

**Bonotto**  
Molvena, Italy

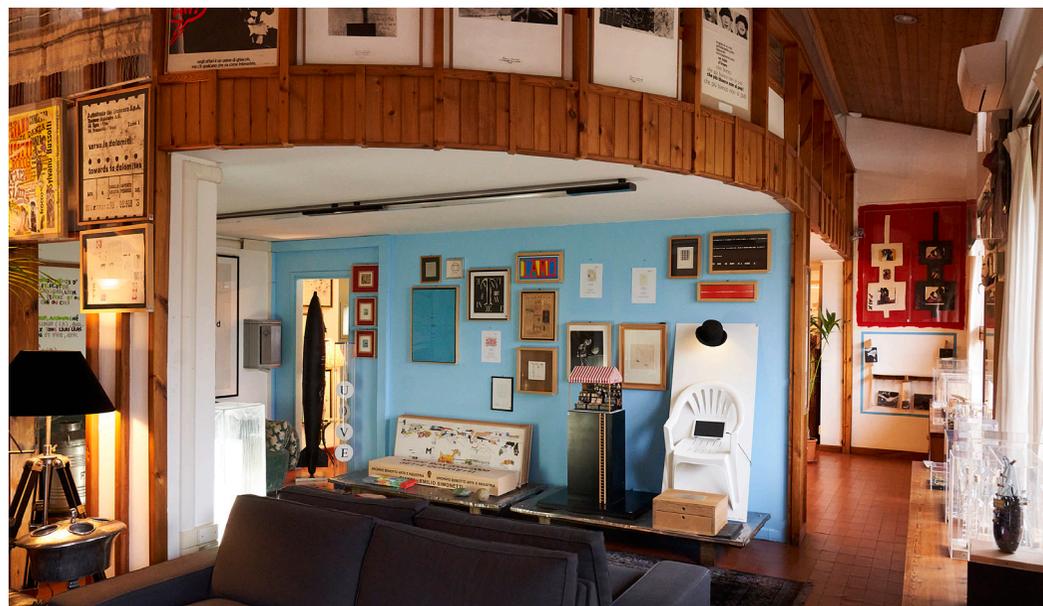
“This factory is a work of art, the 200 workers here are part of the art and every day is a performance,” says Giovanni Bonotto, the fourth-generation scion of his family business. Textile company Bonotto is renowned in the fashion industry as one of the world’s best and most imaginative fabric-makers but the inspiration behind its products is less well known. According to Giovanni, Bonotto’s team members “work like artists, because they work in an artistic context”. The factory is filled with an awe-inspiring collection of creations.

A robot made using eight televisions – an emblematic work by Korean-American video artist Nam June Paik – sits near the entrance to the factory. US performance artist John Giorno’s framed poetry hangs just above a pair of vending machines. A giant tarp that Yoko Ono emblazoned with the word “Dream” covers a loading gate. Multimedia artist Carolee Schneemann’s self-portraits showing her as a nude ice-skater line a wall next to the looms. The works of Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Ben Patterson and many more ground-breaking artists cover every wall in the workspace.

Founded in 1912 in the northern Italian hinterlands of Vicenza as a straw-hat manufacturer, Bonotto transformed into a textile company in 1972, when Giovanni’s father Luigi took over. Luigi Bonotto learnt fabric-making from Gaetano Marzotto – one of a generation of enlightened Italian industrialists who sought to use the factory as a springboard for humanism and workers’ rights. The annual Marzotto prize for arts and sciences regularly brought intellectuals to this corner of Italy. This is how Luigi Bonotto forged many friendships with artists. He played chess with Marcel Duchamp and invited creatives to visit him, where they would stay in rooms at the factory that he had fixed up as an apartment. The guests would enjoy his hospitality and the space to create new work – and they would often sell him a piece (for a friendly price) at the end of their stay. Yet Luigi never thought



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of it as a residency programme. “When a friend comes to stay, you don’t call it a ‘residence’,” he says. Instead he thought of it as an amicable exchange of ideas. “Every day you begin living all over again. Everything can be turned on its head. That’s a concept John Cage taught me that’s always served us well in the factory.”

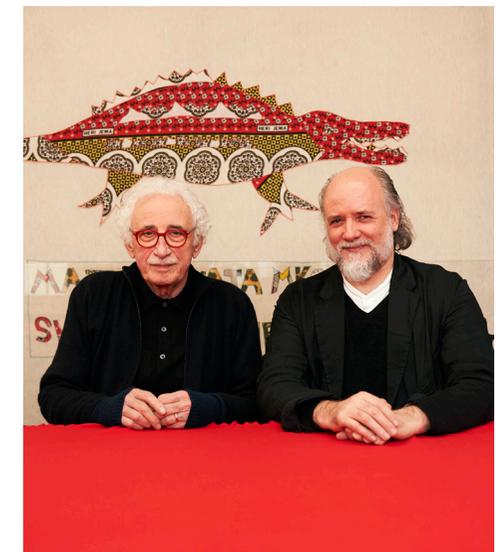
More than 300 artists have since visited Bonotto in Molvena. The factory may now be officially known as the Bonotto Foundation but its valuable art – which has been exhibited at institutions such as Paris’s Palais de Tokyo and London’s Whitechapel Gallery – is still hung casually throughout the space, a working warehouse of concrete floors, fluorescent lights and forklifts.

“People worry that the art is too valuable for this environment but it communicates to everyone here that their work

is truly valuable and it instils the sensitivity of artists in them,” says Giovanni. This philosophy chimes with Bonotto’s production ethic which he calls “fabbrica lenta” (slow factory). Bonotto uses reclaimed mechanical looms from 1956 that generate only 10 per cent of the fabric that an automated machine would – but it’s particularly rich and dense. This way of working also encourages customisation and experimentation.

The tight-knit texture and often unusual patterns of Bonotto fabrics have earned the company long-standing relationships with top fashion houses including Prada, Gucci, Valentino, Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton. And inventing more than 1,000 new styles of fabric each year requires everyone to work with the attitude of an artist.

“At first the artists who came to visit were seen as strange and foreign,” says Giovanni. “But then we understood that the artists had given us what I would call ‘imagination eyeglasses’ to see our work differently. Our workers began to perceive themselves as artists and to see every fabric as a small work of art.” It’s an approach that’s descended, he believes, from Italy’s Renaissance legacy of combining art and artistry in one workshop. “As manufacturers in Italy today, we have to be artists to survive. Rather than compete with mass production, we’re inventing new solutions and visual languages.” — LR



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1. Nam June Paik’s video art greets workers
2. Giovanni Bonotto in the art-adorned factory
3. Apartment inside the factory where, for decades, artists have come to stay and work
4. A work by Fluxus artist Ben Patterson, which moves to the sound of opera
5. Giovanni (on right) and his father Luigi Bonotto in the library where they’ve gathered perhaps Italy’s most significant collection of books by artists

PHOTOGRAPHER: JAMES MOLLISON