

Rebelling Against Insta-Everything at Fendi and Roberto Cavalli



By VANESSA FRIEDMAN SEPT. 22, 2016

MILAN — There’s a balmy wind of minor rebellion sweeping along the catwalks of Milan, making unlikely allies of normally opposing aesthetics, and drawing a line in the sand. The insta-fashion that so defined the start of the season in New York (the way, arguably, insta-everything so defines modern life) is finding little purchase here.

“Craft” is the watchword of the moment, with a new exhibition, “Crafting the Future,” opening on the opening day of fashion week at Mudec, the city’s museum of culture. It is curated by Franca Sozzani, the editor of Italian Vogue.

The exhibition showcases not just the hand behind textiles, buttons, gold (even 3-D printing; just because something involves technology doesn’t make it less time-consuming to create), but also people bent painstakingly over tables: makers, making.

Alberta Ferretti lined the entryway to her show with two ranks of white-coated women from her atelier, and at Brunello Cucinelli, diamanté was hand-embroidered onto suede espadrilles, and the tiniest, subtlest sequins added onto — well, pretty much anything, including gold linen shawls and white cotton trousers.

Then Fausto Puglisi, the young designer who made his name on a fascination with all things va-va-’80s, framed his collection with a quote from Karl Marx.

MaxMara took as its muse Lina Bo Bardi, the midcentury architect who, according to the show notes, “wasn’t scared of letting chaos in.” Backstage before his show, Peter Dundas of Roberto Cavalli proclaimed himself a “stubborn punk.”

And at Fendi, Karl Lagerfeld riffed on the idea of a “destructive Marie Antoinette,” taking her revenge on those who would dismiss the apron.

This will make sense later. For now, know that Milan is not going gently into that Snapchat night. It’s not about Luddism, but rather taking a stand in favor of time. Or, as Mr. Lagerfeld said, “history.”

That’s where he got the apron idea. Then he updated it, abstracted it, married it to wide sporty rugby stripes (also the basis of the court-heeled faux button-up booties), transformed it into silk tunics with belled sleeves over skater skirts with big side-pockets-cum-panniers, or elastic-waisted jacquard skirts that turned to expose under-trousers/bloomers and so rendered it entirely other.

Classic apron dresses were left bare at the back in sheer organza and Petit Trianon prints, and shaved mink was cut into rococo swirls. A refusal to reject the past, or to get stuck in it, never looked quite so provocative.

Yet, also just saying no was Mr. Puglisi, who eschewed a show in favor of a — well, it wasn’t clear exactly: Call it a presentation/happening, done with the help of Armando Punzo, the artistic director of prison theater in Volterra, Italy.

In a darkened nightclub, they built a set of wooden bars and neon crosses, topped by a ceramic Madonna and perfumed by frankincense and myrrh (or something a lot like that). Behind, bare-chested tattooed convicts (they really were) sulked and raged, and models — in easy silk dresses brushed with birds and blooms and Roman Catholic iconography, studded biker leathers inset with the cross, and color-blocked geometries — stomped.

Yeah, there were clothes involved, although they were almost entirely overshadowed by the concept, and the questions it raised. Was he implying that fashion, which so many people have turned into a kind of religion, was actually a prison? Was he saying that designers and the women they dress are trapped in a consumer hell of their own making and that it was time for a jailbreak?

They’re all plausible interpretations — and would probably find many

like-minded converts — though the answer turned out to be a little less fraught: He was thinking about his birthplace, Sicily, and wanted to create “a new, more genuine way to talk about clothes.”

Which maybe is a more diplomatic way of saying what Mr. Dundas said backstage before his Cavalli show: He had decided it was time to “do what I want, the way I want.” This turned out to be a heavy-on-the-handwork boho deluxe travelogue of a wardrobe. It veered from hippie flares patchworked in denim, suede and velvet (also python, chintz and leopard), silver flowers and Navajo beading writhing up the sides, to elaborately embroidered silk kimonos and fringed capes, and an entire souk’s worth of tiered, exotic-print, glimmering maxi dresses.

It was decadent in its decoration, and unabashed about its debt to the 1970s: the time before the web, when knowledge and experience was gained on the road, and surfing referred only to waves.

Even Ms. Ferretti threw off some of her usual tendency toward swooning romance. Instead, she put her troops in jewel-toned flamenco tiers and leather breastplates laced at the back, paired her signature wafty chiffons and cotton eyelets with men’s wear bottoms, and took her embroideries down Mexico way — though MaxMara went even farther south, to the rain forest, for its tropic of athleisure palm frond prints on high-waisted belted leggings, warm-up jackets and bustiers, and its grassy skirts.

“Madagascar” aside, however, the point of all this is, of course, to emphasize the special and the unique — craft by definition defies the concept of multiples — and thus to suggest value, and something that stands the test of time, and is worthy of investment.

Will it work? Or is the insistence on the primacy of the hand simply a dressed-up way to deny reality? We’ll have to wait a few months to see. Maybe this uprising is doomed to fail. If so, at least they’re going down in glamour.

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