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Italian Fashion Makes a Bid for Global Leadership

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Vanessa Friedman
ON THE RUNWAY

In recent years, Milan Fashion Week, which falls third in the Big Four calendar after New York and London and before Paris, has seemed like something of the poor cousin of the tour: tolerated, but increasingly unloved.

Once a tent pole of fashion season, its big-money, big-brand identity has elicited less and less enthusiasm compared with, say, London's edgy young things, or Paris's creative conceptualism and glitz, to the extent that some editors have begun skipping the city.

This has not escaped the attention of Italian fashion, however, and on Tuesday, Carlo Capasa, the chief executive of Costume National and the new president of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana, the industry's governing body in Italy, unveiled his plan for change.

Outlining five main areas of focus, which ranged from working with the national government to nurturing new talent and creating special events, it was, as these things generally are, pretty vague and theoretical, involving the appointment of committees and the analyzing of data, though a few points caught my eye.

First, Mr. Capasa insisted that all the Italian brands that are members of the Camera are united in their will to change, thus effectively addressing

rumors and reports about competing brands, like Roberto Cavalli's not being happy with Giorgio Armani's influence, or Mr. Armani's fighting with Diego Della Valle of Tod's.

"We haven't allowed ourselves to be sidetracked by the squabbling that periodically breaks out in connection with what the media describe as the age-old problem of how fashion shows are scheduled," he said.

"In actual fact, there is full cooperation between us," he said, noting in particular "the agreement of the major brands to spread their shows across the various days." He specifically cited Mr. Armani and his willingness to hold his show on the final day of Milan Fashion Week, thus using his brand (and advertising) muscle to keep people in Milan until the bitter end.

(Mr. Capasa did acknowledge in a phone call that Dolce & Gabbana, the lone big brand holdout, still had not joined the Camera, though he said this was just fine with everyone.)

So he's got the P.R. side under control.

Second, he was specific about two initiatives that will be started this June during the men's wear shows: There will be a "fashion train" from Pitti Uomo in Florence to men's wear in Milan on Friday, June 19, facilitating movement between the events, and there will be special organized tours of Expo Milano and the Prada and Armani museums, which opened in time for Expo Milano. There are also plans for a "fashion week concierge" to help visitors exploit tourist opportunities in the city (and, presumably, spend money at restaurants).

That's all good marketing.

But what are really striking are the plans for "international relations," which go beyond schedule negotiations to joint policies on counterfeiting, creating a "global sustainability think-tank," and becoming "the point of reference and contact for emerging governments and countries in relation to their projects connected with fashion."

Given that the fashion week cities have historically been at loggerheads

over the date issue, with New York claiming shows are too early and Paris saying they are too late; given that Italy is often criticized for the way its well-established brands dominate the fashion scene, leaving little oxygen for the new ones; and given the industry's reliance on leather and its tanning process that is notoriously bad for the environment, these latter aims are meaningfully ambitious.

Whether they can be achieved is another question, but the sheer fact that they have been articulated reflects a real effort to put Italy back at the center of the global fashion conversation. And the fact that the members of the Camera are together responsible for half of Italian fashion's 65 billion euros, or \$73 billion, in revenue (in 2015), should give him a certain amount of leverage.

Mr. Capasa has allotted himself 12 months to get this all underway. It will be interesting to watch.