

IMAGES OF ITALY

NSU Art Museum's "Bellissima" exhibition is a requiem to Italian high fashion.

BY NILA DO SIMON





AT THE VILLA REALE IN MONZA, ITALY. PHOTO BY LUCA PALMER

MADE IN ITALY Opening in February, "Bellissima" is a study of the artists and designers who helped lead Italy out of the economic downfall and aftermath of World War II.

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or those expecting to see beautiful garments and jewels in the upcoming exhibit, “Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968,” at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, the first image in the show might come as a shocker: a large-scale photo mural of Italy in ruins after World War II. The graphic image is not meant to set the tone for the exhibit, but rather to start the narrative of how Italy’s return to international success was jump-started by its post-war plunge into high fashion.

“The story of this exhibit is not just about beautiful design or couture,” says NSU Executive Director Bonnie Clearwater. “It’s also about how after the war, Italy was in ruins, its economy was devastated, and it needed to find a way out. This was the creativity that came out of that destruction.”

Through post-war investments and initiatives, including the Marshall Plan, Italy’s textile and fashion industries became the tools that helped end its economic drought. In “Bellissima,” on display at NSU Art Museum from February 7 to June 5, visitors see how the country became an incubator for fashion designers, artists and filmmakers, spawning the eventual idea of “la dolce vita.”

The dazzling exhibition will feature more than 230 designer garments, from grand ball gowns, elegant cocktail dresses, black-and-white graphic looks, and luxurious suits and coats to red-carpet creations specially made for actresses Ava Gardner, Ingrid Bergman and Lana Turner. Designers featured include Emilio Pucci, Valentino, Fendi, Emilio Schuberth and Sorelle Fontana, as well as one-of-a-kind jewels by Bulgari, the presenting sponsor.

The exhibit originated in Rome, where it was on display at the MAXXI: National Museum of XXI Century Arts from December 2014 through May 2015. Curated by fashion critic Maria Luisa Frisa, MAXXI Art Director Anna Mattiolo and Stefano Tonchi, editor-in-chief of *W* magazine, “Bellissima” is what Tonchi calls a deep glimpse into a little-known part of Italian history.

“I was so motivated to bring this part of history to the U.S. because there’s an image that Italian fashion started in the 1980s with Armani,” Tonchi says. “But it wouldn’t be fair to say that because Armani had predecessors who began this journey of high fashion.”

Tonchi says that when envisioning who would best grasp the richness of this exhibit, he could only think of one name: Bonnie Clearwater. The two friends had discussed bringing “Bellissima” to Florida for years, and things fell in place after Clearwater became NSU Art Museum’s executive director in

2013. The opening festivities for the exhibit will include a gala at the museum that Clearwater says will be “extremely glamorous” and will welcome special guests and global dignitaries.

“When you think of the big cultural centers in the U.S., you have New York and Los Angeles, and then I always think of Florida,” Tonchi says. “It’s becoming a place where South America and North America meet.”

American women became enamored with the novelty of Italian high fashion thanks in part to Clare Boothe Luce, the U.S. ambassador to Italy from 1953 to 1956. Tonchi credits her for introducing Italian fashion to American women and connecting Italian factories with the American department stores.

That era marked a turning point in women’s fashion. Women were gravitating more toward sensible attire that maintained a high level of luxury. Cocktail dresses were shorter and less confining. Day suits had simple designs, but were constructed with high-quality double-faced cashmere, making them light and versatile. Even gowns had movement to them.

“Italian haute couture was always very practical with beautiful fabrics and finishes,” Tonchi says. “At the time, it was very different from the French couture of Balenciaga and Christian Dior, who created petticoats and skirts that would not fit into taxicabs. The Italians really dressed women for modern life. It was always very special, but very wearable.”

“Bellissima” will also highlight how Italian designers, artists and filmmakers influenced one another during those seminal years of creation. For example, designer Mila Schön used artist Lucio Fontana’s cut canvases as inspirations for her sketches, and designer Germana Marucelli would use kinetic prints created with artist Getulio Alviani to add dimension to her silk gowns.

“The title says what the show is about,” Tonchi says. “*Bellissima* is a word that came to represent everything beautiful of Italy, a word that is really about Italian lifestyle, not just fashion.”

A native of Italy, Tonchi’s personal connections to “Bellissima” go beyond his curatorial responsibilities. For him, it’s a chance to show Americans what it means to be “made in Italy.”

“I think about that statement a lot,” he says. “‘Made in Italy’ has a certain value. It’s the dream behind the Italian lifestyle. When you buy a beautiful Ferragamo shoe or a Valentino gown, it’s much more than an object. You buy a little piece of that great image of Italy. You buy a piece of a dream.” ■



ARTISTIC EXPRESSION Co-curator Stefano Tonchi, the editor-in-chief of *W* magazine, says the exhibit will highlight "a very specific part of Italian history that is not really well known," which includes a multidisciplinary look at fashion, art and film during that era. In this photo, a model is standing at the Musei Capitolini in Rome in a Sorelle Fontana dress in 1952.

PHOTO BY REGINA PELANG



READY TO WEAR The more than 230 exhibit pieces range from gowns to suits to Bulgari jewels, all displaying the skill and quality for which Italian craftsmen are known.

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QSVLIVS M F VOIVIA
SE VIR
X VIR STATIONE ANP
SYLPIA C F PL
CORNELI

TIME CAPSULE In this photo taken in Rome in 1948, models are wearing gowns designed by De Gasperi Zezza.