



1



2



3



4

② FASHION: Education Class of its own *Florence*

Fashion schools tend to be either technical or conceptual. Yet Florence's Polimoda is stitching together a new approach, promoting both practical skills and artistic experimentation. We meet some of its creative leaders and learners, who are changing the look of the industry.

WRITER
Laura Rysman

PHOTOGRAPHY
Andrea Pugiotto



5



6



7



8



1 "Fashion school is the space where creative minds can run free," says Massimiliano Giornetti, director of Florence's Polimoda fashion college. "It's where new ideas are spared the demands of the market and where mistakes can be made." Dressed head-to-toe in Prada with a pair of oxfords sprouting leather flowers at the toes, his flamboyant style is somewhat outdone by his surroundings. His office is distinguished by a soaring ceiling exuberantly decorated with frescoed cherubs and gilded cornices. This location, Villa Favard, a 19th-century pleasure palace commissioned in Florence by a woman thought to have been a paramour of Napoleon III, today serves as the heart of Polimoda. This is fashion school, Italian-style.

Giornetti, the creative director who made Salvatore Ferragamo a fashion headliner in the 2000s, took over the top job at Polimoda last year. An alumnus himself – and most recently its head of design – he has spearheaded an internal push towards creativity with appreciable results. "Fashion requires intuition and ability but also the nerve to break rules," he says. His approach is quickly paying off. At Polimoda's end-of-year runway show in 2021 the fashion industry reaction was highly

Previous page

1. Fitting a final year student's collection
2. Dress by Camille Burkhardt
3. Model Alessio Bargiacchi wears work by Federico Toscano
4. Outfit by Alvaro Barrera Lozano
5. Bargiacchi with Federico Toscano
6. Cole Luca Heard
7. Student Cecil Kademy
8. Twist on bridal design by student Bruna Giordano

This spread

1. Pattern-making class
2. Central building at Manifattura Tabacchi
3. Massimiliano Giornetti, director of Polimoda
4. An Vandevorst, head of fashion design
5. Kris van Assche, Polimoda's mentor for creative direction

positive. As one *Vogue* correspondent was overheard saying, "That was way better than [London's] Central Saint Martins", the ultimate accolade in style-school status.

Giornetti's ascension is just one of the signals of a new age at Polimoda. While doubling down on the value of time-honoured craftsmanship, the curriculum is expanding to support an industry shifting its focus towards sustainability and material innovation. Last year Giornetti was joined by another pair of big international fashion names, An Vandevorst and Kris Van Assche. An interesting choice for the school, the Belgian designers' work tends to represent a meditative and pared-down modernity that's scarce in Italy's lively and commercially driven design aesthetics.

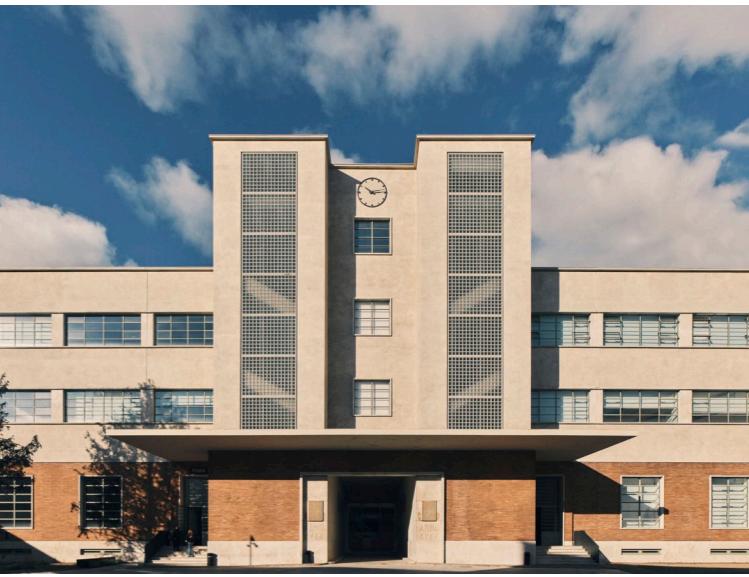
So what attracts this kind of talent to these academic halls? "It was a good moment in my life to share my knowledge," says Vandevorst, who closed her label AF Vandevorst in 2020. "It's nice to see how these young designers are approaching things. Fashion is a bit upside down right now but they will be the ones to change it." Not your average head of department – she is dressed in her own striking designs – she adds that she has confidence that

Polimoda graduates will be part of an industry shake-up. "You can already see that after the glut of clothes and brands we've had, things are starting to become more focused," she says.

Like Van Assche, Vandevorst is one of the marquee names to have come out of Antwerp and its Royal Academy of Fine Arts fashion school, along with the acclaimed Antwerp Six, which included Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester. Although Florence and Antwerp are similarly small cities with rich histories, fashion-wise they couldn't be further apart. Florence remains staked to its past glories; Antwerp embodies postmodern cosmopolitanism. Traditionally their fashion institutions have diverged: Polimoda prioritised teaching students to sew and understand fashion from a maker's and manufacturer's point of view; the Royal Academy taught budding designers to think poetically. Yet the Polimoda education taking shape today offers a more balanced approach. A slew of new vocational and business courses (fashion writing, consumer behaviour, trend forecasting, e-commerce and more) that were added under previous leadership have rendered the institution wholly practical for future fashion professionals. Meanwhile, the school's reputation for creativity has flourished.

"What I like about Polimoda are the opportunities in the variety of courses that students have on offer," says Vandevorst. "Antwerp's Royal Academy has remained focused on creativity alone, while Polimoda has the facilities that the industry demands. And you're in the midst of all the greatest artisans and factories of Italy." Vandevorst wasn't taught about fabrics in her own education, she adds, but she has intensified textiles education at the Florence school, bringing in specialists. "Polimoda makes you more prepared for the industry," she says. "Fashion is, after all, an applied profession; it isn't art."

Van Assche, who helmed Dior Homme for 11 years, led a celebrated eponymous line and helped to transform Italian shoe-maker Berluti into a fully fledged menswear brand, says that his current job is narrower in reach but no less exciting. Today he oversees a masterclass in creative direction at Polimoda. Here students present projects showing the vision they would implement at a real-life brand to one of the industry's pre-eminent figures in the field. "I hope that my career as a creative



2 **3** **4** **5** **Manifattura Tabacchi Design Lab**

When it opened in 1940, Manifattura Tabacchi (pictured above), a cigar factory, was a rationalist masterpiece of industrial architecture. Sadly, it closed, plunging an entire neighbourhood on the western edge of Florence into near ruin. A recent partnership between the city, Polimoda and private developers is turning the dilapidated factory buildings into a cultural complex that will eventually include apartments, a hotel and the extension of a tram line to the area. Already, the resuscitated Manifattura houses a hive of Polimoda fashion students in its grand central building. The former factory space is now a marvel of four floors of classrooms and labs with state-of-the-art Juki sewing machines, two photo studios and one of the largest academic knitwear labs in Europe, filled with both electric and hand-powered looms.

director can give answers to their questions," says Van Assche. "The idea is that it's an equal exchange, a win-win situation for everyone. On my side, I'm hoping to get their enthusiasm, their point of view and their ideas on how the fashion industry will evolve."

In turn, Van Assche illuminates some of the facts that students must understand in an industry that feels increasingly dominated by amateurs. Where today they might envy social-media stars who head fashion lines despite a lack of formal preparation, he points out that influencers devote considerable time to building their online presence and usually lean on trained designers to translate their ideas into products. He also promotes the fact that education – and working for seasoned designers after graduation – is the most reliable route into the industry. There's a bit of Belgian pragmatism thrown into his dealings with students who occasionally need a reality check. For example, he says that while students feel that some collections should be "genderless", certain concepts pushed to their extremes can restrict the creative palette. "If everything needs to fit all body types, you'll have to make everything out of stretchy materials," he says. "To be creatively free, we should not impose too many rules on ourselves."

Polimoda was founded in 1986 as part of a collaboration between the cities of Florence and Prato, various fashion trade associations, Florentine designer Emilio Pucci and New York's Fashion Institute of Technology – a school long associated with trade jobs rather than design. Almost 40 years later, Polimoda is ranked as one of the best fashion schools in Italy, a triumph in a country that produces much of the world's luxury clothing and leather goods. But this comes at a cost. With an annual tuition price of €18,000 for undergraduates and €28,000 at the graduate level, education here is a steep investment compared to much cheaper public institutions, such as Antwerp's Royal Academy or the Politecnico di Milano. But Polimoda offers students an increasingly diversified curriculum and access to supreme levels of traditional and hi-tech equipment, as well as immersion in the Italian network of top-end manufacturers, artisans and brands.

Alongside Giornetti, several notable fashion names have emerged from Polimoda. They include Francesco Risso, who heads Marni, Aquazzura's Edgardo Osorio and Lucie and

"I wanted to deepen my learning and get a degree from a prestigious school so that my next employer will have to listen to me"



1



2

1. Bruna Giordano dress
2. From Alvaro Barrera Lozano's collection
3. Cristina Neagu
4. Drawing class
5. Fiona Grassberger
6. Inside the Villa Favard

Luke Meier, the married creative directors of Jil Sander, who met while studying at the school. As a location for design education, Florence, itself a centre of premium clothing manufacturing, is flanked by Tuscany's speciality hubs. Italy's textile-weaving capital of Prato is nearby, as are the bag-crafting workshops of Scandicci, the tanneries of Santa Croce and more. Students are encouraged to participate in three to six-month internships at fashion companies and a number of industry heavyweights have partnered with Polimoda on courses at the school. This includes Gucci (fashion retail management), Salvatore Ferragamo (shoe design), Tod's (bag design) and *Vogue Italia* (fashion art direction), all aiming to usher new talents from Polimoda into their professional ranks.

"The professors are more than teachers – they all work in fashion, which means they have contacts and can open doors for you," says Leonardo Brini, a fashion design management student from Bologna. "They have real experience and can tell you where to get things made, connecting us with tailors and fabric companies, for example."

The school is also in flux, responding to the ever-changing and increasingly pressing needs of the industry. Linda Loppa was formerly the longtime head of Antwerp's Royal Academy and a one-time director of Polimoda; she now serves as a strategy adviser at the Florence school. "The world is in confrontation with this industry and its impact," says Loppa. "Today we're talking about sustainability, circularity, gender fluidity, inequality and scientific advances. We're in a big transition."

Moldovan designer Cristina Neagu, who decided to pause her career to study at Polimoda, reflects this transition. She made the decision after 15 years in the fashion industry in Paris and London. This was motivated by the problems she had seen, from workers exploited through punishing hours to pregnant women hustled out of their positions and people forced to work illegally during lockdowns. "It was all about profit," she says. "But I don't want to burn out and leave the industry because I still love it. I have enough experience that I don't need another diploma but I wanted to deepen my learning and get a degree from a prestigious school so that my next employer will have to listen to me." Her projects at Polimoda focus on



3



4



5



6

creative upcycling of the piles of deadstock men's shirts stored in the recycling hubs of nearby warehouses. "There is no way out but to become sustainable and a school, especially an international school like this one, is the right environment to begin the process. The world is changing and so should education."

While there is important work to be done, fashion school in Florence is still about having fun and this is felt in the hallways of Polimoda. In jaunty contrast to the buttoned-up aesthetic of Florence's residents, the young aspirants traipse to class in fake-fur jackets and fingerless gloves, vintage lederhosen with rhinestone-studded tights and combat boots. "Polimoda is the most creative school in Italy but you're also in touch with all the manufacturers and craftspeople here," says Bruna Giordano, a Brazilian student, who has already launched her own brand, Lilith, reworking bridal-wear tropes into easygoing pieces that extol female liberation. "The school combines technique with conceptualism," says another student, Federico Toscano. Camille Elaine Burkhardt, an American who used to work in luxury retail and calls her design studies "a pandemic decision", chose Polimoda "to be in Tuscany, where there's a real connection to leather and textiles."

Because of its workshops, Polimoda never completely closed during the pandemic, maintaining special "artisan" status, as students had to be present to sew, drape and construct their projects. "Classes had to be in person or I would not have come," says Alvaro Barrera Lozano, a fashion design student from Mexico, who dropped out of New York University when his business classes moved online. His collection, with traditional suiting reimagined to wrap and twist around the body, was made in collaboration with a Florence tailor. "Here everything we're doing, from technical drawing to draping, is hands on."

"Polimoda is a key cultural intermediary in the contemporary boom of Florence," says Giornetti, back at his frescoed director's office. He adds that this school is a springboard for students, nurturing the creativity and values that will forge the future. But it is also an engine of vitality for the surrounding community. "Florence is a classical city but students coexist with that classicism and regenerate Florence with culture," he says. "It's what Polimoda is here for: to create a cultural bridge between the past and the future." — 