

THE MAX FACTOR

WHEN ACHILLE MARAMOTTI FOUNDED HIS BUSINESS, IT WAS MAKING COATS FOR 'THE DOCTOR'S WIFE'. SIXTY-FIVE YEARS LATER THE WORLD HAS CHANGED, BUT MAX MARA'S QUALITY AND ELEGANCE HAVE NOT.

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G

iuseppe Bacci's hands glide across the silky soft cashmere fabric as if he's stroking a beloved cat. He has been producing luxurious coats for the Italian brand Max Mara for nearly 40 years and this example of fine tailoring still manages to stir his emotions. "This is like a work of art that is one of a kind," he says softly.

Max Mara was founded in 1951 by Achille Maramotti in the northern region of Emilia Romagna, famous for its prosciutto and parmesan, as well as its reputation for innovation and hard work. Maramotti learned something of his trade from his mother, Giulia, a dressmaker, who not only taught sewing but gave impoverished women tips on how to recycle their family's clothes after World War II.

The entrepreneur started his business producing coats for a type of woman he described as "the doctor's wife". Since then the company has evolved into a global empire with annual turnover more than €1.3 billion (\$1.9bn) and nine brands including Max Mara, Max & Co., Marina Rinaldi and Pennyblack.

These days the Max Mara flagship brand has 2350 stores in more than 100 countries, and the company is run by Maramotti's sons, Luigi and Ignacio, and daughter, Maria Ludovica. Known for their discretion, they prefer Bacci and other valued members of their close-knit team to tell the company's story for them.

Bacci began his working life with Max Mara as a young graduate with a degree as a surveyor. "We got married and we are still together," he jokes. He's in charge of the company's San Maurizio plant, a luminous space filled with skylights, spanning 10,000sqm on the edge of the quaint town of Reggio Emilia.

San Maurizio is only one of the company's factories but it's a powerhouse. There are more than 200 cutters, seamstresses and other highly trained staff here and they

produce 100,000 coats and jackets a year for well-heeled women around the world. "The quality of our work is not simply about producing an article of clothing that is pleasing or beautiful because of its colour or design," Bacci says. "It is because everyone here is working to make sure we achieve that result."

Rolls of the softest cashmere, mohair, alpaca, sheep's wool and camel hair line the shelves at San Maurizio before highly-mechanised machines slice them to fit the pattern maker's precise dimensions. Seamstresses work silently on various body parts – sleeves, collars, lapels and pockets – while others scan items for quality and precision at six points on the production line. Nearly 20 per cent of the work is done by hand.

"It is the details that produce a different level of quality," Bacci says. "We pay scrupulous attention to respecting the design – the stitching, the form, the length, all the characteristics of the design."

As Bacci moves through the factory, which he prefers to call a "studio" or "workshop", the various elements of each coat are pieced together. On the final leg, dozens of cranberry, camel, white, and black coats wrapped in plastic glide past on heading for consignment.

After years at the helm Bacci has lost none of his enthusiasm. "I am heading towards the end of my career but I still get satisfaction from a beautiful design, created with a beautiful fabric or in a beautiful colour," he says.

He pauses before a mannequin wearing the 101801, a classic coat made of a cashmere and wool blend that was first produced by Max Mara in 1981. One of the company's top sellers, the 101801 is undergoing a revival thanks to an international advertising campaign featuring model Gigi Hadid, who boasts more than 20 million Instagram followers. She is introducing this classic to a new generation and giving it a sense of cool.

"This is a unique model," says Bacci. "The buttonholes are made by hand, there is a belt holder inside and a label with the history of the model in English and Italian."

A few kilometres away at Max Mara's sleek corporate headquarters, Ian Griffiths is listening to Brazilian bossa nova in an airy office filled with samples of his latest winter collection. The energetic Englishman is Max Mara's creative director. With a background in architecture, fashion and art, he joined Max Mara as a young designer after graduating from the Royal College of Art in London and has been with them ever since.

"I've grown up with this company. If I think about the woman who wears Max Mara I know her like a friend," says Griffiths while reclining on a black leather sofa. "What I'm doing feels like a natural progression."

The walls of his spacious office are lined with design sketches and photos of famous German artists from the Bauhaus era of the 1920s who inspired his latest winter



Creative director Ian Griffiths in his office with sketches and inspirations for the winter 2015-16 collection





Griffiths, whose background is in architecture, fashion and art, says for Max Mara the fabric is always the starting point.

designs. “We were looking at Dada and Hannah Hoch, that’s her at the top,” Griffiths says pointing to the various faces on the wall.

These artists inspired the coats and jackets patterned in black, brown and cream on display in his office, while there’s an explosion of bold yellow and green among the clothes hanging on a rack in the centre of the room. “There’s this injection of searing colour from the Bauhaus, these fabrics look like wet paint,” he says. “We call the collection ‘Kinetic Energy’. There was a lot of movement and it was about women emerging.”

Griffiths likens clothing design to building construction and obviously enjoys applying the principles of proportion and precision. “Getting the right shapes in the right fabrics and clothes and getting them to do the right things, and never torturing the fabrics, is for me the principle of design,” he says. “I love fashion. You can learn to make a pair of trousers on your mum’s sewing machine, it’s something you can do in an hour. It’s not like a building that takes years.”

Whether it’s architecture or fashion design, Griffiths says raw materials are fundamental. Max Mara works closely with fabric manufacturers who are constantly creating new fabrics in collaboration with Griffiths and his small team. “For Max Mara, fabric is the starting point,” he says. “Like architecture, you decide what your house is going to be built out of and you come up with a design that is appropriate for that material.

“A lot of fabrics I conceive in my head, they don’t exist. Or I start from a classic base and I think about how I can transform it.”

Suddenly the bespectacled designer jumps off the sofa and grabs a vibrant green alpaca coat from the winter collection to illustrate the point. The wool fabric is a kind of bouclé with tiny curled ply.

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“To achieve that effect and uniformity and pass quality control means you have to work with a very clever supplier or it could be a disaster,” he says.

Griffiths has been able to develop and reinforce the identity of Max Mara while finding new ways to interpret fashion and incorporate new trends. He’s now looking at model and singer Grace Jones to inspire a future collection. “It’s important to have a solid product like Max Mara with a very strong story, and a very strong identity, but each season tells that story in a different way,” he says. “It’s about presenting this classic product in a new way that appeals on a magic level – through a shop window, a magazine article or an advertising campaign.”

Griffiths, who divides his time among Italy, Spain and the UK, says he loves spotting a “Max Mara woman” on the street. But he readily admits his client is no longer “the doctor’s wife”.

“She IS the local doctor, and not just a doctor. She is a lawyer, she’s a journalist, she’s a successful businesswoman or PR. She has emerged in the world.”

He says that evolution is also evident among women in Australia, a place he admires for its style and

sophistication in interior design as well as fashion. “The old Barry Humphries Edna Everage cliché has been swept away,” Griffiths says. “Now we think of Australia as a place of great style and it’s very cool.”

There are few people who know Max Mara as well as Laura Lusuardi. Born locally in Reggio Emilia, her family sold fabrics and she joined the company’s style team as a teenager in 1964. She later became style coordinator of the group’s collections working closely with Achille Maramotti, whom she calls “a visionary”. After more than 50 years of service she has become something of a sage within the company, and now oversees Max Mara’s vast archive in Reggio Emilia of vintage and contemporary garments, fabric samples and knits.

“The archive passes on the memories and the culture of our company for the next generation,” Lusuardi says proudly. “It’s the history of Italian fashion, about prêt à porter, about manufacturing.”

There are 100,000 items in the collection – including 20,000 garments and accessories, 8000 vintage items, sketches, photographs, fabrics, and documents. New recruits or seasoned designers can browse around for an historical perspective or inspiration for future work.

Some of the vintage items date back to the late 1800s while others feature stunning lace, beading or other workmanship from the early 20th century. “Each one has a detail that can inspire designers,” she says.

Lusuardi stresses that these days women are looking for practicality and security in what they buy. “When you look at the success of Max Mara the key word is quality,” she says. “But loyalty is the thing that really adds value because there is continuity in our work.

“In so many companies new managers come in and they turn everything upside down. If you do that, you lose your identity.” **W**