

# Style leader

## Milan

We meet this dedicated follower of fashion whose designs for heritage Italian brand Aspesi are setting new trends worldwide.

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How does an American end up as the creative director of a brand that defines the style of Milan? Take a look at Lawrence Steele and it's easy to understand. Wearing a smart rollneck and billowing white canvas trousers that he designed for Lombardy's Aspesi, matched with well-trodden Doc Martens that the 58-year-old has worn since college, he pulls off the art of Milanese style better than the Milanese themselves, with the perfect tailoring and subtly playful details that make Italian dressing so enviable.

"I've been entrusted with something that's sort of a national treasure," he says of his appointment as the creative director of Aspesi. "I'd put in the time and the elbow grease here and worked alongside Alberto Aspesi, the former

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owner of the brand, so it was more like returning home than being handed a task," he says, while standing in front of images showing his latest designs at the company's showroom in Milan.

Steele's history with Aspesi is long. After initially taking roles with Moschino and Prada, he started a 13-year tenure as a consultant for Aspesi in 2004, followed by three years when he went over to Marni as associate creative director to Francesco Risso, his long-time partner and the fashion house's creative director since 2016. He returned to Aspesi as creative director of the entire brand in 2020 and his first collection hits shops this spring. It's a demurely unisex medley of timeless Italian basics where most items – trench coats, field jackets, wide-cut chinos, rugby tops, pocketed button-downs – are sized for men and women, with some pieces even miniaturised for children.

"Clothing is an alphabet of identity," says Steele. "But rather than imposing a voice, mine are quiet clothes that allow a person to let their identity show." Steele sees his work as outfitting different generations. "It's for a grandparent in a tailored blazer and the teenager who borrows that blazer but transforms it into something more radical," he says. "It's also an extension of something fundamental that's been going on in fashion: the breaking down of codes between men and women."

As the son of a military dad, Steele moved frequently in his youth – Germany, Spain, Japan and then midwestern

America – and he used fashion as a tool of survival. "I was so shy as a kid that the easiest way for me to make friends was to be particular [in how I dressed] because that would start a conversation," he says. "I couldn't find clothes that were different so I got Vogue patterns and started sewing them and then tweaking them – that's how I became a designer." In high school, he says he started off as a nerdy outsider but by graduation he had earned the popular vote of "most likely to succeed". "That was thanks to the power of suggestion that our culture puts into costume," says Steele, smiling.

Arriving in Milan in the 1980s, he felt like an anomaly: American, black, and gay, in a country that was then still very homogeneously Italian-born and still very Catholic. But he found ways to be embraced by a society that retained fond memories of US assistance in the war and of the industrial boom that followed. He adopted a look derived from American culture: in Milan, it was the era of the *paninari* – the so-called "sandwich eaters", who were embracing the casual food habits and sportier daywear of the US with Levi's jeans, trainers and puffer jackets. Steele, already well-versed in the American art of sandwich-eating, easily slipped in among the *paninari* with his beloved Aspesi down puffer – a signature product then as now. "Clothing has always been a secret way of talking," he says. "When you take a wardrobe, anybody's wardrobe, it tells the story of that person." — Ⓜ



### The CV

**1963:** Born in Hampton, Virginia.

**1985:** Begins apprenticeship with Franco Moschino.

**2004:** Begins work as a consultant for Aspesi.

**2017:** Takes role as associate creative director at Marni.

**2020:** Returns to Aspesi as creative director.

**2022:** Launches first collection with Aspesi.