# Sorelle Fontana and Hollywood on the Tiber: The Birth of the Modern Italian Fashion Industry 1949-1959



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# Introduction

Joan Rivers, a comedian working as a correspondent for E! News, found herself bored during the 1994 Golden Globe Awards red carpet. In an attempt to lighten the affair, and entertain audiences at home, Rivers struck up casual conversations with actresses using the simple question: "who are you wearing?" At first, the *New York Times* belittled the inquiry to be "improper grammar" and "shallow," but the question quickly became a "staple" of most red carpet interviews, and revolutionized the nature of award show press coverage.<sup>1</sup> Despite the seeming ingenuity of the question, Rivers was tapping into a preexisting fascination: people have always wanted to know what, or rather *who*, celebrities are wearing.

Since the early days of Hollywood, the media have followed the sartorial choices of influential figures for the amusement of audiences at home. This is because celebrities are "surrogate dressers, stylish proxies for the casual masses."<sup>2</sup> Though average people often cannot afford to wear the dreamy couture donned on red carpets, celebrity closets allow them to fantasize, providing them with style inspiration that they can cheaply replicate. With their immense influence, celebrities act as advertising vehicles for designers, who lend actresses and musicians their latest collections to be appreciated by a global audience of millions.

Despite the widespread obsession with fashion in pop culture, the study of fashion has mostly been excluded from traditional academia. Unlike architecture, film, music, and visual arts, fashion's interdisciplinary value is consistently overlooked. This is because fashion is the only art form that is worn on the human body and universally experienced by everyone. Thus, fashion has become something that is utilitarian, seemingly lacking the expressive capabilities to qualify as art. Even when considering elaborate garments, fashion is still overlooked by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Julie Miller, 'The Evolution of Hollywood's Red Carpet, from the Golden Age to the GlamCam360'' *Vanity Fair,* August 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Daniel Harris, "Celebrity Clothing." Salmagundi, 168/169 (2010): 233-47.

academics because it is an art form that has been historically centered on and directed toward women. Of course, men have also participated in fashion throughout history. However, in most Western societies, the silhouettes of men's garments have remained relatively consistent and, frankly, unimaginative. Alternatively, the only thing consistent about women's fashion is that it exists in a constant state of transformation. Though fashion trends often reflect the artistic periods of the time — baroque, rococo, neoclassical, art deco — they are often not included among the other artistic works that define the canon. Unlike famous painters, sculptors, and composers, the primary creators and consumers of fashion throughout history have been women.

Fashion's feminine association has made it often dismissed as something that is frivolous, materialistic, and inconsequential. When looking at the fashion adorned by celebrities, a class of people whose "superficial" impact is often also not deemed worthy of serious academic analysis, this is even more true. Despite this, as the nineteenth century French historian Augustin Challamel observed, "fashion, in fact, acts as a sort of thermometer of the infinitely various tastes of the day, which are influenced by many external circumstances."<sup>3</sup> Fashion often reflects greater historical phenomena of the time, such as the rise of the Sorelle Fontana in postwar reconstruction Italy.

I came to write this thesis because I wanted to share the story of three women who used their design skills and knowledge of celebrity power to reconstruct the Italian economy, build a new reputation for Rome, and lay the foundation for the modern Italian fashion industry during the years 1949 to 1959. Founding an atelier in war-torn Rome in 1943, the sisters Zoe, Micol, and Giovanna Fontana had great ambitions. At the time the sisters took this leap of faith, Italian fashion had not been prominent since the Renaissance. Though this is the story of Italian fashion,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Augustin Challamel, *The History of Fashion In France: Or, The Dress of Women From the Gallo-Roman Period to the Present Time*, trans. John Lillie and Frances Cashel Hoey (London: Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1882), 2.

it is also one that is deeply American, as it was America's film industry, celebrities, and fashion market that allowed for the Sorelle Fontana to thrive. In the years following World War II, the United States emerged as the dominant economic power, while a third of Italy's national wealth was destroyed.<sup>4</sup> With the onset of the Cold War, the United States introduced the Marshall Plan, giving over \$1.4 billion dollars to Italy in an effort to keep them under capitalistic influence.<sup>5</sup> Beyond this, the United States' wealth made it the new target market for European fashion. American participation was a key factor for the success of Italian fashion.

The relationship between the United States and the growth of Italian fashion is often fragmented into different categories when it is discussed by historians. The historian Nicola White has written the most extensively on the economic relationship between the United States and Italian fashion in her work *Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry*, in which she discusses the Marshall Plan's role in the creation of the Italian fashion industry.<sup>6</sup> Historian Eugenia Paulicelli has written about the relationship between the American film industry and the Italian fashion industry in her book, *Italian style: Fashion & Film From Early Cinema to the Digital Age*.<sup>7</sup> In *Dolce Vita Confidential: Fellini, Loren, Pucci, Paparazzi, and the Swinging High Life of 1950s Rome*, Shawn Levy explores the influence of American celebrities on Italian fashion.<sup>8</sup> While all of these secondary sources make note of the Sorelle Fontana's influence, they fail to recognize the role that the sisters played as the primary link between Italian fashion and the United States market. This thesis will attempt to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Nicola White, *Reconstructing Italian fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian fashion*, 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian fashion*, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli, *Italian Style: Fashion & Film From Early Cinema to the Digital Age*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential: Fellini, Loren, Pucci, Paparazzi, and the Swinging High Life of 1950s Rome,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016).

rectify this by proving that the Sorelle Fontana used American films, American celebrities, and American economic support to launch the Italian fashion industry that we know today.

It was clear to the Fontanas that the only way to build a successful fashion industry was to capture the hearts of Americans. So, utilizing their celebrity clients, the Sorelle Fontana introduced themselves to American consumers through media coverage. Thus, the primary evidence for this thesis consists largely of articles from American newspapers and magazines. To explore this history, I reviewed the archives of numerous publications, such as the *New York Times, The Hartford Courant,* and the *Los Angeles Times,* examining the portrayal of Sorelle Fontana designs on celebrities. It is clear that the work of the American press contributed to a growing consciousness of the Sorelle Fontana, as well as Italian fashion, in the United States. In addition to these newspapers and magazines, I also utilized the archives of two of America's leading sources of fashion during the 1950s: *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily.* Using these fashion-focused publications, I was able to investigate the market success of the sisters' designs, as well as their reputation with American retailers and clientele.

The second body of archival source material came from the Fondazione Micol Fontana in Rome. The foundation houses an archive of the Sorelle Fontana's work, including thousands of the sisters' design sketches and personal photographs, as well as information from famous clients. Though the designs are beautiful, this thesis is focused on their global economic impact, rather than an evaluation of their aesthetic designs. The foundation published a large portion of this archival material in a booklet entitled *900 Secolo Alla Moda 1900-2001: Sorelle Fontana*, where first-hand accounts from Micol Fontana have been translated into English. The images and information in this publication, in addition to Fondazione Micol Fontana's digitized exhibits, have been invaluable to my research. When combined, the newspaper accounts and archival

material from the Fondazione Micol Fontana work to illustrate the influence of the Sorelle Fontana, and the role that they played in the construction of the Italian fashion industry.

Chapter One delves into both the history of Italian fashion and the early years of the Sorelle Fontana. The chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the rivalry between French and Italian fashion. During the 1920s, when the young Sorelle Fontana were being trained as dressmakers, the National Fascist Party rose to power in Italy. Under Mussolini's direction, the state launched many unsuccessful campaigns to establish a national Italian fashion. Though WWII put an end to these fascist initiatives, the Sorelle Fontana were still committed to their own fashion efforts, moving to Rome and establishing their dress store in 1943.

Similar to his efforts in fashion, Mussolini spearheaded many initiatives to create a national fascist film industry. Despite these efforts, Italy failed to rival dominant Hollywood productions. Chapter Two discusses this, delving into the history of American film production in Italy during the first half of the twentieth century. After the war, much of Italy's film-focused infrastructure was left unused. With the encouragement of the United States government, American film producers began traveling to Rome to make their films, ushering in the era of "Hollywood on the Tiber."

Rome received an influx of Hollywood stars as a result of this American movie production. Chapter Three focuses on how the Sorelle Fontana built relationships with these celebrities and used these friendships to launch their business in the American market.

Finally, Chapter Four discusses how the Sorelle Fontana utilized their American recognition and success to promote the developing Italian economy. Joining a 1951 showcase of Italian fashion for American buyers, the Sorelle Fontana knowingly used their popularity to bring recognition to lesser-known Italian designers. The chapter reveals the consistent effort made by the sisters to use only Italian textiles and to keep their fashion production in Italy. It concludes with the presentation of evidence for the remarkable success of the sisters and their dreams for the Italian fashion industry.

Up to now, the Sorelle Fontana's influence in this industry's evolution has been widely overshadowed by male designers that followed in their footsteps, such as Valentino, Armani, and Versace. This thesis will demonstrate that one of Italy's greatest modern industries was built by three women who understood the power of fashion and celebrity.

# **CHAPTER ONE:**

# The Beginnings of Italian Fashion

When discussing global centers of high fashion, two countries often come to mind: France and Italy. This, however, was not always the case. For much of modern history, France, or specifically Paris, has served as the exclusive arbiter of Western fashion. The origins of this dominance reach as far back as the reign of King Louis XIV in the seventeenth century. In fact, the French word for fashion, "mode," first appeared in a 1690 Dictionaire Universel by Antoine Furetier, and was defined as "the manner of dressing following the customs of the court."9 King Louis XIV made fashion a priority of his reign, and would keep track of court members' attire to ensure they were not repeating the same outfit too frequently.<sup>10</sup> France became famous for its opulent styles that changed with the seasons, setting trends throughout the rest of the world. Thus, by the eighteenth century, people from all countries looked to France for the latest fashions. In 1746, the Boston-based newspaper The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle featured a column entitled "French Fashion Exploded," where a self-described "old unpolished country gentleman" complained about traveling to town only to be "left surprised with the fashions" from France that he saw everywhere.<sup>11</sup> The man believed that his fellow "Britons... ought to be seriously engaged in a war with France" due to political tensions between the two countries, not "giving the French all the encouragement [they could] by consuming their commodities."<sup>12</sup> Despite this man's anti-French protests, and the eventual war that would indeed occur with France, it seems that he was in the minority opinion about French fashion; international consumers, especially in the United Kingdom and the American Colonies,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Valerie Steele, Paris Fashion: A Cultural History, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Bonnie English, A Cultural History of Fashion in the Twentieth Century: From the Catwalk to the Sidewalk, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> "French Fashions Exploded." The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle, May 1746, 204.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> "French Fashions Exploded," 204

continued looking to France as the center of fashion. In 1792, the British daily newspaper *The Times* even ran a column entitled "French Fashions" that alerted the public about styles that had been deemed "entirely out of fashion" by the French so they could adjust their wardrobes accordingly.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the city of Paris had developed into a "cluster" of fashion organizations: dressmaking workshops, couture houses, department stores, and fashion magazines.<sup>14</sup> These entities were eventually united in 1868 with the development of the "Chambre Syndicale De la Couture et de la Confection Pour Dames et Fillettes," an organization that created the "legal, social, and economic tools to protect the interests of couture."<sup>15</sup> By 1897, the organization had over 130 members and worked to establish a sense of "legitimacy" for French couture, which made the country the official authority on high fashion throughout the world.<sup>16</sup> In the early twentieth century, France's fashion dominance was only solidified by the concentration of famous designers working in Paris like Paul Poiret, Jeanne Paquin, Madeleine Vionnet, Coco Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin, and Elsa Schiaparelli.

Elsa Schiaparelli, one of the most famous designers to work in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century, was actually Italian. There is little speculation about why Schiaparelli chose to abandon her home country to make a name for herself in France. Schiaparelli could never have reached the same level of success in Italy as she did in France during the 1930s. Despite this, like France, Italy too had once been a center for fashion. However, Italy's authority over Western fashion began during the Renaissance period. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Italy had developed a "growing manufacturing industry" and "became the central location in which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> "French Fashions." *Times*, 24 September, 1792, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Sophie Kurkdjian, "The Cultural Value of Parisian Couture." *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Kurkdjian, "The Cultural Value of Parisian Couture," 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Kurkdjian, "The Cultural Value of Parisian Couture," 140.

the codification of dress was accomplished in a modern way.<sup>17</sup> It was during this time that Italy developed an immensely profitable silk production industry that constituted an estimated 30% of French imports in 1567.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, as the center of the Renaissance art movement, Italy was generally viewed as the cultural center of Europe. Many women depicted in Renaissance paintings wear fashion styles that originated in Italy during the time.

However, over the years, styles eventually began to change, and Italians could no longer compete with the emerging fashions introduced by the seventeenth century French court. Though Italy continued to produce textiles, by the nineteenth century it was clear to Italians that they were no longer the center of fashion. In 1804, the founder of the Italian Fashion journal *Corriere delle Dame*, Carolina Aurienti, wrote:

Shame on you! Italy, the master of all times in all genres of the divine art of the beautiful goes begging to borrow its fashion from Paris? Renounce at once this dependence for your attire, and even if this ever changing invention of fashion were a vice and not a need of the rich and a support for the arts, I would tell you: follow Italian vices and not those coming from other places.<sup>19</sup>

This sentiment was taken up by the leaders of the nineteenth century Risorgimento period, who sought to abandon French influence and instate a "*costume all'Italiana*" as a way of furthering national unity.<sup>20</sup> One of this movement's initiatives was to bring velvet, a popular fifteenth century Italian Renaissance fabric, back into fashion.<sup>21</sup> Despite these efforts, no consolidated fashion industry emerged in Italy during the nineteenth century. So, when "Italian Renaissance

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli, "Moda and Moderno," Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy, (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Luca Moláa. *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2000), xv.
 <sup>19</sup> Carolina Aurienti, *Corriere delle Dame* (1804), as quoted in Gabriella Romani, "Fashioning the Italian nation:

Risorgimento and its costume all'italiana", Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 20 (2015): 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Gabriella Romani, "Fashioning the Italian nation: Risorgimento and its costume all'italiana", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 20 (2015): 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Gabriella Romani, "Fashioning the Italian nation,"12.

Models" eventually did make a comeback into the style of wealthy Europeans in the 1910s, it was under the direction of the French label House of Worth, not the Italians.<sup>22</sup>

In 1909, Queen Margherita and Queen Helena of Italy "decided to form a sort of association to put an end to the autocracy of Parisian dressmakers," but these efforts, once again, did little to reinstate Italian authority in Western fashion.<sup>23</sup> In fact, for the first two decades of the twentieth century, Italy was mentioned in American fashion publications only for its "laces, jewelry, velvet and embroidery," not its designs.<sup>24</sup> In 1909, *Vogue* ran a story about "Italian silk combination underwear," made by the Julius Kayser Company, an American brand.<sup>25</sup> Later in 1913, *Vogue* once again ran a story about Italy, this time focusing on "modern Italian laces," that could be purchased at B. Altman & Company.<sup>26</sup> In both instances, Italy was only referenced for its textiles as a means of promoting American products and stores, not its own use of these textiles. By the early twentieth century, it was abundantly clear that France reigned supreme in the world of fashion, and Italy no longer had the authority it once enjoyed.

It was during this same time that three little girls were born in the small Italian city of Traversetolo, just outside of Parma. Their names were Zoe, born in 1911, Micol, born in 1913, and Giovanna, born in 1915. The girls were the daughters of Amabile Fontana, a local dressmaker whose family had been in the business for "almost two centuries," and Giovanni Fontana, the owner of a small construction business that had built a local church in Traversetolo, as well as the Fontana family home.<sup>27</sup> From the moment the girls "could hold a needle and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> "Fashion: Worth Presents Italian Renaissance Modes." Vogue, 1 October, 1916, 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> "Italian Queens Revolt Against Paris Modistes: Will Form Association To Stop Frequent Changes And Odd Styles. Dress to Suit Figure Leaders of Fashion in America, it is Hoped, Will Join in Reform." *St. Louis Post*, 24 January 1909, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> De Lange, "Italian Style Motifs: That Country's Entrance To War Suggest Many New Ideas for Fashion's Realm—Italian Green for Millinery — Ideas might be Taken from Italian Laces, Jewelry, Velvete and Embroidery." *Women's Wear Daily*, 18 June 1915, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> "Fashion: Italian Silk Combination Underwear." *Vogue*, 18 March 1909, 472.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> "Fashion: Modern Italian Laces." Vogue, 15 September 1913, 76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda 1900-2001: Sorelle Fontana, (Rome: Promograph, 2000), 12.

scissors," Amabile "trained her daughters to learn every phase of dressmaking" and recruited them to work with her.<sup>28</sup> When the girls had finished their compulsory schooling they were immediately "moved up to the other school, [their] mother's school."<sup>29</sup> As a result of their family long tradition of dressmaking, the Fontana girls were "brought up in an atmosphere of total dedication to their craft" and "they had to serve years and years of hard and difficult apprenticeship" with "no Saturdays or Sundays off," and no "proper wage."<sup>30</sup> Under their mother's guidance, the Fontana girls not only learned how to sew and construct garments, but were also taught specialty craft techniques such as embroidery and beading.<sup>31</sup> Though local boys would often try to talk to the girls, who became known as the "three via Fanfulla girls" for the street that they lived on, Micol Fontana claimed they had no time to flirt and recounted the girls' tight schedule:<sup>32</sup>

The dressmaker's was run with military, even Prussian, precision by my mother Amabile. The schedule was work in the morning until lunchtime; then a break for a couple of hours, and then back to work until dinner-time, which was always at seven, summer and winter alike. After dinner, we were allowed out for a few hours before settling down to the evening's work.<sup>33</sup>

While the Fontana sisters did not have a typical childhood, their mother worked to instill a level of perfectionism within them that would ultimately prove to be an invaluable asset.

France remained the sole arbiter of Western high fashion during the Fontanas' childhood in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite this, as evidenced by the existence of Amabile Fontana's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Virginia Pope, "75-Year-Old Matriarch and 3 Daughters Thrust Casa Fontana in Fashion Spotlight." *New York Times*, 17 July 1954, p.16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential: Fellini, Loren, Pucci, Paparazzi, and the Swinging High Life of 1950s Rome,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 13.

dressmaking business, Italy was not entirely devoid of fashion. Of course, Italy had continued to be "a textile leader," with a rise in new "hydroelectric resources" during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Italy saw the development of its leather goods. In 1921, Guccio Gucci, a leather craftsman, established a shop in Florence that became popular for its shoes, bags, and horse riding goods.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in 1927, Salvatore Ferragamo, an Italian shoemaker who had lived in California and became "the favorite custom shoemaker of Hollywood's cinema queens" during the 1910s, returned to Italy and set up a shoe shop in Florence.<sup>36</sup> While Ferragamo and Gucci became world-famous, Italy's advancements in textiles and accessories were generally "regarded as secondary to the dress," in which Paris still dominated.<sup>37</sup>

It was also at this time, however, that Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party rose to power. To achieve Italian domination, the National Fascist Party adopted nineteenth century Risorgimento efforts and focused on the creation of a national fashion. Of course, a focal point of this movement was to discourage Italian women from wearing French styles. This, however, was a problem for most Italian dressmakers, whose businesses existed on reproducing costly French styles for Italian women. The National Fascist Party directly attacked this business model. In 1926, *The Observer* remarked that the "latest category to be threatened with Fascist organization [was] that of the dressmakers!" who reportedly spent 200 million lire "each year in Paris… buying the season's models," to reproduce in their own shops.<sup>38</sup> In response to this, "The Impero" said:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> "Italy a Textile Leader: Hydroelectric Expansion Credited With Growth of Industry," *New York Times*, 26 September, 1924, p. 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Mary Ellen Snodgrass, "Guccio Gucci," World Clothing and Fashion: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Social Influence, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 286.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> "Hollywood Footwear Artist Plans Atelier In Southland," Los Angeles Times, 4 July 1926, p.2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Valerie Steele, "Italian Fashion and America," *The Italian Metamorphosis 1943-1968*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1994), 496.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> "Fascism and Fashions: 'Let Italian Dressmakers Stay At Home,"" The Observer, 15 August 1926, p.6.

Let Italian dressmakers and tailors stay at home and enjoy sea bathing on the Adriatic or Tyrrhenian coast. Until they renounce their amusing trips to Paris it will be impossible to achieve two things: the creation of a fashion in dress exquisitely Italian and the collaboration of the dressmaking and tailoring industries with the general economic battle. Only refuse passports to these high priests and priestesses of fashion and it will soon be seen what a number of Italian creations can be turned out.<sup>39</sup>

Instead of having dressmakers follow France's influence, the National Fascist Party sought to dictate the coming fashions of the 1930s themselves "under the aegis of the National Fascist Federation of the Clothing Industry," a new organization, which was "making strenuous efforts to free Italian women from their slavery to foreign styles."<sup>40</sup> Similar to Risorgimento initiatives, the National Fascist Party sought to achieve an Italian fashion by "going back to the fourteenth century for its models," when Italy was last dominant, attempting to popularize long skirts "with full draperies" and "high collars from which the head emerges."<sup>41</sup>

Despite these efforts from the National Fascist Party, "there was little interest in the couture" from Italy.<sup>42</sup> An August 1926 edition of *Women's Wear Daily* announced that people were "unexcited by Mussolini's command of Italian fashion" and that "smart women [would] accept only Paris styles."<sup>43</sup> In fact, *Women's Wear Daily* even speculated Mussolini's efforts could achieve an opposite effect, and inspire Parisian couturiers to design their own "new French interpretation of Italian Motifs."<sup>44</sup> By 1932, Mussolini had "devoted a great deal of time" and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> "Fascism and Fashions," The Observer, p.6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> "Italian Fashions in 1930: Fascism Decrees a Return to 'Womanly Curves," *The Observer*, 12 October 1929, p. 12. <sup>41</sup> "Italian Fashions in 1930," *The Observer*, p.12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> B.J Perkins, "Paris Unexcited by Mussolini Command of Italian Fashions for Italy: Couture Suggests That, while Italian Design May be Stimulated, Smart Women Will Accept Only Paris Styles Because Smart Society is Cosmopolitan — Movement May Inspire New French Interpretation of Italian Motifs." *Women's Wear Daily*, 10 August 1926, 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Perkins, "Paris Unexcited by Mussolini," 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Perkins, "Paris Unexcited by Mussolini," 33.

had become so "greatly interested in women's clothes" that he committed over \$100,000 to create an organization in Turin that would "encourage the art of designing dresses, millinery, and footwear" in "national Italian models" for the approval of Italian women.<sup>45</sup> Despite these new efforts to take over "the position that Paris [held] in the realm of women's fashions," the *New York Times* found that "most Italians still [preferred] to follow the lead of Paris."<sup>46</sup> In another desperate attempt to compete with the French, in 1936, the Fascist Federation of Dress Material Merchants even "announced a competition for posters and slogans to advertise the merits of Italian fashions" as a means of advertising the "beauty and durability [of] articles of clothing produced in Italy."<sup>47</sup> However, "Paris fashions [were] still the inspiration for most Italian dressmakers," like the Fontana sisters.<sup>48</sup> In fact, even the wives of fascist leaders continued to wear Parisian copies themselves.<sup>49</sup>

During the early 1930s, while fashion became a primary initiative of the National Fascist Party, the Fontana girls began to think about a life beyond Traversetolo. In 1934, the eldest sister Zoe married "a likable boy with ambitious plans" named Mario Montanarini, who restored antiques for a living.<sup>50</sup> The couple packed up their things, traveled to the Parma train station, and "asked [where] the first train was passing through."<sup>51</sup> It just so happened that the next train was headed to Rome. One could argue that it was this train that decided the fate of the Sorelle Fontana, as it was their strategic location in Rome that would help catapult them to international fame. However, on that fateful day, Zoe was unaware of what the future held. Micol and

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> "Mussolini Founds School to Improve Italian Styles: Il Duce Appropriates \$100,000 to Keep at Home Money Now Going to Paris Arbiters of Fashion; Asks Support of Women." *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1932, p. 15.
 <sup>46</sup> "Italy Would Lead Fashion: But Women Still Prefer to Follow Style Set By Paris." *New York Times*, 7 August 1932, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> "Fascists Fight Paris Influence on Italy's Styles: Start Campaign to Create National Fashions." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 29 January 1936, p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> "Fascists Fight Paris Influence on Italy's Styles: Start Campaign to Create National Fashions," 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Steele. "Italian Fashion and America," 497.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 14.

Giovanna eventually followed in Zoe's footsteps and moved to the capital city a few months later.<sup>52</sup> Upon arriving in Rome, Zoe found a job working for the Roman dressmaker Zecca, Micol worked for Battilocchi, another rival dressmaker, and Giovanna worked at home.<sup>53</sup> The sisters used these jobs as an opportunity to further develop their dressmaking skills, now specialized for an elite Roman clientele. After several years, the sisters finally saved up enough money to open their own Roman dressmaking shop in 1943.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1940s, World War II halted most of the National Fascist Party's costly initiatives to compete with French fashion. Instead, the regime began to impose wartime sumptuary rules. In 1942, due to wartime limitations, "skirts [became] shorter and skimpier, hats tinier and more cockeyed," and the Fascist party made "slacks... strictly forbidden" as the regime saw pants to be "the exclusive prerogative of the male."<sup>55</sup> The *New York Times* reported that Benito Mussolini also forbade "the wives, sisters and mothers of dead soldiers" from wearing mourning garments to keep "the Italian people from realizing the extent of casualties."<sup>56</sup> In addition to the National Fascist Party's continual interference with Italian fashion, the war itself had a massive impact on dressmakers. By 1943, a "prolonged military attack on Italy" forced many Italian dressmakers to face textile shortages, higher prices, and an increasing rate of illegal transactions of woolen cloth for about "1,000 to 1,500 lire per meter."<sup>57</sup>

Of course, 1943 was not the most opportune time for the Sorelle Fontana to start their business. In fact, the Sorelle Fontana opened their house on the same day that "United States

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 15.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> "Italy Aids Women to Keep Looks while Nazis Impose Dowdiness: Returned Correspondents Report Extremes of Fashion in Former Country -- almost no Cosmetics can be Bought in Germany." *New York Times*, 3 June 1942, 19. <sup>56</sup> "Italy Aids Women," *New York Times*, p.19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Edgar R Rosen. "Attack on Italy Exposes Many to Serious Textile Shortages." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 July 1943, 9.

troops entered Anzio," a city just a few miles south of Rome.<sup>58</sup> During the war, "life was stringent and money [was] of little value" for the sisters, leaving them forced to "barter 22 pounds of potatoes for a length of magnificent embroidered blue fabric" to keep their dressmaking house alive in the early years.<sup>59</sup> In a 1954 interview with the *New York Times*, Micol Fontana reflected on this time and claimed that the sisters "could hear the distant bombing of guns while [they] worked."<sup>60</sup> Despite these struggles, the war also brought unforeseen benefits to the sisters. Due to wartime sanctions, the Sorelle Fontana were "thrown completely on their own" and were left "without inspiration from Paris" that had guided them in the past. As a result, the women "began to create original models" and became "pioneers in establishing Roman couture."<sup>61</sup> Though the sisters had struggled at the start of their business, the war helped the Sorelle Fontana cultivate an original style that would eventually become their signature.

Needless to say, the war was not as positive for everyone. The Italian population was left impoverished from the wartime destruction, making fashion the least of the average Italian's concerns in the mid-1940s. In fact, in 1944, organizations like the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the American Relief for Italy Incorporation began to collect "usable garments, new or worn, for every age" to clothe citizens in "war-torn" Italy.<sup>62</sup> As late as 1949, Italy's poor reportedly totaled 3.5 million, with 412,801 people "living in 6,392 poor houses in the country, while 1,635,683 others [received] free meals from 17,131 social relief stations."<sup>63</sup> During this immense hardship, the Sorelle Fontana were only kept in business by a small elite clientele who patronized the atelier as a means of keeping up with post-war French fashion for a lower price.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Virginia Pope, "75-Year-Old Matriarch and 3 Daughters Thrust Casa Fontana in Fashion Spotlight." *New York Times*, 17 July 1954, p.16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Ilka Chase, "How the Fontanas Sewed Themselves into a Money Bag." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 2 February 1958, p.4. <sup>60</sup> Pope, "75-Year-Old Matriarch." p.16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Pope, "75-Year-Old Matriarch." p.16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> "Clothes For Italy." New York Times, 19 June 1944, p.18.

<sup>63 &</sup>quot;Italy's Poor Total 3,500,000." The Hartford Courant (1923-1995), 23 July 1949, 3.

By 1947, *Vogue* noticed this small, stylish subset of the Italian population. The magazine published a spread entitled "Italian Fashion," focusing on the styles of "the sophisticated Italian woman" and the designers she bought from.<sup>64</sup> Though the Fontanas were briefly mentioned as popular dressmakers, the publication did not explore their work further. Instead, it claimed that much of the work in Italy had strong "French influence."<sup>65</sup> At the end of the piece, *Vogue* predicted what would become of fashion in Italy:

Italy has, in summation, everything necessary to a vital and original fashion industry: talent, fabric, and beautiful women. With post-war easing of materials and labour, and more expert direction, Italian clothes should command a distinguished audience.<sup>66</sup>

This observation was not revolutionary. Italy had been known for these fashionable qualities long before 1947. Yet, for centuries the Italians continued to be unsuccessful in their efforts to build a consolidated fashion industry to rival the French. Both the leaders of the Risorgimento and the leaders of the National Fascist Party had failed to achieve fashion prominence. Despite this, *Vogue* was right to assume the time had come. In the mid-twentieth century, Italian fashion was about to finally step out of France's shadow and into the limelight. However, unbeknownst to anyone, this was not going to occur because of Italy's fabric, craftsmanship, or beautiful women. Italy was going to become a global fashion power thanks to the presence of Hollywood in Rome and the Sorelle Fontana.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Marya Mannes, "Fashion: Italian Fashion." Vogue, 1 January 1947, 119.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Mannes, "Fashion: Italian Fashion," 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Mannes, "Fashion: Italian Fashion," 156.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

# The Growth of Cinecittà Studios and Hollywood on the Tiber

Similar to Italian Fashion, the Italian film industry also spent much of its history being second best to another country— America. In the twentieth century, the Italian film industry did not have the same steady evolution as its American counterpart. Rather, Italian cinema success fluctuated, facing many high and low points throughout the early 1900s. At the dawn of the motion picture, Italy had far-reaching success with its silent films, including 1913's *Quo Vadis?*, a movie the *New York Times* said had no problem "[filling] a Broadway theater,"<sup>67</sup> and 1914's *Cabiria*, which *Variety* magazine deemed a "masterpiece."<sup>68</sup> Italian silent films were especially well regarded in the United States, as *Cabiria* was the first motion picture ever shown at the White House South Lawn on June 26th, 1914.<sup>69</sup> A November 1928 edition of the *New York Times* the arrival of "Italian movie star" Jean De Matteis on a trip to the U.S., evidencing that relative enthusiasm for Italian movies continued into the end of the silent film era.<sup>70</sup>

Despite this, by the mid-1920s, Italy's hold on motion pictures faced a sharp decline — De Matties' visit to the U.S. was actually to look for work in Hollywood. Italian films could not compete with the popularity of their American counterparts, and the development of "talking pictures," or "talkies," only exacerbated their decline. Recognizing this, Benito Mussolini offered a 5,000 lire prize for an Italian film competition as early as September 1926, claiming that movies "in the past [had] been the course of riches and fame to the country" and that "Italy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> "Quo Vadis? At Astor: Moving Pictures of Famous Story of Rome Shown for First Time Here," *New York Times*, 22 April 1913, p.11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> "He is Not an African!," Variety, 10 December 1915, 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> "French Ambassador and Wife Soon to Take Ship for Visit to Paris Home," *The Washington Post*, 27 June 1914, p.7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> "Italian Movie star arrives," New York Times, 28 November 1928, p. 33.

must reaffirm her new energies" in this artistic realm.<sup>71</sup> The following month, *The Washington Post* reported that "a motion picture merger designed to crush the American competition in Italy [had] been formed" and that "the films shown will all be of Italian manufacture and feature only Italian players."<sup>72</sup> Despite this, American films continued to critically dominate Italian films at the beginning of the 1930s. The swift actions of the Italian government to combat this decline illustrated how much Italy valued cinema as part of its national and cultural identity. Thus, in his quest to "rebuild" Italy as a powerful nation to rival the United States, Benito Mussolini made the rebirth of the Italian film industry a top priority.

The prioritization of the film industry made sense, as Mussolini himself was a devotee of motion pictures, including ones from the United States. In fact, Mussolini wrote American movie star Anita Page over one hundred fan letters, and even allegedly asked her to marry him.<sup>73</sup> In 1928, Mussolini opened the International Institute of Educative Cinematography at the Villa Falconieri to help foster Italian film leaders.<sup>74</sup> He also created the Mussolini Cup, which was awarded annually at the Motion Picture Exhibit in Venice. Yet, in 1935, categories like "Best Foreign Film," "Most Artistic Foreign Film," and "Best Animated Cartoon" were swept by American productions.<sup>75</sup>

Despite his failure to revive the Italian film industry to its former glory, Mussolini's endeavors proved his stalwart support of the craft, as he actively worked to support new film creators and encourage an appreciation for cinema throughout Italy. Beyond his personal respect for the art form, Mussolini also recognized that movies had the power to function as effective means of propaganda. In fact, Mussolini often appropriated Vladimir Lenin's phrase "cinema is

<sup>73</sup> Austin Mutti-Mewse, "Oh Honey, His Letters Were So Gooey, So Touching...," The Guardian, 2 November 2000.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> "Mussolini: Premier Offers Prize for Italian Movie," *The Austin Statesman*, 6 September 1926, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> "Italian Movie Merger to End U.S. Control." *The Washington Post*, 15 Oct 1926, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> "Mussolini Extols Movies Links Them With Printing and Photography as Epoch-Making," *New York Times*, 6 November 1928, p.5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> "American Films Win Italian Movie Awards," *The Austin American*, 8 September 1935, p. 2.

the most powerful weapon."<sup>76</sup> As a result, Mussolini treated motion pictures as he would any other fascist weapon and devoted funds to create a Ministry of Press and Propaganda. A September 1934 edition of the *Wall Street Journal* took note of this, announcing how this "new department of press and propaganda" was explicitly for the "cinematographic guilds over the movie industry," aptly foreshadowing the next decade of Italian film with the title "Italian Movie Censorship."<sup>77</sup> Thus, when the famed Roman Cines studios burned down in 1935, it was clear that the creation of a centralized Italian film studio was the logical next step and a key focus of Mussolini's La Terza Roma, or "The Third Rome."

In 1936, Mussolini created a ten million dollar plan to "make Rome the greatest film center in Europe," reportedly spending \$100,000 on British studio equipment.<sup>78</sup> He soon bought a large plot of land fifteen minutes southeast of Rome for three million lire.<sup>79</sup> In August of 1936, Mussolini sent Carlo Roncoroni, head of Cines film company, to complete a "two weeks' survey of Hollywood studios," and buy American sound equipment in preparation for the construction of Cinecittà.<sup>80</sup> Constantly studying the Americans, the creators of the studio were not subtle about their intentions to become a competitor in the global film industry. After an astonishingly quick fifteen months of construction, on April 28, 1936, Cinecittà, or "Studio City", a 73-building compound with 145 walled acres, was born.<sup>81</sup>

The effect of this new studio on the Italian Film industry was immediate. Cinecittà became the largest studio in Europe, replacing UFA studios in Berlin.<sup>82</sup> The fascist guilds

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Stephen Gundle, "Italian Cinema under Fascism." *In Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> "Italian Movie Censorship," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 1934, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> "Italy's New Studio," *The Sun*, 27 September 1936, p. T6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> "Italy Film Chief: Roncoroni Will Survey Studio Construction For Adoption in Rome," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 August 1936, p.A2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Gundle, "Italian Cinema under Fascism," 19.

allowed for the expedited production of films, increasing the number of movies made annually from 59 in 1938 to 120 in 1942."<sup>83</sup> One of the first projects out of Cinecittà was 1937's *Scipione l'Africano*, "Scipio the African," a tale of the ancient Romans fighting Hannibal in northern Africa during the Second Punic War. Described as both a "magnificently bloody spectacle and a good history lesson" by the *Los Angeles Times, Scipione l'Africano* included English subtitles, and was distributed throughout the United States.<sup>84</sup> Despite this appeal to American audiences, it is clear that the film had greater intentions than simply rivaling Hollywood films. The movie's subject matter functioned as historical propaganda to justify Italy's military pursuits in Africa throughout the 1930s. Though movies produced in Cinecittà after *Scipione l'Africano* fell into a wide range of genres beyond war films, unsurprisingly, none were free from fascist undertones.

By 1938, many large American motion picture companies sought to "abandon the Italian Market as a result of the dissatisfaction [with] the Italian government's film monopoly" as the Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche (ENIC) tightened restrictions on foreign films.<sup>85</sup> This, however, did not seem to disappoint Mussolini's eldest son, Vittorio, who had just come out with his first film *Luciano Serra, Pilota* "Luciano Serra, Air Pilot" (1938) which was "intended to glorify the passion for aviation" in Italy.<sup>86</sup> Having studied in the United States, Vittorio claimed that "personally and politically" he was "content that American films, produced in that Hebrew Communist center which is Hollywood, [were] not to enter Italy."<sup>87</sup> Despite Vittorio's confidence, by 1941, it seemed that the Italian population did not agree, as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> "Scipione L'Africano' a Grand Spectacular Film," Los Angeles Times, 3 February 1940, p. A7.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> "Foreign News: Russia Fears Attack in L941 Japanese Annihilate Army Quezon Orders Martial Law U.S. Film Firm to Quit Italy China 75TH Annihilated," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 November 1938, p.6.
 <sup>86</sup> "Vittorio Mussolini's First Film," *The Irish Times*, 3 August 1938, p.10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> "Loss of U. S. Films Seen Blow to Italy: Vittorio Mussolini is Worried Over Fate of Own Movies," New York

*Times*, 27 November 1938, p. 37.

September issue of the *Hollywood Reporter* claimed that Italy was "crying for Hollywood movies."<sup>88</sup>

By 1943, the war forced Cinecittà to shut down production, laying off 1,200 employees and clearing the way for the Nazis to set up camp on the premises. Nazi soldiers used Cinecittà as a base for both storing ammunition and imprisoning captives until January 1944, when allied forces heavily bombed the studios and damaged the soundstages. According to Italian film journalist Adriano Baracco, the Nazis "stole whatever possible" from Cinecittà and "left behind 36 million in damages" when they fled the studios.<sup>89</sup> As a result of the wartime bombing and looting, Cinecittà was no longer suitable for film production, nor were any productions being funded at the time. So, in the wake of the war in 1945, the recently unoccupied Cinecittà began hosting thousands of displaced people, largely under the age of 18.90 The premises that had once been called Mussolini's "Dream Factory" ultimately became two refugee camps: "one run by the Italian government for some five thousand Italian refugees from North Africa: the other, by UNRRA as a transit point for refugees being moved north and east to their homelands."91 In the post-war years, thousands of people were left with no choice but to call Cinecittà, the jewel of Mussolini's regime, their home. Despite its dramatically different function, Cinecittà still proved to be a haven for movie lovers. The camp had "a theater where movies [were] shown every night."92 Even after the suffering caused by Mussolini's fascist regime, the Italian love of cinema persisted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> "Italy Crying for Hollywood Movies," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 1941, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup>Adriano Baracco, "L'amante grassa," *Star 1*, no. 1 (August 1944), as quoted in Noa Steimatsky, "The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944-1950)," *October*, 128 (2009): 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Noa Steimatsky, "The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944-1950)," October, 128 (2009): 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Robert McLaughlin, "People and Ideas: Persons Still Displaced: Cinecitta–D.P. Camp in Rome." *Vogue*, 1 July 1946, p. 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> McLaughlin, "People and Ideas," p. 91.

Ironically, it was precisely this wartime suffering that allowed for a comeback of the Italian movie industry and the commercial success of Cinecittà studios, which proved to be far greater than anything Mussolini had seen. Free from fascist guilds and inspired by post-war life. young Italian directors started to create new movies in the mid-1940s, pioneering an innovative new film genre: Neorealism. One of these young directors was Roberto Rossellini, who, though an anti-fascist, worked as a director under Vittorio Mussolini throughout the early 1940s. In 1945, he took to the streets of Rome and created his first film Roma Città Aperta "Rome, Open City" about the Italian resistance of Nazi occupation. While the critical response in Italy was decent, the movie was a sensation in the Americas "with a box-office gross in the United States alone of close to \$5,000,000."93 The following year, Rossellini continued this wave of success with *Paisan*, another realistic war film for which he "accepted two awards from The New York Film Critics and the National Board of Review of Motion pictures" in the United States.<sup>94</sup> Filming outside of the studio and casting real people as actors, Rossellini captivated American audiences and made them sympathetic to Italians, who, only a few years prior, had been regarded as enemies. Inspired, directors Alberto Lattuada and Vittorio De Sica also released blockbuster films in the neorealist style including Il Bandito "The Bandit" (1946), Sciuscia "Shoeshine" (1946), and Ladri di Biciclette "Bicycle Thieves" (1948), which was labeled by Vogue as "the best film for thirty years," and cemented Italy's title as "the new centre of the cinema" by 1949.95

The success of free-range neorealist films encouraged Cinecittà to resume its original purpose as a movie studio. In 1948, the studio released *Fabiola*, its first film since the war. Dubbed "the biggest film produced in Italy since the silent days," *Fabiola* directed American

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, "The Personal History of Roberto Rossellini: Noted Italian Director Supplies Missing Background to a Fabulous Movie Career," *New York Times*, 23 January 1949, p.X5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Pryor, "The Personal History of Roberto Rossellini," p. X5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Richard Winnington, "People and Ideas: Italian Influence in the Films," Vogue, 15 November 1949, 112.

attention to the capabilities of Cinecittà by utilizing breathtaking Italian scenery, creating spectacular costumes and set designs, and hiring talented background actors.<sup>96</sup> Film producers in the United States were intrigued by the capabilities of Italian-made movies. This feeling was further heightened by a "growing rate of currency restrictions" coinciding with the 1948 European Recovery Program (ERP), also known as the Marshall Plan.<sup>97</sup> New rules "prevented U.S. [film] producers from converting" the profits of their movies, that were "big money makers" in Italy, into United States dollars in an effort to protect local Italian film production.<sup>98</sup>

With its post-war critical success, Italian cinema did not want to lose out to American competition once again. American film leaders started to have "large hoards of frozen funds accumulated abroad from foreign business" and figured "they may as well use up some of this money in production costs."<sup>99</sup> So, American studios began traveling to Rome to make movies with "locked funds." The first major American movie to film in Rome was 20th Century Fox's *Prince of Foxes* (1949), starring American movie stars Tyrone Power and Orson Welles. The film was a commercial success and was even nominated for a few Academy Awards. However, it was not until the 1949 production of *Quo Vadis* (1951) that Hollywood truly understood the power of a Roman-made film. Starring Robert Taylor and Deborah Kerr, "MGM's \$6,000,000 spectacle" *Quo Vadis* transported audiences back to imperial Rome, filming at Roman ruins and using over 7,000 extras, 10,000 costumes, 67,000 props, and more than 200 animals, including 50 lions.<sup>100</sup> MGM Studios decided to use Cinecittà as an auxiliary studio while filming *Quo* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> "Feldman Obtains Release to Rival of Quo Vadis," Variety, 9 May 1949, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Joseph W. Taylor, "Hollywood Overseas: Movie Makers Salvage Frozen Foreign Profits: Shoot Pictures Abroad Plan 19 Films in Europe. Africa, Argentina in 49: Some Pare their Costs Mrs. Miniver and Miss Garbo U.S. Movie Makers use Frozen Foreign Profits for Overseas Filming." *Wall Street Journal*, 1949, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Taylor, "Hollywood Overseas," *Wall Street Journal*, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup>J.Howard Rutledge, "Hollywood Abroad: Movie Industry Shoots More Films Overseas; the Costs are Lower Film Union Notes a Record 28 Planned Or Under Way in most Recent Count from Africa to Fiji Islands Hollywood Abroad: Movie Industry is Shooting More Films Overseas." *Wall Street Journal* 18 September 1952, p.1.
<sup>100</sup> Edwin Schallert, "Martyrdom Real in 'Quo Vadis': Times on Overseas Phone Told about Troupe's Trials Stars Tell

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Quo Vadis' Film Woes." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 August 1950, p.2.

*Vadis*, expediting the professional recovery of the studios, all while 700 refugees, who may have even acted as background characters in the film, were still living on the premises.<sup>101</sup> The movie became one of the highest-grossing films of 1951, and was nominated for eight Oscars. Thanks to the American business and the help of the Italian government, by 1950, Cinecittà was entirely reconstructed, equipped with state-of-the-art electrical and sound recording equipment, as well as gardens, set-building workshops, and a swimming pool.<sup>102</sup> It was reported that at least twelve films could be created simultaneously at the studio.<sup>103</sup> By the beginning of the next decade, it was clear that Hollywood was entering a golden age, and the Italian Cinecittà was to be at the center of it.

At the start of the 1950s, in the wake of *Quo Vadis*, dozens of studios flocked to Rome, tapping into their locked funds and creating new films. In 1952, production started on famed director William Wyler's newest project: *Roman Holiday* (1953). Shot throughout the city, *Roman Holiday* followed a runaway princess as she enjoyed the splendors of Rome with an undercover reporter. One of Cinecittà's biggest success stories, *Roman Holiday* was called "the most accomplished piece of work in every way" and would go on to win three Academy Awards, including best actress for Audrey Hepburn's debut performance.<sup>104</sup> In 1953, world-renowned movie stars Humphrey Bogart and Ava Gardner flew into Rome to play the lead roles in yet another Cinecittà blockbuster movie: *The Barefoot Contessa*. This "thought-provoking film" by Joseph L. Mankiewicz was also nominated for two Academy Awards. Immediately after, in 1954, Warner Brothers created *Helen of Troy*, with a "reconstruction of Troy" that was "vivid and detailed."<sup>105</sup> This film was especially significant since Italians filled all technical roles,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Steimatsky, "The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944-1950)," 49

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> George Campbell Dixon, "Cinecittà: Rome's Film City," The Sphere, 24 April 1954, p.217

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Dixon, "Cinecittà: Rome's Film City," p.217

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> C. A. Lejeune, "Roman Holiday," *The Sketch*, September 1953, p. 246.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> "Helen of Troy," Monthly Film Bulletin, 1956, p.28.

showing that American crews were unnecessary at Cinecittà.<sup>106</sup> In 1954, American producer Robert Goldstein made headlines when he signed a six-movie deal with Thetis Films of Rome all to be shot in Italy.<sup>107</sup> That same year, Cinecittà became the biggest international film production center in all of Europe. It was easy to see why the Italian film industry was called the "Hollywood of Europe," as it began consistently turning out 160 films per year.<sup>108</sup> The president of the Italian Motion Pictures Association spoke about this international success in 1954 with *The Washington Post*:

Hollywood is sending over fewer pictures, yet 'American distributing companies doing business in Italy are making more money than ever before.' Box office receipts for American films rose from 48 million dollars in 1949 to 84 million in 1954. In 1953 Hollywood producers took 15 million out of Italy in net exportable earnings, an increase of 5 million over 1949... Movies have attracted an estimated 800 million people in Italy this year compared to 600 million in 1949.<sup>109</sup>

During the 1950s and the 1960s, some of the biggest blockbusters of the twentieth century like *Ben-Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963) were made at Cinecittà. Additionally, Italian filmmakers were also able to have wide-ranging commercial success with films like Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* in 1960. Instead of trying to outperform Hollywood as it had done in the past, the Italian film industry had learned how to use Hollywood's dominance to its own advantage, allowing for this decade of film to appropriately be deemed the era of "Hollywood on the Tiber."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 111.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Thomas M. Pryor, "Six-Film Deal sett with Rome Group: Hollywood to Provide Stars—First 3 Offerings Will Be Designed Also for TV," *New York Times*, 18 Jan 1954, p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> "Rome Becoming A Film Center," *The Washington Post*, 26 December 1954, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> "Rome Becoming A Film Center," *The Washington Post*, p.1.

One consequence of American movie production in Rome was, of course, an influx of movie stars in the city. A 1953 edition of *The Hollywood Reporter* claimed that "there [were] almost as many Hollywood names in Italy...as there [were] in California."<sup>110</sup> American actors were drawn to a life in Rome, having "all the glories of Italy and the Mediterranean within reach."<sup>111</sup>As a result, every major Hollywood movie star flocked to Rome at some point during the 1950s. To name a few: Orson Welles, Robert Wagner, Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, Burt Lancaster, Clark Gable, Marlon Brando, Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Kirk Douglas, Ava Gardner, Cary Grant, Marlene Dietrich, James Stewart, Grace Kelly, Gary Cooper, Rex Harrison, and William Holden. In fact, Hollywood's presence in Rome even turned Italian actresses like Gina Lollobrigida and Sophia Loren into bona fide American movie stars. The stars were seen all over Rome, often congregating in cafes, shops, and restaurants on the trendy Via Veneto.<sup>112</sup> Journalist George Cambell Dixon took note of this American invasion while on a visit to Rome in 1954:

Naturally, Cinecittà means a great deal, economically, to Rome. I have walked into the Excelsior Hotel when the array of slacks and open-necked sweat shirts (conspicuous in a land where people still dress with a pleasant formality), plus the clamour of American accents, suggested Hollywood's Brown Derby at lunch-time. The dollars spent so freely seep down through all classes of Roman society.<sup>113</sup>

In addition to helping the movie business and the overall Italian economy, the presence of American movie stars established a new profession in the city: paparazzi. Though the term paparazzi coincidentally didn't come into use until after the character Paparazzo in Fellini's 1960

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Albert Califano, "Rome, There Are Almost As Many Hollywood Names in Italy at the Moment," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1953, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Dixon, "Cinecittà: Rome's Film City," p.145-147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 112

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Dixon, "Cinecittà: Rome's Film City," p.145-147.

film *La Dolce Vita*, celebrity photographers worked all over Rome throughout the 1950s, and were known as "scattini," or, in English, "snappers" of photos.<sup>114</sup> The publishing boom of the post-war years led to the creation of new celebrity-focused magazines like *L'Europeo* (1945), *Oggi* (1945), *Tempo* (1946), *La Settimana Incom* (1948), *Epoca* (1950), and *L'Espresso* (1955), which had a high demand for images of the growing American celebrity population in Rome.<sup>115</sup> The scattini were so omnipresent that even the secretive 1953 marriage of actors Lana Turner and Lex Barker was discovered by a hoard of Italian photographers.<sup>116</sup> Annoyed, Turner threatened to not get married if the photographers didn't leave her alone, but the scattini remained outside her ceremony until she finally posed for photos.<sup>117</sup> In this golden age of Hollywood, interest in American movie stars reached across the globe; Rome was at the center of it all, and the Sorelle Fontana noticed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> "Lana Turner, Lex Barker Wed in Italy Ceremony: Film Couple Exchange Shield-shaped Rings after Photographers Upset Secrecy Plans," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1953, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> "Lana Turner," *Los Angeles Times*, p. 2.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

# Sorelle Fontana and Hollywood

It is no surprise that the paparazzi discovered the whereabouts of Lana Turner and Lex Barker's marriage in 1953, despite its attempted secrecy. This was hardly the first celebrity romance to take place in Rome. In fact, since the dawn of the "Hollywood on the Tiber" era, celebrity couples frequently formed on film sets in the city. Perhaps the most scandalous example was the extramarital affair of Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman and Italian director Roberto Rossellini, in which Bergman "gave birth to a son by Rossellini while still married to a Los Angeles physician."<sup>118</sup> Despite this, the press that surrounded these various Hollywood couples never seemed to compare to the fanfare generated by Tyrone Power and Linda Christian, who wed in Rome on January 27, 1949. While filming Prince of Foxes in Rome, Power met Christian, an up-and-coming actress famous for her role in Tarzan and the Mermaids (1948).<sup>119</sup> According to *The Manchester Guardian*, "several thousand people broke through a strong police cordon round in the church of Santa Francesca Romana" to catch a glimpse of the couple on their wedding day.<sup>120</sup> The wedding transformed an "ancient church... into a setting of Hollywood splendor," covering it in lilies, camellias, and carnations, with floodlights and an electric organ "supplied by a huge generator borrowed from an Italian motion-picture studio."<sup>121</sup> In addition to the spectators, there were "sixty photographers inside the church" that were "jockeying for a position around the altar," visibly irritating the groom.<sup>122</sup> Power was not the only one to be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> "Ingrid Bergman Papers To Be Viewed in Court: Attorney Says Brief Case of Amnesia Victim Who Served Actress To be Opened." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 1950, p.13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Hedda Hopper, "Linda Christian Tells About Romance With Tyrone Power: Romance With Ty Power Told By Linda Christian." *Los Angeles Times*, 1 August 1948, p. C1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> "A Bit of Hollywood in Rome: Sunset at the Wedding of Tyrone Power." *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 January 1949, p.5.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> "Roman Holiday: Power Wedding Touches Off Riot Power Wedding." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 January 1949, p.1.
 <sup>122</sup> "A Bit of Hollywood in Rome: Sunset at the Wedding of Tyrone Power." *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 January 1949, p.5.

displeased by the crowds of people and photographers. The American Monsignor Hemmick, "a canon of St. Peter's," had been flown into Rome to deliver the service, only for his sermon to be "hardly audible over the clicks of the massed cameras, the whirr of the news-reel cameras, and the rustle of the excited audience."<sup>123</sup> But of course, in post-war Italy, a high-profile event of this magnitude was bound to create a commotion — and at the center of it all was the stunning Linda Christian in a "seventeenth-century style white satin dress, sewn with seed pearls and sequins," complete with a 15-foot long train and a "veil [of] about 22 feet" designed and crafted by the Sorelle Fontana.<sup>124</sup>

This wedding was considered to be the Sorelle Fontana's first major introduction into the global fashion market. Though their atelier had existed since 1943, the sisters had operated on a local scale in the same manner as their fellow Italian dressmakers, looking to Paris for design inspiration. In the post-war years, exorbitantly high prices of Parisian couture only strengthened this trend. During this time, the Parisian haute couture market rebounded with the emergence of new designers like Christian Dior in 1947, whose "sensational lengths of skirts" used "yards of material" and ushered in a "new look" silhouette, abandoning the modest war-time styles and becoming the standard for fashionable women around the world.<sup>125</sup> With a monopoly over the industry, Parisian fashion houses increased their prices by 25% as early as March of 1945.<sup>126</sup> In 1947, it was reported that dresses by the Fontana sisters "hovered around 30,000 lire (\$100 or so) for a day dress and 60,000 lire for an evening gown," — prices that were "far lower than in Paris."<sup>127</sup> So, wealthy Italian women like Gioia Marconi, the daughter of Guglielmo Marconi, known as the "father of wireless radio," sought out the Fontana sisters to design their wardrobes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> "A Bit of Hollywood in Rome," 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> "A Bit of Hollywood in Rome," 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> "Dior Stands By 'New Look: Originator of Style Lets Well Enough Alone," *The Sun*, 9 February 1948, p.9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> "Paris Couture Model Price Increase 25%." *Women's Wear Daily*, Fairchild, News Service. 7 March 1945, 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Mannes "Fashion: Italian Fashion." Vogue, 1947, 155.

in Parisian styles to avoid French price tags.<sup>128</sup> By the late 1940s, however, the Sorelle Fontana actively worked to differentiate themselves from both their Italian and French peers. Years later, in a 1954 interview with *The Hartford Courant*, Micol Fontana spoke about the sisters' unique design strategy, claiming that Sorelle Fontana garments were always "shaped into a silhouette" that best displayed a woman's "body, bust, [and] hips" and showed "her off at her feminine loveliest."<sup>129</sup> The sisters ensured that their dresses were "shaped to fit like a glove" by working in tandem: "Zoe did the cutting with her golden scissors, Micol was in charge of the design, and Giovanna took care of the proportions."<sup>130</sup>

Marconi was so pleased with the sisters' exceptional work that she began to brag about the atelier's speed, quality, and cost to the elite members of her social circle.<sup>131</sup> One such member was Irene Galitzine, a Russian princess, who followed Marconi's recommendation and began buying clothes from the sisters.<sup>132</sup> Though Galitzine eventually went on to design her own competing fashion line in the early 1950s, her admiration of the Sorelle Fontana was so great that she continued to "warmly [admire] the work of the three Fontana sisters" at their fashion shows.<sup>133</sup> While the patronage of Marconi and Galitzine was impressive by post-war Italian standards, during the late 1940s, the Fontana Sisters remained largely unknown in the United States, a vast market occupied entirely by Parisian couture.

In a spread about "Italian Fashion" in *Vogue*'s January 1947 issue, the Fontana sisters received only a small mention. In this article, the Sorelle Fontana are grouped with Gabriellasport as the "two most popular dressmakers in Rome," because of the "presiding spirit"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> Edyth Radom, "The Fontana Dynasty," *The Hartford Courant*, 29 August 1954, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Micol Fontana as quoted in Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> "Soft Afternoon and Evening Types at Irene Galitzine," Women's Wear Daily, 31 March 1950, 7.

of Princess Galitzine.<sup>134</sup> Though even a brief mention in *Vogue* is a feat by any standard, the publication did not feature any images of their dresses, and the sisters were simply recognized within the context of their work for Galitzine. Ultimately, however, the Fontanas' friendship with Galitzine did not overshadow them, as media reports might have initially suggested. Instead, this relationship proved to be immensely beneficial to the sisters; it was Galitzine who recommended the Sorelle Fontana atelier to her friend Linda Christian.<sup>135</sup> Thus, as early as 1947, it was clear that the Fontana sisters already understood the immense power of word-of-mouth marketing and had cultivated the first example of what would prove to be a long line of mutually beneficial friendships with high-profile figures.

Linda Christian's wedding dress permanently changed the relationship between the Fontana sisters and the United States press. Several months before the wedding, American publications began hailing the Fontana sisters as "Rome's leading fashion designers," purely based on the rumor that they were designing Christian's wedding gown.<sup>136</sup> Just before the wedding, in early 1949, *Vogue* once again featured the Sorelle Fontana. But this time, the publication prominently displayed a full-page image of the Sorelle Fontana's "sable-banded white ball gown of pleated chiffon over layers of net" on Linda Christian, noting how the dress was personally made for Christian by the Italian designers.<sup>137</sup> Not only was one of their dresses prominently displayed in a major American fashion publication for the first time, but the article alluded to a close relationship between Linda Christian and the Sorelle Fontana, further proving their legitimacy to American audiences. Of course, this attention was nothing compared to what occurred after the debut of the wedding dress.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> Mannes, "Fashion: Italian fashion," Vogue, 1947, 155.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> "Tyrone's Latest Gets Her Gown," The Austin Statesman, 12 August 1948, p.13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> "People and Ideas: Linda Christian/Princess Ahmed Fakhry," Vogue, 1 January 1949, 124.

By July of 1949, it seemed that Christian had inspired her Hollywood peers, as *Women's* Wear Daily published the headline "American Film Stars Are Buying Wardrobes at Italian Dressmakers."<sup>138</sup> The publication detailed how Rome had suddenly "become a major stopover for visiting New York and Hollywood personalities" who almost always treated themselves "with a visit to the local haute couture" ateliers and bought anywhere from "one to 26 models from the top houses."<sup>139</sup> One Hollywood actress who made this fashion pilgrimage was Joan Bennett, the wife of Walter Wanger, who subsequently posed in her new Sorelle Fontana wardrobe for a fashion spread in an August 1949 edition of *The Sun*.<sup>140</sup> The publication praised the Fontana sisters for their "limitless imagination with good fashion," "flair for creative design," and ability to be both "elaborate" but also "modest and fulfilling" for Bennett's audience with the Pope.<sup>141</sup> In addition to Bennet, Grace Kelly had also participated in this trend, seeking out an evening dress from the Fontana atelier in 1949.<sup>142</sup> By November of that same year, Women's Wear Daily ran another story claiming that the Fontanas' winter collection had "the most original models" in contrast to the other houses that mainly "[followed] those Paris launched in August."143 This rave review from a paramount American fashion source was a clear indication that the American market was not only paying attention to Sorelle Fontana, but also looking at the design trio as the leading example of a new Italian style.

The Sorelle Fontana's popularity grew exponentially with the increasing presence of American movie stars at Cinecittà studios and the rising demand for their skills on the sets of new Hollywood films. In 1949, the American actress Myrna Loy requested that Sorelle Fontana

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> "American Film Stars are Buying Wardrobes at Italian Dressmakers," *Women's Wear Daily*, 22 July 1949, 4. <sup>139</sup> "American Film Stars," *Women's Wear Daily*, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Jean Spadea. "The Glass of Fashion: Roman Beauties." *The Sun*, 9 August 1949, 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>141</sup> Spadea, "The Glass of Fashion," *The Sun*, 9 August 1949, 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>142</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> "Dressmakers Say Long for Evening, Short for Cocktails: From Rome," *Women's Wear Daily*, 17 November 1949, 10.

design her costumes for the upcoming film *If This Be Sin*.<sup>144</sup> The Fontana sisters already had experience in film costume design, as they had contributed to the 1948 Italian movie, *La Signora Delle Camelie*.<sup>145</sup> However, their work in this film had not rendered the same sensational attention as their work in *If This Be Sin*.<sup>146</sup> That same year, they were also asked to construct the costumes for both Michele Morgan and Elisa Cegani in the hit film *Fabiola*.<sup>147</sup>

This interest extended into the personal wardrobes of Hollywood stars as well. In Rome for the filming of her husband Robert Taylor's new movie Quo Vadis in 1950, Barbara Stanwyck ordered an entire wardrobe of Sorelle Fontana models.<sup>148</sup> Inspired by Stanwyck, Taylor's co-star Deborah Kerr quickly followed suit and ordered dresses by Sorelle Fontana for herself.<sup>149</sup> It seemed that the close environments of film sets were perfect for word-of-mouth recommendations like this. So, during the "Hollywood on the Tiber" era in the early 1950s, Rome quickly became known as "a dress center for many leading American and English movie stars" with the Fontana sisters leading the way. Some of the most famous Hollywood actresses began to shop at Sorelle Fontana while working on movies in Rome: Rita Hayworth, Loretta Young, Irene Dunne. In 1954, Elizabeth Taylor visited the atelier, leaving with a crisp black and white cocktail dress, but not before posing for a photoshoot in the sisters' showroom.<sup>150</sup> Soon, celebrities began attending their fashion shows as well. A July 1952 showing of the Fontanas' work was "filled to capacity with members of the fashion press from all over the world, famous designers," and "stars of the screen and stage" including "the lovely Audrey Hepburn."<sup>151</sup> While filming Roman Holiday, Audrey Hepburn sought out trousseau and wedding dress from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>150</sup>"Liz Taylor 1954." Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars, Database on-line. Fondazione Micol Fontana.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>151</sup> Edyth Radom, "Fontana Collection to be Shown in Hartford." *The Hartford Courant*, 12 October 1952, 1.

Fontana atelier.<sup>152</sup> Even though the Italian nobility had initially helped put the Sorelle Fontana on the map, it was Linda Christian and the enduring presence of Hollywood in Rome that worked to recruit new high-profile clients for the atelier and catapult them to international fame.

In Rome during the 1950s, the paparazzi followed actresses' every move, often noting their clothes and the stores they shopped in. With the Sorelle Fontana's name throughout the American and international media, it was no surprise that the Fontana sisters' reputation spread beyond Hollywood circles. By the early 1950s, the Sorelle Fontana were bestowed with the honor of dressing Queen Narriman of Egypt, who chose fashion in Italy "in preference to Paris."<sup>153</sup> Queen Narriman, who ordered "a fabulous trousseau of seventy formal evening dresses," was an incredibly notable client, as she marked the first significant example of an influential aristocrat turning away from the fashions of France, and instead looking to the Sorelle Fontana.<sup>154</sup> By 1955, the Fontana sisters once again beat out many other influential designers to dress Angelita Trujillo, the daughter of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo for an extravagant gala. It was reported that "one-third of the nation's national budget was spent on this gala affair" with "a good portion" of the money "invested in Italian designer Fontana gowns for chic Angelita and her entourage of 150 princesses."<sup>155</sup>

Naturally, the Fontanas' reputation also spread to Washington D.C., where their designs caught the eye of numerous influential political figures. One of the most notable was Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, dressed by the design trio for the Tiffany Ball in Newport, Rhode Island in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> The gorgeous dress was completed, but the wedding never occurred, so it was given to a young seamstress at the atelier instead; "Audrey Hepburn's wedding gown fitting 1952." *Sorelle Fontana: A Perfect Wedding Dress*, Database on-line. Fondazione Micol Fontana Rome, Italy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Walter Lucas, "Florence Has Designs On Fashions: Italian City Makes Debut Rome Grows Organizers Swamped Traditions Recalled Heritage Remains ERP Has Active Role." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 28, August 1951, p.9. <sup>154</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, *900 Secolo Alla Moda*, 35.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Lauren Derby, "The Dictator's Seduction: Gender and State Spectacle during the Trujillo Regime." *Callaloo 23*, no. 3 (2000): 1112-1146.

1955.<sup>156</sup> Kennedy must have enjoyed her experience with the atelier, as the Fontanas later dressed her step-sister Janet Auchincloss for her wedding in 1966.<sup>157</sup> Famously, the Sorelle Fontana also dressed Margaret Truman, socialite and daughter of President Harry S. Truman, in a sixteenth century Venetian lace and honey-colored tulle dress for her wedding to Clifton Daniel, editor-in-chief of the *New York Times*, in 1956.<sup>158</sup> The wedding was a highly publicized affair, with details of the Fontanas' dress shared in the largest publications throughout the United States. In the months leading up to the wedding, the design trio was pressured by the American media to reveal details about the high-profile gown. However, the Fontana sisters did not crack, replying with the Roman proverb "sposa in segreto vestuta, avrà sempre dolce la vita" which translated to "for a bride dressed in secret, a life forever sweet."<sup>159</sup>After the event, *Women's Wear Daily* admiringly reported that Micol Fontana had even named the color of the dress "Marguerite" after the bride.<sup>160</sup>

Designing such a significant article of clothing for Truman, the Sorelle Fontana became close with the presidential family, and Micol Fontana was even invited by Margaret's mother, the former First Lady, to a private party at their home in Missouri while on a visit to America.<sup>161</sup> This friendship endured and the Fontana sisters continued to dress Margaret well into the 1960s.<sup>162</sup> Dressing an American president's daughter served as a significant achievement for the Fontana sisters, as Italy had been at war with the United States only a decade prior. Margaret's wedding dress not only displayed how successful the sisters had become, but also represented an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>156</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>158</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> "Margaret Truman's Wedding Dress," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 March 1956, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>160</sup> "Lace for Brides in the News: Margaret Truman Wears Navy Travel Ensemble, Color also Favored by Guests at Wedding: Matrons of Honor in Yellow," *Women's Wear Daily*, 23 April 1956, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda 1900-2001: Sorelle Fontana, 68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>162</sup> Robert F. Hawkins, "Rome," Variety, 15 June 1960, 10.

economic turning point for Italy, showcasing how far the country had come in its reconstruction efforts supported by American aid.

As exemplified by their friendship with Margaret Truman, the Fontanas were known for the close relationships that they shared with their celebrity clients, in addition to their beautiful designs. In October 1951, just two years after their landmark wedding, Linda Christian and Tyrone Power invited Micol Fontana to visit them in Hollywood.<sup>163</sup> Micol claimed that the Power couple "wanted all the movie stars to see Fontana clothes," and even organized a fashion show for her to display her designs to an American audience.<sup>164</sup> The show was such a hit with Hollywood crowds that the audience reportedly jumped on the runway in celebration.<sup>165</sup> In addition to organizing the fashion show, Power and Christian hosted a party in Micol's honor, to celebrate her achievements. The evening was delightful, and Micol was even driven home in a convertible by Cary Grant.<sup>166</sup> Beyond Micol's personal enjoyment, the events worked to both strengthen the Fontanas' existing ties in the Hollywood community and build new recognition in America, which wouldn't have been possible without the friendship of Tyrone Power and Linda Christian. The greatest testament to this friendship, however, came the following day, when Micol was brought to the hospital to visit Linda Christian, who had just given birth to her first child. Just two years later, Micol was named the godmother of Christian's second child.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the Fontana sisters' close relationships with many notable figures, their most famous friendship was with the legendary actress Ava Gardner. The sisters were introduced to the Hollywood legend on the set of her film *The Barefoot Contessa* in 1953, for which they were commissioned to make thirty dresses.<sup>168</sup> The movie was a box office hit, grossing over \$3 million

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>163</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>164</sup> Micol Fontana as quoted in White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>165</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>166</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>167</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>168</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 56.

dollars.<sup>169</sup> Gardner was so impressed with the Sorelle Fontana's work that she requested to work with them on another four films, and continued to order thirty dresses from the atelier every year after the release of *The Barefoot Contessa*.<sup>170</sup> Even when Gardner was reportedly "ordered to bed with sniffles" she still "got up to see about her dresses" for her "wardrobe consultation" with the Fontanas.<sup>171</sup> Gardner became so close to the design trio that she would often bring her husband Frank Sinatra along to the fittings. In December of 1953, *The Sun* reported that Zoe Fontana had "spent three hours... with the couple."<sup>172</sup> In the article, Zoe dissuaded the rumors that Sinatra and Gardner's marriage was "on the rocks," claiming instead that the two were "cooing like two doves."<sup>173</sup> The validity of these statements is questionable, as the couple publicly separated and then filed for divorce a few months later.<sup>174</sup> In fact, Micol later recalled how Gardner often talked about her "difficult romances" within "the discreet walls of the atelier."<sup>175</sup> Regardless of the situation, the Fontana sisters worked to protect Gardner's privacy, ruthlessly defending her in the press despite the vicious rumors. Through these actions, the Fontana sisters earned Garner's admiration and trust. In particular, Gardner became very close with Micol Fontana, often seeking her company outside of the atelier and bringing her along to press events.<sup>176</sup> It was reported that Ava Gardner even flew Micol to Mexico to join her on a movie set and make "her clothes for the picture."177

As a result of this friendship, Gardner became a quasi-spokesperson for the Sorelle Fontana brand and even began walking in their fashion shows. According to David Douglas

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> "1954 Box Office Champs." Variety. 5 January 1955, 59.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>170</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>171</sup> "Frankie and Ava 'Coo Like Doves'," The Sun, 31 Dec 1953, p.3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>172</sup> "Frankie and Ava" *The Sun*, p.3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>173</sup> "Frankie and Ava" *The Sun*, p.3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>174</sup> E. Wells, "The Rise And Fall and Rise Again of Frank Sinatra," *Good Housekeeping*, August 1954, 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>175</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 56.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>176</sup> H. La B, "What Goes on at Cosmopolitan." Cosmopolitan, December 1954, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>177</sup> Hedda Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood: Richard Basehart Will Star in 'Brothers Karamazov," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 April 1957, p.12.

Duncan of *Life* magazine, this tradition started when "Ava turned up one afternoon at a Fontana fashion show and, unannounced and deadpan, modeled a dress from the movie" to the delight of "Madame Fontana's unsuspecting clientele" who "couldn't believe their eyes."<sup>178</sup> Fashion journalist Irene Brinn once caught a glimpse of Gardner backstage at a Sorelle Fontana 1954 fashion show, and reported her impression of the rare moment in *Bellezza* magazine:

Ava Gardner has been described as an exceptional model in one of the Sorelle Fontana fashion shows... The artfully wicked Fontana sisters have the knack of always keeping a trump card up their sleeve. This time, towards the end of the show, the coup de théâtre was discretely announced by a shifting of armchairs; the staircase that led from the atelier into the room had to be completely cleared in order to create a large space around the last steps. The operation "solemn descent" was staged so perfectly that nobody in the other rooms was aware of it. Fortunately, I was able to climb up to a kind of landing where, surrounded by rough wooden tables, buckets of French champagne on ice, cans of hairspray, and slices of lemon, Ava Gardner dressed in green satin was waiting for her cue to appear on stage. Never has an actress behaved so solemnly. She paced up and down in her small cage, she wrung her hands, she cleared her throat, she adjusted her bodice, she sighed, she allowed Zoe Fontana to hold her face in both hands and plant an encouraging kiss on her forehead... and when her cue came, she made the sign of the cross. Then, like someone going to the guillotine, she went to face the applause.<sup>179</sup>

Though Gardner was clearly uncomfortable, she still used her fame to promote Sorelle Fontana's work, and even let Zoe plant a kiss on her face, proving her dedicated friendship. In fact, it was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>178</sup> David Douglas Duncan, "New Light on Ava:Pictures Show a Changed Star at Work in Rome," *Life*, 12 April 1954, 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>179</sup> Irene Brin, *Bellezza* (1954), as quoted in Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda 1900-2001: Sorelle Fontana, 56-57

Ava Gardner who debuted one of the design trio's most controversial works: the Cassock style coat dress. The red-trimmed structured black dress was styled with a Cardinal hat, cord and tassel, and a cross necklace to "complete the effect" and was "known as 'il pretino' (the priest)" for its blatant Catholic influence.<sup>180</sup> Gardner wore the dress on the catwalk for the Fontana sisters' 1955 "Cardinale line" collection. Though the Fontana sisters were devout Catholics, they were also celebrity marketing experts who understood that the priestly dress would generate attention when worn on an actress like Ava Gardner, who was known for her sensuality. The sisters were correct, and the dress was so influential that it served as inspiration for a dress in Federico Fellini's hit 1959 film, La Dolce Vita, which ended up winning an Oscar for Best Costume Design.<sup>181</sup> Gardner served as an ambassador for the brand off the runway as well. For the highly publicized wedding of Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier in 1956, Micol Fontana dressed Ava Gardner in two looks: one for the wedding ceremony called 'Roma Antica' and another for the reception called 'Enchanted Garden.'<sup>182</sup> This "fairy-tale wedding" was televised by MGM studios and "touched the hearts of millions throughout the world," thus serving as yet another great marketing opportunity for the Sorelle Fontana.<sup>183</sup>

While the friendship and patronage of famous figures like Ava Gardner were personally important to the Fontana sisters, the real significance of these relationships was the publicity and business that they brought to the sisters. In the 1950s, Hollywood starlets and political figures emerged as a new class of popular tastemakers who worked to set the fashion trends of the times. For most of Western history, this role had previously been occupied by the aristocracy, whose high fashion trends rarely spread beyond their elite circles. By the 1950s, however, Hollywood

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>180</sup> "Cassock style coat dress for actress Ava Gardner 1955," *Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars*, Database on-line. Fondazione Micol Fontana, Rome, Italy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>181</sup> "Cassock style coat," Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>182</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 59

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>183</sup> Jennifer, "Social Journal: Wedding in Monaco." The Tatler and Bystander, 2 May 1956, 220.

stars' fashion filled the screens of every movie and the pages of every newspaper and magazine. Average Americans were able to see celebrities wearing Sorelle Fontana clothing, and subsequently desire their dresses for themselves.

Quite early on, the Sorelle Fontana recognized that they could utilize their celebrity connections to tap into the American market. When Micol Fontana was invited to Hollywood by Linda Christian and Tyrone Powers in October 1951, she used the opportunity to continue on a tour of the United States, visiting the four cities "Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, and New York," and presenting the "first introduction to European couture" for many Americans.<sup>184</sup> The Fontanas also understood that most Americans would read about their designs, but were unable to travel to Rome frequently enough to buy them. So, in 1951 after "several years of urging," the sisters opened "another house of Fontana" in New York.<sup>185</sup> In this store, the Sorelle Fontana "formed a partnership with Tafel, a name famous for the designing of beautiful wedding gowns" where they made "daytime, cocktail, evening and bridal clothes for… about \$75 to \$300" which was "a fraction of the prices in [their] Roman salon."<sup>186</sup> Naturally, this new atelier was quickly christened with celebrity visits, including one from Marilyn Monroe.<sup>187</sup>

By the mid-1950s, they worked to expand their American market even further by making their clothes more accessible without diminishing their brand. As early as July of 1954, *Women's Wear Daily* published the headline "Fontana Sisters Set Ready-Made Export Line"<sup>188</sup> and in November 1955 announced that the "Fontanas [Entered] Hosiery Field With New Mat-Finished Nylons."<sup>189</sup> The sisters were moving in this direction for good reason. In April of 1958, *Good* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>184</sup> Edyth Radom, "Fontana Collection to be shown in Hartford," *The Hartford Courant*, 12 October 1952,1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>185</sup> Edyth Radom, "Fontana Collection," 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>186</sup> Edyth Radom, "Fontana Collection," 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>187</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>188</sup> "Fontana Sisters Set Ready-Made Export Line." Women's Wear Daily, 23 Jul 1954, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>189</sup> "Hosiery: Fontana Enters Hosiery Field with New Mat-Finished Nylons." *Women's Wear Daily*, 18 November 1955, 22.

Housekeeping, a magazine written for average American housewives, published a guide on "How to Speak High Fashion" and included "FONTANA (Fohn-tan'-nah) 3 sisters in Rome" amongst legendary fashion names like Chanel, Dior, and Louis Vuitton.<sup>190</sup> Articles like this demonstrated just how far-reaching and influential the Fontana name had become thanks to celebrity connections. The Fontana sisters recognized that average Americans, like the subscribers of *Good Housekeeping*, could not afford their traditional couture fashion. So, the Sorelle Fontana became "pioneers in ready to wear signed by couturières," selling non-couture products, like ready-to-wear clothing, perfume, and accessories under their recognizable name, and setting an example for other Italian fashion houses.<sup>191</sup> And of course, it didn't hurt that their fragrance "Glory by Fontana" featured a testimonial from Anita Ekberg, the star of La Dolce *Vita*, who gave the scent her seal of approval.<sup>192</sup> In July 1958, *Women's Wear Daily* even recognized the Sorelle Fontana as one of the top four "sportswear houses showing in Rome" purchased by American buyers.<sup>193</sup> By January of 1959, their "business expansion" was accelerating so fast that the Fontana sisters had to "divide their workrooms into two laboratories" - their original atelier "at the Piazza di Spagna premises, exclusively for the creation of couture models" and another "in Via del Tritone, for the sampling and reproduction of wholesale couture and boutique styles."<sup>194</sup>

The rapid expansion of the Fontana brand was almost entirely due to the publicity they received from their numerous celebrity clients. Because the Sorelle Fontana were able to captivate the hearts of Hollywood stars, they were subsequently able to capitalize on the wallets

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>190</sup> "How to Speak HIGH FASHION," Good Housekeeping, April 1958, 163.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>191</sup> "Italy: Rome Couture Bids for Sales." Women's Wear Daily, 9 Oct 1961, 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>192</sup>"Anita Ekberg and Zoe Fontana 1959." *Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars*, Database on-line.Fondazione Micol Fontana, Rome, Italy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>193</sup> E. V. Massai "U.S. Buying is Good at Four Roman Houses: Several Couturiers Set Showings Here." *Women's Wear Daily*, 21 July 1958, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>194</sup> 'Fontanas Establish Two Production Laboratories." *Women's Wear Daily*, 6 January 1959, 19.

of Americans, a goal market of the Italian fashion industry in the post-war years. With an American seal of approval, the Fontanas were later able to travel across the world, bringing their designs and ready-made products along with them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: The Rise of the Modern Italian Fashion Industry

The official beginning of the Italian high fashion industry can be traced back to a specific date: February 12th, 1951. Of course, fashion creators had existed in the country long before; however, this date was the first time prominent Italian designers were consolidated in a presentation for an international audience. While seemingly a serendipitous occasion, the birth of Italian fashion was not a random occurrence. In the wake of WWII, the international fashion industry was forced to shift. Nazi occupation had severely altered the relationship between Parisian fashion and international buyers, especially in the United States. During the war, many Parisian couturiers had continued to design new collections, but were met with immense "American criticism," as U.S. fashion representatives believed that French "products [were] Nazified."<sup>195</sup> American media outlets propagated the misconception that French designers were "collaborationist."<sup>196</sup> In the late 1940s, as this vilified wartime reputation began to fade, Americans soon found new issues with the French industry. American fashion buyers and publications resented the high prices and elaborate post-war trends introduced by new French designers like Christian Dior. Though France still enjoyed a monopoly over international fashion, it was clear that the United States, whose post-war economic dominance made them a primary market for high fashion, was growing weary of Paris. Americans were looking for something new in the world of high fashion and, luckily, Giovanni Battista Giorgini, a smart entrepreneur, noticed this.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>195</sup>"Sportswear: Parts Editor in U.S.A. Champions Couture Against 'Nazified' Stigma: Kathleen Cannell Tells Fashion Group of Boston that Despite German Occupation, Nazi Women Refrain from Purchasing Fashions by Choice and by Government Dissuasion." *Women's Wear Daily*, 10 May 1944, 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>196</sup> "Sportswear: Parts Editor in U.S.A," *Women's Wear Daily*, 46.

The fashion presentation that occurred in February 1951 was the work of Giovanni Battista Giorgini, a 50-year-old man of aristocratic descent.<sup>197</sup> Giorgini was born in 1898 and grew up in Tuscany, working for his cousin as an international salesman of Italian products.<sup>198</sup> Through this occupation, Giorgini became familiar with the American market, and even set up an "Allied Forces Gift Shop" after World War II, where Italians sold their goods to British and American soldiers.<sup>199</sup> Giorgini recognized the huge potential for goods that were "Made in Italy" in the United States market. So, by the 1950s, Giorgini decided to turn his attention towards Italian fashion. Though a centralized fashion industry had not successfully existed in Italy for centuries, Italians had always worked as integral members of the international fashion system. In fact, it was Italy's well-known heritage of fine craftsmanship, especially as "small manufacturers of silks, wools, skins, and furs," often used by French designers, that attracted American and British soldiers to Giorgini's store in the first place.<sup>200</sup> In addition to their reputation for quality handiwork, Italians also maintained a lesser-known legacy in French high fashion. Many Italians, like Cesare Guidi who designed collections for Dior in 1946, often worked behind the scenes in Parisian fashion houses.<sup>201</sup> Thus, Italy already showed both the talent and the reputation to serve as the foundation for a fashion industry. Giorgini realized that he could capitalize on these factors, as well as the wavering status of Parisian fashion, to create an entirely new industry in Italy. However, Giorgini also understood that American approval would be a key factor in Italian fashion's success. So, he devised a plan to "organize a presentation" of Italian high fashion to "establish Italian fashion in [the American] market."<sup>202</sup> In order to make this event a success,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>197</sup> Luigi Settembrini, "From Haute Couture to Pret-a-Porter," *The Italian Metamorphosis 1943-1968*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1994), 484.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>198</sup> Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>199</sup> Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>200</sup> Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 31.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>201</sup> Luigi Settembrini, "From Haute Couture to Pret-a-Porter," 486.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>202</sup> Giovanni Battista Giorgini as quoted in Shawn Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential: Fellini, Loren, Pucci, Paparazzi, and the Swinging High Life of 1950s Rome*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 34

Giorgini carefully recruited a handful of designers who would serve as the inaugural representation of Italian fashion. Not surprisingly, Giorgini first turned to the Sorelle Fontana.

By the time Giorgini reached out to the Sorelle Fontana in 1950, the sisters had already made a splash in the international press for their work with Linda Christian and other Hollywood stars. Having already been featured in *Vogue*, the Fontanas were popular and respected, especially in America. So, for good reason, Micol Fontana was "hesitant" to join the exhibition.<sup>203</sup> Joining an Italian fashion show with other lesser-known designers risked the value of their brand. Additionally, the Fontanas were reluctant to work with Giorgini, as he wanted them to develop a completely original "Italian" collection and asked the sisters to completely abandon French design inspiration.<sup>204</sup> Though half of the Fontanas' collections were original designs already, they still heavily relied on the business of their French-inspired dresses. Micol remembered feeling intimidated by the prospect of expanding her original designs and creating a new national fashion: "the French were an institution, and we were just some Italian dressmakers with an idea... turning our backs on Paris meant giving up a mechanism that we knew worked."205 In fact, Giovanna fought against the invitation, claiming it was "too difficult to compete with the French."<sup>206</sup> Despite this, Micol and Zoe did not want to "stay in one place."<sup>207</sup> They decided to take a chance, and agreed to be a part of the show, as a means for both Italy and their own atelier to "move forward."<sup>208</sup> Giorgini was obviously thrilled with the influential Fontanas' decision to join his showcase. The Fontanas' participation encouraged a slew of smaller fashion designers to follow their lead, uniting a group of designers who would ultimately prove to be the founding members of the immensely successful high fashion industry in Italy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>203</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>204</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 83.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>205</sup> Micol Fontana as quoted in Courtney Colavita, "Italy's Golden Moment." Women's Wear Daily, 2 March 2001, 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>206</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>207</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>208</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 39.

The Fontana sisters were willing to risk everything for the chance to help Italian fashion finally succeed, but they could never have anticipated the level of success this event would generate.

Once the Sorelle Fontana agreed to join the show, Giorgini was able to leverage their participation to recruit other prominent Italian designers. One was Simonetta Visconti, another Roman couturier who had been "a member of the Italian aristocracy," but was jailed twice by the National Fascist Party "for her allied leanings during the war," ultimately turning to fashion design as a means of rebuilding herself.<sup>209</sup> Visconti brought more casual "sports-and-boutique type" clothes to the event, in contrast to the elevated couture of the Sorelle Fontana.<sup>210</sup> Similarly, Giorgini recruited Emilio Pucci, a nobleman from Florence. Pucci had also made a name for himself with his colorful sportswear and bold patterns. In addition to Visconti and Pucci, Giorgini recruited other designers like Giovanna Caracciolo of Carosa and Emilio Schuberth.<sup>211</sup> For the audience, Giorgini was able to get a total of nine North American clients to attend, including B. Altman and Company and Bergdorf Goodman from New York, I. Magnin & Company from San Francisco, Henry Morgan & Company from Montreal, the US ready-to-wear manufacturers Leto Cohn Lo Balbo and Hannah Troy, and a few publications.<sup>212</sup> Giorgini secured many of these attendees by falsely claiming rival firms had already RSVP'd to the event.<sup>213</sup> When members of the American audience arrived in Italy, they were whisked away to the presentation, which was held at Giorgini's home in Florence Villa Torrigiani.<sup>214</sup> The fashion show, unlike the individual designer shows seen in Paris, employed a

"combination-presentation," with collections from "seventeen of the Italian couturières from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>209</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up: A Big, Hectic Fashion Show Attracts U.S. Style Leaders Poses a Challenge to Paris" *Life*, 20 August 1951, 110.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>210</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 110.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>211</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 105.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>212</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>213</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>214</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli, *Italian Style: Fashion & Film From Early Cinema to the Digital Age*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 117.

Rome, Milan, Florence, Turin" all in one sitting.<sup>215</sup> While the amount of designers presenting "well outnumbered the audience," the small group of "big shot customers in retail and manufacturing business" were nonetheless impressed.<sup>216</sup> Though *Women's Wear Daily* "was the only American paper represented" at the February 12th event, "word got around that the Italians had a great deal to offer," and Italian fashion was quickly noticed by the entire international fashion community.<sup>217</sup> When reflecting on the widespread impact of this presentation, there is no question that the Sorelle Fontana's participation helped provide the inaugural showcase with a level of credibility that allowed for it to succeed.

After the "real success" of the first event, Giorgini started planning another showcase for the next season of Italian designs.<sup>218</sup> However, this time around, Giorgini did not have to trick any American representatives into attending. Instead, numerous American publications and department store buyers who had heard about the February 12th event clamored to receive an invitation to the next presentation. On July 19th, 1951, over 170 "leaders of U.S. fashion" attended Giorgini's second show, far surpassing his modest estimates that 30 or 40 American buyers would take part.<sup>219</sup> In total, there were 250 people in the audience including "press, manufacturers, and store representatives" from all over the world.<sup>220</sup> In fact, prior to the event, *Vogue* reported that the lobbies of Italian hotels began to look like "Seventh Avenue during the buying season," as dozens of American buyers piled into the country for the showings.<sup>221</sup> The event was located in the Grand Hotel, a huge ballroom that had white walls "encrusted with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>215</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections, Casual Clothes," *Vogue*, 1 September 1951, 188.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>216</sup> Gloria Braggiotti Etting, "Florence In Fashion." Town & Country, 1 September 1951, 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>217</sup> Matilda Taylor, "First Arrivals at Italian Fashion Openings: Italian Dressmakers Present Fall Collections in Joint Showings in Florence," *Women's Wear Daily*, 20 July 1951, 1; Gloria Braggiotti Etting. "Florence In Fashion." *Town & Country*, 09, 1951, 135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>218</sup> "Italian Styles Gain Approval of U. S. Buyers: Many from Top Fashion Stores Attend Florence Showing of 180 Models and Accessories." *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 February 1951 15, 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>219</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," Life, 104

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>220</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections." *Vogue*, 189.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>221</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," *Vogue*, 188.

frisky cherubim" and "electric fans."<sup>222</sup> To make the second presentation a success, Giorgini had organized for "an orchestra of two Italian musicians" to play, and recruited his youngest daughter, Matilda, to "make certain [that guests] had their programs."<sup>223</sup> The show was organized as a combination show, just as the first one had been. The first "big show" of the event opened with the designers "Antonelli, followed by Carosa, Fabiani, Fontana, Schuberth, and Visconti" and lasted four hours.<sup>224</sup> Many American audience members complained about the show's length, the venue's uncomfortable heat, and the hard seats provided to them.<sup>225</sup> Despite this "audience of great fashion connoisseurs" being "exhausted and hot," *Town & Country* reporter Gloria Braggiotti Etting observed that everyone in attendance still had a "good-humored open-mindedness in their manner" during the show.<sup>226</sup> The "three-day marathon" of fashion consisted of an "exciting program of fashion presentations, cocktail parties, and the Giorgini ball on the last night" in the Palazzo Torrigiani's botanical gardens.<sup>227</sup> The presentations were a success, and almost all members of the American fashion industry returned to the United States with a new perception of Italian fashion.

Similar to the first event, the second Italian high fashion presentation received glowing reviews, but this time on a much larger scale, as reporters from some of the most prominent American publications had attended. In fact, the August 1951 edition of *Life* magazine dedicated a nine-page spread to the event, entitled "Italy Gets Dressed Up: A Big, Hectic Fashion Show Attracts U.S. Style Leaders, Poses a Challenge to Paris."<sup>228</sup> The magazine described the second fashion event to be "a true renaissance" for Italian fashion, despite their "real disadvantage"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>222</sup> Etting, "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>223</sup> Etting, "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>224</sup> Etting, "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>225</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," Vogue, 189.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>226</sup> Etting, "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>227</sup> Etting, "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>228</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 104.

when compared to the prominence of Paris fashion.<sup>229</sup> When reviewing the collections, *Life* labeled the designer Fabiani as the "dark horse entry from Rome" and the "most popular designer" to emerge from the showing followed by "Simonetta Visconti and sportswear designers Veneziani and Emilio."<sup>230</sup> In addition, the Fontana sisters were praised for having "sold many beautiful ball gowns" due in large part to their preexisting "U.S. reputation for dressing Hollywood stars."<sup>231</sup> The Fontana sisters' noticeably high sales, when compared to other Italian designers, made it clear that the Americans were already familiar with and fans of Sorelle Fontana's work. Many American buyers were willing to purchase Fontana pieces, even if this was the first time they had seen a Fontana collection in person, because of their positive reputation in Hollywood. As a result of this notoriety, the Fontanas' participation in the presentation also likely recruited many American buyers to the event. While many American buyers had high expectations about the Sorelle Fontana's work, they were then able to be pleasantly surprised by other Italian designers like Fabiani and Visconti, who did not have the same reputation in America. This was especially true for the new sportswear category that Italian designers had pioneered. According to Life, the "Italian sportswear had an easy casualness which appealed to the U.S. buyers," felt unique to Italy, and had prices that attracted buyers, as they permitted the import of "fashions in quantity with original stitching and fabrics intact.<sup>232</sup> By the end of the event, "when the trunks were packed and the orders totaled up" it was clear that "Italy had made a good beginning in its upstart attempt to enter Fashion's big leagues."233

Another prominent American publication, *Town & Country*, published an eight-page spread on the event. The author of the piece, Gloria Braggiotti Etting, claimed that "the names

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>229</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," Life, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>230</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," Life, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>231</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>232</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>233</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," Life, 108.

Visconti and Fabiani towered over the others" but "every one of the designers had some exceptionally interesting and original costumes to offer."<sup>234</sup> Though Visconti's designs were seen to be "most adaptable to… American tastes," the Fontana sisters were noted to have shown off their "inherited dressmaking talents" and "penchant for delicate embroidery and hand appliqués" through dresses like "a full-skirted evening gown, with puffed shell-shaped peplums overlapping one another."<sup>235</sup> Etting raved that the "original designs" of the presentation helped "Italy's inherent artistry" to re-emerge from "amnesia after years of regimentation and war," and made it clear that Italian designers were "grateful for what the Marshall Plan [had] done for them."<sup>236</sup> Etting also claimed that, while not entirely free from French influence, the presentation had "a definite Italian feeling for color flourishes" and "a voluptuous sense of form and an absence of unnecessary froufrou."<sup>237</sup> As in *Life*, designers like Fabiani and Visconti were heavily discussed in the press review because they were new to American audiences. The Sorelle Fontana were not discussed at large because they were already known as a reliable design house by the press.

*Vogue*, arguably one of the most influential American fashion magazines, also reviewed the event and, similar to *Life* and *Town & Country*, was pleasantly surprised by new designers like Fabiani, Visconti, and boutique designers like Emilio. However, after seeing the presentation, *Vogue* claimed that the "truth about the Italian market [was] that it [had] fabrics, leathers, basket work, sweaters, and good workers."<sup>238</sup>After the presentation, unlike *Life*'s review, *Vogue* was worried that the Italian fashion industry was not yet ready to compete with France. Noting how Emilio Pucci could not "complete all his orders because he [cut] everything himself," *Vogue* believed that Italians "[didn't] know how to sell or produce in quantity."<sup>239</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>234</sup> Etting. "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>235</sup> Etting. "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>236</sup> Etting. "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>237</sup> Etting. "Florence In Fashion," 176.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>238</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," Vogue, 189.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>239</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," Vogue, 247.

Optimistically, *Vogue* claimed that the event's breakout stars Fabiani and Visconti were "hard workers" and "would surely go on being successful" once the market in Italy developed.<sup>240</sup> After this prediction, however, *Vogue* made a point of remarking that the atelier Fontana was already "an excellent dressmaker."<sup>241</sup> While Fabiani and Visconti had seemingly stolen the show, it was clear that *Vogue* believed they were far from reaching the same level of excellence and dependability as the Fontana sisters.

By November of that same year, *Vogue* ran a 5-page piece on Italian fashion entitled "Fashion: Italian Ideas For Any South," discussing the latest Italian fashion trends such as baroque pearls, tight trousers, and sandals.<sup>242</sup>Although *Vogue* had been reluctant to praise certain elements of Italian fashion, it was clear that Giorgini's presentation had left a mark on the publication and the rest of the world, bringing Italy style to the forefront of international tastes.

As Italian fashion became more popular with American consumers, so did Italian textiles. Italy had already been known for its heritage of craftwork and textiles, especially wool from the Tuscany and Lombardy regions and silk from Venice, Florence, Lucca.<sup>243</sup> In fact, textiles had played a significant role in Italy's twentieth century economic history. As early as 1906, Italian textiles were prominently displayed at the world's fair in Milan and Turin.<sup>244</sup> Textiles were also a major focus of the Italian National Fascist Party. By 1934, Mussolini's *Ente Nazionale della Moda* in Turin worked to control all Italian textile production, in combination with their control of fashion.<sup>245</sup> By 1937, textile exhibitions began to occur throughout the country, often showcasing innovative new materials, like Rayon, as a means of promoting the Italian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>240</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," Vogue, 247.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>241</sup> "Fashion: From the Italian Collections," Vogue, 247.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>242</sup> "Fashion: Italian Ideas for any South." Vogue, 15 November 1951, 124.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>243</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>244</sup> Paulicelli, *Italian Style*, 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>245</sup> Paulicelli, *Italian Style*, 78.

industry.<sup>246</sup> These showcases stopped during World War II, when a third of Italy's national wealth was destroyed between 1938 and 1945.<sup>247</sup> However, many Italian textile factories emerged from the war miraculously unscathed, approximated at 0.5 percent damage, allowing for textile production to be Italy's largest projected post-war output in 1946.<sup>248</sup> Because textile manufactures had been spared from wartime destruction, the textile industry became a major part of Italy's economic recovery, and a focus of Italy's Marshall Plan aid.

While there was no concrete proposal for Marshall Plan "fund distribution" in Italy, the head of the Economic Cooperation Agency, Paul Hofmann, found that "textiles were being 'indiscriminately favored'" because the United States coincidentally had "huge stocks of raw cotton to clear."<sup>249</sup> The textile-focused Marshall Aid arrived in Italy in two forms. Americans began sending their old clothes for the poverty-stricken Italian population, with the intention that the leftover and unusable clothing would be then given to Italian textile companies, mixed with nylon, and recycled for sale.<sup>250</sup> The United States also gave Italian textile companies a \$25 million dollar loan in 1945 to pay for 150,000 barrels of raw American cotton.<sup>251</sup> Thanks to these initiatives, by 1950, *The Manchester Guardian* reported that English wool textile traders were "becoming gravely concerned about the extent of [England's] imports of wool cloth from Italy," which were "nearly twenty times as large as British exports of similar goods to Italy."<sup>252</sup> By the time that Giorgini's presentations occurred, textile companies were ready to take advantage of Italy's newfound popularity in the international fashion community.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>246</sup> Paulicelli, *Italian Style*, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>247</sup> Paulicelli, *Italian Style*, 87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>248</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>249</sup> White, Reconstructing Italian Fashion, 20-21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>250</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>251</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>252</sup> "Italian Textiles," The Manchester Guardian, 27 July 1950, 6.

Naturally, many Italian textile companies collaborated with rising Italian designers, as the two industries had much to gain from one another. This was not a new occurrence. As early as the mid-1940s, the largest artificial textile manufacturer in Europe, Italian Snia Viscosa, hired the designer Germana Marucelli as a consultant.<sup>253</sup> However, partnerships like these exploded after Giovanni's presentation. In their review of the July 1951 event, *Life* magazine noticed how "buyers were impressed by some designs, by the fabrics and by the possibility of increased direct imports" during the showcase.<sup>254</sup> Not only were the original Italian designs gaining attention, but so were the Italian textiles they used. While the Italian textile industry was already highly productive due in part to Marshall fund support, brands like Snia Viscosa, whose artificial fabrics weren't traditionally used in high fashion, recognized that they had a lot to gain from associating themselves with the emerging designers in the country.<sup>255</sup> It was only after the explosion of Italian fashion that the entire Italian textile industry became world renowned.

The Sorelle Fontana served as some of the Italian textile industry's most ardent supporters. Since the conception of their atelier in 1943, the sisters always used Italian fabrics for their haute couture creations, even when they struggled to afford them.<sup>256</sup> In fact, it was reported that the Sorelle Fontana "used only their own native materials" until 1960.<sup>257</sup> Micol Fontana even recalled having partnerships with specific Italian textile manufacturers, such as Botto for their wool, and Ambrosini and Clerica Tessuto for their silk.<sup>258</sup> The Fontana sisters viewed these partnerships to be "very special relationship[s]" as the two entities would often work together to create fabrics that would sometimes be "entirely exclusive."<sup>259</sup> In an interview, Micol boldly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>253</sup> Settembrini, "From Haute Couture to Pret-a-Porter," 490.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>254</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," Life, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>255</sup> "Italian Textile Industry Hit as Strike Spread," Chicago Daily Tribune, 25 September 1947, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>256</sup> Chase, "How the Fontanas Sewed Themselves into a Money Bag," 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>257</sup> "Fontana Brings Colour and Drama to Dublin" The Irish Times, 10 May 1960, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>258</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>259</sup> Micol Fontana, as quoted in Nicola White, *Reconstructing Italian fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 29.

stated that "textiles were vital to [the Sorelle Fontana's] success."<sup>260</sup> Of course, these partnerships were just as, if not more, beneficial to the textile manufacturers themselves. When asked about Italian textiles, Micol Fontana spoke about Italian silk production, claiming that "Como was and still is the best in the world, but before 1951, nobody knew it."<sup>261</sup> Through this statement, Micol Fontana not only expressed her personal admiration for Italian textiles, but also her commitment to promoting them. Specifically mentioning 1951, Micol indicated that Sorelle Fontana's use of Italian textiles in Giorgini's presentations helped provide the Italian textile industry with worldwide recognition. Thanks to their many Hollywood connections, the Sorelle Fontana's fashion shows, media outlets like *The Hartford Courant* reported on how the sisters "employed traditional Italian fabrics — especially silks and organza."<sup>262</sup> Consistently using Italian fabrics and speaking about them favorably, the Fontana Sisters purposely utilized their media attention to advertise Italian fabrics. By making Italian textiles a key part of their brand, the Sorelle Fontana elevated the industry as a whole.

In the late 1950s, the Sorelle Fontana expanded their business beyond haute couture to include a ready-to-wear fashion line. They did this through a 1957 partnership with the American fashion manufacturer Tafel, agreeing to design pret-a-porter collections only for United States stores.<sup>263</sup> Despite the success of this business venture, in 1960, the Sorelle Fontana created another boutique line called Fontana Alta-Moda-Pronta, to be made in a new factory outside of Rome, employing 400 people.<sup>264</sup> Even though the Sorelle Fontana could have continued to work with Tafel and expand their business in America, they decided to bring their ready-to-wear

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>260</sup> Micol Fontana as quoted in White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>261</sup> Micol Fontana as quoted in White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>262</sup> "Bright-Painted Fabrics Take Spotlight in Rome." *The Hartford Courant*, 17 January 1960, 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>263</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>264</sup> White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion*, 52.

production back to Italy, to both utilize Italian fabrics and provide jobs within the Italian fashion industry. By the late 1950s, Italy began to surpass France and England as the "leading European exporter" of textiles and clothing goods to the United States.<sup>265</sup> Ready-made garment output rose "from 45 million articles in 1950 to 2 billion articles in 1957" while at the same time, Italian wool, knit, and silk textile output rose fivefold.<sup>266</sup> Though the Sorelle Fontana had found success through American partners, they transferred their production to Italy to once again promote the entire Italian fashion market.

By the mid-1950s, the high quality of the Sorelle Fontana's work had become symbolic of both the Italian fashion industry and the country itself. In 1958, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story entitled "Fontanas' Fine Italian Hand Fashions Dress."<sup>267</sup> In this headline, the word "Italian" was used as an adjective to describe the style and quality of the garment, not its nationality. Of course, this was because the Sorelle Fontana spent years promoting the association between their garments and Italy itself. Instead of trying to distinguish their brand from their country, the Fontanas' fully embraced their role as ambassadors of Italian fashion.

As early as 1952, Italian director Luciamo Emmer shot the film *Le ragazze di Piazza Spagna (Three Girls in Rome)* in the Sorelle Fontana's Roman atelier; Zoe, along with some Fontana seamstresses, even appeared in the film.<sup>268</sup> The film was about three seamstresses who "attract the eye of a professor" and battle with one another for his courtship while "poverty, jealousy, [and] deception... reduce each of the girls to tears before a happy ending."<sup>269</sup> To display his gratitude, in 1952, Emmer invited the Sorelle Fontana to accompany the producers on a promotional tour for the film in the United States. Micol Fontana, who was known as the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>265</sup> Settembrini, "From Haute Couture to Pret-a-Porter," 490.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>266</sup> Settembrini, "From Haute Couture to Pret-a-Porter," 490.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>267</sup> "Fontana's Fine Italian Hand Fashions Dress." Los Angeles Times, 14 November 1958, p.1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>268</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 49

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>269</sup> Mae Tinee, "Film of Three Girls' Loves Long, Tedious: Three Girls From Rome," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 October 1953, p.15.

"American Sister" for her frequent trips to the United States, English skills, and friendship with Ava Gardner, elected to go, bringing along 3 Italian models: Luisa, Elsa, and Iris.<sup>270</sup> On this trip, Micol sought to promote the Sorelle Fontana brand and "[testify] to the great success of the early made in Italy" fashion industry.<sup>271</sup> Though the film received moderate reviews, with *The Chicago* Tribune calling it "tedious," Micol Fontana made a lasting impression while "visiting major cities with the three glamorous models from her atelier in Rome."<sup>272</sup> One of the first stops on the tour was the famous department store Arnold Constable, where the women met the company's president Isaac Liberman.<sup>273</sup> Newsday reported on this first stop, claiming that Micol Fontana showed "new Italian designs" that were "dazzling" and "continental," and "the audience oohed and ahed in great delight."274 It is clear from Newsday's choice of diction, like "Italian" and "continental," that Italy had taken a new meaning of luxury in the American fashion market. While touring the city of Chicago, Micol dressed Luisa, Elsa, and Iris in "cotton velvet coats of green, red, and white — the colors of the Italian flag — over matching dresses."<sup>275</sup> The models "broke into dance steps, hummed songs, and stopped traffic from the Art Institute to Lincoln Park," as well as posing for a photographer.<sup>276</sup> Micol remembered standing in an open-topped Alfa Romeo driving down the main street, which was "lined with applauding crowds."<sup>277</sup> Micol Fontana knew that the model's presence in the city would cause a stir, and chose to take advantage of the moment to promote Italy once more. After this tour, Micol used every trip to the United States as an opportunity to promote "not only the Fontana brand but the very idea of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>270</sup> "Fontana Shows Italian Fashions in Manhasset." Newsday, 15 September 1953, p.47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>271</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 49

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>272</sup> Edyth Radom, "Fontana and Her 'Three Girls from Rome'." The Hartford Courant, 11 October 1953, 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>273</sup> "Fontana Shows Italian Fashions in Manhasset." Newsday, 15 September 1953, 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>274</sup> "Fontana Shows Italian Fashions in Manhasset," Newsday, 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>275</sup> Lucy Key Miller. "Front Views & Profiles: Three Beauties from Rome Tour Chicago." Chicago Daily Tribune,

<sup>21</sup> October 1953, p.3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>276</sup> Miller, "Front Views & Profiles," 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>277</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 69.

Italian fashion."<sup>278</sup> In fact, while attending an opening night at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, Micol went as far as dying her hair green, to complete her red and white outfit and become a walking Italian flag.<sup>279</sup>

While the Fontana sisters were frequently promoting Italian fashion in the United States, they also encouraged American designers to work in Italy. In 1956, the sisters created The Fontana Scholarship Awards, where they "presented four young United States fashion designers" with scholarships to study in Rome."280 The program was sponsored by The Napier Company and Nolde and Horst Company, two American companies.<sup>281</sup> For the program, the winners were funded to work with the sister for three months in Rome.<sup>282</sup> The winners of the first scholarship were William Schad from Pratt Institute, Theresa Maranzini from the Philadelphia Museum School of Art, and Rosemarie Amerusso and Nancy Staluppi from the High School of Fashion Industries.<sup>283</sup> In fact, the Fontana sisters "were the first to open the doors of their salon to American students."<sup>284</sup> The Sorelle Fontana invited future leaders of American fashion to study in Rome in the hopes of creating enduring relationships between these students and Italian fashion. In addition to fashion studies, the Fontana sisters arranged for the students to have Italian language study, sight-seeing, and museum research, as well as a special diploma from the Italian Government, who were "sufficiently impressed with the program."<sup>285</sup> The Fontana Scholarship Awards are emblematic of the sisters' passion of advocating for Italian fashion and fashion education.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>278</sup> Levy. Dolce Vita Confidential. 127.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>279</sup> Levy, Dolce Vita Confidential, 127.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>280</sup> "Fontana Presents Designer Awards." Women's Wear Daily, 30 October 1956, 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>281</sup> "Fontana of Rome," Town & Country, May 1957, 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>282</sup> Anna Brady, "Roman Triumvirate: 1959." The Sun, 17 October 1959, p.8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>283</sup> "Fontana of Rome," *Town & Country*, May 1957, 90.
<sup>284</sup> "Fontana of Rome," *Town & Country*, 90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>285</sup> "Fontana of Rome," Town & Country, 90.

The efforts of the Sorelle Fontana to popularize Italian fashion were, obviously, not in vain. In the years following their many fashion presentations, textile promotions, and U.S. tours, Italy became a fixture of the international fashion scene. By 1962, the same year the Fontanas stated they "would not again show couture collections to the press," it was announced that "the export of Italian fashion... far surpassed the Paris export."<sup>286</sup> The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of a new class of Italian designers — Valentino Garavani (1960), Giorgio Armani (1975), Brunello Cucinelli (1978), Gianni Versace (1978) — whose legacy would be even more wide-reaching than the first generation. In 1966, the Los Angeles Times described Valentino as a "master of refined taste, a superb color artist, and a perfectionist whose tailoring techniques and emphasis on simplified elegance and femininity sparkle with new ideas and romantic allure."<sup>287</sup> In 1968, *Time* magazine described him as the "world's most sought-after designer," designing Jackie Kennedy's second wedding dress, and selling over 700 copies of his garments ranging from \$90-\$495 in less than five days at Lord & Taylor.<sup>288</sup> During this time, many specialty accessory design houses like Gucci, Fendi, and Salvatore Ferragamo began designing ready-to-wear collections for the first time. By 1977, the new images of Italian fashion helped encourage sales of textile, shoe, and clothing abroad which, despite reported economic challenges, accounted "for about four billion dollars — an amount equal to what [Italy spent] on agricultural imports." By 1982, Italian designer Giorgio Armani was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, and the publication announced that Italian clothes made up a reported 70% of all European garments sold in the American department stores I. Magnin and Bergdorf Goodman.<sup>289</sup> The 1980s were described as the "Age of Armani" who had followed in Valentino's lead and built a business

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>286</sup> "Italian Fashions Overtake Paris." *Times*, 16 July 1962, 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>287</sup> Fay Hammond, "Valentino Elevates Rome High Fashion: Valentino Scheme." Los Angeles Times, 21 Jul 1966, p.1. <sup>288</sup> "Fashion: Valentino the Victorious," *Time*, 29 March 1968, 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>289</sup> Elisabetta Merlo, "Italian Fashion Business: Achievements and Challenges 1970s-2000s," Business History, 344.

worth over \$320 million by 1990.<sup>290</sup> In the 1980s, even more Italian designers, such as Franco Moschino (1983), Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana (1985), and Miuccia Prada (1989), joined Italy's thriving ready-to-wear industry. By the end of the twentieth century, Italy's "Moda Industria reported that Italian domestic consumption of womenswear" was around "20.673 trillion lire (\$11.52 billion)" and "total Italian exports of clothing, knitwear and shoes... 20.130 trillion" lire.<sup>291</sup> While this immense success cannot be entirely attributed to the Sorelle Fontana, there is no doubt that their efforts put Italian fashion on the map, and laid the groundwork for future generations of Italian designers to reach even greater levels of success.

Despite their seemingly unbroken record of success, by 1992, the Sorelle Fontana had made the decision to sell their operations to an Italian Financial Group.<sup>292</sup> By the time that Micol, the last living Fontana sister died at the age of 101 in 2015, the legacy of the Sorelle Fontana had been almost forgotten. Eclipsed by the successful Italian fashion industry that they helped to create, the Fontanas' work slowed with age, and their eponymous brand lost the celebrity-driven notoriety it once enjoyed, quickly dissolving after its sale. Though their label has not endured, the testaments to the Sorelle Fontana legacy are the dominance of Italian fashion, the enduring power of celebrity influence, and, of course, every collection of each Italian designer, which they have no doubt inspired through their artistry and their love for their country.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>290</sup> Meredith Etherington-Smith, "Emperor Armani," Harpers and Queen, November 1990, 224.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>291</sup> Heather O'Brian, "Italian Fashion Industry Remains Unruffled by Slower Asian Sales," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 March 1998, p.4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>292</sup> Simona Reinach, "Fontana Sisters," *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, Valerie Steele, (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005), 104.

#### **Conclusion:**

On July 4th, 1957, Zoe, Micol, Giovanna, their mother Amabile, and the entire Sorelle Fontana atelier staff — including dressmakers, artisans, storemen, and even delivery boys made their way to the Vatican, where they were granted a special audience with Pope Pius XII.<sup>293</sup> For the Catholic sisters, it was an honor for their work to be acknowledged by the church, and the event helped to celebrate Amabile's 50th anniversary as a dressmaker.<sup>294</sup> Pope Piux XII took an interest in the Fontanas' work, asking them various questions and even gifting the sisters his white skull-cap as a memento for the occasion.<sup>295</sup> Beyond the personal significance of this event for the sisters, the day marked the first time that a "Pontiff officially took note of women's fashions without condemning them."<sup>296</sup> It is no surprise that the Sorelle Fontana were the first designers to receive this honor. By 1957, Pope Pius XII likely recognized the extraordinary impact that the sisters had, not only on his city of residence, but on his country as well.

The Sorelle Fontana did what the leaders of the Risorgimento and the National Fascist Party failed to do: they created a national Italian fashion. What separated the sisters from these leaders is that they did not seek to create fashion as a means of state control or to promote a sense of nationalistic dominance. When Micol Fontana dyed her hair green and dressed in the colors of the Italian flag, she did so in an effort to move away from the fascist nationalism of her childhood and to advertise a new Italy that she and her sisters were cultivating: an Italy that rejected uniformity and embraced creativity. Later in her life, Micol Fontana begged the question

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>293</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>294</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>295</sup> Fondazione Micol Fontana, 900 Secolo Alla Moda, 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>296</sup> Papal Spokesman as quoted in Levy, *Dolce Vita Confidential*, 129.

"don't you think that it is kind of sad to see people who dress all in the same way... uniformity is really sad, isn't it?"<sup>297</sup>

The Sorelle Fontana were successful in cultivating a unique Italian fashion because they also understood celebrity power and the importance of marketing. While Mussolini launched costly initiatives to garner global attention for Italian designs, the Sorelle Fontana never underestimated the power of a single dress worn by an influential figure. Linda Christian's wedding dress may have done more for Italian fashion than all of the National Fascist Party's efforts.

Perhaps the greatest reason why the Sorelle Fontana succeeded when fascist leaders failed, however, is that the sisters had an inherent understanding of what women across the world were looking for. They were three female dressmakers who had come from a legacy of female dressmakers. Naturally, as women, the Fontana Sisters were faced with innumerable challenges. In a 2004 interview, Micol Fontana remembers that in 1946, one of her sisters "went to a bank to ask for a loan," and "nobody there wanted to talk to her, simply because she was a woman."<sup>298</sup> However, the sisters also understood that their gender provided them with an advantage. In that same interview, Micol Fontana said "women designers are better than men because they know women better and what women want to be."<sup>299</sup> It was for exactly this reason that women's wear, not men's wear, launched the Italian fashion industry, with the Sorelle Fontana leading the way. Though fashion's artistic integrity is often discredited for its female associations, this is what makes the artform so unique: it is mostly a practice by women and for women. The Sorelle Fontana embraced this truth, and in doing so, paved the way for Italian designers of all genders.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>297</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli, "Appendix: Interview with Micol Fontana," *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 155–168.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>298</sup> Paulicelli, "Appendix: Interview with Micol Fontana,"155–168.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>299</sup> Paulicelli, "Appendix: Interview with Micol Fontana,"155–168.

# **Images:**





Image 1 and 2: Scenes from Cinecittà Studios, on the set of *Quo Vadis* (1951).<sup>300</sup>



Image 3: Zoe Fontana and Anita Ekberg in a Testimonial for the Fontana Fragrance, Glory by Fontana.301

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>300</sup> Campbell Dixon George. "Cinecittà: Rome's Film City," p.145-147.
 <sup>301</sup> "Anita Ekberg and Zoe Fontana 1959." Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars, Database on-line. Fondazione Micol Fontana, Rome, Italy.

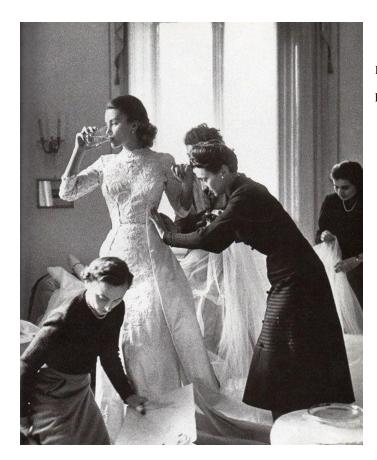


Image 5: Ava Gardner in the 'il pretino' dress.<sup>303</sup>

Image 4: The Sorelle Fontana fitting Linda Christian for her wedding gown. 302



 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>302</sup> "Linda Christian's Wedding Gown Fitting 1949." Sorelle Fontana: A Perfect Wedding Dress, Database on-line. Fondazione Micol Fontana Rome, Italy.
 <sup>303</sup> "Cassock style coat," Sorelle Fontana: Dressing the Stars.



Image 6: Giovanni Battista Giorgini, the Sorelle Fontana, and the inaugural class of Italian designers 1951.<sup>304</sup>



Image 7: Fontana Alta-Moda-Pronta factory in Cecchina, Italy in 1965.<sup>305</sup>

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>304</sup> "Italy Gets Dressed Up," *Life*, 104.
 <sup>305</sup> "Sorelle Fontana High Fashion Ready Factory at Cecchina (Roma)," Fondazione Micol Fontana: .

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