



## Night At The Italian Academy: How Does High Fashion Interpret Cultural Heritage?

By Caroline Mullooly on Oct 05, 2019



*Thursday night, Caroline Mullooly attended Cultural Heritage Practices & Critical Fashion: How Does (High) Fashion Interpret Cultural Heritage?, a workshop and exhibition at the Italian Academy.*

The overhead lights dimmed as artists, scholars, and students settled into rows of seats. Sparkling water dripped into small cups, and graduate students scrambled to find pens to note what was about to unfold. A hush fell over the audience as Dr. Barbara Faedda, Executive Director of the Italian Academy and an Assistant Adjunct Professor in Columbia's Department of Italian, took the podium and welcomed everyone to the event.

The three-hour workshop consisted of welcoming remarks from Dr. Faedda and a series of lectures from Daniela Calanca, Lynda Dematteo, Emanuele Coccia, Eugenia Paulicelli, Barbara Carnevali, and Simona Segre Reinach. The workshop was followed by an art exhibition reception.

The overarching theme of the workshop was that fashion connects to various academic fields because it demonstrates culture on a day-to-day scale. Lynda Dematteo, a

current researcher at the School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, best expressed this idea with her lecture on how fashion exemplifies gender and social norms.

When speaking about the common men's suit, Dr. Dematteo discussed how the typical '9 to 5' wear "is associated with tradition and social conformity," and how modern designers continue to create pieces for people who "do not respond to the idea of Western masculinity." Her commentary on the suit offered a view into how the cultural norms of gender and society can endure and adapt at the same time.

The lecturers also discussed how fashion can teach us about the culture of a particular historical time period. Emanuele Coccia, Associate Professor at L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris, connected Dior's clothing line "The New Look" with the globalization of the Post-War Era. Dior mixed "French with non-French", including other Italian and European trends from the time. This melting pot of trends represented the Post-War idea of cultural mixing. "French-ness" did not solely belong to France anymore. Dr. Coccia believes that designers like Dior represented the idea that "[one can] be French in New York and Venezuela."

Another lecturer, Eugenia Paulicelli, addressed the whiteness and eurocentricity of the fashion industry. Dr. Paulicelli, founder and director of the Fabric of Cultures Project, stated that "white people and white institutions use nonwhite people to acquire socioeconomic value." Dr. Paulicelli referenced the 2018 release of a Gucci jacket nearly identical to one created in the 1980's by "Dapper Dan," a Harlem tailor, without crediting him. Dr. Paulicelli critiqued how top, predominantly-white powerhouses like Gucci profit from the work of people of color, forcing the audience to acknowledge the racism present in the fashion world today.

Following their presentations, the speakers held a question and answer session, then moved with the audience down to the ground floor for the exhibition reception. As a newcomer to the fashion world, I was unsure of what to expect.

The justified academic heaviness of the workshop shifted to an aura of social lightness. With light fanfare of wine and appetizers, the lecturers mingled with the public, discussing everything from the hemlines of dresses to the ever-changing weather.

After I thanked Dr. Faedda for the event, she mentioned that she would like to see more undergraduate involvement, both in the Italian Academy and in fashion studies. For upcoming events at the Italian Academy, please feel free to visit their [website](#) or contact the team.

On my way out, I heard Dr. Faedda mention that we "have to make space [for fashion]," as it connects to our daily lives—whether we consider ourselves fashionable or not.