Episode 2: The Matter with Stefania Ricci

Transcript of the second episode of the podcast "With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" titled "The Matter", with guest Stefania Ricci. MOOC "Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré", Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre with Paolo Ferrarini. In this series of conversations, we meet designers and practitioners from every field. With them, we talk about their projects, their challenges and their working methods, always starting from Gianfranco Ferré's design principles – namely body, matter, colour, detail, volume and movement. We will discover viewpoints, disciplines and applications that help us to understand more clearly Gianfranco Ferré's vision, his cultural legacy and the relevance of his thinking in all the different fields of contemporary design.

Artisanal or industrial, traditional or technological, light as air or solid as a rock. For Gianfranco Ferré, matter has always been a field for experimentation. We talk about it with Stefania Ricci, who welcomes us into the galleries of the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum in Florence, of which she is director. In an imaginary dialogue between two masters, we compare Ferré's research with the very concrete visions of a shoemaker who quite literally defined the history of contemporary fashion. In this episode, we also address the theme of sustainability – an essential topic when we talk about matter and when we design real innovation.

Paolo Ferrarini: Stefania, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre, Digital Innovation for the Creative and Cultural Industries at the Politecnico di Milano.
Today with you we will talk about one of the founding values of Gianfranco Ferré's creative process, namely The Matter. With the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum you have curated many exhibitions dedicated precisely to specific matter, to specific materials: I am thinking, for example, of silk, but also of the theme of sustainability, which you have explored in depth. How do you choose a material that will become the protagonist of an exhibition?

Stefania Ricci: I believe that knowledge of the material is an extremely important factor. Because in the design work that one does in two dimensions – whether it is a drawing on paper or a drawing done on a computer – you never have an idea of the final outcome until you find a combination with the right matter. In fact, when we see modest results, even when they are conceptually interesting, they almost always stem from a lack of practical experience with the material. And this is a feature that very strongly distinguishes Italian design. Because Italian design has its roots in that well-known period everyone talks about and recognises us for – the Renaissance – when the great artists were able to combine superb artisanal skill with a form of design. Almost all of them were artists rather than craftsmen, but they had hands-on experience with the material.
So, this work on materials… if I think of design and of someone like Ugo La Pietra, for instance, it is clearly impossible to separate the result of their work from the great amount of work they have done to understand materials. This aspect of materials is fundamental. And all the great fashion designers – Ferré is certainly one of them, although he is not the only one – literally emerge from

having started out working on materials. Hence, a deep understanding, for example, of fabrics: of the way a bouclé wool fabric behaves compared with a lighter wool, a lightweight wool, a cool wool. So, if we think that clothing is the architecture closest to the body, we cannot ignore the importance of the material in the final realisation. I believe that this factor, which clearly emerges in Ferré's work – since he actually trained as an architect – involves not only the form, but the form that is paired with the right material for that form. I don't think this ever goes out of fashion, and it still defines the creativity of design today.
The work done, for instance, by many new designers whose focus is more on research and who are less commercially driven – without taking anything away from those who work in more commercial fashion – is precisely based on this work on matter. We might think of Iris van Herpen, for example, but also of all the work done by Viktor & Rolf, which is highly conceptual but built on matter as well as on design. So, I see this as an enormously important factor.
In my own work, as director for many years of the Ferragamo Museum, I have had the opportunity to investigate materials in great depth. It is impossible to imagine a Ferragamo shoe, with all its creativity and aesthetic strength, without this crucial emphasis on materials that has defined his work: from cork, to the use of hemp, through to sweet-wrapper paper. But never as mere decoration, always in a way that is connected to architecture: the shoes remain shoes. So, matter is not used for ornament, but becomes an integral part of the structure of the accessory – just as it does, for Ferré, in his garments.

PF: Matter does not win out over function.

SR: Matter, in Italian design, never wins out over function. The two are perfectly married, precisely because the cultural connotation of Italian design can be traced back to the Renaissance. Whereas, if you look at a French designer, for instance, you will often see that matter – decoration – outweighs the architecture. It is an additional element, a magnificent one, of course. I am not making a value judgement here, but pointing out a completely different approach.

PF: I am thinking of one of the recent exhibitions you organised, which focused specifically on silk – on Ferragamo's relationship with silk and, more broadly, on what silk means today. I remember that the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum does not only work on the past, but also very actively on the contemporary: there is always this dialogue which is quite unique, even in the fashion sector. Could you tell us a little about how this exhibition came about, how it developed and how the contemporary dimension came into play around such a well-known material as silk?

SR: Silk has always been a highly fascinating fabric. The Silk Road was a crucial trade route, but it was also important because this is a fabric that is so lustrous, so soft, so full of movement – silk is always in motion. In fact, when we staged this exhibition – which was primarily a tribute to Salvatore Ferragamo's daughter Fulvia, who, from the 1970s, brought silk into the Ferragamo brand for accessories (scarves, ties), and then influenced a part of the clothing line – silk became a strongly identifying feature of the brand, and it was she who introduced it.
When we began to conceive an exhibition dedicated specifically to the scarf, to this painting on such a remarkable material, together with Judith Clark – who was in charge of the installation – Judith wanted the way the scarves were displayed to retain that sense of movement in silk. So, if there was a wave in the scarf's design, for example, the idea was that it should not appear as something

static, but as something that was always changing, even in terms of its aesthetic appearance.
We then worked through the entire archive, showing how the theme of inspiration worked. They worked with moodboards that drew on extraordinary sources of inspiration, many of them historical books, miniatures, wallpapers, the famous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century volumes devoted to flora and fauna. They were scientific tools that were used as examples and then reinterpreted in combinations that were absolutely contemporary. And we brought the story right up to the present day, because this is still very much an ongoing process.
It was also interesting to see the work done with two Chinese conceptual artists, who conceived a scarf as a kind of storytelling of silk. They juxtaposed Chinese myths – certain symbolic figures, particularly animals – with those of Western culture. They believe that it is through Chinese myth and Western myth that the two cultures have genuinely met, because myth goes beyond reality and belongs to the world of the imaginary.
It was wonderful to see this sort of dictionary of figures, ranging from sphinxes to griffins, or this kind of seven-headed Chinese monster symbolising certain Chinese mountains. All this was used to recount, in a scarf, what had been the key point of contact along the Silk Road – or rather, Roads – because, as we know, there were many Silk Roads: some ran inland and others by sea.
Silk is an extremely fascinating fabric, but difficult to work with because it is so elusive. It clearly cannot support overly architectural constructions. Today, the big issue is also how to use recycled silks in order to make silk sustainable. There is also a so-called vegan silk that comes from India, part of an Indian tradition, where the cocoon is pierced by the silkworm as it becomes a butterfly, thus sparing the animal, but the resulting silk consists of a spliced yarn. These are beautiful productions but still confined to small centres; they are not yet able to supply the demands of large-scale production such as that in the Como area, where – we should remember – we find some of the most important textile manufacturers in the world and, above all, major printing mills.

PF: Of course. Speaking of sustainability, a few years ago another memorable exhibition you organised here at the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum was "Sustainable Thinking", which was dedicated to sustainable thinking itself. But we know that there is, on the one hand, the 'thinking' of sustainability and, on the other, its materiality. Could you give us – drawing on that wonderful exhibition – two or three particularly contemporary examples of matter and sustainability that might serve as inspiration?

SR: The "Sustainable Thinking" exhibition was extremely complex, because sustainability is a complex topic. It requires profound technical knowledge, particularly in chemistry and physics, and materials obviously play a central role. It presented a dialogue between a number of new-generation designers who have chosen sustainability as their business model – designers who we see are not only outstanding creatives, but also communicators. They communicate sustainability through their work.
On the other side, though, the most extraordinary part concerns the materials themselves: the work that the textile industry in particular, and all the industries linked to materials, are doing to build and create new materials. And here we focused on everything to do with recycling. I will just mention Ecoalf, for example, for those famous plastic bottles that are turned into yarn to make new padded jackets. Or the whole Re.Verso project – a group of companies in a region that is very close to us, the Prato district, where recycling is a long-standing tradition.

PF: It is in their DNA.

SR: They have now come together to recycle cashmere, creating high-quality cashmere from production offcuts and from the recycling of cashmere garments, items and accessories. Another very important section was devoted to innovation: for instance, all those materials that look like leather but are in fact made from pineapple-processing waste, or all the work done by the start-up Vegea, which uses grape-processing waste to create a material that is similar to leather.
In the United States, however, research is being conducted on bacteria to obtain a material that can reproduce the look and performance of leather. So, there is this extraordinary world of materials being created inside laboratories. Then there is the rediscovery of natural materials that require very little water. It is interesting to see how we are returning to a number of autarchic materials, such as orbace – a traditional Sardinian woollen cloth – or gorse, and then hemp. There is now a major debate and significant campaigning to bring back hemp cultivation, because hemp can be harvested two or three times a year with very low water consumption, and before the 1960s Italy had widespread hemp cultivation.
I always quote the example of Ferragamo, who devised an agreement with Fede Cheti: in the Cremona area, women worked with hemp, and Cheti's fabrics were then used by Ferragamo to make shoes. They were a model of what we would now call Italian fashion, before the phrase "made in Italy" had even been coined.
The work Piacenza is now doing on its archive is also very interesting: retrieving native wools. In Italy – and these are all things I did not know, frankly – there are forty types of indigenous wool, which produce fleeces ranging from beige to grey; there are two black ones too, which I believe are both in Sardinia.
So, as well as recovering the wool from the sheep and paying the farmers – because previously the fleeces were sometimes buried, which risked polluting the groundwater, as it was not economically viable to send them to be processed, but the animals nevertheless need to be shorn for their own well-being – he has recovered these native wools. Drawing on this extraordinary archive – it is an historic company with a remarkable archive of weaves – he is now producing items of absolute excellence.
This world of natural materials is truly incredible and increasingly complex. Entering this world is fascinating, but it is essential to have a very detailed knowledge of the materials in order to create the right product.

PF: Yes, it is a form of expertise that seems very far removed from fashion, but it may well be the starting point for projects that we cannot yet imagine. Precisely by starting from nature and the qualities of matter, we could envisage some truly wonderful work, definitely.

SR: The work with native wools, if you think about it, is really remarkable, because they do not crease and they are waterproof. So, they offer some truly exceptional performance.

PF: In fashion, touch is an absolutely fundamental sense, as we know. When we talk about matter, we often fall in love with a material by touching it, but in the digital realm we lose this almost entirely. A lot of shopping, for instance, is now done online: you only have physical contact with the material when you open the box – and that contact can be positive, but it can also be very negative. I am also thinking of the museum dimension, where we look but do not touch, especially when it comes to fashion: materials are very fragile, perishable, easily stained and marked. We do not, in short, have direct access to their tactile qualities. How do you manage, in the exhibitions you curate, to guarantee some form of contact with matter?

SR: Physical contact in exhibitions is complex, because there is always the issue of conservation. When we staged "Sustainable Thinking", for example, as these were new materials, we gave visitors the chance to touch them, to get a sense of… because the major issue with sustainability is convincing people that beautiful things can still be created. There is still a sort of prejudice that sustainability implies a modest aesthetic result. That is no longer the case.

PF: No, nor should it be.

SR: So this hands-on experience was important. When it comes to historical pieces, it is impossible. That is why the way a garment is mounted, the way it is built for display, is so crucial. It is one of the major challenges of exhibition design: how to render the body.

PF: Of course.

SR: Because a garment is made to be worn, to be worn by a person who does not stand still but moves. We know very well that the effect of a fabric is also determined by movement. I am thinking of those fabrics that I myself have had the chance to work with when I was at the Costume Gallery in Palazzo Pitti. Think of the dresses from the era of Fortuny, for example, or of [Maria Monaci] Gallenga: those velours chiffons which combine the shimmer of velvet with the lightness of a feather. The true beauty emerges when you see them worn. Lillian Gish, who was one of Fortuny's clients, famously wore his "Delphos" gowns without underwear because otherwise everything would have shown through – so the idea of movement… so, the way you mount the garment is vitally important.
The most formative experience I have had in staging exhibitions was when, in one of the first major projects I worked on, I assisted with the Tirelli donation to the Costume Gallery in Palazzo Pitti. I worked on the historic garments, which had been used primarily in Visconti's films, but not only his. And the way he mounted those garments was extraordinary. He managed to conjure the presence of real women – famous women, such as Claudia Cardinale in "The Leopard" – using headless mannequins, and yet the end result was that they looked like living people.
So, the structure… if you think of a dress from around 1860, in taffeta – a fairly stiff fabric – it is the way you mount it that creates the shape. If, on the other hand, you want to convey the idea of lightness – and that is something you must communicate to the public – you have to be able to drape it, to create that sense of movement. But this is one of the limits of exhibitions. Even without a glass case, you still cannot touch the pieces.

PF: I remember that in "Sustainable Thinking" there were boxes where you could feel these materials with your hands.

SR: It is important, for instance, for schools to have access to this. The AN/ARCHIVE project set up by Polimoda is based precisely on collections of garments that are not especially precious but are designed for students to work on, so that they can see the constructions and touch the materials.

PF: Of course.

SR: Because I do not think the role of touch will ever be replaced by artificial intelligence; it will

be difficult, because you fall in love with one material rather than another precisely by… and it is often linked to memory as well: touching a material can evoke the memory of when you first touched it, of what that moment meant. My dream would be to curate an exhibition that allows you to enter into materials, to feel them: the more enveloping ones, those that are deliberately stiffer, the more technical ones – so that you feel as though you are inside some kind of house. That would be fantastic.

PF: The rarest material in the Ferragamo archives?

SR: The rarest material… Ferragamo worked with every conceivable kind of material, so I have to say that we have not managed to get hold of the one he talks about which, aside from the gold shoe, was – he says – the most expensive piece he ever created. It cost 500 dollars at the time, and he made it when he was in America, so we are talking about the 1920s. It was a sandal with hummingbird feathers. Hummingbird feathers are part of a Mexican craft tradition, and I know what this material looks like because in Palazzo Pitti, in the Treasury of the Grand Dukes, there is a bishop's mitre from the sixteenth century that the Medici imported from Mexico. It looks like a kind of wool, but it is made entirely out of feathers, because the hummingbird is the smallest bird in the world and the feathers are worked in such a way that they look almost like down, but they are feathers.

PF: So, does that shoe exist, or did it once exist? Do you know whether it survives?

SR: The mitre?

PF: No, I mean Ferragamo's shoe.

SR: He tells the story of this shoe. He made it, but I do not know. Perhaps it is somewhere, who can say?

PF: Who knows. It is such a rare object that no one has ever seen it.

SR: The most delicate pieces, in terms of conservation, are all those made of silk. Once silk has gathered dust over a long period of time, it breaks.

PF: Of course.

SR: So, they require very careful conservation.

PF: And if you had to choose, again from the Ferragamo archives, the material you think is the most contemporary – one that has not been sufficiently explored and that, in your view, could be an extraordinary source of inspiration and a starting point for contemporary design – what would it be?

SR: I would say all the work he did with cellophane, which was actually a kind of paper rather than plastic. The artificial component consisted of these sheets of viscose, like sweet-wrapper paper, which he used for weaving. They are soft, not hard to the touch. He liked them enormously because they lent themselves to different constructions and they were shiny: under the lights in a

shop window, they reflected the light, and when worn they were almost like having metal on your feet. I think this effect – I am not necessarily talking about this specific material – is still very interesting.
And then, certainly, all those humble materials that he loved so much, such as felt. He was very fond of hat felt. He even patented – he was a marketing genius – what he called "reinforced felt", because it had a lining. Felt is usually used for hats; it is too soft to make a shoe. So he added a sort of lining and created this patent, which he called the "reinforced felt" patent.
Felt is a very sustainable material, one that today can be made using regenerated wool and so on. I see many designers who work on sustainability using felt, and it is also very beautiful for shoes.

PF: Yes, felt for shoes is not something that immediately springs to mind. You think of hats, perhaps of trimmings and details, but not of the substance. Another thing I find incredibly fascinating is the family of plant-based materials you mentioned earlier: hemp, gorse and so on. There is really scope there for some extraordinary research.

SR: Because the work is all in the weaving, you see? It is similar to what was once done with raffia. Natural raffia – straw – is one thing: it came from a type of wheat that, from the eighteenth century, was cultivated here and was very soft, and was used to make hats. But the shiny raffia comes from an African palm. At Ferragamo's time, there was the famous "straw market" in Florence, in Piazza del Mercato Nuovo – which today has become a tourist market – and that was where straw was traded. You could also find this so-called "Philippines grass", which was actually a fabric made with a plant fibre from the Philippines.
A great deal of work is now being done, in the context of sustainability, on plant fibres – on orbace, on plants that are very common or regarded as poor, such as gorse – and these can be woven, especially for summer shoes.

PF: Plant-based matter is also very present today in high-end cuisine: chefs are rediscovering certain wild herbs, and even offal and other "poor" ingredients. This is far less common in fashion, perhaps because brands still have this desire for luxury, which perhaps comes more from the companies than from the public. Do you think there could be a similar rediscovery in fashion?

SR: I have seen a great deal of change since "Sustainable Thinking" – which opened in 2018, so not very long ago. The landscape has changed significantly. Everyone is now working seriously on this. I mentioned earlier, in our conversation, all the work Prada has done on its signature material, nylon. Their Re-Nylon project, reworking the brand's iconic nylon using only regenerated nylon, represents a very strong and, I would say, ethically sound stance. Because luxury must be ethical. We cannot think of a form of luxury that does not take into account our health and the health of the planet.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated and produced by Paolo Ferrarini for the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre. Full credits can be found in the synopsis of each episode.