

RETAIL / ITALY

COMMON THREAD

Milan was once a breeding ground for fashion talent but the big names that emerged in the 1980s still cast a shadow over the city's flagship industry. So why have young independent brands failed to break through despite the huge advantage of having some of the world's best makers on their doorstep?

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Fashion has long been Milan's calling card to the world. So, given that the city is flourishing for the first time in decades – with a new generation reinvigorating design, culture and dining – you would assume that the fashion scene was a catalyst. But you'd be wrong. It's not that fashion is doing badly here: the luxury establishment, led by Gucci and Prada, is raking in billions and the industry is growing at 3 per cent per year, more than twice the rate of the city's economy as a whole. Yet, amid a citywide boom that ought to encourage creativity and risk, there are very few young independent fashion brands. So what is holding back Milan's next generation?

Italy's fashion industry hauls in €84bn per year, making it the country's second-most lucrative industry, after cars. There is a huge web of big-name brands, artisans and specialist manufacturers. Milanese brands have long been gifted an advantage: they have some of the world's best workshops on their doorstep. In the 1980s the city was a breeding ground for talent: Giorgio Armani, Miuccia Prada, Gianni Versace, Franco Moschino, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana all rose up the ranks here. This old guard still dominates Milan's fashion-week schedule, in stark contrast to its Parisian equivalent: a bonafide melting pot of established and up-and-coming names.

The dearth of young brands today might be partly attributable to the national psyche. "There's no faith in young people in Italy," says Simone Rizzo, co-founder of Sunnei, one of the few independent labels currently finding success. In many work environments, young people are treated "like children", says Rizzo: paid low wages and expected to survive on parental help (66 per cent of Italians live with their parents until the age of 35). The punishing tax rates are especially problematic for start-ups, freelancing jobs and the kind of part-time gigs that attract creative types. Against this backdrop, a comfortable position at a storied fashion house is a far more

appealing proposition than launching an independent venture. "Most of our students would love to have their own line," says Giulia Bedoni, director of education at Milanese fashion school Istituto Marangoni. "But they realise that this big fashion industry that already exists offers them a better opportunity."

"The difference here [compared with other European capitals, such as Berlin or Paris] is the bureaucratic and economic factor," says Bedoni, whose college offers grants to students and organises public fashion shows for them to display their wares. "Young people are suffocated by our system. A lot is done by schools and business that ought to be done by the government."

But it's not all gloomy. Two competitions run by *Vogue Italia* – Who's on Next and Vogue Talents – offer exposure (though no cash) for small brands. Camera Moda, the association behind Milan fashion week, has become a staunch ally to young designers under the reign of president Carlo Capasa, who took the helm in 2015. His initiatives include: the Fashion Hub, a pavilion at every fashion week showcasing 15 emerging brands; the Fashion Lab Incubator, a partnership with Unicredit bank, which connects designers and investors; and Fashion Trust, which offers mentoring with industry professionals. Camera Moda also provides a runway space in Palazzo Reale for more established designers and adds the shows to the official fashion-week calendar, though the cost of hire is often prohibitive for independent brands. These programmes are underwritten



by the association's 220 member companies, which include Prada, Valentino, Armani, Fendi and almost every other well-known Italian house except Dolce & Gabbana. "These brands that support us appreciate that our initiatives don't necessarily offer immediate returns," says Capasa. "If we can create a positive fashion system that's attractive to young people, promotes the future and puts on impressive fashion weeks, the entire industry will eventually benefit." Thanks to these initiatives, resourcefulness and determination, a handful of young Milanese brands are making inroads: Sunnei creates playful yet finely tailored pieces; Marco de Vincenzo's kaleidoscopic *outré* womenswear received investment from LVMH; and Blazé (*see sidebar, right*) specialises in women's tailoring.

Arthur Arbesser, an Austrian who stayed in Milan to found his eponymous brand after a stint at Armani, produces womenswear emblazoned with graphic prints. He maintains a second office in Vienna and his experiences working in the two cities are telling. In the Austrian capital he received €250,000 from the government over a two-and-a-half-year period to fund his business; in Milan the Camera Moda offered a runway

space. Otherwise, he says, "We don't get real support here. Everyone fights their own battle." He recently became the designer for Fay, a brand owned by Tod's, and uses the income to support his own line.

Given the commercial nous required to succeed here, it's not surprising that one of the most successful young brands is run by two designers with a background in business rather than fashion. Rizzo and Loris Messina, the founders of Sunnei, studied economics before starting their line in 2015 after friends introduced them to fabric-makers in Como and clothing producers in Vicenza. "We didn't have any background in product or design when we launched but we knew what we liked, we knew the market and we understood business," says Rizzo. They hold high-impact but low-cost runway shows every season, their online sales are growing exponentially and they recently added a

womenswear line to complement their cheerily striped men's shirts and jackets. They have a network of stockists in the US, China and Japan but from the outset Sunnei has sold the majority of its clothes directly to customers to maximise margins; its sole shop is the Milan flagship. Among Milan's new generation, Sunnei is the only brand with a physical presence – another sign of the current difficulties. "If you're young in Italy, people assume you still lack experience," says Rizzo; Sunnei employs eight people, all under the age of 25. "But we're not an 'emerging brand', we've emerged," he says with a wry smile. "It's time to get rid of the dinosaurs. It's time for young people to take over."



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