

The Old Fashion Atelier in Florence

The Art of Transforming Natural Fibers into Fashionable Clothing

COSTANZA MENCHI | STAFF WRITER

One of the latest fashion trends, established also during the past edition of Pitti Uomo fashion week, Pitti Bimbo and Milan fashion week, is the use of natural fibers to promote eco-friendly fashion.

We all, as consumers, should be aware of the effects that our daily choices make on the environment, also through what we wear. Today it makes sense to propose natural textile products, manufactured respecting the environment and using traditional techniques of tailoring and dressmaking. More fashion firms have been demonstrating that in the textile sector a sustainable alternative exists and can promote a territory and its resources, handicraft, respecting the environment, creating high-quality products of great satisfaction for the final users. The *Sartoria Artigianale Old Fashion* in Florence is one of them. (www.oldfashionsartoria.com)

Irma Schwegler, the founder of this tailoring workshop, dedicated her life to her passion for handmade haute couture. She was born in Switzerland and trained in France, Italy and England, improving her research on the fabrics and styles of European tradition. In 2002 she founded Old Fashion Tailoring Workshop for Men and Women on Via Gran Bretagna 63, Florence. Since then Schwegler has been working to create a unique product, born from the union of natural fabrics and couture techniques, deep-seated in tradition yet directed towards research and innovation, design and wearability.

"I chose the name Old Fashion because it reminds me of the bond between the past, the present and the future, where innovation and tradition, art and culture, technique and technology merge together into one unique whole. For tailoring, I aspire to a form of artistic craftsmanship that combines the quality-conscious techniques of the past with the same skills needed to make works of art - a sort of 'goldsmith of textiles,'" says Schwegler.

In her collections she uses textiles from the Tuscany region, in particular the *panno Casentino* (Casentino cloth), a type of woolen cloth typical of the Casentino Valley, nearby Arezzo. It is immediately recognizable because of the swirls and of the classic colors of orange and green, and, even if today it is made in various trendy colors, it has been produced in the Casentino Valley since the 14th century. It was used also for making the clothes for the Franciscan friars of La Verna Sanctuary. In the 1800s the coat, very classic and double-breasted, with black belt and necklet, was elegant and sophisticated, thus it was appreciated by many Italian intellectuals, like the statesman Baron Bettino Ricasoli, the composer Giuseppe Verdi and the opera composer Giacomo Puccini.

In order to spread her name and cre-

ations on the market, Schwegler participates in many Italian and international events and fairs, while pursuing her research in unusual fabrics. She started working with the research program *Filo e Artificio (Thread and Artifice)*, promoted by the Tuscany Region in cooperation with the Bio-meteorological Institute and the Climate and Sustainability Foundation. This moment marked an exciting period in which she was able to experiment with new textiles and, thanks to research on short chain production, she got in touch with shepherds and yarns producers. Schwegler has also taught young tailors

an annual course organized by the Province of Florence. Thanks to the *borsa lavoro* (scholarship) provided by the *Osservatorio dei Mestieri d'Arte* (Observatory of Arts and Crafts), she started training students in the complex art of tailoring.

Visiting Irma Schwegler's workshop-atelier is like entering a special fashion world full of colors, creativity, quality; if you decide to order a made-to-measure garment, you will be sure of having found the uniqueness and the authenticity of Made in Italy.



The *panno Casentino*, the cloth this jacket is made of, has been produced in the Casentino Valley since the 14th century.



Jackets at the *Sartoria Artigianale Old Fashion*. Left: Irma Schwegler in her workshop preparing new fashion the old fashioned way.

BOOK REVIEW

Black Hearts, by Jim Frederick

S.A. SALENIUS | STAFF WRITER

The anguished "Black Hearts" is a captivatingly narrated shocking story of "one platoon's descent into madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death."

The Contributing Editor and Senior Editor for Time magazine in their London office, Jim Frederick, has published a testimony of the dreadful experiences of "the Black Heart Brigade," a unit from the U.S. 101st Airborne Division's 502nd Infantry Regiment in Iraq. The group of soldiers was positioned south of Baghdad in late 2005, in the so-called "Triangle of Death," the most dangerous area of the country. As Americans in Iraq were resented and perceived as occupiers rather than liberators, their presence soon became a trigger for growing tensions that led to psychological exhaustion of the men. In his book, Frederick captures the fear, violence, hatred, frustration, and mental stress of the men who were working under incompetent leadership. As Frederick's book and reports from the war testify, the nightmarish situation intensified and saw increasing atrocities that included civilian casualties. "Black Hearts" narrates the story of one of them.

The book is not fiction but a true story of the psychological descent of one Black Heart platoon, ironically called the Bravo Company, into physical decline and mental confusion. Brutality and substance abuse were part of the daily routine of the 1st

Battalion that had been abandoned in one of the most dangerous areas undermanned, overseen by poor leadership, with failures in command, without proper equipment, living in a situation of continuous sleep deprivation and unbearable stress. The devastating consequences of the declining morale that permeated the existence of the soldiers led to one of the most tragic war crimes the U.S. forces ever committed.

The mental fragility of the men in the war zone can only partially explain the atrocious rape of a fourteen-year old Iraqi girl, Abeer Qassim, the burning of her body, and the execution of her family. The book is based on the interviews with Black Heart soldiers, including Specialist Paul Cortez, Specialist James Barker, Private First Class Jesse Spielman and Private First Class Steven Green, who were responsible of the horrid crime committed in March 2006. The story crudely exposes the madness of war and the heinousness of the destruction of human lives, be they civilian or military. When reading the story, one wishes its insanity were fiction rather than reality.

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