

# FROM ARTISAN SKILLS TO THE PRODUCTION OF SERVICES? BRANDS IN THE 19TH CENTURY HISTORY OF THE ITALIAN FASHION SYSTEM

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## Introduction

This paper deals with brands, or trade marks, as a source for investigating the history of the Italian fashion industry between the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and WW1. More precisely, a specific attention will be paid to the relationship between firms producing fashion items – such as fabrics, clothes, corsets, garments and accessories - and the market.

On the eve of the war, Italian fashion was still a copy of the French one. At that time, Paris held an unquestioned leadership in matters of taste, quality of fabrics and innovations in dress styling. Parisian couturiers were well known not only in Europe, but also in USA where they had already begun to export their most fashionable creations. Nevertheless, for Italian fashion the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the starting point of a slow process leading to a complete emancipation from Paris. Whilst Rome was rapidly losing the role of domestic trend setter traditionally played by the royal and papal courts, Turin and Milan emerged as the leading cities of Italy's economic and industrial development and, at the same time, as capitals of fashion. In 1881 the first Italian industrial exhibition took place in Milan where – according to a quite approximate and inaccurate secondary source<sup>1</sup> - about 1.300 factories, 2.000 shops, 454 stores and 11.500 workshops employing 40.000 people produced fabrics, clothes and a large variety of fashion articles: silk ribbons, corsets, gloves, shoes, hats, millineries. Thirty years later it was the turn of Turin where, just a few years before, the first Italian exhibition of decorative arts had included a section devoted to fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> C.Zambelli, *Studi statistici sul movimento economico-sociale della città di Milano*, in *Mediolanum*, Milano 1881.

The industrial exhibition held in 1911 gave to the industrial and artisan dressmakers, both well established in the city, the opportunity of showing the best items of their production.

However, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Milan was the city with the highest income per capita in the country. It was tightly connected to the most advanced continental European markets. It could rely on a very diversified productive environment in which all elements of the clothing and the textile industry were present. Finally, Milan boasted a modern department store - the Magazzini Fratelli Bocconi - and a large number of women's magazines. As a matter of fact, Milan was the leader of the emerging Italian fashion industry as the increasing number of trade marks registered by the local chamber of commerce also confirms (see Section 1)

Brands represent a source accessible by historians specialized in different fields and are especially useful for art historians, commercial law historians and business historians. According to the researches carried out by the former, some of the brands were created by anonymous artists referring to the *art nouveau* style - established in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in all its essential formal connotations: the floral decoration, the binding curving lines, the flat monochromatic surfaces. In this sense, brands can help us to understand how the most innovative cultural movements were perceived and interpreted in Italy.

According to law historians brands were created to certify the craftsman's ability and/or reliability and changed in meaning and in function according to the different historical periods, the institutional context, the characteristics and the size of the economic space within which the branded goods circulated. In the Middle Ages the use of the brand was regulated by the guilds, which controlled every aspect of the activity carried out by merchants and craftsmen and obliged the craftsmen to mark their products with the collective guild brand. In a system that was so rigidly regulated, brands had the function of strengthening the most important branches of local production, protecting them from competition and promoting export. In this way the brand contributed to ensuring the guilds, the city and the State economic, financial and fiscal advantages. Free facultative use of the brand was only really established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when some of the most distinguished intellectuals of the

Enlightenment indicated the compulsory use of brands as a form of limitation on free competition. The legacy of such a conviction was gathered and elaborated in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the brand name took on relevance both as an instrument of information regarding the existence of new goods - and in second place of publicising the company that produced them - and as a means of the identification or differentiation of goods that had become, with the progressive establishment of mass production, otherwise difficult to distinguish. Moreover, improvements in transport and communication occurred in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century deeply modified the economic geography of regional and national markets offering opportunities hitherto unknown in the commercialisation of goods. As a consequence business and consumer habits also changed. Goods no longer travelled accompanied by the merchant, who was in general a known and trusted person, but circulated within an impersonal commercial system. In their turn the consumers began to familiarize with the large-scale distribution that decisively contributed to the modernisation of consumer models.

As a matter of fact, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French (1857), English (1862), Italian (1868), American (1870) and German (1878) commercial legislation all indistinctly perceived the innovations occurring in brand function and meaning.<sup>2</sup> The historical records this paper is based on were originated by the law approved in 1868. By recognising the right of the industrialist and the merchant to mark the goods produced and sold, the law established that the distinctive sign or mark had to necessarily contain the name of the person, the firm or society and the plant or factory the product came from. One was also required to deposit the brand in the Prefettura<sup>3</sup> where the producer or seller had to present two examples of the brand accompanied by a brief description. The Prefettura then transmitted the documents to the section regarding industrial patents of the Ministry for Agriculture, Industry and Commerce

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<sup>2</sup> A. Beltran – S. Chauveau – G. Galvez-Behar, *Des brevets et des marques. Une histoire de la propriété industrielle*, Fayard, 2002, p. 91-92. For a brief chronology of US legal history about trade marks see also M. Wilkins, *The Neglected Intangible Asset :The Influence of the Trade Mark on the Rise of the Modern Corporation*, in «Business History», Vol. 34, No. 1, (1992), pp. 66-95.

<sup>3</sup> In Italian administration the Prefettura is the organism which has jurisdiction over the province, which in its turn is the intermediary administrative unit between the commune, or local council, and the region.

attached to the Royal Industrial Museum in Turin, at that time capital of the Kingdom, which recorded the brand as a registered trade mark. At this point the phase of publicising the trade mark began. This initiative came under the competence of the Chambers of Commerce, that is of the organisms that represented local business interests. Once the registration had taken place, one of the two examples was returned to the Prefettura which transmitted it to the competent Chamber of Commerce in order that the latter might display it in order to guarantee the transparency of the market.<sup>4</sup> In 1913 the regulations regarding the deposit of brand marks were changed, substituting the obligation to deposit them with the obligation of accompanying the request for registration with a printed example, while the description previously requested now had to include specific information regarding the colour, wherever this constituted a characterising element. In keeping intact its prerogatives as a means of communication, the brand was losing the iconographic characteristics that have made it a source of extreme interest in retracing the first steps taken by business in investment in marketing and distribution.

Finally, according to the existing business history literature inspired by the pioneering work of Alfred Chandler, brands played a critical role in the rise of the modern managerial enterprises. With few exceptions<sup>5</sup>, evidence is based upon the American experience and referred to industries producing final goods – such as beverages and packaged food - for mass consumption in which brands are expected to be more crucial than science or technology in firm strategies.

However, it is important to stress that this paper doesn't have the purpose of studying how the use of brands affected and changed the structure of large corporations. In our opinion brands can also be used, in a macro more than a micro perspective, as an historical source to know more about the model of consumption, the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to publication by display, the Milan Chamber of Commerce had the brands regularly published in "Il Sole", the most important economic newspaper of the time, thus anticipating what would become, from 1884 on, the only channel for the publicizing of brands, designs, industrial patents and factory models in view of the progressive integration of the national market and the obligations deriving from reciprocal international agreements. This was the "Official Bulletin of industrial ownership" which, in 1886, became the "Official Bulletin of industrial and artistic ownership".

<sup>5</sup> D.HIGGINS –G.TWEEDALE, *Asset or Liability? Trade Marks in the Sheffield Cutlery and Tool Trades*, in «Business History», Vol. 37, No 3, (1995), pp. 1-27.

between firms and market and the structure of an industry especially if it is - as in the case of the industry producing fashion objects such as fabrics, corsets, garments and accessories - otherwise scanty documented.

The paper is divided in four parts. In the first two parts, the dataset we have built is described and analyzed respectively from a quantitative and chronological perspective. In the third section we focus on brands registered in the textile and clothing category to put forward some hypothesis concerning the structure of the fashion industry between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and WW1. Finally, a closer look at some specific kinds of goods and firms provides further evidence on the development and modernization of the fashion business.

## **1. A quantitative approach**

The data on which this paper is based have been collected using the registers of brands deposited in Milan's Chamber of Commerce in the period 1869-1914. The brands are recorded by the source in chronological order (on the basis of the deposit date) and each entry provides the following information: Name of the company (or individual) depositing the brand; city in which the company or individual is based<sup>6</sup>; date; type of brand registered. As far as this last kind of information is concerned, its level of detail varies greatly across the years: at times the brands are described very accurately while often the only information provided is the business field to which the brand is related.

In order to use the dataset for the purposes of our research, we have grouped them according to broad product categories. The categories are the following: cosmetics (including medical products and generic drugs); mechanical products; chemicals; food; others. Textile, clothing and accessories have all been grouped into a single category, although detailed information is provided for each brand belonging to this class in order to allow distinction between textiles (the majority of entries) and

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of information is quite difficult to interpret, as many foreign companies appear registered as if their headquarters were located in Milan. This can be explained by the fact that foreign companies would rely on lawyers or representatives seated in Milan in order to register their brands with the Milanese Chamber of Commerce.

clothing/apparel goods.<sup>7</sup> A distinction has been made between brands registered by Italian and foreign companies, although the name of the company (or the individual) applying for registration has been noted only for the textile, clothing and accessories category (as this is the focus of this paper).

The time span covered by the dataset is 1869-1916. However, the source does not provide any information for the period 1883-1888.<sup>8</sup> There is another gap for the years 1898-1909, which will be filled as research progresses. However, the uniformity of the data for the periods before and after these dates and the fact that the years 1898-1909 have seen no major events occurring in the textile and clothing industry seem to suggest that the lack of figures on brands for these years is not relevant for the aims of our paper. Moreover, due to time constraints and since the research is still in progress, at the moment the data for the years 1912-1914 provide only the total amount of brands registered and the company (or individual) names, their being Italian or foreign, and, if available, type of brand for the category textile, clothing and accessories. For 1915 and 1916 the only available data at the moment is the total amount of brands registered at the Milanese chamber of commerce and the amount of brands belonging to each of the above-mentioned categories.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1. Brands registered at Milan's Chamber of Commerce (grouped per year and by category)

	<i>Cosm.</i>	<i>Mech.</i>	<i>Chem.</i>	<i>Food</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Text/Cloth</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>1869</b>	5	-	-	-	-	-	5
<b>1870</b>	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
<b>1871</b>	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
<b>1872</b>	-	1	-	-	1	2	4
<b>1873</b>	2	-	-	-	2	1	5
<b>1874</b>	2	-	1	-	1	-	4

<sup>7</sup> Sewing machines have been inserted in this category due to their relevance for the fashion industry.

<sup>8</sup> The registers have no entries for the years 1883-1888.

<sup>9</sup> Data for 1915-1916 has been collected from a different source, and this may explain some of the differences in the figures presented in Table 1. The source for 1915-1916 is a secondary one: Comune di Milano, *Annuario storico statistico 1916*, Milano, 1917 (sez. X “Traffici”, parte E. “Commercio”).

	<i>Cosm.</i>	<i>Mech.</i>	<i>Chem.</i>	<i>Food</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Text/Cloth</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>1875</b>	10	-	1	1	1	-	13
<b>1876</b>	4	3	-	-	2	1	10
<b>1877</b>	4	-	-	3	1	-	8
<b>1878</b>	8	-	5	3	1	4	21
<b>1879</b>	2	-	1	3	1	6	13
<b>1880</b>	13	-	-	2	1	4	20
<b>1881</b>	7	-	1	3	3	7	21
<b>1882</b>	1	-	-	-	7	2	10
<b>1889</b>	14	-	6	3	13	15	51
<b>1890</b>	19	1	22	3	11	8	64
<b>1891</b>	16	-	6	8	11	35	76
<b>1892</b>	15	1	12	9	14	8	59
<b>1893</b>	17	4	6	23	9	11	70
<b>1894</b>	20	5	17	14	13	20	89
<b>1895</b>	14	9	13	11	35	9	91
<b>1896</b>	21	4	19	11	23	40	118
<b>1897</b>	17	11	16	6	37	23	110
<b>1910</b>	48	42	15	25	89	79	298
<b>1911</b>	43	26	25	28	150	87	359
<b>1912</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	73	398
<b>1913</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	92	457
<b>1914</b>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	64	315
<b>1915</b>	33	17	8	23	37	47	165
<b>1916</b>	32	27	6	-	56	20	141
<b>Total</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>658</b>	<b>2999</b>

Sources: Archivio Storico della Camera di commercio di Milano, *Registri marchi*; except for 1915-1916 (see note 3).

As shown in Table 2, the data also allows to calculate the role played by foreign companies (or individuals) in the registration of brands and trademarks in these years. However it is important to notice that the source employed is not very accurate on this issue, as many brands clearly registered by foreign companies (or individuals) are recorded under the name of the Italian (or Milanese) agent by whom the file was presented at the Chamber of Commerce, making it difficult to trace the exact

geographical location of the registering company.

Table 2. Geographical origin of companies/individuals registering brands in Milan

	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>Others/Uncertain</i>	<i>Italy</i>
<b>1869</b>							5
<b>1870</b>		1					1
<b>1871</b>	1						1
<b>1872</b>	1	1			1	1	
<b>1873</b>	2					1	2
<b>1874</b>						1	3
<b>1875</b>			1				12
<b>1876</b>				3		2	5
<b>1877</b>		5					3
<b>1878</b>		8	1			3	9
<b>1879</b>		3			1	6	3
<b>1880</b>	4			1	3	2	10
<b>1881</b>		1		9		1	10
<b>1882</b>		4		3			3
<b>1889</b>	3	4		4		6	33
<b>1890</b>	5	11		2		6	40
<b>1891</b>	3	2		38		1	32
<b>1892</b>	5	5	2			4	43
<b>1893</b>	5	7		3			55
<b>1894</b>	10	10	3	14	4	2	46
<b>1895</b>	5	15	5	6		6	54
<b>1896</b>	1	18	6	35	1	9	48
<b>1897</b>	2	25	1	14	7	5	56
<b>1910</b>	1	49	2	7	9	10	220
<b>1911</b>		85	5	13	10	15	231
<b>1912 (* )</b>		9		1	2	4	56
<b>1913 (* )</b>		5		1	2	10	74

	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>Others/Uncertain</i>	<i>Italy</i>
<b>1914</b> <b>(*)</b>		2			1		61
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>270</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>1116</b>

(\*) *Figures concern only brands in the textile/clothing and accessories category.*

*Sources:* Archivio Storico della Camera di commercio di Milano, *Registri marchi*; except for 1915-1916 (see note 3).

As far as the relationship between Italian and foreign brands is concerned, Table 2 shows that the number of Italian companies (or single individuals) applying for brand registration is growing in time. Specially significant is the increase in the number of Italian brands starting from 1910. This fact confirms one of the traditional historiographical interpretations of the country's economic development, according to which the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and especially the years up to 1907) experienced a strong economic and industrial growth, chiefly concentrated in the Northern regions. As for the role of foreign brands, the data show the growing importance of Germany, particularly starting from the mid 1890s, coupled with the parallel decline of brand being registered by French companies. A closer look at the predominant typology of brands registered by foreign companies shows that the increased weight of German trademarks is mainly connected with the registration of brands belonging to the chemical industry (closely followed by mechanical firms), thus confirming the leading role played by the country in the development of one of the typical sectors of the Second Industrial Revolution. It is also interesting to note the rather continuous persistence throughout the analyzed period of brands registered by British companies, whose major presence is concentrated in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. British brands seem to be most numerous in the category of cotton thread and textiles, with a few companies (among which a predominant role is played by two of the industry's leading actors on the international scene, Clark & C. and J. & P. Coats) standing out among the rest.<sup>10</sup> The number of brands registered by American

<sup>10</sup> More on J. & P. Coats and on the cotton thread industry will be said in Section 4, as firms active in this sector stand out for the large amount of brands registered in this period, probably a result both of the specific characteristics of their product and of the ongoing changes in market

companies is rather low throughout the period (although it increases in the last years considered) and there is no clear predominance of a specific kind of industry even if there is a certain number of firms belonging to the textile and clothing category.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 1 shows the overall amount of brands registered until 1911<sup>12</sup> in the different industrial sectors considered. Let alone the category “Others” (which collects an assorted and non-homogenous array of products), it is interesting to note that the largest amount of brands is registered in the textiles/clothing category (362 brands), followed by the cosmetics industry (305 brands), while the number of brands registered by the other industries appears rather smaller. While the large amount of brands belonging to the “Cosmetics” industry comes as no surprise, more interesting is the fact that textile and clothing companies played such a strong attention to the issue of brands. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the growth of the market for goods such as cotton thread following the diffusion of the sewing machine (both for domestic and industrial use) which brought firms of the sector to a more energetic action in the marketing field. But it can also be seen as a growth in the competition within the sector requiring companies to make a stronger effort to reach out to potential final consumers.

Figure 1. Overall amount of brands registered by Italian and foreign companies together divided by industrial categories, 1869-1911

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structure.

<sup>11</sup> Once again, firms producing cotton thread register a higher amount of brands compared to companies belonging to other sectors. Among American companies one can also notice a larger number (compared to the other countries present in the sample) of shoe manufacturers (such as the Dorothy Dodd Shoe Company and the Thomas G. Plant Shoe Factory, both of Boston).

<sup>12</sup> After 1911 the figures are not comparable as we only have the data for brands belonging to the textile/clothing category.

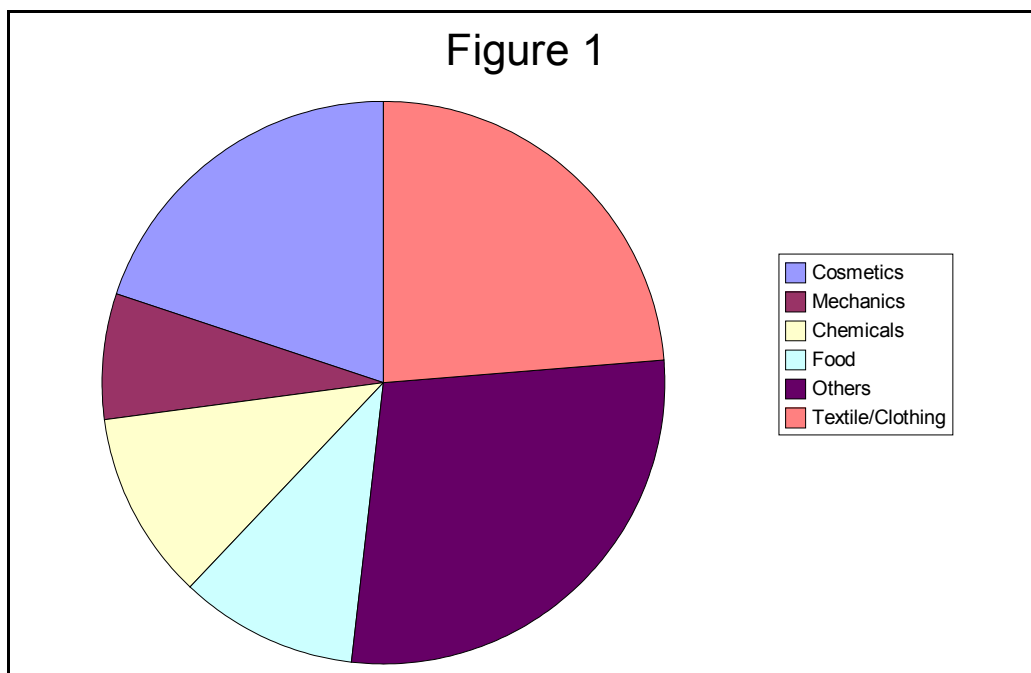
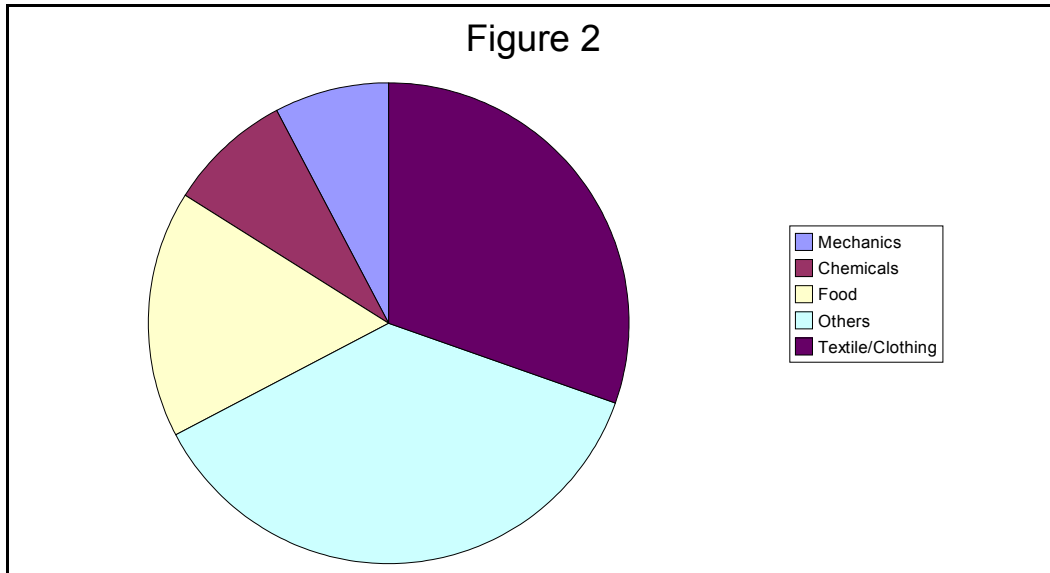


Figure 2 shows the overall amount of brands registered until 1911 in Italy in the different industrial sectors considered. Compared to the international situation, the main difference in the Milanese scenario is the lower amount of brands registered in the category “Textiles and clothing” and wider predominance of entries for “Cosmetics”. The figures are in accordance with the country's later stage of industrial development, as shown by the fact that the majority of brands registered in the category “Textiles and clothing” concerns firms involved in the production of cotton thread or textiles, with an insignificant amount of brands referring to companies active in the production of clothing or clothing accessories.

Figure 2. Overall amount of brands registered by Italian companies divided by industrial categories, 1869-1911



For example, out of the 206 brands of the “Textile and clothing” category registered in the period 1869-1911, only 1 refers to ready-to-wear clothes.<sup>13</sup> Even more surprisingly, one of the most diffused and renowned productive activities practiced within the Milanese urban center – the manufacture of gloves – never appears in the dataset before 1912.<sup>14</sup> Slightly more frequent is the registration of brands related to corsets – one of the most diffused fashion accessories of the period – with 6 entries until 1911 and 5 in the following years. Yet, one single company – the firm Rosenthal, Fleischer e C. - is responsible for 5 of the 11 recorded brands. Only one Italian company registered brands related to the production of stockings before 1912, and only two registered brands concerning hats before that date.<sup>15</sup> The situation is not much different if one looks at the production of shoes (which was to originate one of the main industrial districts in Lombardy), out of the 37 brands registered in the period

<sup>13</sup> This brand was registered in 1911 by the company "I Successori di L. Aucher". No information of the firm has been found in the Historical Archives of the Milanese Chamber of Commerce.

<sup>14</sup> Two brands are recorded for gloves by the company Ditta Domenico Silva di Rinaldo Silva (1912 and 1913).

<sup>15</sup> As far as stockings are concerned, the dominant actor on the Milanese scene is the firm Paolo Santagostino. As for hats, the number of entries grows significantly starting from 1912 reaching the number of 13 registered brands.

1869-1914, only 14 belonged to Italian firms, and only 3 of them were registered before 1912.

## **2. A chronological approach**

The evolution in brand registration can also be used to provide further evidence to the stages of Italy's process of industrialization. On one side, it is interesting to verify what kind of relationship exists between the registration of brands in the textiles and clothing sectors and the changes in the Italian customs legislation. It is well known that in the first period after the political unification of the country the Italian government had chosen to adopt the liberalistic attitude and commercial legislation inherited by Piedmont. This decision had of course caused the reaction of both the country's small entrepreneurial community and of the much more numerous class of agrarian land-owners. The period 1875-1882 saw a first revision of the tariffs, that brought a mild protection to some industries (among which especially textiles, the most diffused manufacturing activity in the country) and to agriculture products. A more resolute endorsement of a protectionist legislation came in 1887, again with a stronger protection registered for textiles and wheat (being the strongest pressure groups), while other key industries (such as engineering and chemicals, surely still at a very primitive phase of development) were left without any kind of tariff privilege. The period 1896-1907 is traditionally seen by historians as the true "take off" of Italy's industrialization, with a high and fast growth of GDP and of industrial investments. During Italy's "take off" (which in any case was not abrupt, but rested instead on a quite diffused and deeply rooted industrial basis that had been built over a rather long time period) some of the most distinctive features of the country's economic structure are already clear, the most evident being the contemporary growth of "traditional", labor intensive industries (textiles above all) and of the new, technological intensive sectors typical of the Second Industrial Revolution. After an economic crisis in 1907, the years before World War One are characterized by a continuous industrial growth and market expansion due to the increase of per capita incomes.

Table 3 shows the amount of brands in the Textile and clothing category registered by Italian and foreign firms at the Milanese chamber of commerce in the three above-described periods.

Table 3. Brands registered by Italian and foreign firms in the “Textiles and clothing” category

	<i>Italian firms</i>	<i>Foreign firms</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>
<b>1869-1890</b>	22	23	11
<b>1894-1897</b>	30	68	13
<b>1910-1914</b>	323	66	50

Sources: Archivio Storico della Camera di commercio di Milano, *Registri marchi*.

The figures show little connection between the changes in customs legislation and the registration of brands in the textiles and clothing category, even if the textiles industry was one of the sectors which most benefited from the introduction of tariffs discouraging the importation of foreign products. As a matter of fact, the years 1894-1897 see a wide majority of foreign brands (more than twice as much than their Italian counterpart) registered at the Milanese chamber of commerce, although in this period foreign goods had to pay a rather high customs duty when entering into the Italian market. Instead, the period in which Italian firms of the textile and clothing sector register an amount of brands which is definitively higher than that of their foreign counterpart is the last one, when the demand of textiles and garments/accessories is in sensible growth thanks to the rise in incomes experienced in the years before World War One.

One can thus say that the Italian textiles and clothing industry (although one must bear in mind that the majority of brands belongs to textile and not clothing firms) did not employ branding as a tool to conquer the domestic market in a period in which foreign competition should have been especially vulnerable. Moreover, the use of brands becomes widespread after the sector reached a certain maturity and it seems to respond to the enlargement of market size.

### 3. Reading the structure of the fashion industry through brands

A closer look at the brand registered in the “Textiles and clothing” category by Italian companies allows to put forward some hypothesis concerning the structure of Italy's fashion industry between the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and World War One. As we have already mentioned, although these were crucial years for the country's industrialization, information concerning the state of the fashion business in this period is still scanty. Table 4 provides greater detail concerning the typologies of brands registered by Italian companies of the “Textiles and clothing” category. The brands are divided into more specific sub-classes in order to create a more accurate picture of the economy of fashion in Milan between 1870 and 1915.

Table 4. Detailed classification of brands registered by Italian firms of the “Textiles and clothing” category, 1869-1914

<i>Cotton textiles</i>	150
<i>Cotton thread</i>	111
<i>Haberdashery</i>	18
<i>Sewing machines</i>	17
<i>Hat manufacturing</i>	15
<i>Shoes</i>	14
<i>Corsets</i>	10
<i>Silk</i>	6
<i>Knitwear</i>	4
<i>Underwear</i>	4
<i>Ties</i>	3
<i>Stockings</i>	3
<i>Overcoats/Mantels</i>	2
<i>Linen</i>	2
<i>Buttons</i>	2
<i>Gloves</i>	2

<i>Cotton textiles</i>	150
<i>Ready-made clothing</i>	1
<i>Others</i>	26

The first consideration regarding the displayed data is that the vast majority of brands has been registered by firms producing cotton thread and by textiles company (especially by those producing cotton textiles). By contrast, the amount of brands registered by firms or individuals active in the various phases of the production of clothing and accessories (largely equivalent to what today we would refer to as fashion industry) is strikingly low. It is clear that in Italy at the eve of World War One only textile companies (and especially cotton mills) had reached a level of industrial and organizational development that called for investments in branding and marketing capabilities.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, judging by the amounts of brands registered in the same period, the production of fashion was still organized in an almost totally pre-industrial and artisan way. The fact that firms active in these kinds of activities did not feel the need to register their brands means that the relationship with the market was still carried out mainly on a one-to-one and individualistic basis. Each artisan (or each firm) active in this sector had direct contact with the customer and the final goods would be tailor-produced, meaning that they would be made and adjusted in order to fit the specific needs of each client. Fashion in this period in Milan (but one could well say in Italy) was then still far from showing a modern industrial organization, both as far as the supply and the demand side are concerned.

The backwardness of Italy's fashion business and its predominant artisan structure are confirmed by the analysis of advertising in the numerous women's magazines published in this same period. Although this research is still in progress, the data collected up to this point and referring to the most diffused and popular women's magazines in Italy between the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and World War One show that, although advertising was a growing practice in these years, most of the ads were publicizing

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<sup>16</sup> The tight link between the use of brands and the evolution of industrial enterprises is clearly stated by much of the literature that analyses brands from a business history perspective; among others see Wilkins, M. (1992). "The neglected intangible asset: the influence of the trademark in the rise of the modern corporation." in *Business History*, vol. 34, n. 1, pp. 66-99.

cosmetics and medical products (lotions, creams, pills and the like – roughly the same goods that would fall in our “Cosmetics” category) while there is virtually no evidence of announcements made to sell fashion accessories or clothing. In other words, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and World War One, although market size for consumer goods was increasing together with incomes, fashion firms (or artisans) still felt no need to invest in communication to attract potential customers. In such a backward scenario, the case of Italy's most important department store, the “Magazzino Fratelli Bocconi” (the future “La Rinascente”), with its brightly colored and stylistically refined mail catalogues starting already from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and conceived in order to attract a growing mass of consumers stands out as a true exception.

#### **4. A closer look at the fashion business: evidence from some case studies**

Given the backwardness of the general framework, which explains the small number of brands registered by fashion companies in this period, we still need to explain why some companies active in this sector were already investing in commercial and marketing practices. A closer look at some specific examples can provide some further evidence on the development and modernization of the fashion business in Milan before World War One and the Fascist attempt in the Twenties to create an Italian fashion industry (opposed to the French one).

##### **4.1. Textiles: the case of cotton thread**

The figures concerning the brands registered at the Milan chamber of commerce suggest that cotton thread is a kind of product which benefits from a careful branding strategy. This is due to the typology of the product: it is a standardized good sold both to private (households or tailors) and industrial consumers while at the same time it is produced in many different qualities (i.e. the different size of the thread, which determines the final price of the product, and the different colors), each of which was

associated with a specific brand for commercial purposes.

As far as the production of cotton thread is concerned, large scale production in Italy has started in the early 1870s as a diversification of the activity of one of the major Italian cotton mills, the Cotonificio Cantoni. Production within the Cotonificio Cantoni eventually lead (in 1890) to the creation of an autonomous firm, the Fabbriche italiane filati cucirini, in whose board of directors sat many of the most important cotton entrepreneurs of the country.<sup>17</sup> After an uncertain start, the company had encountered growing difficulties that had become especially worrying at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when an attempt to create a more modern, managerial organization was made. However, it was only the acquisition of control by the Scottish company J. & P. Coats, one of the international leaders in the industry, in 1904 that allowed the Italian firm to survive, changing name in Cucirini Cantoni Coats. The Scottish company was eager to acquire control of the Italian firm as the British market offered progressively less room for expansion while the protectionist policy adopted by the Italian government made penetration in the country more problematic. It was only in 1910, however, that Scottish direction understood that the company's major problem was a lack of modern managerial skills and tried to solve it by sending in Italy a junior manager that had already worked for J. & P. Coats subsidiaries in Germany.<sup>18</sup> The change in management was extremely positive for the company, which registered profits again for the first time in more than a decade. What is interesting to notice is that the shift in strategy produced by the arrival of the Scottish director is well reflected also in the registration of brands. As a matter of fact, starting from 1911 the Cucirini Cantoni Coats is the Italian company that registers the largest amount of brands (20 brands in 1911, 12 in 1912, 13 in 1913 and 31 in 1914) – a fact shared with the Scottish mother company J. & P. Coats (40 brands) and its competitor Clark and C. (41 brands). The new attention demonstrated by Cucirini Cantoni Coats to the issue of brands is one of the aspects of the changes in the marketing strategy of the company that new Scottish management considered of highest priority. The strategy adopted

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<sup>17</sup> Among them Eugenio and Costanzo Cantoni, Ernesto De Angeli and Pio Borghi. See Bova, F. (1987), "La Cucurini Cantoni Coats e il settore dei cucirini in Italia", *Storia in Lombardia*, a. IV, n. 1, pp. 49-97.

<sup>18</sup> The manager sent from Glasgow was James Henderson, who remained at the head of the company for more than 40 years. See Bova, F. (1987), "La Cucurini Cantoni Coats e il settore dei cucirini in Italia", *Storia in Lombardia*, a. IV, n. 1, pp. 49-97.

from 1910 onwards was basically aimed at conquering the highest segment of the Italian market (both domestic and industrial consumers) by assessing the superior quality of threads produced by Cucirini Cantoni Coats compared to other competitors. The diffusion and advertisement of brands can well be interpreted as part of such a strategy that represented a true revolution compared to the behavior of the previous Italian direction (lead by Cantoni) who had been unable to create a truly modern marketing and sales organization.

## **4.2.Fashion**

What kind of firms related to fashion registered their brands? In order to answer this question, we have crossed the dataset - even though taking just few examples - with the information provided by literature and by the Chamber of Commerce's Firm Register that records the date of birth of firm, the company name, the activity, and sometimes gives additional notices about its business.

In 1903, the industry producing linen for women was carried out in Milan by almost ten thousand people, a workforce almost totally made by women working at their own home and selling their production to merchants-entrepreneurs who often gave them the basic equipment, that is, the sewing machine<sup>19</sup>. Some of them traded with the international markets: the Rosenthal and Fleischer company, that in 1898 employed 130 workers, exported corsets to Berlin, Paris and Wien.

With the considerable exception of Vergeat - a firm employing 300 people that produced ribbons, linings and trimmings for hats branded in 1907 and 1911 and exported in the Austrian Empire by a company founded together with the owner of the greatest Italian department store - the industry producing hats for men was barely represented in Milan. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century it had moved to the nearby town of Monza, where cheap unskilled workforce was employed in the wool cups production, a kind of hat never branded in the period we have considered. The companies listed in

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<sup>19</sup> A. Schiavi, *Le condizioni generali della classe operaia in Milano: salari, giornate di lavoro reddito*, Milano, 1907. More precisely, 1988 of them produced laces, veils, ribbons, embroideries and trimmings in general, 481 corsets, 5220 and 1577 were respectively sewers and tailor/dressmakers.

the dataset came from Piedmont where this industry had established benefiting from the proximity to one of the major Italian wool districts. Borsalino and Panizza produced high quality hats and exported them to Europe, USA and Latin America. One more company listed in the dataset had its own headquarter in Parma, a city located in the southern part of the Po Valley where hat makers, who usually carried out their apprenticeship in French, often spent an additional period of training.

Differently from hat production, the manufacture of gloves and shoes was still largely represented in the urban fashion economy, as two detailed inquiries dating back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century report. Glove production was almost totally a female activity performed by women cutting and sewing skins at their home, while in the shoe factories male workforce prevailed and mechanization had at the time almost completely replaced the hand work. With the exception of Rovatti, quoted by the inquiry as example of high quality shoes produced by a large firm, no company active in this branch registered a brand.

The dataset also contains names of some more entrepreneurs well known in the urban business community, such as Ernesto De Angeli, Centenari e Zinelli, Frette.

Ernesto De Angeli's dyeing factory was specialized in printing and well known for its research laboratory where new colours were tested on fabrics. Founded in 1878, at the end of the century it employed almost one thousand workers. Centenari e Zinelli, founded in 1873, produced elastic clothes. They were not properly clothes – and therefore they were different from today's elasticised cloth which is a fabric obtained by use of synthetic fibers – but were in fact strips of elastic which were employed in the making of corsets and footwear. Elastic clothes were branded in 1881 and 1893 when more than two hundreds women worked at Centenari e Zinelli.

The brand Frette was registered while the firm – founded by a French entrepreneur from Grenoble who brought in Italy the production of linen made by flax for domestic use and for hotels - was experiencing a management turnover and undertaking a strongly market oriented strategy. The opening of new shops in the main Italian cities and the mail order catalogues, together with brand registration, were innovations in retailing and advertising introduced to face the national rival - the Linificio e canapificio nazionale making flax fabrics cheaper than the ones produced by Frette –

and the Belgian competitors that also registered their brands in Milan.

## **6. Conclusions**

In short, we believe that our trade marks dataset provides a selection - in terms of quality of production, size of firms and relationship to competitive markets - of the best and the top of the Italian fashion business community. This can be considered a further evidence of the backwardness of the Italian fashion industry, whilst cotton firms emerge as the most well established and structured modern enterprises.

However, the numerical relevance of the textile, clothing and fashion industries in the statistics regarding brands seems above all to confirm the character of Italian economic development as being “on two fronts”. According to Luciano Cafagna – author of some pioneering and important studies on Italy’s economic development - after a long phase of accumulation that lasted until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italian economic development followed a course precariously poised between the First and the Second Industrial Revolutions. In substance, it would seem that Italy had hardly reached the goals of the First Industrial Revolution while it was already experiencing the new paradigms set out by the technological innovations of the Second Industrial Revolution; and, we can now add, while it was already experiencing the new course set out by the marketing and retailing innovations.

Moreover, textile, clothing and the fashion accessory industries were particularly precocious forerunners in adopting marketing innovations and taking on models of behaviour proper of the big companies producing large-scale consumer goods for whom the brand was a means to exploit scale economies. This goal could not be shared by the clothing and textile industries quoted here as they lacked the dimensions and the structure of the largest corporations. For these small enterprises, the trade mark is used as an instrument to face fierce competition on foreign markets and more rarely – there is just one example quoted here - to push foreign rivals out of their home market. In addition, brands were a method employed to organize a market which was

not only enlarged by the innovations in the communications, transport and distribution systems, but was also deeply transformed by the new arising models of consumptions caused by urbanization, one of the most impressive changes in the way of life - and consequently in the way of making clothes and wearing them - occurred during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the analysis of the brands registered between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and WW1 allows us to put forward an hypothesis concerning the process that eventually lead to the emancipation of the Italian fashion industry from the French one, that seems to be started from the strengthening of the textile industry - the pipeline industrial basis – and a never lost skills in cosmopolitan trade.