

Women of Fashion Museums: Stories of enlightened women, art historians, collectors, and editors who have brought fashion into museums

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a study about the birth of fashion museums in Italy with reference to the role that women have played within these cultural institutions. The research focuses on three main case studies: Palma Bucarelli, Anna Piaggi, and Cecilia Matteucci Lavarini. The former was the first woman director of Rome’s National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, the second was the legendary fashion editor to whom the Victoria and Albert Museum has dedicated the exhibition entitled *Anna Piaggi: Fashion-ology*, and the last is a collector of *haute couture* dresses and Oriental costumes. Significant exhibitions have been dedicated to these style icons in international venues while their clothes are enriching the permanent collections of museums such as the Boncompagni Ludovisi Museum in Rome or the Museum of Costume and Fashion in Florence. The paper aims to bring to the surface the importance that these figures have had in the history of fashion museology.

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Introduction: a brief overview of fashion museums in Italy

The opening of fashion museums in Italy is a recent matter: although the origins of exhibition practices date back to the World Expos and fair exhibitions as well as art’s *vernissage* within galleries and Salons, the entry of contemporary fashion into Italian museums did not occur until the 1950s with the birth of corporate museums. These were ethnographic museums that presented the objects in relation to the craft instrument from which they were produced and mostly displayed accessories (Chiarelli 2005, 866; Segre Reinach 2017, 58-59). On the other hand, Giovanni Battista Giorgini brought Italian fashion to the museum through the iconic fashion show that he organized in the White Room at the Florentine Pitti Palace (1952). The 1950s are generally recognized as the years of the birth of Italian fashion (Vergani 1993); indeed, there was a trend for fair exhibitions and shootings set in cultural venues such as Strozzi Palace or The Galleria Borghese Museum (Frisa, Mattiolo, and Tonchi, 2014).

However, a significant change took place around the turn of the 1970s when the first fashion and costume museums were opened to the public, e. g., Fortuny Museum in Venice (1975), Museo del tessuto di Prato (1975), the Costume Gallery in Florence (1983, today Museum of Costume and Fashion), Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Como (1985), the Museum of Palazzo Mocenigo with its Study Center for History of Textiles, Costume, and Perfume in Venice (1985), and so on. This period was also marked by temporary exhibitions such as *1922-1943: Vent’anni di moda italiana*

held at Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan (1980-81) and which was set up as a function of the international conference “Per un museo della moda” (1981-2); and *Conseguenze impreviste. Arte, moda, design: ipotesi di nuove creatività in Italia* (1983), a widespread exhibition held in Prato that laid the groundwork for the Florence Biennale / *Biennale della Moda* (1996, 1998) (Monti 2019, 62-89). In the 1990s, new fashion museums were founded, e. g., the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo in Florence (1995), the Boncompagni Ludovisi Museum for the Decorative Arts, Tradition and Fashion of the 19th and 20th Centuries in Rome (1995), and so on. In the same year, a National Committee—*Commissione nazionale per la tutela e la valorizzazione delle arti decorative, della moda e del costume*—was set up to elaborate a ministerial standard for cataloging ancient and contemporary dresses: the VeAC card and the *Lemmario* (Vestimenti 2010; Spadaccini 2021).

Today, a new phase for Italian museums has begun and many private museums have been opened to the public, including the museum of Roberto Capucci Foundation in Florence (2007, in 2017 the museum moved to Udine); Museo del tessile e dell’abbigliamento “Elena Aldobrandini” (2003, today Museo della Moda Napoli-Fondazione Mondragone); Palazzo Morando, Costume Moda Immagine in Milan (2010); Gucci Museo in Florence (2011, since 2018 part of the Gucci Garden); Armani/Silos (2015), and many more. These new openings go along with the rediscovering of the archives from whose preserved material they derive, e. g., the Gianfranco Ferré Foundation – now Gianfranco Ferré Research Center – opened in 2011 (Gnoli 2012, 324; Calanca 2014, 17-47). Of particular interest are the virtual museums that mark the beginning of a new digital phase, among them the Valentino Garavani Museum launched in 2011. The pandemic situation has accelerated this process and many museums have made virtual tours available.

The history of Italian fashion museums is therefore utmost forty years old. As a consequence, the literature on this history is very recent, too, and so is the need to fill this gap (see Campagnolo 2017, and Marchetti and Segre Reinach 2017).

Case studies: women of fashion museums

With these necessary premises, who were the protagonists of this story? While the role of fashion designers such as Rosa Genoni or Maria Monaci Gallenga is better known in the literature as filtered through the pen of Rosita Levi Pisetzky, Italy's first fashion historian, it is now necessary to bring to light the names of those involved in these milestones of the history of Italian fashion museums.

An interesting document is, for instance, the list of the committee members who elaborated the aforementioned VeAC card: Chair Cristina Aschengreen Piacenti, former director of the Costume Gallery in Florence, Alessandra Mottola Molfin, Sandra Pinto, Maria Luisa Polichetti, and Bonizza Giordani Aragno were the principal contributors—a team of women!

Taking inspiration from Valerie Steele’s book *Women of Fashion* (Steele 1991) and Julia Petrov’s essay “Gender Considerations in Fashion History Exhibitions,” the subject is worth investigating (Petrov 2014, 77-90). Indeed, this article is just part of wider research that is willing to present three figures that in different ways—directly as well as indirectly—played a key role within these cultural institutions: Palma Bucarelli, Anna Piaggi, and Cecilia Matteucci Lavarini.

An art historian

Palma Bucarelli was an art historian and the first woman director of Rome’s National Gallery of Modern Art, the enlightened mind who brought contemporary art to Italy. If Palma’s identification with the Gallery is well known in the history of art criticism—suffice it to say that the top floor became her residence—perhaps her kinship with the Boncompagni Ludovisi Museum is not.

At the end of the 1990s the Gallery, then directed by the aforementioned Sandra Pinto, was promoting the opening of the Boncompagni Ludovisi. The latter was under the cultural property regime of the Soprintendenza Speciale per l'Arte moderna e contemporanea (namely the Gallery) and was directed by Gianna Piantoni (Bonizza Giordani Aragno was appointed as a consultant curator for fashion at the museum) (Amaturo 2018; Spadaccini 2021). This explains Palma's testamentary will—at that time 85 years old—to donate her wardrobe collection to the museum (1996). After Palma, Valentino Garavani with Giancarlo Giammetti, and many other designers, as well as private collectors, donated their garments (Amaturo and Filamingo 2021).

Aware of her charm, vanity, and femme fatale, Palma was targeted by a certain male chauvinist mentality and denounced in her diaries, which she nevertheless managed to overcome (Bucarelli 1997, Cantatore with Sassi 2011; Ferrario 2010). Art critic Philippe Daverio has indeed proposed parallelism with Coco Chanel (direct testimony, see docufilm *Palma Bucarelli. La signora dell'arte italiana*, directed by Elisa Amoruso 2018). Her daily "uniform" consisted of austere tailor-made suits and straight-cut jackets, but she was also used to wearing high fashion gowns for major events, such as those of Sorelle Botti, a Roman atelier founded by three sisters.

Palma organized a fashion show in the Gallery in 1961 after overcoming the objection of the Ministry of Education, which considered the museum unsuitable to host the launch of a new American lipstick brand, probably Rubinstein, in 1957 (Margozzi 2012, 10). She also curated the Italian art section for the Montreal World Expo in 1967: in addition to paintings and sculptures, she selected the artists' jewellery, clothes, and accessories, which were also on display (Margozzi and Marullo 2012).

Today, Palma's dresses are exposed in the "Palm of Elegance" room inside the Boncompagni Ludovisi Museum and they document the evolution of taste around the "Hollywood on the Tiber" period and so the transition between the 1950s—when Italian fashion depended on the French model—and the 1970s—when it assumed a real identity also thanks to the rise of the ready-to-wear.

An editor

Anna Piaggi was fashion editor for *Arianna* magazine, editor-at-large for Condé Nast, fashion editor for *Vanity*, and curator of the *D.P. Doppie Pagine di Anna Piaggi* on *Vogue Italia* from the late 1980s. She collaborated with the biggest photographers such as Alfa Castaldi who also was her life partner, illustrators like Antonio Lopez, and designers like Karl Lagerfeld, who elected her as his muse and dedicated to her the book *Anna-chronique* (Piaggi and Lagerfeld 1986), and Stephen Jones. She was also a close friend of Vern Lambert, fashion historian and period dress collector who had a stall at the Chelsea Antiques Market that influenced her style (D'Annunzio 2022, 75-88).

Period dresses mixed and matched with contemporary designers' pieces, the ever-present hat, and a legwarmer worn as a glove in a Dadaist manner are Piaggi's trademarks, along with the iconic blue hair. She was the first Italian journalist to whom the Victoria and Albert Museum has dedicated an exhibition, entitled *Anna Piaggi: Fashion-ology* and curated by Judith Clark in London in 2006 (Clark 2006).

Anna was a passionate collector of "aesthetic traps" (Brigidini 2010, 929) that have been represented in exhibitions such as *Women in the Spotlight in the 20th Century* curated by Caterina Chiarelli at the Costume Gallery in Florence (2013-17). The items on display came from Anna's collection that the Ministry for Culture purchased for the museum in 2009 (Chiarelli 2013b, 85); Cecilia Matteucci Lavarini's dresses were also displayed during the exhibition.

Last January, as a natural outgrowth of the exhibition *Anna Piaggi: Illustrations by Karl Lagerfeld*, Vestiaire Collective and the Sozzani Foundation promoted the event *Vestiaire Collective x Fondazione Sozzani: State-of-the-art circular fashion* (Milan 2022). A selection of “vintage”—an adjective that Anna coined (Chiarelli 2013b, 65)—clothes from Associazione Culturale Anna Piaggi was sold online together with those of Franca Sozzani from the Sozzani Foundation to provide cultural programs.

Despite the articles, editorials, documentaries, and exhibitions dedicated to Anna's memory, there is still not a complete monograph as recently pointed out by Grazia D'Annunzio (D'Annunzio 2022, 80).

A collector

Cecilia Matteucci Lavarini is a famous style icon, muse of designers and artists such as Sissi, and close to Miuccia Prada's best friend Manuela Pavesi; she is often immortalized in the front rows of fashion shows. Newspapers, blogs, and magazines such as *Vogue Italia* published her photos and have dedicated interviews and editorials to her (Casadio 2019a, 57).

A passionate art collector along with her husband Giampiero (Weiermar 2004), she is also a collector of *haute couture* dresses and “Oriental” costumes—referring to her social media *Wunderkammer* profile (@ceciliamatteucci / Instagram). Using the definitions proposed by Amy De La Haye, who in turn quotes Doris Langley Moore, Cecilia might be identified as a “virtuosa historian” as Langley Moore divides collectors into two categories: the former desire the “museum pieces”, while the second seeks what is atypical and rare (Langley Moore, quoted in De La Haye 2018, 386). Cecilia has in fact acquired the most iconic pieces from every high fashion collection from the 1980s to date, always thinking about their final destination—the museum (Guasti 2013, 87)—and has therefore systematically collected them according to a precise criterion. As well as dresses by Chanel, Christian Dior, Yves Saint-Laurent, and Karl Lagerfeld, her collection includes pieces bought at auctions like Christie's or Sotheby's, vintage markets in Versilia, and so on (Casadio 2019b, 251).

Often featured in temporary exhibitions— such as *Bulgari. The Story, the Dream*, curated by Chiara Ottaviano at Castel Sant'Angelo and Palazzo Venezia (Rome 2019)—she has already established a donation of over 300 items to the Museum of Costume and Fashion in Florence as a V&A museum blog reported on September 26, 2014. At the time of writing (August 8, 2022), this author had asked for feedback from the Uffizi Galleries—to which group the Museum of Costume and Fashion belongs—but any details about the progress status of the agreement are confidential, so the information has been reported so far as it was made public (in Chiarelli 2013a the collector is included in the Registry of donors, 4, 253; see also Casadio 2019a, 57). This news remains worth investigating since the collector wished to find a permanent space to host her *whole* collection, amounting to thousands of pieces (Casadio 2019a, 57).

Conclusion

The history of Italian fashion museums is still developing and so is that of their protagonists. This paper aimed to bring to the surface the importance that these figures have had in the history of fashion museology in order to preserve their memory.

The collections of Palma, Anna, and Cecilia cannot be simply considered as “wardrobe collections” since they are the result of targeted buying campaigns, demonstrating their awareness of the importance of such documents of material culture. These dresses, in addition to enriching the permanent collections of the main Italian museums, have been presented in international

exhibitions, contributing to the customs clearance of fashion beyond national borders. The example of Anna Piaggi also lets us think back to all the collections of fashion editors, stylists, and influencers, which certainly exist but escape “official” mapping as they are private collections—Manuela Pavesi, Franca Sozzani, Anna Dello Russo, and many others fit perfectly into this framework. This theme, therefore, opens up future research potential and a field of investigation could certainly be represented by private archives.

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