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The Italian Academy's newest exhibition highlights fashion's role in shaping American culture

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ARIELLE SHTERNFELD / SENIOR STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The exhibition, titled “Full of Enthusiasm: American Buyers Captured by Italian Fashion in the 1950s,” featured photography.

At Thursday’s opening of the Italian Academy’s new exhibition, photographs told the story of how an Italian entrepreneur bridged the gap between the Italian and American fashion markets.

The exhibition, titled “Full of Enthusiasm: American Buyers Captured by Italian Fashion in the 1950s,” was curated by Barbara Faedda, the executive director of the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies at Columbia.

A panel discussion featuring international professors, scholars, and authors preceded the exhibition's opening. The panelists discussed the intersection of cultural heritage with critical fashion theory and engaged in a Q&A session with the audience.

Simona Segre Reinach, one of the panelists, is an associate professor of fashion studies at the University of Bologna in Italy. Reinach's writing and research focus on fashion from a global perspective, and she serves on the editorial board of numerous fashion journals.

In keeping with the exhibition's theme, Reinach explained in an interview with *Spectator* that fashion and cultural heritage are interconnected.

"Fashion is not just a matter of dressing, but it's a matter of culture," Reinach said. "Culture is related to the past, to the present, to the future, and to the imagination and narratives that are around this history. Fashion should be understood as an important anthropological tool, as an anthropological issue."

In the 1950s, French fashion made up a large part of American couture. Italian entrepreneur Giovanni Battista Giorgini and his wife Nella changed this with a simple idea—a few runway shows and an elaborate cocktail party.

"Full of Enthusiasm" featured photographs of Giorgini's runway shows in Florence, where he showcased Italian designs to Americans on their way back from Paris's couture week. The exhibit's name is a reference to the enthusiastic letters that Giorgini received from New Yorkers about his shows, which were a huge success. The shows were seen as a major contributor to Italy's 500% increase in clothing exports from 1950 to 1955.

As displayed in the exhibition with photographs from Giorgini's shows, fashion had a powerful impact on culture and politics at the time. In the 1950s, Giorgini made an active effort to connect the American political landscape with his work in Italy. He frequently visited America on business, and he even used the Washington Monument as a backdrop for a 1965 portrait of a model in an elaborate Italian gown.

"There is a new issue that fashion should also be political," Reinach said. "The [most recent] catwalk shows were really taking these political issues at their core. I think that it's important now in a globalized world to analyze the culture flows around the different soft powers of different countries. Fashion is part of the soft power, as is cinema, as is literature, as culture in general."

Other panelists at the exhibition opening included: Daniela Calanca, an assistant professor at the University of Bologna; Barbara Carnevali, an associate professor at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris; Emanuele Coccia, an associate professor at *EHESS*; Lynda Dematteo, a researcher at the *Institut interdisciplinaire d'anthropologie du contemporain*; and Eugenia Paulicelli, a professor of Italian and comparative literature and women's studies at Queens College

Paulicelli is also the founder of the Concentration in Fashion Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Paulicelli researches fashion history and theory, as well as the intersection between fashion, literature, cinema, social justice, sustainability, and more. She spoke with *Spectator* about the role of fashion in understanding culture.

“Fashion is part of this narrative. Because whatever you choose to put on your body, there's some connection,” Paulicelli said. “Either with you, from an individual level, if it's something related to your family, or to your own culture. Each one of us has a background, you are not born in a vacuum.”

As an Italian immigrant, Paulicelli felt especially passionate about fashion's connection to cultural identity. For her, fashion is empowerment—especially for groups of people who have been marginalized in the past.

“For migrants or minority groups, the meaning of fashion is quite different from a person who's privileged,” Paulicelli said. “It's a completely different thing. For those kinds of people, you want to stand out, you want to be visible, and you want to make a statement. Not just to make a fashion statement, but because you want to be visible as an individual, as your cultural identity.”