

Right materials

We visit Gentili Mosconi, the Como fabrics firm that stitches the fashion industry together.

By *Ivan Carvalho*

Photography *Alessandro Furchino Capria*



(1) Francesco Gentili, owner of Gentili Mosconi, with his catalogued archives
(2) One of the company's elaborate designs



One of the fashion world's best-kept secrets sits in plain sight in a nondescript two-storey building on an industrial park in the suburbs of Como. From the outside, its exterior a dull grey hue, there's not much that hints at a creative powerhouse that, every season, helps the world's leading fashion brands conjure up eye-catching, brightly patterned designs. Even the logo – a tall sailing ship sandwiched between the names “Gentili” and “Mosconi” – gives nothing away.

Owner Francesco Gentili prefers it that way. The 53-year-old businessman leads us down a corridor into a huge space piled high with fabrics in a sea of vibrant colours, looking every inch like a modern-day fashion El Dorado. For 30 years, Gentili Mosconi has been a leading supplier of bespoke textiles and patterns to the biggest names in the world of womenswear; the company doesn't like to discuss its clients but it's known to work with the likes of Valentino, Prada, Céline, Dior and Gucci. If you venture into a top fashion shop today there's every chance you'll see at least one design that was developed with the help of Gentili's 100-strong team of printmakers and illustrators.

“This business is in my blood – my father and uncle before me worked in textiles and I can't see myself doing anything else,” says Gentili, as he wades through swathes of silk taffeta. He crumples a white-and-silver bundle in his hands, which elicits a crackling noise. In industry jargon this material is known as “scroop” and is created via a finishing technique that uses acid to harden the filament yarns to make the fabric rustle more. “I love the sound it makes.”

Gentili's clients appreciate his dedication to the craft, which began aged 18 when he went to work as a driver and warehouse worker for one of the leading weavers in Como's highly respected silk district. Five years later, in 1988, Gentili and his then wife Patrizia Mosconi set

out on their own with a small enterprise focusing on creating textiles for scarves and neckties. One of their first clients was the Italian navy, which was in search of elegant scarves to hand out aboard the fleet's *Amerigo Vespucci* training vessel (the origin of the company's nautical logo). In time they expanded their textile-making skills and honed their talent for dreaming up patterns in silk and other fabrics.

Thirty years and some 30,000 fabric designs later, Gentili's attraction to textiles hasn't diminished. He recently set up an educational programme at a local institute to pass on the region's know-how to a new generation. "Our tradition of quality silk-manufacturing goes back hundreds of years to Ludovico II Moro, who brought mulberries and silkworm breeding to the area," he says. "Today it's important to pass on our skills in printmaking and weaving. When students see a finished design appear on the runway, photographed by hundreds and shared across the world via the media, it makes them proud," he adds, before excusing himself to answer his phone and begin conversing in French with one of his clients.

From Milan to London to New York, Gentili's clients seek out his firm for its exclusivity and ability to translate ideas into eye-catching prints. He prefers not to attend trade fairs such as *Première Vision* and *Milano Unica*, where major textile firms show their products. He believes that it's better to shun ready-made proposals and listen to his 200-plus clients (80 per cent of designs are custom-made). "We work with leading names – these people are not interested in just doing nice floral prints for dresses each season. Our aim is to surprise them," he says, pointing to a silk-nylon-polyester creation in aqua green, black and white that calls to mind one of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.

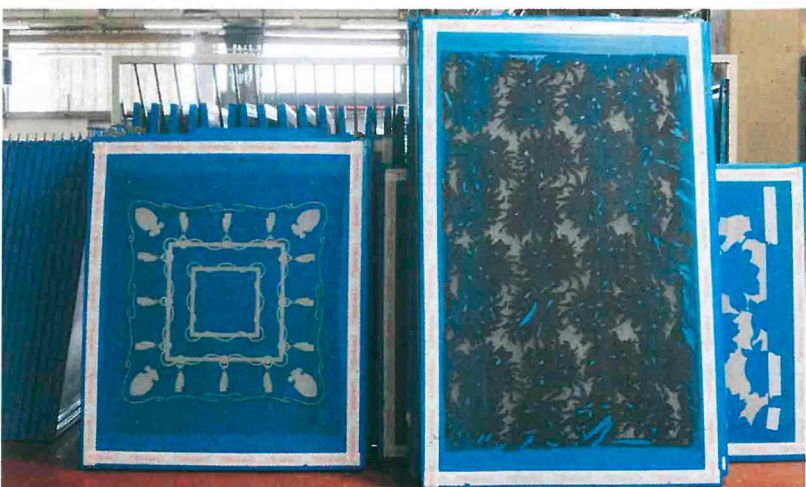
Designers turn to Gentili for personalised solutions. One example he recalls is when the now retired fashion great Valentino Garavani – founder of Valentino – rang him from his car and spoke about how a recent visit to a Roman church with a striking sculpture had fired his imagination. The pair decided that the best avenue to pursue in order to capture the



essence of the centuries-old house of worship was a traditional (and painstakingly slow) woodblock-printing technique done by hand, that lends the material the quality of a rare masterpiece. The end result was a cape for the Italian fashion house that dazzled onlookers at its runway show.

One client happy to speak openly about Gentili's expertise is Jörg Ehrlich, co-founder of German womenswear label Odeeh, who initially came into contact with the Como firm when he was working as creative director at René Lezard. "Francesco is one of the few partners we constantly work with," says Ehrlich. "This is remarkable because there are ups and downs when it comes to creative developments with mills and weavers. Not with Francesco. Lots of his competitors try to rely on their archives

(1) Neera Tana, creative director of Gentili Mosconi, in her office
(2) Colourful silk prints (3) Screens for printing designs on silk
(4) A new design hot off the press
(5) Detail of a bee print





training in painting with watercolours and illustration, Tana interacts with fashion brands on a daily basis. “It’s a demanding job, especially now with the continuous need for collections throughout the fashion calendar on the part of clothing labels, who propose spring and fall looks together with preview and resort offerings,” she says. “Everyone is maxed out creativity-wise so we step in to offer a helping hand.”

Tana and her team typically begin by receiving images, drawings and even one-line descriptions from fashion houses for a collection. On her desk is one request from a New York-based label in need of looks inspired by a 1970s Studio 54 dance party, together with python prints and “crushable charmeuses” (a lightweight, satiny fabric). From there, sketches are

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and wait until the designer tells them what to do. He is always proactive and pushes the envelope.”

The other thing that keeps brands coming back to Gentili is his extensive library of historic books and fabric samples. This treasure trove of items – collected during his travels – provides inspiration for both his creative team and visiting designers. “This is a labour of love and really gets to the heart of what we do,” says Gentili of his collection, as he grabs an 1890s book, full of swathes of dress fabrics, that was once the property of a French door-to-door salesman. Whenever Gentili is on the road he frequents antiques shops and markets in search of potentially inspiring publications, whether tomes covering Ottoman embroidery and Aloha shirt designs, or obscure 1960s Italian swimwear catalogues. He’s amassed several thousand titles, all carefully filed so that his design department can access them when requests come in for new patterns.

Neera Tana, the company’s creative director, oversees the creation of new designs. With a background that includes

drawn in pencil or pen before the team pick up their styluses and move to CAD. There is a give-and-take with clients throughout the process. When it comes to production the team works with silk-screen printers and versatile digital textile machines that operate like inkjet printers, making a single pass over the material to disperse colours at precise points.

Tana sees her supporting role as having taken on more importance in recent years, with houses such as Gucci ushering in a new era of maximalist runway looks defined by bold colours and dramatic head-turning prints. Additionally, at a time when clothes are often viewed on a backlit screen, bright patterns pop – and sell well. “Now people want something that stands out, with colours that are warm but decisive. It’s about being seen – it’s the age of Instagram,” says Tana. And as vivid textiles come into their own, Gentili, which turns out about 1,500 new designs every season, is perfectly poised. “They are always one step ahead,” says Odeeh’s Ehrlich. “Francesco knows the business. He is a visionary.” — (M)