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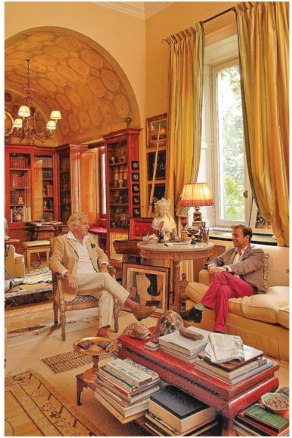

Clockwise from left, Piero and Emanuele Castellini in the C&C Milano showroom; a portrait of the cast of 'I Am Love,' taken in the Villa Necchi Campiglio; Piero Castellini and his son, Nicolo, in Piero's apartment, one of the locations used in the 2009 film 'I Am Love'; the Italian firm's 'Pienza Sole' fabric.

Touching the fabric of Italian life

One family embodies true old Milanese style so much that Hollywood immortalized it on film

By Helen Kirwan-Taylor

"Made In Italy" has come to mean many things over the centuries. In modern times, it more often than not is linked to objects that defy gravity and are incomprehensibly complicated to manufacture, leather as soft as a child's bottom and opulent, silky textiles you don't dare touch for fear of spoiling, like those seen in countless Milan showrooms this week as part of the Furniture Fair.

The zeitgeist of Italian manufacturing today is perhaps best captured in the 2009 film "I Am Love," directed by Luca Guadagnino and starring Tilda Swinton. The film, which tells the story of a wealthy Milanese textile family trying to cope with finding a successor in a time of rapid globalization, is a ravishing and authentic glimpse into Milan's private inner world of old entrepreneurial wealth, sumptuous palazzos and refined understated luxury.

The story plot (repressed, Russian-born wife of Lombardian textile magnate goes mad and runs off with son's chef friend) is somewhat implausible. Who would want to run away from all that elegance? But the rest—the refined but relaxed manners of the men folk; the understated décor of their homes; Ms. Swinton's designer clothes, by Jil Sander and Silvia Venturini Fendi, an associate producer of the film and herself an heiress to a design dynasty; the dinner tables set with hand-sewn linens, antique china and colored crystal, and surrounded by the entire extended family—could not shout "Made In Italy" any louder. (In fact, they refer to "Made In Italy" almost as a kind of catch phrase throughout the film.)

While based on fictional characters, the film nonetheless has a very real-life counterpart in the Castellini family, owners of luxury textile firm C&C Milano. In fact, the film could easily have been called "I am C&C Milano" for all the inner connections, not to mention coincidences, that link the plot of the film to the family.

Which is how I come to find myself in a 15th-century Milanese palazzo, overlooking the garden where Leonardo da Vinci once retreated during the period in which he was painting the Sistine Chapel, feeling like I just walked onto the set of "I Am Love," which, to a certain extent, is true. The Atellani Palazzo on Corso Magenta was once owned by the powerful Sforza family and now contains a private museum, with 17th-century frescoed Zodiac ceilings and paintings by Crespi. The house, which also contains an apartment and a book store, now belongs to Piero Castellini, who, along with his cousin Emanuele, owns C&C Milano.

The parallel universes of the Castellinis and the fictitious Recchis of "I Am Love" intertwine and overlap like the weave of an ikat fabric.

After a lengthy search for a primary film location, Mr. Guadagnino, the director chose Milan's Villa Necchi Campiglio to be the home for the Recchi family.

The director, who vaguely knew Piero (an architect, known for his careful restoration work), did not know that the now state-owned modernist villa was designed by Piero's grandfather, the architect Piero Portaluppi, in the 1930s. Nor did he know that the villa had been recently restored by Piero.

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And when the director hired a scout to help find two more Milan locations for the shoot, they ended up selecting Piero's apartment ("I didn't know anything about it," says Piero) and the textile warehouse/factory where the Castellinis produce many of their woven cloths ("We didn't know anything about that either," adds Emanuele). At that point, Mr. Guadagnino called Piero and said "You might as well help me design this set"—and I assume he followed this by an "And you might as well appear in the film while you're at it," since Piero does.

Where fiction ends and reality begins got harder to distinguish the longer I spoke with Piero and Emanuele Castellini. The director, I am told, arrived with a finished script; the fact that there is an old Milanese textile family who matches, sometimes eerily so, the fictitious description is sheer happenstance, according to the two men.

The Castellinis are one of the most powerful Lombardian textile families, with roots dating back to the 1850s, when an ambitious Clateo Castellini started buying out his cousins to create the beginnings of a company. Theirs is an old entrepreneurial family whose portfolio spans banking, fashion, retail and, of course, property, which seems to come out of their pores. The Castellinis are, in Emanuele's words, members of the bourgeoisie, where fast cars, big yachts, ancient Tuscan Palazzos and beautifully dressed women go without saying.

The film's Recchis are just as powerful and grand as the Castellinis, which is likely why Mr. Guadagnino chose Piero's apartment as the second location in the film. This is where the patriarch of the Recchi family lives with his wife, played by Marisa Berenson.

In the film as in life, the apartment is true old Milanese style, with an eclectic treasure trove of contemporary photographs by Tazio Secchiaroli and Carlo Gavazzeni, antiques, animal throws, new and vintage textiles (all C&C Milano, of course) and decorative objects handed down through the generations, all painlessly tossed together as some might put together the ingredients of a pasta. The director clearly didn't need a set designer; he shot it exactly as it appears now—including the cables that are sticking out of corners and the cushions with torn edges. Old Milanese is also very un-bling.

This certain understated, worn-around-the-edges opulence finds its way into the Castellinis' exquisite and effortlessly chic fabrics. "We double weave," says Emanuele, "and we pre-wash." Their collection of 150 different fabrics are all woven and yarn-dyed to make them look much older and faded, before being hand-finished in their factory in Oleggio. "China can't do this. India can't do this" says Piero, who takes inspiration from his travels. "They wouldn't want to. It's so time consuming."

Typically Italian, the collection isn't fussy: The 100% linens, such as the ikat-based "Pienza," are meant to flow naturally from 12-meter windows and grace Portofino poolside deck chairs—which is how the Castellinis first made their fortune; they created the cloth coverings for the original Venice Lido chairs. This is "I Am Love" territory and one fully expects Prada-clad ladies with Hermès handbags dangling from their arms to be perusing the print section.

That's not far off. C&C Milano fabrics appear in a Rocco Forte and Bulgari hotel, and the Ferragamo family's Castoglione del Bosco hotel, as well as the lobby of luxury hotel Principe di Savoia in Milan, not to mention many Agnelli interiors. Piero also did one of Giorgio Armani's offices.

Many might dream of living in the Atellani House. Personally, I prefer the large, airy showroom in a palazzo next door, overlooking da Vinci's garden. I could see myself waking up in the white four-poster bed designed by Piero, which he casually covered in delicate white linen sheets, or taking a bath in the antique lobster tub, covered, of course, with C&C Milano's Valbonne Aragosta fabric. C&C Milano also makes sheets, table linens and the kind of cashmere you might have to mortgage your house for (prices start at around €200).

The Castellinis may be an established name in textiles, but expect to hear more about them. The Lisson Gallery is moving into the same building as the C&C Milano Corso Magenta showroom and the cousins have plans to open showrooms in Moscow and London. This is where the universes of "I Am Love" and C&C Milano align again. Both Emmanuelle, 61 years old, and Piero, 72, are moving on in age, and as of now, there is no obvious successor to the family business. There are no dead bodies in swimming pools in the real Castellini world, but like the Recchis, who in the film are trying to close a global deal, the cousins are open to offers—but unlike the film, there is no rush. The business has been around since 1850, why hurry now?

Made in Italy

Local design talent shines at Milan Furniture Fair

By Helen Kirwan-Taylor

Visitors to this year's Milan Furniture Fair, which ends this weekend, could be left in no doubt that Italy is in the throes of celebrating the 150th anniversary of its unification. The country's flag was omnipresent. Edra covered its iconic "Flap" sofa in red, white and green leather, while Gaetano Pesce created 61 (for 1861) tables in those same colors for Cassina. The tables, which form a giant map of Italy, will be auctioned off at the end of the fair. Fratelli Guzzini, makers of plastic trays and kitchen items, made the colors of the Italian flag the theme of their entire Milan store and had an accidental hit on their hands with their limited-edition green-and-red plastic magazine (€80) and umbrella stands (€120). Guzzini Managing Director Gianluca Pazzaglini said the collection was supposed to be limited, but, judging from the amount of people lining up at the cash register, he will need to reconsider.

"Made it Italy" is the big theme this year, and no one can make that claim louder or more cheerfully than B&B Italia. "What is Made In Italy?" asks president Giorgio Busnelli, pausing over an espresso in the Via Durini showroom. "I think it means outstanding. It means excellence." The company's technological know-how allows it the freedom to look "techno-craft," as B&B calls it (meaning it could be handmade, but isn't), as with Patricia Urquiola's new cross-legged "Husk" chair, with a sleeping bag-like removable cushion (from £1,926).

Mr. Busnelli, who runs the company with his brother Emanuele, is famous for his attention to detail. But it wasn't until he was approached by Pierre-Alexis Dumas, the artistic director of Hermès, two years ago to manufacture their latest line of furniture, launched this week, that he really had to put that to test. "Hermès is a company that goes above the ceiling in terms of quality. It's so high, it's supersonic," he says. It took years to produce two new lines, including the "Metiers" five-piece office collection by Italian architect Enzo Mari and the "Matieres" seven-piece living collection by Antonio Citterio, composed of a sofa, meridienne, coffee table, console, side table, chaise lounge and a chair, cleverly called "Armchair for Reading and Resting," that shifts from sitting to reclining. Fashion and design have long been bedfellows, but this truly is a happy marriage. "Did you do the leather paneling on this 'Storage Coffer' or did we?" Hermès Chief Executive Patrick Thomas asked Mr. Busnelli during the exclusive world launch. "I think we did," Mr. Busnelli said, fingering the leather stitching. Mr. Busnelli took on the challenge for one simple reason: "It's Hermes!," he said, adding that "the joy is that costs were no limit," as Mr. Thomas nodded in agreement.

As Hermès and B&B were basking in mutual glory, the much smaller Italian boutique firm of Sawaya & Moroni were literally pushing people away from Zaha Hadid's polished aluminium Z-Chair. Mr. Moroni has long collaborated with Ms. Hadid, and now the hard work seems to have paid off. "We already sold five Z-Chairs [in a series of 24], and the fair has been on for two days," Mr. Moroni says enthusiastically. That's five times £150,000. The bad news is the price of the chair goes up in £20,000 increments with each group of five (so six to 10 will sell for £170,00 each). At a private dinner the night before, I saw a well-known art collector passing around photos of the Z-Chair on her iPhone. I suspect she may have been one of those five.

"Altre Novita," as the Italians like to say (meaning other news), includes the fact that Poltrona Frau, the über-luxurious brand owned by the Charme Group and a previously dull design label, is finally showing innovation. Their Ginger chair (€1,930) and Fred table (€5,450) by Roberto Lazzeroni in new, loose, softer leather was a successful new departure. Cassina was also strong, choosing to reproduce the "Veliero" bookshelf by Franco Albino. It's made up made up of a series of steel ties, glass and brass details and ash wood, which look like they could topple over (the bookshelf probably did then). Now they're good to go (€15,000-€20,000)

The fair is never complete without Edra. Forgive me for saying that much of what this wonderful Italian company produces is mad, but it's always fun. This year their theme was "Edra in Wonderland," which included a wrinkly fake-fur-covered chair called "Grinza'" (it looks like a fat pug) and several hairy cabinets by Massimo Morozzi and the Brazilian Campana Brothers. Upon leaving the showroom, I casually asked how many Italians buy such amusing items. "Oh not very many," replied the attendant, "but the rest of the world loves them." "Made In Italy" doesn't require that it stay in Italy. And that's a great thing too.

Z-Chair designed by Zaha Hadid for Sawaya Moroni.