

A NEW DIRECTION



Fall 2010 Collection



BOLD BRIONI

The iconic Italian menswear label takes a striking step forward with its new line for women.

BY KRISTINA STEWART WARD

Brioni is in good company when it claims that a perfectly cut jacket is a sort of sartorial armor, but this season the fashion house takes the motif a step further, declaring ancient Japanese Samurai armor as inspiration for the fall 2009 women's collection that is being heralded as breakthrough. *The New York Times'* Suzy Menkes is among those praising the "tailoring that shadows, but never grips, the body." The veteran fashion critic adds: "Brioni, a house based on artisans and handwork, has now found its place in women's fashion."

While the 65-year-old menswear company launched its women's designs eight years ago and has enjoyed brisk sales since then, this collection seems to mark a new direction for the esteemed label now being led by 39-year-old CEO Andrea Perrone, a grandson of Brioni cofounder Gaetano Savini. Until July Perrone shared leadership duties with two other Co-CEOs, but in a move that signals a more decisive and youthful perspective at Brioni, Perrone alone now steers the company. Under his direction, the womenswear is flourishing, and he credits his estimable design team.

This season, Brioni's designers use a dark palette of brown, gray, indigo, pewter and black, and have created sculpted, organic shapes that are simultaneously historic and futuristic. In

addition to the feudal Japanese motifs, kimono-esque coats among them, there is also considerable homage to *Blade Runner* and the film's era-blending fashions: There are architecturally cantilevered necklines and shoulders; bodices are constructed with dramatic diagonal tucks; mutton sleeves and extended jewel collars are combined with daring effect; and shirts with lightweight pleated sleeves are mixed with woolen bodices and paired with slim, knee-length skirts or trousers with overlapping panels.

Such a hybrid of styles might look muddled if rendered by another design house, but Brioni's provenance is fine tailoring before all else, so the execution of these bold concepts is flawless. The tailors, seamstresses and designers are based in the Abruzzo region of Italy, three hours from Rome, where the company was founded in 1945 by Perrone's grandfather and Nazareno Fonticoli, an accomplished tailor who earned his stripes at a tailoring school in Abruzzo.

The partners named their company after the island of Brioni, a 1,700-acre piece of land in an Adriatic archipelago off the coast of Croatia, the former Yugoslavia. While the island has served as a resort destination since Roman times, the Belle Époque was considered its heyday, with two massive hotels, elaborate villas, an 18-hole golf course, a heated saltwater pool, sailing regattas, a summer polo season and its own namesake society magazine printed in four languages. Brioni

The island of Brioni.



A Storied Affair

The onetime glamorous resort town embedded in the picturesque island of Brioni had fallen into disrepair after the death of its last overlord, Yugoslavia's infamous dictator Josip Tito, who turned the island into his own personal playground after WWII, inviting an international mix of royalty, presidents, prime ministers and celebrities, including the Queen of England, Indira Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw, John Rockefeller, Sophia Loren, Douglas Fairbanks, Richard Burton and Liz Taylor. The list of 150 guests compiled by the fashion label in 2004 for its three-day Brioni Polo Classic was similarly filled with bold-faced names, including Croatia's prime minister and its president, Oliver Rothschild, Winston Churchill's namesake grandson and the rakishly good-looking Crown Prince of Jodhpur, Shivraj Singh, a 10-goal polo player who like his father, the Maharaja of Jodhpur, learned the sport while studying at Eton and at Oxford.

Well-spoken and well-dressed, from slim Brioni suits to elaborate Indian robes, Shivraj struck fellow guests as the ideal modern Brioni poster boy, and indeed, the 28-year-old ended up stealing the show both on and off the field. He was among the first to disembark onto the island and surely felt right at home as he and his fellow guests were greeted with a massive billowing tent under which was set a makeshift lounge, an expansive buffet luncheon and several dozen attendants, some of whom silently whisked luggage away to hotel rooms where guests later found their wardrobe tucked neatly



into drawers and closets. Before the night's elaborate Istrian dinner at the marina, guests were lured to the polo fields where the four assembled teams were introduced. This would be the first time polo was played on the island since 1933, and Brioni spared no drama.

Rigorous games played out over the three days and every picturesque location on the island was commandeered for feasts, including one that featured an operatic performance set atop Roman ruins. Women wore long gowns and men donned black tie and military regalia—well, most men. Young Shivraj was clad in orange, yellow and pink robes, and unsurprisingly, was surrounded by an attentive cluster of female admirers.

He was regaling them with tales from the polo field, which he had left only two hours earlier. One of the women asked if he would return for the polo championship here next year. Smiling broadly, he assured her that he would, but not more than eight months later, a polo accident in his native India would put the crown prince into month-long coma, the effects of the devastating horseback collision nearly taking his life and impairing his ability to walk and talk. Shivraj's glamorous polo career was cut short, and seems to have seen its heyday on this trip. Even the Brioni Polo Classic's lifespan would be brief on the island—from 2004 to 2006. But their combined effects are still the stuff of modern legend, as any polo aficionado can attest, and such legend is what venerable brands like Brioni are made of.

was frequented by well-dressed Europeans, so it's little wonder that the two enterprising Italians chose the island's name for their fashion label.

It's also little wonder that, in 2004, Brioni management decided to recharge the island with a little glamour of its own (see sidebar). Indeed, the savvy design company has long known how to cultivate a robust international image. In 1952 Brioni staged its inaugural fashion show in Florence and then the tailors took it on the road, showing their designs in New York, among other international locations. In more recent years, film has served as a vital addition to Brioni's global image, the label dressing Tom Hanks in *Angels & Demons*, and James Bond for 14 years before that. The company has a shared history with Hollywood that goes back to its earliest years in the late 1940s and Cinecittà, Rome's famous film studio that lured nearly every mid-century matinee idol to the city; they all returned home with suitcases filled with Brioni's formidable handiwork. Among these ambassadors were Clark Gable, Cary Grant, John Wayne, Kirk Douglas, Rock Hudson, Henry Fonda, Richard Burton and Gary Cooper. Today the company's high-profile clients extend to every industry, from Al Pacino and Pierce Brosnan to Donald Trump, Nelson Mandela and England's Prince Andrew.

But Queen Elizabeth's son isn't the only high-profile Brit to stray from Savile Row in pursuit of what came to be known as "the Continental Style." James Bond began wearing Brioni in the 1995 film *GoldenEye*, the first time 007 wore anything other than Savile Row suits. The film's costume designer, Lindy Hemming, says, "We wanted to be sure that Pierce Brosnan had an elegant and modern look, but one that wouldn't appear dated in a few years' time." She found the perfect ally in Brioni, a company that didn't flinch when she requested that gun holsters be stitched into the exquisitely cut suit. Brioni was quick to fill their stores with \$6,000 versions of the celebrated secret-agent suits, and while gun holsters were not standard issue for the off-the-rack incarnation, more than one master tailor at Brioni over the years has been asked to add a "secret pocket at around waist length in the jacket...reinforced to carry something heavy." Then there was the sultan who requested 100 suits to be made within a month's time, knowing full well that the made-to-measure suits require 18 hours of work, and the bespoke incarnation takes between 25 and 32 hours. Some 20 percent of Brioni's business still comes from these handmade items, and until 1960 these were the only two ways suits were created.

While the label is still best known for shirts and impeccably cut suits, Brioni has expanded into sportswear, formalwear, luxury pajamas, robes, smoking jackets—and womenswear. The growing emphasis on dressing women is part of the diversification plans spearheaded by Brioni's young CEO, and if Fall 2009 is any indication, Andrea Perrone's legacy might prove to be as illustrious as that of his grandfather.

