with women who knew how to sew and made garments for the whole family. The number of locations and the omnipresence of the producers of the work made the activity and a certain culture of manufacturing extremely visible in society at large. During the 20th century, the huge industrial and marketing progress that occurred in the clothing sector brought the idea of design and the figure of the designer to the fore as the main values of a brand. As a result, fashion moved from being manufacturing-based to being image-based, from the production of objects to the production of brands, from the real to signs. In Europe, the movement of production overseas has made the stages involved in production practically invisible to the consumer. Design and aesthetics have become the main components in the fashion system, leaving little space for the values linked to manufacturing and the techniques involved in producing garments.

On the other hand, one of the interesting points that comes from the examination of the particular case of “work clothes” is the basic primordial issue of their functional nature. The importance of this notion leads to the design, trend or style aspects of the work garment finding themselves relegated to a supporting role. So this notion of permanence in the work garment means we can observe and isolate certain issues that are also true for fashion garments. Style and design include just as many issues linked to the oscillations between the unique and the

collective, between the individual and the group, between the exception and the norm, between the one-off piece and the mass-produced, between craftsmanship and industry. However, to a certain extent, heritage seems to be well placed to re-inject some uniqueness to a system that is largely dominated by mass-production.

During my time as resident in the “fashion design” section at the Villa Médicis in Rome, in 2008-2009, I took a keen interest in what is behind this huge trend for unique garments. In order to illustrate this I will base my analysis on an experiment developed in collaboration with the local hand-made fabric manufacturers, which produced a sort of map of skills that in turn became the exhibition “*When in Rome, do as Romans do*” that was presented at the Valentina Moncada gallery in January 2009 as part of Rome’s fashion week.

With the aim of establishing a parallel between the local system –based on the manufacturing of unique pieces– and the international retail distribution system, I came up with an exhibition project that entailed having thirty Roman tailors of bespoke shirts “copy” a mass-produced shirt from Zara the most standardized product available –both in terms of the product but also in terms of the stores that sell them. It was a cotton blue and white striped men’s shirt, a traditional, relatively timeless model that has been around for over fifty years and will probably be still around in fifty year’s time! It is an industrially produced shirt that is sold all over the world in huge quantities in a chain of stores that even standardise their points of sale: the perfect example of the current fashion system, based on low production costs and a maximum retail capacity on an international scale. The high level of internationalisation in fashion leaves little room these days for the idea of local particularities or a culture of manufacturing.

On the contrary, the system of the Roman tailors relies on the direct retail relationship between manufacturer and client; I was interested in highlighting those particular values by inviting thirty Roman tailors to “re-make” the same shirt. So thirty unique pieces were made each characterising each tailor’s own culture, not to promote their own design skills or creativity as it was a question of “copying” a precise model, but more to display the particularity that the skills of each tailor imprinted on the shirt that made each product unique. As a result, the same object, made by thirty different people, is still a different object, even if the aesthetics are the same. In addition, the installation of the thirty shirts was accompanied by a series of video portraits of men, each of whom told a story about a shirt. This set up, besides the invisible values linked to the manufacturing of the garment, underlined the idea of the appropriation of the garment by each client-consumer. The idea was to show how a standard shirt can become a good-luck charm or an object that projects values that go beyond the aesthetic, values that are invisible to others but that – for those of us who create that particular link and the projections on to the garment – change the meaning and value of the object. Rome may not be a fashion capital – in the same way as Paris, Milan, New York or London –but it is unquestionably the political capital of Italy. It is the country’s legal, diplomatic and aristocratic centre that at the same time includes many professional congregations that are obliged to dress themselves in a classic, even traditional manner. Why then, in the eyes of the client, would a bespoke shirt be more singular than a ready to wear shirt? There are doubtless a number of reasons. The very act of having a shirt made to measure supposes an arbitrage between personal choice and the obligation to belong to a group when the time comes to choose one’s tailor. The share of personal

expression relies first of all on the choice of fabric, colour, motif and details such as the type of collar, its rigidity, the shape of the cuffs or the different types of buttons and buttoning options. Through the choice and enumeration of his own taste, the level of implication on the part of the client in the creation of the garment is obvious. The fact that the client is ordering a product that doesn't exist yet confers a greater responsibility on the client in terms of design, unlike the ready to wear system where the onus is on the brand, the designer or the couturier and his team. Involvement on this level inevitably changes the client's perception of his own shirt. In fact, in Italy the concept of the Latin term *ad personam*² is very present. The term is often used in everyday language or in the press, not merely to define a political stance; it is also frequently found in presentation brochures or on the Internet sites of Italian tailors who provide a made to measure service.

Beyond personal aesthetic preferences, the personalisation of the made to measure shirt also occurs through the application of the client's initials. According to a frequent custom in Rome, men have their initials stitched on the left side of the shirt. They can be placed elsewhere, on the cuffs or on the collar. Choice is expressed through the thread used, its level of contrast with the fabric of the shirt, and the type of characters used: capitals, lower case, straight or in italics. This factor is crucial in terms of self-presentation but also in terms of the position one adopts relative to the group one belongs to, or, on the contrary, the group one wishes to be differentiated from. In Milan in the eighties for example, ambitious young men had their initials stitched very obviously on the collars of their shirts. Their symbolic importance is such that tailors offer to stitch them by hand even if the rest of the shirt is entirely machine-sewn. It is as if the most obvious reflection of the

client's personality on the shirt must imperatively be the result of the most "human" part of the manufacturing process.

In addition to the degree of representation and self-valorisation, for the client, having a shirt made to measure also represents the notion of belonging to a group. First of all the very product in question, the shirt, is a veritable archetype of male clothing, in as much as it expresses the passage to adulthood and the representation of masculinity. As such, when a young man turns eighteen, he is often given the gift of a made to measure shirt by his loved ones. So having a garment made is almost a ritual or a rite of passage. As for the representation of masculinity, I can quote a story told to me by one of the tailors. It was about a police woman who came to have her work shirts made to measure as her male colleagues had theirs done at the same tailor. And while salaries in general are not very high in Rome, she insisted on only wearing made to measure shirts at 100 or 120 euros each under her uniform... Having her shirts made to measure was also doubtless a means for the policewoman to compete with her male colleagues on an even playing field by joining the "club who wear made to measure shirts, made by this tailor". In other cases, the colours and choice of fabric, types of stripes are often also used to show one's membership of a particular political party. In the same way that a tie of a certain colour can also make a political reference, these extremely traditional garments use numerous symbols that are not written down but that nonetheless exist and project the idea of belonging to a group.

I should point out that word of mouth is essential in this system as it doesn't rely on marketing or advertising. When one knows a good tailor, one passes on the information only to colleagues or people one likes. As a result a system has developed that is not unlike that of private clubs, to the extent

that certain tailors I approached to make a shirt and take part in this exhibition did not wish to participate and above all preferred not to have any kind of publicity or even to avoid any confusion with the thirty other tailors. Their usual clients are often made up of politicians and international businessmen whose custom enables the tailor to fill his orders and leaves no room for new clients. These boutiques are often invisible from the street and are not in either the yellow pages or on the Internet, they represent the marketing antithesis of the average ready to wear chain that searches for the best sales zone with the most footfall and the highest possible level of visibility through advertising.

The manufacturing process is invisible in the contemporary fashion system. When the client walks in to a ready-to-wear store the product is already there, most often the result of overseas production. One doesn't know where it has been made, some "made in" labels indicate the origin of the product in a very vague manner –and at times are completely false. For all of these reasons, it is quite difficult to get a real idea of the manufacturing and work involved. Both the manufacturing and the human input to that manufacturing are major components of the design of these garments, most often ignored by current brands. In fact, this local micro-system relies on the handing down of skills, on heritage and the notion of family to which Romans and Italians in general are much attached. Until now, all of these points work in favour of the continuation of a system that has almost disappeared everywhere else in Europe. Most of the tailors I met in Rome are tailors from father to son for many generations often in the same location with the same skills and a clientele that is also passed down from one generation to another. This entails an emotional attachment to the work that can be felt, it is symbolically very important for tailors to

practice and maintain the profession of their ancestors. This is becoming an issue today in as much as the younger generation do not have the same emotional ties to the job and sometimes finding someone to take over the business is not easy.

The idea of manufacturing is also extremely important for tailors as it is handed down orally from father to son, from master to student. For example, when his parents died, one of the tailors I met inherited a ground-floor shop and a basement workshop. His first reaction was to break with tradition and to modernise everything. He went to Ikea to buy office furniture: a mixture of "fake black wood" melamine panels with smoky glass and brushed aluminium. Once the store was refurbished, he soon found it impossible to be both in the workshop and the store as he took care of both the shirt cutting and the customers. So to solve the problem he set up a big plank of chipboard on a table in the centre of the store, totally out of keeping with the sparse Ikea look of the furniture and that is where he now cuts the shirts for his clients. In doing so and in a completely involuntary and unthinking manner, he shifted manufacturing right into the centre of the point of sale, by pure necessity. His initial wish to have a fashionable, modern store meant the type of furniture he chose had a certain neutrality to it, but at the same time, his almost emotional attachment to both manufacturing and customer relations (the two mainstays of his profession) meant he had to make some awkward modifications to his space, thereby proving the importance of the visibility of manufacturing in this system.

The idea of handmade garment and specifically things that are "made in Italy", are a question of national pride in Italy, much more than in France. When one lives in Italy, it is common to hear the expression "made in Italy" every day. This subject is in the news at the moment as a law³ has just

been gone through to control fake labels and to give a real value to the term “made in Italy”, as it has been tarnished by the scandals of the clandestine Chinese workshops in the Prato and Naples regions and imported Asian products with fake “made in Italy” labels.

To conclude, it is easy to believe that all of the elements that make up the links between the client and his garment, between the tailor and the garment he makes and between the client and the tailor, contribute to the “design” of the garment and the choice of tailor. Whether they come from one’s own personality or narcissism, from one’s relationship with the social environment or the local manufacturing culture, these elements are added on as an extra layer to the garment, not a visible layer –the aesthetic is untouched– but symbolically to the extent that they transform the perception the client has of the garment. The translation of these elements into the contemporary fashion field would doubtless be an efficient means to bring some meaning back to the international fashion system and to ready to wear brands who only very rarely take these values into account. But how is it possible to introduce non industrial, truly singular actions to a milieu that is completely industrialised from manufacturing to advertising?

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1. *Un guide sur mesure. Rome, 239 lieux de la Capitale où l'homme peut se faire réaliser vêtements et accessoires sur mesure* (*A made to measure Guide. Rome, 239 places in the Capital where a man can have clothes and accessories made to measure*), by Andrea Spezzigu and Pascal Gautrand, introduction by Silvia Venturini Fendi, Palombi Editori, 2010 (The Italian and English versions have already been published).

2. Latin term: that which addresses the private individual, that which comes from his private life.

3. The “Reguzzoni-Versace” n.55 law of April 8th 2010, unanimously voted by the Italian parliament, forbids the use of the label “Made in Italy” on textiles, shoes and leather goods whose different production stages have not occurred for the most part in Italy. At least two of the following must take place in Italy: thread-milling, weaving, dye-finishing and manufacturing.