

BUSINESS

Lanificio Luigi Colombo's Fusion of Crafts, Technology for Finest Fabrics

- The Italian company works with the best luxury brands in the world, supplying the finest fabrics.

BY LUISA ZARGANI

BORGOSIESA, Italy – Nature – including the unique quality of the Sesia river's water flowing down from the Alps' Monte Rosa – and the human touch are essential to the quality of the cashmere, vicuña, guanaco, camel hair and superfine wool Lanificio Luigi Colombo has been treating for decades and that has allowed it to work with the best luxury brands in the world. These are all elements Roberto Colombo, who helms the Italian company, is keenly aware of, as a tour of the plant here – about an hour and a half from Milan and with the Alps in the background – clearly shows.

A huge water purifier stands outside the factory, which employs 400 people, who deftly balance technology and craftsmanship. Colombo did not hop on the sustainability bandwagon recently. "We are aware of the strong impact the textile industry has on the environment and for years we've been investing in systems that would allow us to return to nature what nature gives us," Colombo said. Case in point, the water of the Sesia river, which does not contain any calcium and magnesium salts, gives a unique quality to yarns and fabrics, he explained, through washing, dyeing and finishing, and the purified water is then returned to the river.

The company has just concluded a new five-year cycle of investments, totaling 8 million euros, with the opening of a new washing and dyeing plant, which allows the mill to be considered "one of the most modern firms in the world in terms of the textile cycle," trumpeted Colombo. "Concluded is the wrong word, though – there is no end to such investments." The investments were also channeled in new machinery, water recycling and recovery of hot water, which helps to save energy. The company has also been relying on solar panels for the past 10 years. "Each one of us has to do something [to be sustainable], so let's use the technology that is available to save energy and produce less pollution. It doesn't take too many years to make things right, but it's also not a strategy you can fine-tune in a day. We are at a point in the world when I would say human activities have reached the limit to return to the original conditions."

Colombo realized more than four decades ago that to ensure the company's future it was necessary to focus on high-end technology and know-how and mainly on rare and precious fibers that are "difficult to find and to transform."

The company, which has a vertical production, comprises a textile and an apparel and accessories division. The textile division accounts for between 70 percent and 75 percent of sales, which in 2018 totaled 90 million euros. Colombo fiercely guarded the privacy of the brands his company works with and asked WWD to respect this stance, but it's safe to say that the roster includes many international luxury labels.

The company works 500,000 kilograms of raw materials per year at the two-storied plants in Borgosesia



Lanificio Colombo's "flying stole."

and nearby Ghemme, which cover a surface of 324,000 square feet. Colombo buys the raw materials in the places of origin – Mongolia, China, Latin America, Australia and Canada – mixing cashmere with chinchilla, or mink and sable – all furs shed by the animals in the spring, noted Colombo.

which help protect from the winter cold, ice and snow. Colombo sees an increasing and real demand for this kind of natural product and craft.

Among the innovations the company lists, there is cashmere with gold and Yangir, a group of fabrics produced with the precious fiber of the Siberian Ibex goat, which lives on the Himalayas, on Mongolia's Altai range, and on Kazakhstan mountains, with a fineness of 13.5 microns.

For the fabric production alone, there are 94 manufacturing cycles with 18 intermediate controls. In another area of the plant, thistles are used to gently lift the hairy surface of the fabric to obtain a 3-D, sable effect.

Colombo introduced an apparel division 20 years ago, helmed by his wife Caterina, and the "Kate" cashmere fleece jacket, unlined and garment-dyed in a highly diversified color palette, is a must, as is the "flying stole," a stunner made with 100 percent vicuña that is so fine that 150 kilometers of the material are necessary to obtain a kilo of yarn. Only 300 pieces of the stole are made every year.

"We are not a fashion company, but we try to interpret the transformation of noble fibers in a modern way," Colombo said, showing his own soft jacket in cashmere that weighs only 380 grams, which can be scrunched up and put in a pocket and will not wrinkle. "It's sophisticated and technologically advanced, because the cylindrical fiber inside is empty. I rarely wear a jacket but this – I never realize I am wearing it." The jacket retails at 2,200 euros, while the flying stole costs 3,500 euros. Colombo is aware of the luxury customer who can afford such items, and underscored that the producers that can provide them are "less than half the fingers of a hand."

He is also aware of the fact that the main challenge is that this "know how is not replicable, even if you have money at your disposal, it's not only a mix of engineering and technology, but also of an ensemble of generations that have learned this job and exactly know how to use such technology. These are artisanal products that are industrially produced and the human factor is determinant, just as the technology cannot live without the human element. One cannot exist without the other."

In addition to its own stores in Milan's Via Spiga; the Sardinian luxury resort Porto Cervo; Bergamo, Italy, and in South Korea's Seoul, Daegu and Busan, Colombo's apparel and accessories are distributed in department stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, Saks and Barneys, as well as online.

"We want the company to be healthy and we have time to further distribute the brand." Colombo, the third-generation of the family, is wary of a growth that is "too fast and that forces to sell your own company." The goal, he noted, is to keep the firm in the family.

"One of my biggest satisfactions ever, I was walking down Fifth Avenue around 15 years ago and I was struck by a lady wearing a beautiful scarf, so I told her as much and she responded: 'Of course, it's Colombo.' I swear it happened and I did not have the strength to tell her who I was," he said.

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ROBERTO COLOMBO,
LANIFICIO LUIGI COLOMBO

The company supports and protects the future of the communities of breeders in Inner and Outer Mongolia, in sync with the Colombo family's respect for the environment, to help overcome critical factors such as unforeseeable weather variations and the sometimes improper use of the areas dedicated to farming. The mill has joined forces with the Sustainable Fibre Alliance to educate and develop the economy while protecting the territory and the animals and the communities.

All this is much more ecological, he contended, than synthetic furs derived by petrol. "What we are doing is simply using the fibers shed by animals during the spring, a process similar to that of many domestic pets. And it's a millenary cycle," said Colombo, noting that farmers comb the animals separating these fine hairs that would be lost anyway,