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EXHIBITION REVIEW: FROM THE HEART TO THE HANDS
Dolce & Gabbana held at Palazzo Reale Milano Italy
Sunday 7 April – Sunday 4 August 2024
Curator: Florence Müller

Margo Barton

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As they say, when in Rome, or in this case Milano, I took it upon myself to visit an exhibition highlighting the designs of Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, known as Dolce & Gabbana (D&G). I am someone more drawn to so-called intellectual, almost sensible fashion, and because of that thought that the D&G, *Heart to Hand* exhibition could be unpleasant, filled with garish, unwearable confections, but as I was in Milano, I planned a visit.

I had knowledge of the strong links between Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana's heritage, their love of their Italian, and Sicilian culture in particular; their geographic location in the Mediterranean and their fashion designs. Founded in 1985 by the two designers, Dolce born and raised in the province of Palermo Italy, and Gabbana born in Milan and raised in Veneto region of Italy, and their aesthetic of Italian-ness, of abundant luxury has not waivered, they have a brand handwriting that is noticeable in their fashions, their merchandising, and which also extends to the usual fashion and fashion related products of shoes, handbags, scarves, sunglasses, spectacles, perfumes, as well as the not so usual homewares, food, beverages, pasta, cake, wine, SMEG refrigerators and Bialetti stove top espresso machines, all anchoring the brand as a beacon of Sicilian culture, and Italian-ness in general.

In *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes (1977) analyzed an advertisement for Panzani¹, a purveyor of Italian food products, and proposed that because of the connotations of the image of pasta and their Italian name, the brand was also a signifier of Italianity. Barthes went on to discuss that, "Italianity is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting." (Barthes, 1977, p.48) Much like D&Gs foray into products that are not fashion or fashion related, but which further endorse the Italian-ness and Italianity of D&G, obvious in some collections, for example in Sicilian Traditions section, and strengthening the brand identity as a whole.

The curator, Florence Müller, has contributed to more than 200 exhibitions worldwide over their career to date. Müller is known as a fashion historian, an author of numerous publications about fashion, and is a professor in fashion history at Institut Français de la Mode, Paris, France. Müller is a graduate of the Ecole du Louvre and the Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie and was previously Director and curator of the Union Française des Arts du Costume, and the Avenir Foundation Curator of Textile Art and Curator of Fashion at the Denver Art Museum.

While the exhibition isn't a full retrospective, it featured key creations from Dolce and Gabbana's three haute couture lines established in 2012 - Alta Moda (luxury fashion), Alta Sartoria (luxury tailored menswear) and Alta Gioielleria (luxury jewellery) collections. The D&G exhibition was held over 10 rooms in the luxurious Palazzo Reale adjacent to Milan's Duomo. Each room was themed, and each contained reference to the designer's heritage and brand story, everything Italian.

Right from the beginning, as I entered through the thick velvet curtains, my breath was taken away by the sumptuousness and extravagance shown.



Figure 1. [Left] View of room 1, Fatto a Mano, the Hand Made with Duong's paintings lining the walls.

Figure 2. [Right] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Sartoria, Venezia Collection, F/W 2021-22.

Blue top made of feathers and chains in chevron pattern, embellished by golden chains on the neck and armholes; trousers in silk Mikado; T-shirt in silk satin.

ROOM 1: FATTO A MANO, THE HAND MADE

(F/W 12-13; S/S 14; F/W 16-17; S/S 20; F/W 20-21; F/W 21-22; F/W 22-23; F/W 23-24)*

Situated in the middle of the gallery space, numerous mannequins stood on tiered platforms all showing delicious handmade fashions. The fashions in “Fatto a Mano, the Hand Made,” offered real life examples of the most thrilling handmade textiles imaginable. There were so many mannequins, and they were placed so close together it was hard to see everything. I used my camera to zoom into the garments and accessories, trying to see more, and more, I strived to understand how the craftspeople created these, and importantly, decipher how I could make these. To me, the real beauty of Room 1, the “Hand Made” is that as a fashion maker, I can dream that I can also create, and wear such beauty, given the materials, and of course the time.

Lining the room were self-portraits by Anh Duong², artist, model and actress. Dolce commissioned Duong to create a series of paintings in 2012, with the artist donning what appeared to be many D&G fashions in the paintings. These were not fashion illustrations, but instead self-portraits of the artist wearing fashion, Neutres (2024, p58) stated “It is interesting to see in this commissioned series of Duong paintings how the artist is once more wisely controlling the integrity of her own artistic identity while serving the legacy of a mass luxury global brand”. Even though the paintings were spectacular, the materiality of the physical fashions that were the stars in this room, and that somewhat overshadowed Duong's work.

Each time I circled the display, I noticed more intriguing fabrications, techniques and fashions, the wearability, and noted the Italian-ness of the techniques and of the messages, and yes there was some garishness, wearable garishness.



Figure 3. [Left] Left. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Satoria, Venezia Collection, F/W 2021-22.

Kimono entirely embroidered with glass bugle beads, floral elements and crystals; Trousers in satin; Satin shirt with scarf neck.



Figure 4. [Right] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Venezia San Marco Collection, F/W 2021-22.

Dress with crystals, resin, scale sequins, and hand engraved and stretched plexiglass elements.

ROOM 2: THE ART AND CRAFT OF GLASSWORKING

(S/S 16; S/S 20; F/W 21-22; F/W 22-23)

Wearability did not immediately come to mind in Room 2, which was dedicated to highlighting the works by glass artisans. The designs were adorned with glass and crystal embroidery and were created to open D&Gs Alta Moda and Satoria collections held August 2021, in Venice. Murano, an island near Venice has been the center of Italian glass mastery since 13th Century. The fashions were outstanding, majestic and in many cases wearable, and were highlighted by the Murano glass chandeliers, mirrored walls, and underpinned by the startling soundtrack of breaking glass.



Figure 5. [Left] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Palermo Collection, F/W 2017/18.

Hand-painted triple organza corset gown with train in a silk tulle underskirt, embellished with crystals.

Figure 6. [Right] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Siracusa Collection, F/W 2022/23.

Illusion tulle corset dress embroidered with cross-stitch, tulle veil with lace inserts.

ROOM 3: IL GATTOPARDO, THE LEOPARD

(S/S 17; F/W 17-18; F/W 22-23)

If you are a fan of Italian cinema, chances are you have viewed the Luchino Visconti's 1962 film *The Leopard*, a masterful adaptation of an equally important historical novel of the same name by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The film is set in Sicily in the mid 19th century after the arrival of Garibaldi, and during the sociopolitical turmoil of the Italian unification. The movie is said to be D&G's cult film, and represents the designers love of tradition, which was shown in the crinolines in this room, as well as their love changing times and of modernity. Room 3 was dressed to appear like The Gallery of Mirrors in the Palazzo Gangi, Palermo, where *The Leopard* was filmed, however in this exhibition, the mirrors became screens showing footage from the 1962 movie.

At first glance the fashion in this room appeared 'costumey', but on reflection I believe it was the room itself that stamped a historical mood onto the fashion. I carefully examined the fashions and while the techniques harked back to traditional craftsmanship, the fashions themselves were very contemporary, and again were steeped with Italian-ness. When discussing their Siracusa Collection, F/W 2022/23 on their website, Dolce&Gabbana also noted that link to tradition and heritage when they stated "Returning to where everything began".



Figure 7. [Left] Foreground - Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Special Piece.

Lace mantle embroidered with sequins, gold-wound thread, soutache, jet beading, and crystals.



Figure 8. [Right] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Siracusa Collection, F/W 2022/23.

Lurex duchesse hooded coat embroidered with handmade elements in Lurex and lamé, embellished with a Sacred Heart on the back embroidered with crystals.

ROOM 4: DEVOTION

(S/S 20; F/W 22-23)

The Sacred Heart, a symbol of catholic devotion, is also a popular form of Sicilian art and culture, and it was the centrepiece of Room 4. Black and gold being the colour palette, this room was a drawcard for selfies, with a queue of people lined up to take photos. The display was enclosed in a space that resembled a small chapel, lace printed plexiglass framed the space on two sides, and sumptuous gates framed the front of the small chapel like structure.

The installation very much reflected small chapels housed within Sicilian churches, such as within the Cattedrale di Palermo, which was founded in 1185 and which also had multiple additions to the architectural structure and the contents over the centuries³. Reverend David Tracy sums up the influence that ecclesiastical icons and art can have on creatives in his essay included in the *Heavenly Bodies, From Michelangelo To Dolce & Gabbana* (2018, p44), states “the highly visual culture of Catholicism is a natural influence for all manner of artists, fashion designers not exempted.”

While the relationship to the church is palpable, curator Müller reminds the viewer on the Room 4 exhibition wall label, as well as in the exhibition catalogue (Müller p110) “in this exhibition the [Sacred] heart reminds us that creativity cannot happen without a sense of giving oneself, fully, to artistic enterprise.”



Figure 9. View of Room 5, Ateliers, ornaments and volumes.

ROOM 5: ATELIERS, ORNAMENTS AND VOLUMES

(F/VV 12-13; F/VV 22-23; F/VV 23-24)

Through another velvet curtain, to what is arguably the most inspiring room for a person who makes fashion or textiles or jewellery or anything really.

Room 5 is the heart of the exhibition, the homage to the craftspeople who D&G work with. Decked out as an atelier, a fashion designing and making studio, there was a multitude of fashion studio bits and pieces. From the half-sized mannequins in dresses, to the rolls of fabric, to the in-progress pad stitched tailored collars, the embroidery, the piles of exquisite haberdashery, boning, ribbons, soutache, tassels, feathers and more. Screens on the wall opposite the atelier showed craftspeople, jewellers, tailors, and more, all generously sharing the process of creating works for Alta Moda, Alta Sartoria and Alta Gioielleria.

I was captivated, and I wasn't the only one, an elderly lady with what looked like her daughter was oohing and aahing as she watched the different craftspeople describe how to make flowers, how to undertake tambour embroidery, how to measure and cut a menswear shirt. She told me she was a sewer and was so happy to see this work.

I did not want to ever leave this room; it felt like home.



Figure 10. [Left] View of Room 6, Architectural and pictorial.

Figure 11. [Right] Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Napoli Collection, F/W 2016/17.

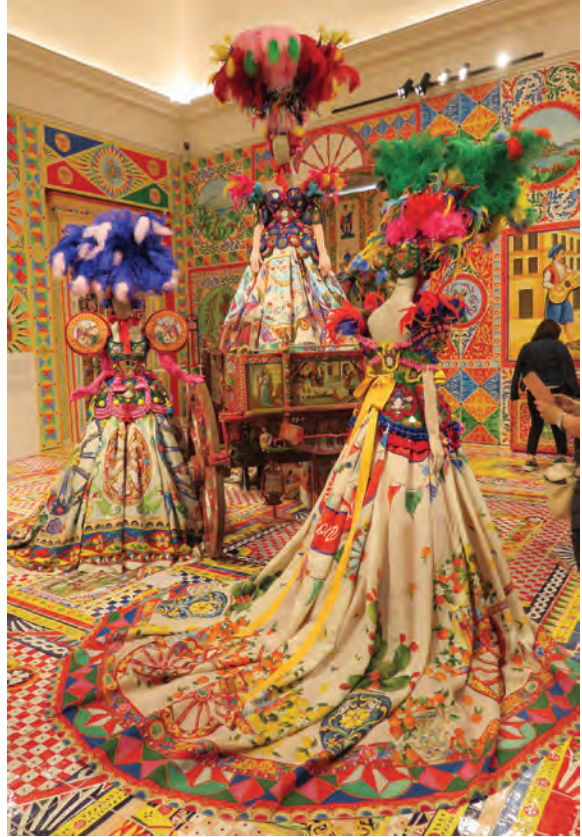
Coat in Lurex brocade entirely embroidered with crystals, sequins, bugle beads and stones.

Handbag (in case) - Dolce & Gabbana Gold Acrylic and Leather Baroque Dolce Box Top Handle Bag.

ROOM 6: ARCHITECTURAL AND PICTORIAL

(F/W 16-17; S/S 19; S/S 20)

When I finally left the Atelier, I entered another realm, an enormous immersive space of video mapped meaningful (to the design duo) renaissance architecture and art works, as they adorned the fashions standing in the centre of the room. Along with the transfixing projections of architecture and art deconstructing in front of my eyes were a collection of designs that drew on a multitude of architectural artistic inspirations from Italy over the ages, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The designs were intricately and lavishly created, with craftspeople being in synch with the designers, and using every exquisite technique imaginable to create a cacophony of textures and colours, on what were mostly quite classic (and wearable) fashions. The little bags here and there reminded me of the receptacles holding the corporeal parts of significant people, as found in Italian churches. The fabrications were numerous, bugle beads, cotton, cross stitch, crystals, frogging, fur, gemstones, gold wound thread, intarsia knit, pearls, piping, plissé Lurex, sequins, silk, soutache, tassels, Velvet, wool and gold plating. Yes, all those things, sometimes all at once - so luxurious, so garish, so elegant, so wearable, so Italian and so subversive.



ROOM 7: SICILIAN TRADITIONS

(F/W 17-18)

The bright wonderful spirit that is Sicily, was presented through vibrant fashions, that reflect the painted work that artisans in traditional hand painted Sicilian ceramics known as majolica, first produced in 1350, and the Sicilian horse drawn cart (*carretto siciliano*), had surpassed their original function of a means of transport, became an elaborately decorated mobile teller of stories and tales, and in the context of this exhibition, had progressed to become a cultural icon, reflecting Italianicity of D&G, their clothes, and indeed the assorted non fashion products. As the exhibition visitor entered the room, traditional Sicilian music played loudly, I felt as if I had been transported to a Sicilian festival, as this more than any other room in the exhibition radiated Sicily. It was hard to stand still with the soundtrack blaring. Another attendee danced around the Sicilian cart, laughing joyously.

What a bodily experience, what a pleasure that D&G and the curator offered to attendees. The vivacious fashions were exotic, and perhaps these were the most extreme of the entire collection, by room 7, I was a D&G devotee. Of note was the huge feather headdresses, reflecting the headdresses horses wear when drawing the painted carts, and the colossal hand painted dresses, with tambourines attached to the sleeves! These fashions were paint-the-town-red central. Also in the gallery space were Sicilian products D&G designed in collaboration with the manufacturers, the Bialetti coffeemaker, the SMEG refrigerator. In this gallery, like the atelier, D&G paid homage to artisans, the tile painters and the cart painters. These artisans were filmed working, and the films again generously shared with gallery attendees. This was a tactile space, attendees could walk on and touch the tiles and the cart, in a gallery setting touching is unusual and it was exhilarating.

And I was taken to Sicily, I love everything Sicily, and I loved this room.



Figure 12. [Above] Sicilian Traditions, Alta Moda, Palermo Collection, F/W 2017-18.

Dresses composed of a Mikado bodice enriched with decorative elements of the Sicilian cart and of a hand painted double gazebo skirt;

Headpieces made with feathers of different qualities, inspired by the harnesses of Sicilian cart horses.

Note the painted tiles and horse cart in the image.



Figure 13. [Right] Sicilian Traditions, Dolce&Gabbana SMEG refrigerators. Note the painted tiles in the image.



Figure 14. White Baroque. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda, Siracusa Collection, F/W 2022-23.

Left, Cotton duchesse jacket with sculpted sleeves embellished with two cherubs in Mikado, horsehair and wadding.

Centre, Alta Moda Siracusa Collection, F/W 2022-23.

Mikado jacket with cutwork embroidery and silk thread. Chantilly lace and chiffon corset dress.

Right, Alta Satoria Ostuni Collection, F/W 2023-24. Armour created by 3D printing thermoplastic polyurethane with metallic side closures, hand painted with Grottaglie ceramic effect. Silk trousers.

(Note that Grottaglie is an area of Apulia where ceramics used in stucco originate).

ROOM 8: WHITE BAROQUE

(F/W 22-23; F/W 23/24)

More Sicilian crafts-person-ship was the inspiration for Room 8. This time in a tribute to Giacomo Serpotta⁴, master of the Baroque period. The wearable baroque stucco work appeared to be ripped from baroque architecture and then transformed into thoroughly modern sculpted fashions that reminded me of 3D printed clothing or accessories. Most of the fashions weren't 3D printed, they were sculpted using very traditional tailoring methods, with horsehair fabric and wadding to add shape and volume to the angels, their wings, the sumptuous flowers, volutes, and swirls of cloth. There was an unusual smell in this room, which perhaps was from the stunning 3D printed thermoplastic polyurethane menswear. This room was another tribute to craftspeople, and how the past present and future are intertwined.



Figure 15. [Left] Dream of Divinity first half of the room. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda Agrigento Collection, F/W 2019-20 and Alta Satoria Sciacca Collection, F/W 2019-20. Assorted materials.

Figure 16. [Right] Dream of Divinity, first half of the room.

Dolce&Gabbana Alta Satoria Marzamemi Collection, F/W 2022-23.

Jewelled armour entirely embroidered with crystals, gold wound thread and seed beads. Dyed denim jeans with rips.

ROOM 9: DREAM OF DIVINITY

(F/W 17-18; F/W 19-20; F/W 21-22)

Displayed much like a Cinecittà film set, there were two halves to this exhibition room.

In the first half of the space a standout with assorted fashion designs, posed as if sculptures of Roman emperors such as Augustus or Hadrian held high on their plinths, as seen in and around Rome to this day. In this context, these mannequins were then dressed in contemporary fashions. Diagonally across the room were women looking like goddesses. When discussing womenswear that looked very much like attire for goddesses, Müller (2024, p183) stated, "Descending from their lofty thrones, the queens of antiquity..."

The simple masculine and feminine shapes comprised of complex patchworked textiles suggested Byzantine mosaics and art. Reminiscent of statues seen in and around Rome's Colosseum, the menswear stood out as very edgy contemporary street fashion with wide appeal, slashed denim trousers worn with outrageous sumptuous jewellery as headdresses and upper body wear; and with simple roman sandals, elegant and irreverent.



Figure 17. Dream of Divinity, second half of the room. Alta Moda and Alta Sartoria room showing designs inspired by Italian byzantine basilicas and art created in assorted fabrications, textiles and textile techniques.

“Dream of Divinity” was divided in two, and around the corner were yet more pieces inspired by the rich subject matter, Byzantine mosaics and art. There was one out of place piece at the back, a men’s suit in a geometric fabric, which to me harked of a Split Enz costume. A highlight was the intarsia fur sweatshirt and matching pants. The assorted fabrications, textiles and textile techniques – appliqué, beads, brocade, bugle beads, cabochons, chiffon, coins, cotton, crepe, cross stitch, crystals, embroidery, fur, georgette, gold wrapped thread, intarsia fur, jet, lace, lamé, Lurex, moiré, patchwork, sequins, silk, stones, tulle, velvet, wool – and the very simple shapes that carried these over the top textile treatments together highlighted the importance of the history, and also the crafts persons skills and abilities to bring these inspirations to life, through fashion, in such a contemporary way.



Figure 18. [Left] The Opera. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda Milano Opera Collection, S/S 2020. Assorted materials.

Figure 19. [Right] The Opera. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda Milano Opera Collection, S/S 2020.

Assorted materials including the intarsia fur coat in mink on organza inspired by Attila and embellished with sable and marmot details.

ROOM 10: OPERA

(S/S 16; S/S 17; S/S 20)

This gallery, decked out like an Italian theatre, I was struck by the discordance, in the looks, colours, textiles, everything, as stated in the exhibition catalogue, (2024, p211) "a phantasmagorical journey through legendary operas". Again, like room one, things were placed so close to each other I couldn't get a clear view, and again, the second time around I saw new delights, including the wonderful table laden with sweet treats to entice these opera characters. D&G took inspiration from several of their favourite operas and created costumes, which were also wearable for special occasions. Of note was the fur coat, patched together in random shapes, and in the most delicious colours. A patchwork made to look that wonderful must have been made by a person with exceptional design and furrier skills. Also noteworthy were the Mikado triplets with the plumed headdresses and coloured tights... I could list everything in this room, but I won't.

As a counterpoint, opposite the display of lavish womenswear was a row of men in strict formal opera wear, many of the menswear pieces were designed and made for the exhibition. Behind them, was a ticket office with ticket vendor, and snappily dressed people further behind, all set for the opera. These attentions to details were impressive.



Figure 20. Dolce&Gabbana Alta Moda Milano Collection, S/S 2013.
Macramé lace dress on a pannier structure with gold filagree corset and crown,
and tulle veil embellished with lace inserts.

I did not want the experience of D&G to end, I wanted to view the entire splendid and inspiring exhibition again and again and again. To extend the experience, I attempted to avoid the exit and slip back through another velvet curtain which led directly into the first room, "Fatto a Mano, the Hand Made." A security person halted me, and I was directed back to the start of the exhibition, and assured that I could do another loop, which of course I did, twice.

Just past Room 10, the "Opera," was a solitary wedding dress, the traditional fashion look to conclude a fashion show. As beautiful as it was, and with such attention to detail, I was somewhat overwhelmed by what I had experienced in the "Opera," and by the security persons intervention, I missed the detail of the bold (to look at) and yet delicate (in its making and parts) of the wedding dress. In my third time around, I can confirm that it was indeed a great beauty, and a tribute to the hearts and hands behind D&G and behind this exhibition.

CONCLUSION

What stands out with Dolce & Gabbana's exhibition, is that the designers or perhaps more accurately, the brands, total commitment to their craftspeople and makers, and their culture, and Italian-ness.

It sounds like there was no downside to this exhibition, well yes there was, my phone ran out of storage space and then battery and then so did my camera. Remember to take a battery pack.

After Milan, Dolce and Gabbana exhibition reformed at the Grand Palais, Paris, France, January to April 2025, and then to Palazzo Esposizioni Roma, Italy, May 14th to August 13th.

The exhibition was developed by the curator Florence Müller to be a touring exhibition, and therefore I am sure that we will see *From the Heart to the Hands* on show across the globe.

Travelling exhibitions can evolve, either because of a different space to work in, or perhaps after reflecting on previous exhibitions. Be assured that due to the limitation of words in this review, as I have not divulged all the delights, that is, it is not a spoiler. I strongly recommend anyone interested in fashion, in textiles, in craft, in culture, in telling one's story through fashion and design, please do take the time to experience this sumptuous Italian-ness and Italianicity of 'From the Heart to the Hands: Dolce & Gabbana' if the opportunity presents itself. And furthermore, I encourage you to use this opportunity to reflect on how each of our cultures and traditional crafts and arts do and could inspire our creative practices and our fashion- wearing. If you are creative of any kind, this exhibition reminds us to remember to look to our traditions, and as the theme of this issue of Scope states, past, present and future are intertwined.

While I've seen and worn many fantastical and inspiring fashions, from fashion students and emerging designers, and in clothes destined for fashion shows or exhibitions only, at this exhibition there were two things that stood out.

Firstly, D&G consistently credited and honoured the crafts people who through their high level of expertise and skill were the gifted conduits from D&Gs hearts to the realised fashions, and who patently understood the heart of the brand, and the hearts of Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana themselves. Secondly, all the fashions, no matter how fanciful, were wearable, by humans, in their not so everyday lives, and isn't wearing the number one reason for fashion?

From the *Heart to the Hands* stole my heart and roused my hands.

Dr Margo Barton (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8055-3630>) is a Professor and Head of Fashion Programmes, School of Design, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand. She is an educator, milliner, fashion designer and fashion show creative director and often brings these elements together in the form of participatory projects where she examines how we use fashion to form our identities, from a design practitioner and from a viewer and wearer's perspective. Through an ongoing participatory wearing project, Citizen Stylist, Barton explores the discourse between the designer and the wearer, and wearer and fashion and the opportunities and challenges that this dialogue promotes. Margo is actively involved in the wider fashion communities in New Zealand and internationally. She is the Creative Director and Co-Chair of iD Dunedin Fashion, including the iD International Emerging Designer Awards and is a board member of the International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes (IFFTI) and chair of the IFFTI membership committee.

* *Exhibition Catalogue Collections Designations*

F/W: Fall/Winter, year,

S/S: Spring/Summer, year

- 1 Panzani is an Italian food producer. <https://www.panzani.com/>
- 2 Anh Duong is a French American artist, actress, and model. Duong is known for her portraits, including self-portraits, many of these are of model and fashion friends met while modelling. Duong met Dolce and Gabbana at the start of their careers, and when she made the move to artist, Dolce and Gabbana started to collect Duong's works. Duong stated in a YouTube interview that she "wanted to introduce fashion into my paintings" and noted that the clothes were always a part of portraiture in the past. <https://youtu.be/d7Usl3aeqy8?si=xY3M1SVf4q-20b>
- 3 Cattedrale di Palermo a cathedral in Palermo, Italy was founded in 1185. It contains a mix of architectural styles and ornamentations, reflecting the eras the additions occurred in, for example mosaics of the Madonna from the 13th Century, a portal added in the 16th Century, monuments on walls from the early 18th century, a meridian / observatory added in 1801 and more. Throughout its history the Cattedrale di Palermo has also become a receptacle of devotional treasures, many of them encrusted in gold, and often highlighting the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a symbol of Christian devotion.
- 4 Giacomo Serpotta , was a master Scillian sculptor of the Baroque period. Born in Palermo in 1656 , Serpotta was famous for using stucco, a technique that harnesses fine plaster and other compounds. Serpotta died in Palermo in 1732.

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