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**BENETTON/ITALY**  
**Back to bright**

After years in the doldrums, beloved Italian brand Benetton is getting a spring in its step. Newly appointed artistic director Jean-Charles de Castelbajac is taking the company back to its roots with a welcome dose of pop – and a sprinkle of punk.

By Laura Rysman  
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Jean-Charles de Castelbajac – a legend of the fashion world and JC/DC to his friends – pioneered an irreverent pop sensibility in the 1970s and 1980s with celebrated knitwear brand Iceberg and then his namesake line. He made waves with outrageous items, such as a coat composed of teddy bears for Madonna and a rainbow cassock for Pope John Paul II, and was dubbed the King of Cartoon. Last year the-Moroccan-born French designer was named artistic director of United Colors of Benetton, tasked with reviving the Italian giant's fortunes.

Benetton was once a byword for accessible and vibrant Italian style. The company was founded in 1965 in the northern Italian province of Treviso by four siblings: Luciano, Giuliana, Gilberto and Carlo Benetton. They went from selling home-knitted sweaters to running a global empire: by the 1990s Benetton's *polipetto* (little octopus) logo and cheery knits were worn by fashionable folk around the world.

In addition to its colourful products, the brand became known for its unorthodox business manoeuvres. In 1982, Benetton began collaborating with Italian photographer Oliviero Toscani to create groundbreaking advertising campaigns. Its multi-ethnic castings became famous. So too did its shocking images: pictures of an umbilically attached new-born baby and the bloodstained clothes of a Croatian soldier caused outrage, veering wildly from what people expected from advertising. The brand also launched initiatives such as the Benetton Foundation for environmental landscape research, the now iconic

*Colors* magazine and *Fabrica*, a centre offering scholarships to young artists.

But the new millennium brought hard times for the company, which dropped its prices and skimmed on quality to compete with the rise of fast fashion. It was wrong-footed by Uniqlo et al and lost its identity. Luciano Benetton, the long-time head of the brand, left in 2008, when he says assets were €155m; his son Alessandro, followed by a professional



**Stepping out:**  
 Cheery runway looks from Benetton



management team, took over. The company was delisted from the Milan Stock Exchange in 2012 due to losses and, by 2016, had lost almost half of its value. Luciano returned in 2017, collaborating again with Toscani to create more controversial ads.

Now he has recruited De Castelbajac to take Benetton back to its agenda-setting past. As a sign of things to come, De Castelbajac staged the brand's first-ever runway show during Milan Fashion Week. While the models filed down the catwalk in his joyful palette, seamstresses sat on stage and sewed. It was an ode to the company's love of colour and quality manufacturing. Here De Castelbajac lays out his plan for the new United Colors of Benetton. — (M)

**MONOCLE: Why did Benetton chose you to refresh its brand?**

**JEAN-CHARLES DE CASTELBAJAC:** Because I'm the best! [Laughs] They chose me because I was the ideal candidate. I definitely wasn't the only one on their list but in the end, with my connection to colours, knitwear, irony, I was best suited to the mission. It was also, perhaps, because I know how to work in a team and how to work with a large company, because I've had experiences with Max Mara, Ellesse, Courrèges, Iceberg. So I have no fear of the factory dimension – on the contrary, I love industry. Most designers prefer little ateliers, where it takes hours for something to be sewn just right. Me, I like machines. I like teams. All those seamstresses who I made take part in the runway show were there because I like this association: that one of them makes a sleeve, another makes a pocket and another the collar, and at the end you've created this communal piece.

**M: Do you still appreciate industry and big factories, when in many ways they have come to represent fast fashion and low quality?**

**JCDC:** Yes, that's not the origin of industry but it is the reality. That's why, with the evolution of Benetton, we're working today on a return to "Made in Italy"; we're coming back to the workshops here and we're getting out of fast fashion.

**M: So the idea is to change how things are made?**

**JCDC:** *Bien sûr!* It's fundamental because Benetton was born as a house of high fashion for all. Back then the



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sweaters were beautiful; the wool was always coloured with just the right dyes. We also have this responsibility to do things ecologically so that when we use dyes, they're not poisoning nature. It's an enormous challenge.

**M: Your role then is not just creative – it's to overhaul everything?**

**JCDC:** Creativity is not what it was in the 1970s. You can't just make a pretty design and say, "OK, you guys go sell it." I wasn't going to show up on the scene like Mick Jagger. You can't do that today. My scope includes marketing and how to reach young people because Benetton had really gotten quite old. The whole millennial generation knows what's cool and when they find things that are cool, they know to

ask how they were made. How something is made has consequences and we need to pay attention to that.

**M: What vision do you want to bring to Benetton?**

**JCDC:** Benetton was always special. It's like a Proustian *madeleine* for the whole family because everyone has fond memories of it. With Luciano's return, Benetton's roots and original emotions are returning. The project is to become a house that makes high-quality, useful things for everyone, and with a fair price.

**M: How can you offer a 'Made in Italy' product at a low price?**

**JCDC:** It could be made in Italy, Croatia or Hungary but always with

good production. We're creating beautiful ecological denim in Tunisia with a structure that's going to be the Benetton "garage". I want to make a line of garage jeans, where we use artisanal dyes and no two pieces are the same. That turns it into high fashion but for everyone, because high fashion means diversity – everyone has something special.

**M: Why do you think Benetton dropped off the radar?**

**JCDC:** After Luciano's departure, Benetton took on a different spirit. It was treated like a fast fashion company but it had never been a fast-fashion company. Benetton is an industrial legend. It's Sleeping Beauty and I'm the prince.

**M: Why did you think Benetton needed to put on a runway show?**

**JCDC:** To signal the road we're taking. It's not just a publicity thing; a show brings together the entire company, from the chauffeur to the head of PR, and everyone acts like part of a single entity. I love that aspect.

**M: From your colourful, logo-bedecked runway designs, it seems like you believe in reviving the historical codes of the brand.**

**JCDC:** Sure but the rainbow is also part of my own code, it's always been the symbol of freedom. And the *polipetto* logo was there when I arrived but it was miniscule. I wanted to use it because it's a beautiful logo and because the brand has this beautiful name: United Colors of Benetton. What company would ever dare to say "united colours"? Brands should be an example and Benetton has an important history of diversity. When you see the ads it did in the 1980s – what other company had courage like that? It was too far ahead of its time. That's what the logo represents.

**M: What's the secret to keeping your creativity fresh?**

**JCDC:** At 69 I feel like I'm 19 but with more wisdom. I'm not melancholy or nostalgic at all, I'm always looking to the next project. Recently Karl [Lagerfeld] passed away. He was never melancholy either. He never claimed things were better before. Nothing was better before. The future is always the best memory there could be.