

Art and Fashion Rub Elbows

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO APRIL 25, 2012

ROME — Fine arts and luxury brands have long crossed paths, creating a blend of culture, merchandising and branding.

The most recent Italian example of this cross-cultural association comes via the Paris-based artists Lucy and Jorge Orta, who created an installation for Maxxi, the National Museum of the 21st Century Arts in Rome.

The artwork was commissioned by the Italian luxury men's wear label Ermenegildo Zegna in a win-win situation — the brand gets visibility, the artists get to work and the cash-strapped museum gets much-needed private financing.

At the presentation of the installation, Mr. Orta described the Zegna family as modern-day Medicis, citing the Florentine dynasty that commissioned work from Michelangelo and Bramante, the Renaissance archistar.

“Working with art makes a brand exciting,” said Gildo Zegna, chief executive officer of the Zegna Group.

Mr. Zegna recently visited the art fair in Miami, where he was struck by the energy and the drive of the art world, and he hopes the association with art will help his label. “We’re happy to do what we’re doing, but there’s business behind it all,” he said.

Zegna’s collaboration with Maxxi comes at a fortuitous time for the museum, which opened less than two years ago and faces an uncertain future because of funding problems. The Culture Ministry in Italy has initiated procedures to replace the board of directors of the foundation that manages the museum with a government-appointed administrator. The dispute centers on what the government says is the board’s inability to attract more private sponsorship to pay for its activities.

Museum officials point out that ticket sales and collaborations with Zegna and other corporate sponsors like BMW helps Maxxi cover more than half of its operating costs: far more, the board says, than other contemporary art museums in Europe, where the state is the principal donor. But this is not enough, according to the culture ministry, which mandated when it set up the foundation that runs the museum that the state would be a minor financial contributor.

The tie between fashion and art is strong in the Orta piece. To create their piece, called “Fabulae Romanae,” or Roman Fables, a microvillage of colorful tents and mannered mannequins, the artists visited Zegna’s wool mill in the Piedmont region of northern Italy, where they were given access to Zegna silks, wools and other fabrics. The material was fashioned — along with French Army blankets, bundles of flea-market secondhand apparel and a multihued assortment of gloves and mitts — into the “dome dwellings” and “refuge wear” typical of the Ortas’ work.

Maria Luisa Frisa, who curated the show, said the artists were the “perfect fit” for the project. Ms. Orta has a background in fashion, and the artists often use fabrics in their artworks. The installation has the support of the Center for Sustainable Fashion at the London College of Fashion. The Ortas have demonstrated a long “commitment to addressing the larger themes of contemporary society — ecology, extreme conditions and difficult territories,” Ms. Frisa said, synching with the Zegna Group’s own socially oriented interests that date back to when Ermenegildo Zegna took over the family wool mill in 1910 and built homes and public facilities for his employees.

Mr. Orta said the collaboration worked well “because we both speak the same language.” But he was quick to point out that the fashion brand had not pushed its fabrics on the artists.

“They gave us carte blanche to use them or not, an ideal situation for the artist,” he said. “It wasn’t about business or promotion of their fabrics, but about exploration.”

The collaboration with Zegna opens up new vistas “on the question of how artists can make art that is not just self-referential but in contact with realities like factories, or schools,” said Giacinto di Pietrantonio, director of GAMEC, Bergamo’s contemporary art museum. “It is a key point of contemporary research,” that however also requires “enlightened managers” to be pursued.

Ms. Orta also teaches at the London College of Fashion.

“In Europe, fashion and art education often blend together,” said Lorcan O’Neill, who owns a contemporary art gallery in Rome adding that Alexander McQueen and John Galiano studied at St. Martin’s in London.



Work by Lucy and Jorge Orta at Maxxi, the contemporary art museum in Rome. The exhibition was commissioned by the luxury men's wear label Ermenegildo Zegna, which reaps visibility for the brand while providing the museum with needed funds.
Credit Cecilia Fiorenza/Maxxi Foundation

“And the fashion world approaches art with great sympathy and respect,” Mr. O’Neill added. “People who make clothes understand what it’s like to be an artist. There’s great pressure to have everything sell or out the door.”

The Orta installation inaugurates ZegnArt, a multiyear cultural project by the Zegna company that involves public institutions like the Maxxi as well as in-store art projects at Zegna boutiques around the world.

Previous cultural forays for the group were managed by the Zegna Foundation, created in 2000, and tended to be localized in the area where the company has its home base.

At the new Ermenegildo Zegna boutique on the fashionable Via Condotti in Rome, a chic and sleek store whose multilevel staircase bears the imprint of the luxury brand store designer Peter Marino, large photographs by the German artist Frank Thiel hang between rows of suits.

Mr. Marino also designed the three-story Maison Louis Vuitton Rome Etoile, which opened in January in what was once a historic cinema in downtown Rome. The store has a 19-seat state-of-the-art cinema and is partnered with the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Italy’s national film school.

On May 2, the New York boutique of Zegna will present five thread paintings commissioned for ZegnArt from Emil Lukas, an American artist whose work Mr. Zegna saw at Art Basel, the Swiss art fair, and immediately bought for his home. Mr. Lukas used Zegna silk threads for the work.

“We had a great collection of silk threads and he used them, instead of polyester. It came out beautifully,” Mr. Zegna said. “That’s the way to open new frontiers to artists, that’s the way to go.”

The Chinese artist Ding Yi, whose work Mr. Zegna discovered in the art district of Shanghai, also visited the Zegna mill. “He fell in love and created two paintings from silk ties,” which were exhibited in Beijing for Zegna’s 20th anniversary event, Mr. Zegna said.

Though the close rapport between art and fashion may not be new, wrinkles remain. Flirting with glamour is a conflicted choice increasingly faced by publicly funded museums. Museum shows featuring designer fashions, which often tour the world, have caused controversy in part because the designers’ companies help sponsor them. The Giorgio Armani show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2000 was one such example. Still, those shows attract audiences; the Alexander McQueen show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011, after McQueen’s suicide at the age of 40, was a big draw.

Starting next month, the Costume Institute at the Met will hold a retrospective honoring Elsa Schiaparelli, who died in 1973, and Miuccia Prada, based on an imaginary conversation between the two Italian fashion legends. Both women have strong links with the contemporary art of their day. Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau collaborated on Schiaparelli fashions, while Ms. Prada’s group heads an important art foundation and will next year inaugurate a contemporary art museum in Milan.

Pio Baldi, president of the Maxxi Foundation, said he was not in favor of hosting designer shows, which smacked of commercial logic. “We’re interested in producing together. Otherwise, we are just a container,” he said. Besides, he added, “pure sponsorship doesn’t exist anymore.”

Museums and private sponsors “need to find a common objective that is in the core business of both and develop a common action from this,” he said.

Doubts remain on the part of some art experts about the hybrids produced by commercial-cultural ventures.

“When disciplines overlap, it is always a bit complicated,” said Angela Vettese, president of the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation in Venice, which promotes contemporary art.

The Rome museum’s collaboration with Zegna is relatively rare in Italy, where private sponsorship of cultural activities receives negligible financial incentives from the state and personal initiatives can be perceived with suspicion.

“Tax benefits would certainly stimulate us to do more,” Mr. Zegna said.

When Diego Della Valle, head of the luxury-leather-goods company Tod’s, pledged €25 million, or \$33 million, to restore the Colosseum in Rome last year, consumer rights groups challenged the donation in court, arguing that the company would exploit the ancient Roman amphitheater for its own aims. The court will rule on the sponsorship in May.

Mr. Zegna would not say how much the group had invested in culture. “By American standards, it isn’t much but for us it is meaningful,” he said.

To lift Zegna’s international visibility, ZegnArt is planning projects with museums in India, Turkey and Brazil, emerging markets where cultural ventures can help a brand make a splash.

“We need to have more young people attracted to the brand, so we take the route of social responsibility, the environment and support of the arts,” Mr. Zegna said.