

Milano Unica Highlights Innovation, Sustainability Amid Business Slowdown in Q1

Although exports of Italian textiles decreased 2.3 percent to 806 million euros in the first three months of 2019, exhibitors took it in stride.

By Martino Carrera on July 16, 2019



The scene at the 29th edition of textile trade show Milano Unica.
Courtesy Photo.

MILAN — Exhibitors at the 29th edition of the Milano Unica textile trade show were blunt as they noted business in the first months of 2019 has been underperforming, dented by geopolitical uncertainties, soaring prices for raw materials and the casualization trend.

The three-day event, which closed here on July 11, spotlighted innovation in both products and processes. Innovation was also seen as the real driver for a more sustainable approach to business at Milano Unica, where stretch and performance fabrics stood out among the key trends.

“Sustainability and digitalization are both subjects we need to address as a system,” said Ercole Botto Poala, president of the textile trade show, during the opening speech. “Our aim, as a fair, is to

highlight the speed of change," he added noting "every company should bring in-house the key assets to keep up with today's evolving scenario, otherwise we're losing an opportunity."

Edoardo Zegna, head of content and innovation at the Ermenegildo Zegna Group, speaking at the inauguration for the first time, said "the question is not whether transparency and sustainability become relevant at some point, but when consumers will no longer accept products without those features," he said.

According to figures released by Confindustria Moda, in the three months ended March 31, the Italian textile industry registered a 3.5 percent contraction in production volumes while exports decreased 2.3 percent to 806 million euros in the same period.

The negative trend contrasts with the positive results for fiscal 2018, which had cast hope on industry's players to keep growing despite difficulties. According to consolidated figures for 2018, revenues grew 0.8 percent to 7.94 billion euros, despite a slowdown in the last quarter. Exports to European countries decreased 4 percent in 2018 while overseas exports were up 1.9 percent.

In the first quarter of 2019, exports to extra-European countries registered a 0.7 percent drop compared to the same period a year earlier, while intra-European exports showed a sharp 3.8 percent contraction.

In keeping with its attempt to become an enabler for its exhibitors and promote a team-building approach, Milano Unica unveiled in February its marketplace, which around 150 companies have embraced so far. Additionally, Botto Poala announced the fair will also offer digital training courses to its exhibitors in partnership with Banca Sella. The trade show will partner with the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana, supplying textiles to the five finalists competing for the Franca Sozzani GCC Award to be bestowed upon the best emerging designer during the Green Carpet Awards on Sept. 22 during Milan Fashion Week.

Stressing the importance of acting as a system for the industry's voice to be heard internationally, Alberto Paccanelli, the recently appointed president of Euratex, explained the region has found a "shared commitment to support local manufacturing as opposed to favoring globalization." Carlo Capasa, president of the national fashion chamber, praised the team-building mind-set since Italy accounts for 41 percent of the European fashion production and "its guidelines should count more than anybody else's."

While acknowledging difficulties, the 465 exhibitors were still optimistic as they unveiled their textile collections for fall 2020. The fair attracted more than 6,000 visitors, in line with the same edition in 2018, with foreign companies growing 2.6 percent.

Storied wool mill Botto Giuseppe marked a new step for its Naturalis Fibra collection by introducing the Slowoolly line of natural stretch combed cashmere fabrics available in five natural colors and sourced from the Alashan region located between China and Mongolia. Selecting partner farms that are Responsible Wool Standard-certified and able to provide traceability is a top priority for Silvio Botto Poala, the company's chief executive officer, who said "suppliers and textile firms should work synergistically."



A fabric from Botto Giuseppe Slowoolly line for fall 2020. Courtesy Photo.

"Some of our traditional clients are moving toward sustainability and also small and young companies are pushing the conversation forward, so revenues are growing along with sustainability," the executive explained noting 20 percent of the firm's collections are labeled as green, but he expects the category to reach 50 percent in five years. The company can leverage cradle-to-cradle certified dyes for knitwear; fluorine-free, water-repellent treatments. and mulesing-free wools in addition to eco-friendly industrial premises in Valle Mosso and Tarcento, in the Piedmont and Friuli Venezia-Giulia regions, respectively.

"Sustainability comes with an extra cost and limitations, for longer production times, which requires a certain planning," Silvio Botto Poala said. Despite a 10 percent contraction in sales of men's fabrics in the first half of 2019, the ceo said he expects to close 2019 in line with the previous year when the firm generated revenues of 64 million euros, as the company has been traditionally focused on women's fabrics. China and the U.S. are the firm's top markets, with the latter country particularly keen on eco-friendly products.

According to consolidated figures, exports to the U.S. in the first three months of 2019 registered a 15.5 percent uptick compared to the same period a year earlier, while in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan and Vietnam showed the highest growth rate, with a 5.6 percent and 28.5 percent increase, respectively.

Guaranteeing animal welfare to secure the fabric's quality is core to Piacenza Cashmere, a wool mill established in 1623 on the outskirts of Biella. Run by the 13th and 14th generation of owners, the textile firm still sources in Perù the vicuna and cashmere fibers that were crafted for its fall 2020 Cocoon collection of super soft fabrics worked for example for a belted nightgown.

"The choice of raw materials is crucial, and going directly to the source represents a plus, allowing us to control the supply chain and exchange our know-how with local communities," said Vasilii Piacenza, brand manager and son of Carlo, the company's ceo. He stressed that sourcing the