

Genius Loci and Emerging Sustainable Fashion Strategies

Two Significant Case-Histories in Italy and Tunisia

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Abstract

The contemporary fashion supply chain is part of the Global Value Chains (GVCs), the organization of production, trade and investments across different countries. Then, authentic *genius loci* is often replaced by fluidly-applied signifiers extremely simplified. Considering the recent trends in fashion, several strategic opportunities for SMEs connected to their cultural heritage and artisanal know-how should be considered. In particular, the new value of sustainability and regenerative design in production processes. The research paper presents two significant examples from Italy and Tunisia. The first one is Prato textile district, Italy, known for its wool textile manufacture, existing since medieval times and in particular for regenerated wool processes called *Cardato*. Based upon this know-how, Prato SMEs offer to market fashion leaders an eco-friendly product in line with emerging sustainable trends. Today, emerging sustainable business models in the Fashion industry are increasingly evolving. In Prato, some SMEs have become part of international fashion events. Similarly, Tunisian brand *Azalée* reintroduced the straw weaving techniques in the contemporary fashion system. *Azalée* is conceived and designed based on local natural materials and culture, which is related to the craft of frond making originating from the palm leaves (called *El-Jerid*). This emerging brand entered the world of contemporary designers and has recently created exclusive eco-friendly baskets for l'Occitance-in-Provence (*The Reset* collection).

1. Introduction

The Latin term *genius loci* identifies the *spirit* or an intrinsic identity of a place or a community. Richard Florida says that *genius loci* “maintains a proper balance between the natural elements and culture, multiple representations of the intangible values referred to this place” (Florida, 2003).

The concept is central to the apprehension of heritage and culture as elucidated by Petzet (2008). *Genius Loci* is considered as a phenomenon related to the spirit of place that embodies a continuous interaction “between the intangible and the tangible” often used in different fields (anthropology, architecture, history, design, etc.).

In this perspective, artisanship represents the place’s identity through tangible and intangible values such as local materials, processes and *savoir-faire*. Some historical production clusters composed of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) as the leather industry in Tuscany (Italy) stands as a significant example. In that area today, as in ancient times, the know-how of tanning and treating the leather are embedded in a long historical tradition and a strong local culture. These immaterial values related to Tuscany’s leather district seem to be not reproducible abroad and continue to attract luxury brands such as Dior, Gucci and LVMH (Bacci et al., 2009).

Similarly, the city of Nabeul (or Neapolis) located in northeastern coast in Tunisia where the historical tradition of the distillery of various flowers (bitter orange, geranium, roses, jasmine, etc.) along with the extraction of essences used as a basis for the creation of several high-quality perfumes is a good illustration. The French luxury brand Guerlain has for the last 10 years been the sole client of the Nabeul perfume distillery (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Flowers of bitter orange, Tunisia, 2019 (Source: Nejia Mansour, 2019).

Craftsmanship culture as a contemporary trend relates to two main contents expressed by Ruskin: “*genius*”, spirit and “*aura*” of the artefact (Ruskin, 1953).

In the same way, Walter Benjamin through the word “*aura*” refers to the immaterial spirit embedded in some artisanal artefacts. In contemporary productions, those intangible values are represented by artisanship “rituals”, still present in advanced supply chains – as the fashion one (Benjamin, 1968).



Figure 2. Leather accessory production, Florence (Italy) (Source: Province of Florence, Assessorato Moda, 2007).

Moreover, craft mastery is the result of precious know-how and the passing-on of knowledge and skills through generations which makes craftsmanship highly valued in the whole fashion manufacturing framework (Fig. 2).

2. Craftsmanship Values in the Global Value Chain (GVC) of Luxury Goods

Contemporary fashion is a complex and highly globalized industry, with clothing often designed in one country, manufactured in another, and sold in a third (Burns et al., 2011), and is fully embedded in the Global Value Chains (GVCs)¹.

¹ Global Value Chains (GVCs) are defined by OECD as the organization of international production, trade, and investments where different stages of the production process are located across different countries (OECD, 2013).

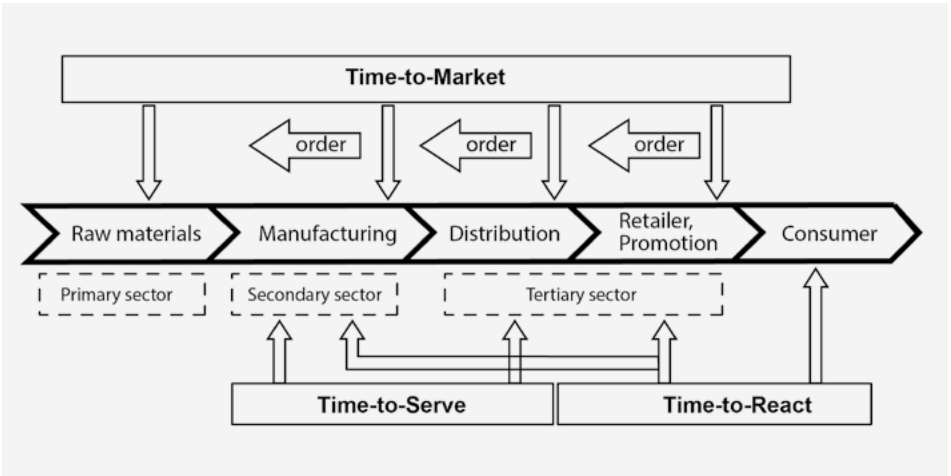


Figure 3. The Fashion Supply Chain Management Model (Čiarnienė & Vienažindienė, 2014).

The globalization of the contemporary fashion system has led to various issues related to the management of the supply chain from time management (long-lead times for manufacturing, short lifecycle, fast-moving) to the coordination with the various entities involved in the chain (outsourcing, vertical integration, traceability).

The fragmentation of the production process of the fashion industry has also shown the importance of craftsmanship as a main intangible asset in this extremely globalized industry. The artisanship position and role within the GVC of the fashion industry is a strategic pillar for the fashion brands. Craftsmanship occurs at different stages of the supply chain from the sourcing of raw materials to manufacturing (Fig. 3).

During the last five years, significant changes have occurred in the competitive environment of the fashion industry and have accelerated the transformation in the GVC.

The digitalization of the economy and the deep changes in the lifestyles of final consumers have contributed to the development and the adaptation of digital marketing, e-commerce and the race to understand and integrate *customer experiences* by fashion key players. Alongside changes in this extremely competitive environment, sustainability has recently emerged as an important new driver in consumers' purchasing decisions as well as in the production processes and the whole supply chain.

Ruskin says that craftsmanship, in a "post-industrial" age, replaces genius (spirit or aura) with high-quality manufacturing and *griffes'* narrative as strategic added value. On the other hand, genius loci (spirit of place) is replaced by the referring to a general location as a fluidly-applied signifier. These topics are particularly fitting for the contemporary fashion high-end market, proposing immaterial contents and values that are often not well described or deepened.

On the other hand, the *savoir-faire* value is emerging again in fashion marketing and communication as intrinsic value and not only as a fluidified signifier. A focus on the immanent quality that bridges the tradition to contemporary glamorous lifestyles. Richard Sennett (2009), through the book *The Craftsman*, proposes a rediscovering of the craftsmanship values with a contemporary spirit, without *nostalgia*.

According to this perspective, we can highlight an emerging market interest in the rituals of craft's know-how, aiming at emphasizing the societal values of the artisan. Then, *savoir-faire* could be analysed and communicated relating to its cultural and

experiential context, discovering the places and socio-cultural contexts in which artisanship grows and develops.

Brunello Cucinelli is for sure the most representative one, an Italian brand specialized in cashmere founded as SME in 1978 in the medieval hamlet of *Solomeo*, a small hilltop village located on the outskirts of Perugia (Umbria, Italy). Brunello Cucinelli success derives from the concept of the “humanistic enterprise model”. *Solomeo* stands as a great workshop aiming at making “neo-humanistic capitalism” into practice. The foundations of the business model are (1) excellence in craftsmanship and manual skills; (2) authentic Made in Italy as a connection in between the past and future technology; (3) dignity of work, profit and a special relationship with the surrounding territory (Del Baldo, 2020) (Fig. 4).

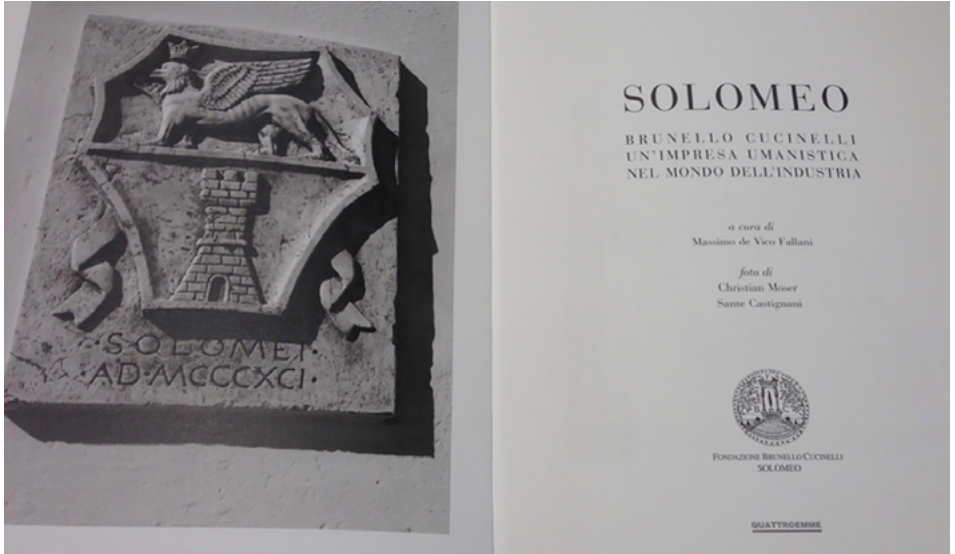


Figure 4. Solomeo' Book by Brunello Cucinelli (retrieved from: <https://shadesofumbria.wordpress.com/2013/11/29/solomeo/>).

According to this perspective, the emerging interest in sustainable issues related to fashion manufacturing could represent one-of-a-kind opportunity to fortify the identity of places and craftsmanship, repositioning SMEs and their districts not just as “makers” but above all as design hubs and cradles of values (Fry et al, 2017). Then *Solomeo* is not just the name of the company’s location but the reference place for the company values and commitments.

3. Advanced Craft and New Chances to Enhance Sustainability

We can define *savoir-faire* by distinguishing between (semi-skilled) factory labour and (highly-skilled) artisan work that combines making and design setting. The artisan faces complex issues and sets creative ideas, to overpass problems and define effective solutions. In contrast with the assembly-line worker, the craftsman takes control of the entire creation-and-production process, employing a vast range of tools and materials.

Usually, when craftsmanship knowledge meets contemporary technologies, the *savoir-faire* absorbs the technology – within the tangible and intangible thought-in-action of the craftsman. The combination of newer technologies with traditional processes can be termed “advanced craftsmanship” (Goretti, 2017). This synergy between traditional skills and contemporary research allows the transfer of *savoir-faire* to contemporary technological platforms without a reduction or – to use Benjamin’s term – “withering” of the excellence (aura) of craftsmanship values (Fry et al, 2017).

Within the contracting and sub-contracting fashion supply chain, the brand manager or chief designers ordinarily meet directly with the craftsman/manufacturing company (usual-

ly an SME) to define and implement not only the collection production but primarily brainstorming with the SMEs references on how to properly set the final design. Then the design is often defined and systematized, modified and facilitated according to manufacturing within the relation between the brand and the production companies.

Thanks to these privileged relations we had many innovations in fashion during the 80's and 90's about the instruction of new practices and new technologies into the production chain, and then the development of specific design directions within iconic fashion collections. During the last decade, the introduction of significant innovation in production logistics allowed the brand to develop significant changes in time-to-market, collections timing and customer customization services – e-commerce business advancements are just a minor example.

According to *solomodasostenibile.it*, fashion and technology represent a strategic “duo”. In particular, the website specialized in sustainable manufacturing wonders how technology could help the “smart factories” to “talk” to the final customer. Blockchain could represent a significant topic, in fact fashion, transparency and sustainability could work together to generate positive impacts in the market. For example, the start-up company Genuine Way launched a digital platform to directly inform the customer about the physical product and its production history.

4. Case-Histories in Italy and Tunisia

According to the Barcelona Declaration developed in 1995 (Euromed Heritage, 2002), craftsmanship stands as a common language in between different Mediterranean coasts and borders.

The history of ancient civilizations, the relation in between “making”, the identity of a place and manufacturing districts organization are characteristics that could be associated to the different geographical and cultural contexts of this area. In this article, we present two significant advanced craftsmanship’s case studies related to sustainable fashion manufacturing models in Italy and Tunisia. The examples, even if presenting different characteristics and scale of development, stand as bridges in between locally sustainable manufacturing models and contemporary fashion demand. Moreover, the case histories represent synergic relations in between cultural elements related to their genius loci and artisanship roots and design-driven perspective.

4.1. Textile Circular Manufacturing in Prato (Italy)

The European Commission promotes new circular business models in fashion, but according to the 2017 report of Ellen Mc Arthur Foundation just 1% of clothes have been recycled, and according to Textile Exchange 97% of raw materials in fashion manufacturing is virgin. Circular economy in fashion is not just about recycling but about taking in consideration the entire lifecycle of an item, from the design phase until the end of its life (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013).

Designers have a big responsibility for this topic, they have to invest in this substantial change. Furthermore, the collaboration between the design departments of fashion brands and the SMEs of the supply chain stands as a centric activity to make effective recycling of the items.

Prato’s textile district is known for its wool textile manufacture, existing since medieval times and known in particular

for regenerated wool processes called *Cardato* (carded) and textile recycling in general. The city's textile vocation dates back to the 12th century and exploded around the second half of the nineteenth century with the opening of new markets. In 2002, the City of Prato opened the Prato Textile Museum and Lazzerini Library² housed in the *Cimatoria Campolmi Leopoldo e C.* 8,500 m² textile mill, the only 19th-century industrial site within the 14th-century walls of the city. It covers 2,400 m² of the long west wing (ground and first floor) of the architectural complex, sharing the building with the Prato Municipal Library (Lazzerini Library). The site has been dedicated to textiles production since the Middle Age, in fact a *gualchiera* (wool fulling mill) had been built on the same site in 1326. Through direct contact to SMEs, public institutions and research centers (as PIN academic research center of Prato) and associations, the research aims at providing an overview on ongoing sustainable processes within the Prato area.

Based upon this ancient know-how, *Cardato Regenerated CO2 Neutral*³ brand was created in 2015 to offer market fashion leaders an eco-friendly product in line with emerging sustainable trends. Currently, the *Associazione per il tessile Riciclato*⁴ includes the majority of recycling SMEs certified through Textile Exchange Label⁵.

2 Prato Textile Museum: Campolmi Factory, the Prato textile museum and Lazzerini Library. European Route of Industrial Heritage. 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.museodeltessuto.it/museo/?lang=en>; <http://www.bibliotecalazzerini.prato.it>.

3 Cardato and Cardato Regenerated CO2 Neutral brand: <http://www.cardato.it/en/en-home/>.

4 Associazione per il tessile Riciclato: <https://astrirecycling.it/en/astri-recycling-2/>.

5 Textile Exchange - retrieved from <https://www.solomodasostenibile.it/2020/07/24/la-moda-il-riciclo-e-leconomia-circolare/>.

Bags of used clothes arrive in Prato from all over Europe. Then, the companies make a differentiation in between the clothes that could be reused as second-hand items and the ones intended for the recycling process. Then, they select the ones including wool to be sent to *Cardato* treatments.

Carding is a specific way of processing fibres. The yarns are produced using virgin fibres but also reusing fibres obtained from recycling old clothing or knits, and cuttings of new fabrics used in the garment industry. The important feature of this process is that it can use short fibres and different lengths, in blends of the most variable composition. The result is a yarn with a particular aspect that distinguishes it from the other type of yarn known as worsted.

Regenerated wool provided, for centuries, a phenomenal opportunity for the development and growth of the textile district of Prato on world markets. The techniques of the *recycling process* in addition to being fascinating to watch, indicate a culture that has concern for the environment, respect for human resources and a tradition of skill and serious professional entrepreneurship.

Carding process -neglected in recent years and then rediscovered- has led to increased creativity and the production of yarns that are even more unusual and precious in compositions with inimitable fashion content. Carded products in cashmere, angora, alpaca, mohair or other fine wools in blends with silk and viscose are developed and included into some of the most famous fashion collections around the world.

Many production steps are developed by traditional techniques avoiding polluting treatments. In example, in the storages con-

taining the bunches of obsolescent cloths, textile materials are grouped based on colour before initiating the recycling path. Through this differentiation, the regenerated clothes won't need to be coloured again, avoiding a significantly polluting step. On the other hand, the 100 years-old company *Comistra*⁶ represents a significant example in yarns *cleaning*. In this small enterprise, they make the *carbonizzo a vapore* (steam-base carbonization), the traditional process to remove the impurities within the textile regeneration process – the last one left in the world.

In March 2021, the magazine *The National Geographic* published a significant article about Prato textile district and included into the cover a dramatic image of a big bunch of used fabrics. This image could be considered at the first sight as the waste emblem. On the contrary, the cover illustrates how these items are not destined to the rubbish dump, but they could become new clothes to be dressed again.

In fact, *The National Geographic* presents *The End of Trash* (Kunzig, 2020; Goldberg, 2020; Gambi, 2020), a virtuous story based in Prato, one of the capitals of the world's circular economy. Then, the history of manufacturing in Prato, strongly related to the recycling processes, could become today's strategic booster to strengthen the production districts and to further up through effective innovation processes. Besides, in February 2016, a group of companies of Northern Tuscany – many of them are from Prato District – decided to

6 Comistra: <https://comistra.it/en/home/>.

join the Greenpeace Detox⁷ commitments. The common goal is bringing the international Brands to rely on the certainty of eco-friendly products made in Italy (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. International article about Prato's cloths regeneration (retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/editor-can-circular-economy-help-reduce-waste/>).

The strong request of certified “green” suppliers in the global fashion market represents indeed a strategic opportunity for Prato’s advanced craftsmanship. More than 200 SMEs among the District have been certified (*Textile Exchange* or *Detox* certifications) and many international brands based their production in Prato.

Moreover, new fashion trends, events and communication campaigns are boosting sustainable paradigms in fashion.

⁷ Greenpeace Detox: <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/7444/italys-largest-fashion-supply-chain-pledges-to-detox-hazardous-chemicals/>.



Figure 6. Carded textiles (source: Texmoda, Prato).

As an example of this rising interest in eco-fashion, we could mention the Green Carpet Fashion Award (GCFA)⁸ in Milan. The event celebrates the best in a sustainable fashion. The awards reflect the commitment of fashion houses to sustainability, as they work to embrace rapid change while preserving the heritage and authenticity of small-scale producers. The project has been launched in 2017 in collaboration with *Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana* (CNMI), adding glamour and celebrity to sustainability issues in a true Oscars ceremony style. Held every year at La Scala theatre in Milan, they are the only awards ceremony to honour both the handprint of fashion (the human

8 Green Carpet Fashion Awards and Tiziano Guardini: retrieved from <https://eco-age.com/agency/events/green-carpet-fashion-awards/>; <https://eco-age.com/resources/gcfa-award-winners-2017/>.

capital that goes into the making of fashion), as well as to acknowledge the footprint (the natural capital and environmental impact) of fashion at this level. In 2018, the young designer Tiziano Guardini was awarded the *Franca Sozzani GCC Award for Best Emerging Designer* at the Green Carpet Challenge. For his garments in woven fabric, Guardini has chosen recycled wool fabrics, produced with carded yarn regenerated by processing post-consumer waste by *Texmoda*⁹ company, Prato (Fig. 6).

4.2. The Tunisian Straw Weaving Techniques at the Heart of Emerging Sustainable Fashion Brands: the Case of Azalée

The Tunisian fashion brand *Azalée* reintroduced the straw weaving techniques in the contemporary fashion system. Inspired by nature, *Azalée* is conceived and designed based on local natural materials and culture, which are related to the craft of frond making originating from the palm leaves (called *El-Jerid*, as the name of a region in the South-West of Tunisia).

El-Jerid region is located between the provinces of Tozeur (north-west) and Kebili (south-east) and covers an area of 586,187 ha. Dotted with oases where about 1.6 million date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera L.*) grow, El-Jerid is one of Tunisia's most important date-producing regions providing about 85% of Tunisia's total production and a livelihood for nearly 60000 households (Agence de Promotion de l'Industrie et de l'Innovation, 2017). The oases embody a natural ecosystem in which the agricultural system has been created by the exceptional know-how of farmers who have initiated then passed

⁹ Texmoda: <https://www.texmodatessuti.com>.

down through generations practices related to land management, irrigation system, varieties selection and crafted tools adapted to this specific environmental context (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Oasis and Palm trees in El-Jerid region (December 2020) (retrieved from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djerid#/media/File:Bled_El_Hadhar_valley_in_Tozeur,_Tunisia_\(Djerid_Oasis\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Djerid#/media/File:Bled_El_Hadhar_valley_in_Tozeur,_Tunisia_(Djerid_Oasis).jpg)).

Alongside this agriculture feature, El-Jerid region is also known for the historical *savoir-faire* passed down through the generation of the art of making fronds from local palm leaves. The palm leaves are feathery and their length ranges between three and six meters. The date palm produces between ten and twenty fronds per year and is characterized by its flexibility, strength, and durability. The manufacturing process of making fronds is very much in line with the circular economy concept (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). Local craftsmen collect

the green fronds of palm leaves that the local farmers in the oases offer them for free (instead of burning them). The green fronds are classified according to their durability and size. The fronds located at the heart of the fronds are valuable as they provide excellent flexibility, very important to craft the finest artisanal products. The green leaves then get dried under the sun's rays before being washed and braided in the form of belts of a length ranging between 6 and 7 meters, then used locally as raw materials for various artisanal products.

The palm fronds have been used for weaving techniques in several professions including hunting, fishing or also for crafting products such as baskets, umbrella, fan, carpets, chairs, tables, baby beds, baskets for preserving fruits and eggs, and in decoration, for example, *chandeliers* and other lightening accessories.

4.2.1. *Genius Loci* and the Craft of Palm Fronds in the Region of El-Jerid

Palm trees in El-Jerid region provide a livelihood for hundreds of craftsmen and is a key to the understanding of the history of the artisanship associated with the *spirit of the place* (Genius loci). The palm leaves have been used in the past for coarse rope braids that are adopted in several professions, including hunting and fishing, where nets are made for fish and birds. Techniques of harvest and use of palm leaves have rapidly been adopted in the crafting of hats -very useful to protect from the sun in this region where temperatures rise to 50 °c in summer -or also for household uses, collecting and preserving dates, and other food as well as in household furniture and decoration.

The historical know-how and the mastery of craftsmen are deeply rooted in the region of El-Jerid where strong economic and socio-cultural interactions sustain this valuable heritage. The mastery and the art of making fronds and weaving technique have evolved to a natural ecosystem that becomes today a source of inspiration for several emerging Tunisian fashion designers eager to develop contemporary products that combine heritage, culture and premise of sustainable fashion business models.

Based on this traditional know-how and the Tunisian culture of weaving natural leaves, *Azalée* is aiming at regenerating modern handcraft creation to enter the contemporary fashion market as a sustainable brand. *Azalée*'s vision is deeply embedded in bringing nature-based heritage and handcraft creation through contemporary and high-end products in line with today's fashion trends (Fig. 8). As stated by the founder (Amira Dérouiche)¹⁰ "*Azalée* represents a whole universe, a universe inspired by nature, thought and conceived to showcase local materials, ancestral know-how and talented women artisans". The innovative design-oriented and vision of *Azalée* have allowed to create a universe where local natural materials, talented local woman artisans and local suppliers collaborate to create a shared-value. She added the choice of the poetic name of *Azalée*, represents a "flower creating a close link with nature, natural products, textures, smells and senses".

10 Interview, 3rd September 2021.



Figure 8. Azalée, weaved palm hat, collection Chapeau Mira (provided by the founder, Amira Derouiche).

This comprehensive approach adopted by *Azalée* shows that the ability to integrate various partners (e.g. local suppliers, women artisans) has enabled to regenerate ancestral know-how through a sustainable and open design perspective.

This promising emerging brand has entered the world of contemporary designers and has recently created exclusive palm fibre baskets for *l'Occitance* (*The Reset* collection) which was awarded as a best seller. This successful co-branding *Azalée-L'Occitane* reflects the strong engagement of both brands in reshaping the design system, inspired by nature and female talents (Fig. 9).



5. Conclusions

The presented case studies illustrate how the relationship between SMEs and commissioning Global brands stands nowadays as a strategic cradle of tangible and intangible values of high-end fashion products. Then, SMEs companies do not act just as manufacturers but as research hubs able to offer design-oriented solutions and up-to-date implementations. Their design driven perspective allows them to define creative guidelines in collaborations with external designers and to include innovation processes in their production framework. Then, even if we notice a kind of *submittance* of the SMEs to the big corporation, we highlight new potentials for the production districts in generating new business models making manufacturing not only as advanced craftsmen but also as design, branding, service design and sustainable development pillars. The emerging request for transparency and traceability about sustainable values of the supply chain offers a new stage. Eco-responsible SMEs could become the centric focus of sustainable fashion production and develop a new design awareness. The production districts and their *genius loci* could represent a new point of reference and warranty for the global customer. Then, the required certifications requested from multinational corporations to the suppliers could become a quality acknowledgement and a manifesto of the existing link in between the good production and the genius loci where *savoir-faire* is located.

Emerging market trends and these changes have been associated with increasing uncertainty and have revealed the urgent need to refine the business models (e.g. LVMH has announced

the Life 360 environmental programme with a strong focus on climate change and sustainability in a broader approach¹¹). In this context, the role and the importance of craftsmanship have rapidly evolved as a key to refine what are the *core values* of fashion companies in a globalized world. Furthermore, the coming-back of the concept *Made in* has recently been oriented to the original notion *spirit of the place* reflecting a more relevant intangible value of the heritage and culture. Thus, the preservation of exceptional craftsmanship alongside a responsible innovation in product and production processes become more relevant in this fashion industry.

11 Considerations like circular economy or biodiversity have emerged as key elements of the sustainability approach of luxury fashion companies (e.g. LVMH & Stella McCartney, Kering, etc.).

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