Raffaello Napoleone on Pitti’s comeback in January and Dolce & Gabbana’s exchange with Florentine artisans

By Godfrey Deeny - 8 September 2020

Few people play as pivotal a role in Italian fashion as Raffaello Napoleone, the chief executive officer of Pitti Imagine, whose twice a year menswear salon is, in many people’s view, the top-ranked fashion salon on the planet.

This year, Pitti had to react rapidly to the onslaught of the pandemic, launching a wide-ranging buyer-friendly Pitti Connect web project, even as the organization was forced to cancel its June salon. It’s difficult to underestimate the importance of Pitti to Florence, as the salon attracts tens of thousands of elegant and well-heeled retailers, the cream of the planet’s biggest buying pencils, twice every year since its debut in 1972.
In their absence, and with the normally bustling capital of the Renaissance as silent as a churchyard, Pitti linked up with Dolce & Gabbana last week to connect the Milan-based design duo to three dozen local artisans. Developing remarkable promotional possibilities for these family-owned crafts businesses to display their great ideas during three days of events in the Tuscan capital. From a Catherine de Medici jewelry display inside the world’s old pharmacy, Officina Profuma-Farmceutica di Santa Maria Novella, and an Alta Sartoria menswear couture show inside city hall, to a gilded Alta Moda gala show in the beautiful garden of Villa Bardini, overlooking the river Arno. The artisans of Florence have rarely had more salubrious settings for their ideas. Like the wonderful centerpieces in engraved glass from Locchi, or the fantastic silver vases from Brandimarte or Argentiere Pagliai on the dinner tables; or emblematic Renaissance knitwear by Aprosio & Co. All the to the brilliant finale of brilliant straw hats and corsets by Grevi, a brand that dates back to 1875; or dazzling bangles from Fratelli Piccini, whose atelier is still on Ponte Vecchio. The duo even gifted beautiful silk brocade or paisley velvet dressing gowns from Loretta Caponi or Fondazione Arte della Seta Lisio to visiting editors, who all wore them to the menswear show.

So, we caught up with Napoleone, the Roman-born CEO, of Pitti - Tuscany’s most international and glamorous annual event, over coffee in Procaci, a charming café on via Tornabuoni, the key luxury shopping street of Florence. Perched on a coffee table between stores of Armani, Bulgari, Hogan and Max Mara, he holds forth.

**FashionNetwork.com: How did it happen that you invited Dolce & Gabbana to Florence?**

**Raffaello Napoleone:** The story is a long one, but nice one. We began speaking two years ago to discuss a Florence project with them. Their idea at first was to just produce a men’s couture show here. But due to the pandemic we had to call off Pitti Uomo this summer, during which time we set up Pitti Connect. So the idea then became to wait until September and also present women and jewelry too. From beginning the goal was to involve many artisans.

Florence is where Italian fashion was born. But it is also a strong town for artisans. So they said, let’s let our brand help promote local artisans in this tough moment. Domenico actually came to Florence eight times. Staying in Portrait, one of the hotels of the Ferragamo family that stayed open. During the lockdown there were only three hotels open in Florence!

So if you look at the title of their two shows here - Renaissance and Rinascita – you can see how much effort they made explaining how this city is not just about fashion but lifestyle - micro mosaics, table-top, silver or glass.

The idea was Domenico and Stefano asking local people if they wanted to be part of this project. And then juxtaposing silver with leather, or books with gold. We had never seen that before; such high level of quality and effort blended. I spent two days with Domenico going around and he really made a huge effort to make this something very contemporary. Artisans can be very, very conservative. Dolce gave them a unique opportunity, like asking Manetti Battiloro, or gold beaters, to color that great meal in the Bardini Gardens, with silver gnudi and golden sirloin. When they usually work on Middle Eastern palaces, and gild things in Paris.
FNW: What did the two designers bring to the city in this moment?
RN: Well, the second major point to underline is that the city and its mayor understood the concept and gave huge support. They had to close Palazzo Vecchio, our city hall, for one week! We have had other shows there - Brooks Brothers, Giambattista Valli and Cavalli – but we never closed it for a week. And then they brought it their own touch. Like putting velvet curtains behind the giant Michelangelo statue of David, to give the building a whole new aspect. It was something they actually did in the Medici period. So, the designers went really deep into the history of the city. You cannot imagine how many books and documents and photos – even book on Calcio Storico by Aldo Fallai, and they got ideas from that.

FNW: What affect did Dolce & Gabbana have on the local artisan community?
RN: An enormous effect, since they gave everyone faith in the future, and belief in the next years, at a moment when many people feel rather lost. Look around, there is still practically no one in Florence. They are also generously gave the town a great women’s dress from Palazzo Vecchio; the one women’s look in the menswear show in red damask and real gold embroidery.

FNW: And why was this all important so important to Florence?
RN: One should understand how vital his has been. Domenico and Stefano have inspired us to think about making a much stronger impact with our craftsman section in Pitti. Now our craftspeople know you have to inject something unexpected. A little poison or spice. Like a Fiat 500, a mass market product consumed to be personalized – where you choose color, gears, engine and accessories. So it becomes your own personal car. We all need to think like that. To create a new impulse to buy, a needed emotion. To give one example - the belts they created with no buckle – only knotted and tied - with fine interlacing – by Scuolo del Cuoio.

What’s noticeable about Dolce & Gabbana is the strength of their Italian ideas; their Made in Italy and their Italian DNA. Yet they are also free to create and don’t let the DNA restrict them, even if they have their own clear iconic images, from black lace to Sicilian flowers. Frankly, I see a lot of fashion, and the quality coming out of their atelier in Legnano is quite extraordinary.
FNW: How has Pitti Connect been doing?
RN: Back in 2019 we decided to open it in January 2021, a new service with content, information and interviews with buyers, stories and trends. Adding more substance to the traffic. But Covid forced us to anticipate that by six months.

FNW: What are the main goals of Pitti Connect?
RN: The initial concept was Fiera Digitale – an ePitti with a simple strategy. We know that it’s impossible for a buyer in three days to visit the 1,200 exhibitors present at Pitti Uomo - a real all-round offer – from young designers to tailoring to street to sportswear. So we thought, why don’t we use the new technology to offer a longer expression to our community? Allowing buyers and exhibitors to be in touch for four or five weeks more. And we’ve grown it 95,000 photos and 2,360 videos and had growing attention.

FNW: How many companies are participating?
RN: We had 501 companies as of July 31, putting up content and attending. We charge 2,500 euros per season to be on Pitti Connect. Inside Pitti, brands pay a basic 300 euros per square meter. But if you want us to set up your booth and everything then it is 450 euros. For an important resource, say Brunello Cucinelli, who takes 300 meters, that means he pays 90,000 euros per show.
FNW: How many buyers have been registering with Pitti Connect?
RN: In the last two weeks of July we had 75,000 buyers registered entering Pitti Connect. Some 130,000 impressions; and 630,000 page views. The average was five pages per person. At first it was 1.20 minutes per section, now it's stickier and close to two minutes. Especially our big interviews, like with Hirofumi Korino of United Arrows, who is the single biggest buyer. His interview had 6,000 page views; just ahead of Cuccinelli with 5,500. We have a list of VIP buyers who cannot travel now but they have multiple relations with brands via Pitti Connect. However, I don't think that digital will ever change the need of physical appointments. Looking at a show on the web is often really boring, as we all realized during the lockdown. Seeing it live and touching products is exciting. Unfortunately, I expect this whole pandemic to take another 18 months. It's a very, very tricky moment. Look at the market - Neiman Marcus which went into Chapter 11, so did J. Crew. Nordstrom needs to find 5 billion dollars, which says it all. Bergdorf has problems and Madison Avenue is empty. However, China has recovered quickly and is performing very well. Ever since China reduced its import duty to boost local consumption, meaning they buy less in Europe; but more at home. Hong Kong is now dead, they are closing shops and it won't start being a major market again anytime soon.

FNW: When do you expect to next be able to stage a Pitti?
RN: In January 2021, which is why we are working very hard. We will be happy to reach half our normal numbers. Six hundred exhibitors would be very good! One needs to understand that 60 percent of our exhibitors have turnovers of less than 5 million euros. So, they may not be able to afford a trade show. Which is why we will use Connect and agents, and we have to handle that. Look around this street. Normally it is very busy on a Friday morning in September. But in the last half hour, no customer has gone in any door of any shop!

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