Italian Designers & Obama for Hope

Marisa Iallonardo (February 12, 2009)

Italian designers' attraction towards President Obama is simply another incarnation of what he means for so many people: hope, change and optimism

When Barack Obama was elected President, I received lots of emails, IMs and Facebook messages

from friends all over Italy expressing their excitement and happiness over the new appointment. And while Italians general love affair with Obama has been well documented—check here [2], here [3] and (especially) here [4]—the First Couple, who has already made a mark on the American fashion scene, seems to have Italian designers smitten, as well.

Case in point: At the recent Rome Haute Couture Fashion week in January, couture designer

Guillermo Mariotto sent an American model down the runway to display the final piece of his collection—an oversized caftan [5] featuring a picture of Barack Obama with the word “Change” along the bottom. That same week, veteran designer Fausto Sarli [6] announced the pink, crystal-encrusted gown he showed, symbolized hope and was dedicated to Michelle Obama. Sarli’s spokesman Carlo Alberto Terranova told Reuters [7], "We dedicated this as a message of hope — that she can bring hope in the world during this period of crisis. It's a homage to the audacity of hope and youth."

And it wasn’t only in Rome. At the Milan menswear fashion week, the Los Angeles Times All the Rage blog [8], describes the finale of the DSquared [9] show (which actually took place on the day of the Inauguration) that featured “Faux-bama”, as the blog called him, and the song “The sun will come out tomorrow” playing in the background. Also in Milan, Donatella Versace dedicated her collection to Obama. And check out these t-shirts [10], featured in a recent issue of Vogue Italia.

Here’s my take: It makes perfect sense. Rome and Milan were the first fashion weeks in a season marred by a recession [11]. Luxury advertisers are pulling out of magazines (American Vogue’s ad sales were down about 44 percent [12] in January), people aren’t dropping thousands of dollars on a designer-branded dress or handbag so quickly—if at all—and, in an effort to cut costs, designers like Marc Jacobs, Betsey Johnson and Luca Luca are not showing [13] at NY Fashion Week (although many are said to be staging their own shows).

So while many argue that there’s an oversaturation of Obama-loving—I swear the other day I saw a news segment describing the backlash about Obama coverage. Literally, news about too much news—I think Italian designers' attraction towards the President is simply another incarnation of what he means for so many people: hope, change, optimism and all the other words the world needs right now, regardless of political affiliations. Even if that means caftans become the new “It” piece of the season.

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