

MEN'S FASHION WEEK GOES LIVE IN MILAN



DOLCE & GABBANA

The return of Gucci to the menswear catwalk calendar, robust sales of Italian fashion and a farewell to the pandemic-imposed trend of virtual shows - it's all systems go for men's fashion week in Milan which opened Friday. Promising spectacle and optimism after a year in which sales of Italian fashion showed the strongest growth of the last 20 years, presentations for Fall-Winter 2023/2024 men's collections run until Tuesday.

Of the 79 shows, only four are digital, a holdover from the debilitating pandemic period that sent sales plunging and brought a halt to live runway shows. Nothing replaces "the live experience, the frenzy, the expectation, the applause, the top models parading on the catwalk and the powerful music," fashion consultant Elisabetta Cavatorta told AFP. Most anticipated was fashion powerhouse Gucci which put on a menswear-only show for the first time in three years and the luxury label's first since artistic director Alessandro Michele's surprise departure in November.

New direction at Gucci?

At its minimalist show Friday, Gucci said it was celebrating "the aesthetics of improvisation" with a collection inspired by the classic wardrobe of the gentle-

man, revisited in a subversive spirit. Combining faded jeans with sequined tops and green and red or pink boots with heels, the collection mixed genres and colors.

Long oversized coats with ample shoulder pads and maxi skirts split to reveal bare legs peppered the collection, while wool hats and rectangular tote bags tossed carelessly over the shoulder added to Gucci's accessory arsenal. With his colorful collections seeped in the 1970s, Michele provided a new lease on life after being tapped in 2015 to revive sales at the storied brand with the world-famous stripe logo in green and red.

While sales exploded by 44 percent in 2018 for Kering's flagship brand, growth has lagged competitors in the last two years. "It remains to be seen whether Alessandro Michele's departure initiates a change of direction for the fashion house," Cavatorta said. As to who will take over the reins at Gucci, the fashion world awaits news of Michele's successor with bated breath.

Soaring revenues

Armani, Prada, Fendi, Dolce & Gabbana and Zegna are among the big labels unveiling men's collections in the Italian fashion capital. But there have been defections including Versace, which plans to show its men's and women's collections together in Los Angeles on March 10. Despite the war in Ukraine and the impact of the energy crisis on an energy-intensive fashion supply chain, sales of Italian fashion last year rose 16 percent to 96.6 billion euros (\$104.4 billion).

"This is the highest revenue in the last 20 years," said Carlo Capasa, president of the Italian Fashion Chamber, at a presentation ahead of the shows last month. Inflation has had an impact, as Italian fashion prices rose by about nine percent in 2022, but their increase is "a positive sign that closes a year marked by dramatic events and difficult times," Capasa added.

Exports of "Made in Italy" fashion climbed 18.7 percent in the first nine months of last year, driven by demand in the United States and the Gulf countries where exports both soared by more than 50 percent. Sales to China grew more moderately, at 18.8 percent, while exports to Russia fell by 26 percent, in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. But one area in which the impact of the COVID-19 crisis will still be felt in Milan is the absence of Chinese buyers. Despite the lifting of coronavirus-related health restrictions by authorities in Beijing, the number of buyers who will travel to the city for the shows will be "limited", Capasa said. — AFP



GUCCI. — AFP photos



DSQUARED2



EMPORIO ARMANI



Let's waltz! Vienna ball season back in full swing

After Covid restrictions had wiped out Vienna's glamorous winter ball season for two years in a row, 50-year-old Wahyuni couldn't wait any longer to get all dolled up and put on her dazzling floral-patterned ballgown to once again waltz the night away. "We love to come here, because the very nice decorations are made out of real flowers and it's very lovely," Wahyuni said, alongside her friend Deasy, who declined to give their full names, as both were attending the legendary Flower Ball in Vienna's neo-Gothic city hall.

Admiring the riot of colours, 46-year-old Deasy, who originally hails from Indonesia, said that she had already been here a few years ago and "had to come back". Known for being one of the most beautifully decorated winter balls among the approximately 450 hosted in the Austrian capital each season, the Flower Ball showcases mesmerizing floral arrangements skillfully crafted out of 100,000 blossoms.

Donning snow-white dresses and classy black evening suits, four first-time debutants said they were "quite nervous" about opening the ball. "I think it is so beautifully decorated, and that makes me super happy," 18-year-old Eduard Wernisch said. The self-described "rookies" said they had attended dance classes for a couple of hours every week since September to be prepared.

The rhythm of the waltz can be tricky and 17-year-old classmate Emma said

she was particularly afraid of dropping her flower bouquet. "People come here with the expectation of experiencing spring" as opposed to the grey, foggy winters so prevalent in Vienna, Peter Hucik, art director of the Flower Ball told AFP. Even though the ball is not sold out, Hucik said he is pleased that 2,400 visitors are attending Friday's ball, kicking off the season as one of Vienna's first big balls.

Most successful season

The COVID-related shutdown of Vienna's famous ball season had caused the city to lose at least 152 million euros (\$164 million) in revenue per year. This season, however, appeared to be on track to become one of Vienna's most successful ever recorded. "The season is making a roaring comeback," Markus Griessler, chairman of the tourism and leisure division of the Vienna Chamber of Commerce, said.

Griessler said he expects the city to rake in "170 million" euros this season. "Every third Viennese aged 15 and older is planning to attend a ball this year," compared to only one in four in 2019, he added, noting that "550,000 sold tickets" are within reach. About one tenth of the ballgoers each year come especially from abroad. On average every ballgoer spends around 320 euros per ball.

Too close for comfort

There are "exciting parallels" between Vienna's ball season and travelling in general, Norbert Kettner, director of the city's tourist office told AFP, when asked about why balls remained a top priority. "Clearly, people insist on travelling and dancing," said Kettner while emphasizing the city's age-old tradition of hosting such events. The tradition dates back to the 18th century, when the balls of the Habsburg royal court ceased to be reserved for the aris-

tracy alone.

The Viennese began adopting court customs for their own soirees, soon launching balls dedicated to hunters, cafe owners and florists. The Viennese used the opportunity to approach the opposite sex, lavishly wine, dine, spy and dance. "The Viennese ball season and the waltz had always been a thorn in the side of the Catholic Church," Kettner said, because "waltzing was too close for comfort".

Therefore the famous ball season "loosely follows the Christian calendar and wraps up before Ash Wednesday," he added. Thousands will earn their living in the flourishing sector, from hotels and restaurants to fashioning evening wear and hairdressing. All businesses were as excited as the revelers to gear up and make this season a success. — AFP



Attendees dance during the opening of the 99th Flower Ball at the City Hall in Vienna on Jan 13, 2023. — AFP photos