

Working for a New Normal in Italian Fashion's Understanding of Race

The Gucci blackface sweater and Dolce & Gabbana's missteps in China have the knitwear designer Edward Buchanan seeking change.

By Kerry Olsen

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Edward Buchanan, the designer and founder of knitwear label Sansovino 6, in Milan.
Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

MILAN — At age 26, Edward Buchanan, an African-American graduate of Parsons School of Design, got his dream job: design director for Bottega Veneta. “I’d walk into factories with my dreadlocks, not speaking Italian,” he said with a laugh. “I was very green.”

And he was received, he recalled, with “curious discomfort.”

It was 1996.

Twenty-two years later — and now the head of his own under-the-radar knitwear label, Sansovino 6, as well as a consultant for luxury fashion houses — he is still one of the few black men working in Italian fashion. “Every fashion house I worked at in Italy, or consulted for,” he said, “I was the only person of color on the design team.”

But as Prada’s Sambo charm, Gucci’s blackface balaclava sweater and Dolce & Gabbana’s stereotypical videos on China roil the fashion world, the industry may finally be waking up to its lack of racial representation and cultural understanding. And Mr. Buchanan finds himself as an activist, a role he had not expected.

“Many houses here don’t employ creatives of color,” said Mr. Buchanan, 48. “The conversations that I’m having, and I want to have, on this subject are super important.”

Emanuele Farneti, editor of Vogue Italia, wrote in an email: “For many years, Italy, like other countries, has ignored the subject of diversity. You need the courage to admit it.”

But, he continued, “In a historic moment in Italy in which a political agenda of selfishness and closure is prevailing, some encouraging signals are there. We’re growing a new generation of Italians who consider diversity the norm both in music and sport. We also hope in the fashion industry that so desperately needs it.”

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Certainly, things have changed — somewhat.

Max Mara, where Mr. Buchanan once worked, has a senior designer from Sierra Leone who has been with the house since 2000 (company policy bars naming members of the design team). In October Roberto Cavalli, in partnership with the nonprofit organization Fra Noi, hired three refugees from Gambia, Pakistan and El Salvador to work in its pattern-cutting department, atelier and Just Cavalli's style office.

And Lawrence Steele, an African-American designer who is the associate creative director of Marni and who has lived and worked in Milan for years, said, "I've had no difficulties whatsoever in getting a job. They've happened spontaneously, and at the brands where I have worked, there has been a language of openness." He said that Marni has long had a multicultural design team.



Mr. Buchanan's sketches for a new collection of knitwear. Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

But still, as the Milan fall shows open this week, there is only one designer of color on the official schedule: Stella Jean, a Haitian-Italian designer based in Rome who, in 2011, became the first black designer to win the Vogue Italia's talent contest Who Is On Next.

The Camera Nazionale Della Moda Italiana, the Italian fashion trade association, said it does not have statistics on the racial breakdown of industry workers in Italy. However, Carlo Capasa, the organization's president, said he believed the issue was one of availability. "There aren't so many designers of color showing here but not

because it's a problem of discrimination," he said during an interview. "Traditionally Italy has been an extremely homogeneous population. Simply put, we don't have a large population of color."

A spokesman for Italy's National Institute of Statistics, which maintains the country's census, said it would not release information about the racial makeup of the population.

Mr. Buchanan is not entirely convinced. "There are loopholes in the system where creatives are not even arriving at the door. It's the headhunters, the education system," he said. "It's not a question of hiring designers solely because of diversity's sake. There are talented people of color in the system now, more than qualified for these jobs, and they're not being selected."

So he has been addressing the reality in the most effective way he knows how: with a collection.

He started in 2017 with the project "Check Your Neck," featuring three jacquard scarves emblazoned with slogans: "Resist," "Wake Up for Freedom" and "We Are All Migrants." Mr. Buchanan gave them to the model Aymeline Valade and to his designer friends like Stefano Pilati; Riccardo Tisci and Marcelo Burlon, who is behind the County of Milan label and co-founder of the New Guards Group (its labels include Off-White and Palm Angels; LVMH is reportedly considering a stake).



In 2017 the designer created three jacquard scarves for a collection called "Check Your Neck." Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

The scarves are sold on the Sansovino website for about \$45 (the cost of manufacturing, Mr. Buchanan said) and with the request that customers post photos of themselves wearing the scarves or communicate in some way what the slogans mean to them.

“After the elections here and in America, and living as a black man in Italy,” Mr. Buchanan said, “I wanted to question what was going on.”

Now he’s trying to build on that momentum with a capsule women’s wear line he was scheduled to introduce on Wednesday.

With 10 styles based on his favorite basics, including a dickey, biker shorts, leggings and a roll-neck sweater, the knitwear collection is being offered in hues that reflect a full spectrum of skin tones. The goal, Mr. Buchanan said, is to be the Fenty Beauty of knits — although this being the cashmere business, colors have names like shore (cream), vintage vicuña (brown) and hoopoe (pink.)

“The first idea we own is the color of our skin,” Mr. Buchanan said. “Whether you’re Irish, Jamaican or Korean, I love the idea you put something on that blends with your skin.”

In addition, dense fringes and multicolored jacquards on the sweaters are meant to symbolize the flags of countries like Germany, the United States and Italy, countries where immigrants often continue to be perceived as outsiders. “These settlers may be third generation but they inhabit the fringes of society,” Mr. Buchanan said. “I wanted to build awareness and question it.”

Of that idea, Stephen Galloway, the Los Angeles-based choreographer and creative consultant who has known Mr. Buchanan since they met in 1998, quoted the rapper Q-Tip: “People gravitate towards the truth sooner or later.”

Mr. Galloway said he applied the quote “to Edward’s journey as a designer. It’s his time, the time is now.”

Mr. Buchanan had a burst of fame during his time at Bottega, too, when he dressed the singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill. “Many companies weren’t giving clothing to hip-hop and R&B stars,” he said, “because they weren’t considered a valid reflection of existing consumers. I attempted to stomp that theory out.”

At the time, he recalled, his network of fashion friends like Emil Wilbekin, a founding editor of Vibe magazine, and Marni Senofonte, an L.A.-based stylist, told him how luxury houses refused to lend their products and how the two were buying from stores to dress rhythm and blues performers.

“I was fortunate because I had a high level of support and security on the inside,” Mr. Buchanan said, noting that Laura Molledo, who owned Bottega at the time, approved of his actions. “There was no resistance from the top,” he said, “although things were different in the marketing department.”

In 2001, after Bottega was sold to Gucci Group (now Kering), Mr. Buchanan left and opened his own clothing and accessories label, called Leflesh, which he designed with Manuela Morin, a close friend and former Bottega accessories designer. Described by the Italian journalist Angelo Flaccavento as, “a mix of Victoriana and R&B,” the fashion label garnered attention from Cher and Iman.

Mr. Buchanan later left Italy for New York and went on to consult for Jennifer Lopez’s Sweetface line and Sean Combs’s Sean John collection, eventually closing Leflesh to concentrate on his outside work.

In 2009 he returned to Milan and the following year he started Sansovino 6, naming the unisex cashmere line for the factory that produced it. The singer-songwriter Erykah Badu snapped up early pieces.

Now Mr. Buchanan is hopeful the industry will start another conversation. Last week Prada announced plans to create an inclusion advisory committee led by the artist and activist Theaster Gates and the director Ava DuVernay. Mr. Buchanan described the move as “very positive,” although he noted that brands “tend to run to the upper echelons of celebrity when addressed with such issues” rather than turning for advice to people already working in the business.

“A diverse design team has the power to nip cultural mistakes in the bud,” he said. “Words have the power to initiate introspection and real conversation, as well as immediate action for the future.”

Ms. Jean, the Haitian-Italian designer, agreed. “To be multicultural is not just putting an African print on the runway,” she said. “Aesthetics are a channel but they’re not the end result.”