

LUCCA

The elegance of the Napoleonic Empire relives in Lucca in the scarves of Hermès

“Mito e Bellezza” (Myth and Beauty). History told through luxury. 80 precious scarves of the famous French Maison, on show in Lucca and, in 2011, in Paris.

Lucia Maffei

An unusual and totally new exhibition opened in Lucca in December 2009. The monumental halls of the Palazzo Ducale, in their over one thousand square meters of exhibition space, hosted an extraordinary weave of silk and history that has “connected” together two of the most widely known brands in the history of the last two centuries: Napoleon Bonaparte – the Emperor par excellence – and the Maison Hermès – the most famous luxury brand in the world for over a century now.

In 1937 in Paris, Emile Maurice Hermès, drawing inspiration from the tradition of the mouchoir de cou still today worn by soldiers, invents the silk carré in a 90x90 cm size, instantly making it an elegant clothing accessory for women. The magazine Vogue immediately recognizes the innovative power of this “...hand-printed silk scarf, of extremely new workmanship. A cheerful and original idea.” From that moment on, Hermès scarves become indispensable objects of any woman’s wardrobe.

BUT WHAT DO GENERAL NAPOLEON BONAPARTE AND THE HERMÈS BRAND HAVE IN COMMON? The Emperor of France and Emile-Maurice Hermès have the same interest in travel; an interest that, almost a century apart, each translates into a specific production of “necessarily” beautiful, light and – above all – functional objects. Through a game of references, the exhibition tells of the Napoleonic myth and of Emile Maurice Hermès’ great passion for the Empire. A passion that spurred him to create not only a specific iconographic syntax used in the scarves, but also a splendid collection of refined travel items inspired by the commander. A passion that, for over 40 years, was embodied in his collection of a multitude of objects connected to the myth of the Empire, many of which went to constitute a wonderful private collection later housed at the top floor of the Maison Hermès in Faubourg S. Honoré, Paris and which is still today retained an endless source of inspiration for the Maison’s designers and stylists.

SYMBOLS AND “STORIES” INSPIRED BY THE EMPIRE thus become a game to characterize an entire production dedicated to women’s fashion, a game that “Mito e Bellezza” proposes to the visitor, involving him or her in a path to discover identifications and combinations in a scenario where the scarf is bestowed an unexpected cultural value. In “Mito e Bellezza”, we can well understand how Napoleon – who spent a large portion of his life involved in military campaigns – was particularly interested in travel items which he himself commissioned to the most important cabinet makers in France. His collection included folding beds, stools, chairs and tables, writing desks, lamps, travel “bookcases”, easily transportable clocks (the famous cappuccine mantel clocks) which the general gave to his soldiers as gifts so that they would always arrive on time, but also the first paper tableware set in history, made of carton bouilli, of course rigorously bearing the imperial eagle design...

A LITTLE OVER A CENTURY LATER, EMILE MAURICE HERMÈS WILL ALSO BE INSPIRED BY THE SAME TRAVEL “PHILOSOPHY”, as illustrated by a series of objects produced at the beginning of the twentieth century to make car trips more comfortable (since trips were no longer made only in carriage!). On show, in the four sections dedicated respectively to Napoleon, Hermès, military and marina apparatus and, finally, to civilian life, besides the 80 Hermès carrés, also about 140 unique objects are on display, many of which released for the very first time from the most important museums in France and Italy. Twelve are the museums involved in the organization of the exhibition. Thanks to

them, it is possible to admire: the splendid weapons collection that Napoleon presented as a gift to commanding general Massèna; the original plates of Caran d'Ache; the soldiers of the Wurt collection; original maps; the manikins of the Brunon collection; military hats; children's toys...

If Napoleon's epic deeds are well evident in the creation of scarves such as "Lettre à Murat" (1946), "Victoire A" (1948), "Victoire B" (1949) and "Napoleon" (1967), in reality over 100 are the carrés that bear strong iconographic and historic traits. This tie with the First Empire that runs along the entire Hermès production, is often not detected due to the more immediate effect given by the refined silk, the designs and the beauty of the colors. "Les Robes" (Ledoux, 1968), for example, features nine horses of different breeds, the most beautiful of all the Grand Napoleonic Stables.

Among these, one of the Emperor's favorites, "le Sara", that accompanies him in his Russian campaign, depicted by Hermès with the saddle used on the day of his coronation, represented before – in 1808 – in the Emperor's desert plates designed by Swebach for the Sèvres factory.

The "Le Geographe", instead, commemorates the scientific expedition promoted by Napoleon in 1800 towards la Nouvelle-Holland – present-day Australia – that saw the participation of 251 people, among whom 22 of the most renowned scientists, anthropologists, geologists, botanists and mineralogists.

MANY AND SIGNIFICANT IMAGES OF MILITARY LIFE in "Brandebourgs" (1972) depicting the jacket of a Horseback Hunter of the Imperial Guard, whose original design is part of the Hermès private collection, up to the "Grand Uniforme" (1985) or "Coiffures Militaires" (1956) carrés.

Among the objects on display – besides the many "country" and travel items belonging to the Emperor, also the children's carriage that belonged to the King of Rome and the originally unique fontaine à cocò, a dispenser for refreshing drinks based on lemonade and liquorice in summer and hot tisanes in winter.

The exhibition invites the visitor to discover the authentic sources of inspiration of the complex and very elegant "game" of cached messages created by

Emile Maurice Hermès – a game where the silk of the scarves is the Ariadne's thread, the indispensable interpretive key, in the exercise of identifications and combinations.

A must-see event in order to know – through silk – the history, myths and daily life of the Napoleonic era, that relive through an extremely refined vintage fashion production. •

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