

- 19th century: straw hat production
- Fabrics for furniture since 1970
- The Bonotto SpA weaving mill was founded in 1977 in Molvena/Vicenza
- Today a family company with the Giovanni brothers (art director and product manager) and Lorenzo Bonotto (administration and organisation)
- 185 employees, turnover of € 34 million



"Embellishment is an outmoded gesture"

ITALIAN WEAVER BONOTTO DOES NOT TAKE PART IN THE CONSTANT RACE TO INNOVATE. HE TAKES IT SLOW AND STEADY, CONCENTRATING ON WORKMANSHIP. GIOVANNI BONOTTO ON CHANGES IN VALUES, DESIRES AND RHYTHMS.

TW: Mr Bonotto, you call the textile industry's production and consumption rhythms into question. What do you think is wrong with them?

Giovanni Bonotto: Everything that the industrial age characterised must be seen as having been overcome. Especially the profit mentality. Those who used to be business-oriented had better start aiming at visions. After all, visions are what it's all about when I characterise handcraft and art as the main jumping off points for new production processes.

Why handcraft and art just now in particular?

They best reflect sensitivity and human needs – and that is what sophisticated consumption is going to be about in the future. But the change in mentality which I think is absolutely necessary was also caused by something of a deeply pragmatic nature: our continued survival.

The survival of European textile producers?

Exactly. The Asians are getting faster and faster and their products keep getting better. We Europeans will have to become more deliberate and thoughtful by necessity. We must contemplate our history, revive our traditions and develop a feeling for the ethics of aesthetics.

That's not a completely new idea; vintage, used looks, the occasional comeback of 'old' fabrics – there's a similar idea behind all of these. How does your vision of the future differ from that of famous directions in fashion?

The difference lies in a change in position on the world market. The size, the speed and the mass-produced comes from Asia. The small, the slow and the hand-made will come from Europe. With the so-called old textiles, fashion isn't supposed to be gazing back into the mists of time. It's a radical change in thinking. I'm talking about doing things slowly, since products with soul can only be made slowly. That's where I think the future of the western textile industry lies: in new/old rhythms and qualities. This is the only way to get out of the competitive relationship with Asia. This may also mean being prepared to become smaller and earn less.

That sounds like an ideology, perhaps even utopian thinking. Can a company really become smaller and slower and still remain competitive?

Absolutely. Bonotto is already doing it. We're currently making a turnover of €29 million and aren't interested in stepping it up. In fact, we're putting on the brakes. The three of us – my father Luigi, my brother Lorenzo and I, as the creative mind of the company – have resolved that we are only going concern ourselves with originality. For several years, we have been buying mechanical looms from the pre-war era in Europe and Japan. We already have ten of them. The last one is a very rare denim loom. We have encapsulated this course of action in the expression *fabbrica lenta*, the 'slow factory' – our customers and friends are excited about it. They take it to mean sense of reality.

So when it comes to fabrics, it has less to do with having lots of bells and whistles – decorations or special effects – but depends much more on the weave itself?

We're convinced of it. It's about real material and traditional values, not make-believe ones. The demand for it has already become apparent in other fields. Take art and architecture, for instance, our family collects, too. Look at Philippe Starck: his ingenious gimmicks suddenly no longer fit the spirit of our times. Instead, we demand – both emotionally and rationally – strict material harmonies and precise shapes. The Japanese Studio Sanaa is a great example for this change in philosophy. The owners, husband and wife Ryue Nishizawa and Kazuyo Sejima, dispense with decoration entirely. They show only material and clear lines. This outlook may well pose a danger to the world of design soon, since embellishment and obligingness are outmoded gestures. A magazine is currently being developed at the NABA, the Milan Academy of Fine Arts, which is supposed to be called 'DID': Design Is Dead.

Is your clientele able to make sense of this development? Can they wait for products that take a long time to be made?

Creative minds from countries with a highly developed textile tradition – that is, ones from Europe and Japan – are looking for creative collaboration with weavers. They are fascinated by our developments. Making allowances for the slowness of the mechanical shuttle loom is merely a question of organisation...

But do the fabrics meet today's requirements for comfort?

Traditionally woven fabric needn't necessarily be cumbersome. Our flannels are more compact that is generally conventional, but that is considered a plus for outdoor models. But we can also soft-wash these fabrics, or abrade them, or rip them a bit, without destroying their antique soul. Such highly expressive materials cry out for connoisseurs. These hand-made aspects are being integrated at Boss Orange. And at premium lines from Diesel and Marni as well.

Do these fabrics cost more than ones of comparable appearance?

They are 30 % more expensive on the average, but last at least ten times as long. They are seasonless. That doesn't only apply to the current crisis. It also has to do with a feeling which many designers are cultivating at the moment: a feeling for the primordial, the primitive, the ethnic.

What do you mean by that?

I believe in a trend towards neo-primitive classicism. Fashion is still soft, flowing, colourful and glamorous. But that will be changing abruptly. It's going back to genuine clothing.

We are buying up old tailor workshops in the Veneto region with the aim of making them famous again. Or take the Japanese working in Paris and Tokyo. They are becoming a role model to many ready-to-wear companies with their principle of 'form plus function'. The absolute guru of material-related clothing has long been hiding in our midst: Carol Christian Poell – an Austrian living in Milan who works with only ten people. His label is called CCP. He is known as the thoroughbred in the industry; his prim creations hang in fewer than a hundred selected stores worldwide and are generally sold out.

Can any neo-primitive aspects be seen in your collections?

Absolutely. We have already presented a clear authenticity for winter 09/10 with yarns from Italian sheep. We're continuing to develop that. We start with natural colours with no chemical finishes and combine primitive aspects, often tinged with ethnic motifs, with techno details for sportswear and work clothes. In our view, that is probably the strongest trend for the coming years.

INTERVIEW: DAGMAR BAGNOLI