

## ORIGINS

### TO THE MAX

IT'S BEEN OVER FIVE DECADES SINCE LAURA LUSUARDI JOINED MAX MARA, ONLY THIRTEEN SHORT YEARS AFTER FOUNDER ACHILLE MARAMOTTI LAUNCHED THE LUXURY LABEL IN REGGIO EMILIA IN 1951. HER EXPERIENCES COULD CERTAINLY FILL A BOOK. HERE, THE FASHION DIRECTOR TELLS SLT ABOUT LIFE AT ITALY'S MOST LUXURIOUS EXPORT.

Words: Julia Seidl

**M**arilyn Monroe once said “You know, most people really don’t know me.” True, it is rare for audiences to look past the blonde bombshell persona and catch a glimpse of the brainy (yes, Norma Jeane attended college classes), bespectacled former wife to playwright Arthur Miller who left behind a 400-book library when she passed away. Yet, one photographer did just that in 1962. Revealing a softer side to the pin-up, George Barris shot an artfully disheveled Marilyn on a Santa Monica beach, clinging to her chunky cardigan and towel. It was that Marilyn, right down to the gripping of her outerwear that served as the muse to Max Mara’s Fall 2015 collection. A tousled Gigi Hadid, playing up her pin-up girl proportions, opened the show in the luxury label’s signature camel coat. It was the fashion equivalent to a hat trick - an icon channeling an icon, wearing what has become the house’s most iconic piece.

Since launching the double-breasted wool cashmere camel coat in 1981, it has become the Italian brand’s trademark and all-time bestseller. In those 34 years since the piece - known universally by its style number 101801 - first hit the fashion scene, Max Mara Fashion Director Laura Lusuardi hasn’t changed a thing with the design. Cut like a man’s coat, the cocooning topper incorporates oversized kimono-like sleeves without a buckle or button in sight, leaving wearers to clutch the overcoat closed, should the need arise. “We consider it to be a perfect piece of design,” says Laura who has been with the brand since 1964. “Its absolute simplicity, eternal elegance and perfect proportions made it timeless.” Like the rest of their outerwear stylings that customers like Katharine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Lauren Bacall once craved from the brand, the 101801 is still made in their Reggio Emilia atelier and head office. “We make sure the link between the style office and production is very tight, ensuring that the final product is of an excellent quality.”

This tradition of the highest quality craftsmanship goes back to the label’s founder Achille Maramotti who formed Max Mara in 1951. He followed in the footsteps of the matriarchs of his family, including his ►



Max Mara's Reggio Emilia head office and factory. Below: Their 101801 coat in production and fashion director Laura Lusuardi.



great-grandmother Marina Rinaldi, who in 1850 owned a dressmaking atelier in the centre of Reggio Emilia, a small cathedral town in the Po Valley of Italy best known for their Parmesan. His mother Guila Fontanesa Maramotti, inherited Marina's passion and began teaching modeling and sewing in 1925. She later published a series of books on the theory of cutting and created the Maramotti Cutting and Dressmaking School, a local tailoring and pattern-making school.



It wasn't a stretch for a young Achille to build on the trade that had come so naturally to his mother and great-grandmother and so, at the age of 24, he founded Max Mara. Inspired by styles of French high fashion but using modern, technologically advanced tailoring techniques (an important differentiation for a country that was used to only hand-made garments), Achille originally specialized in the production of coats. His first collection included a camel coat and geranium red suit with a goal to dress the growing middle class population, or "the doctor's wife" as he used to say. Though legend states the company was named after Count Max, aristocrat living in Reggio Emilia at the time who was a symbol of elegance and class, Laura has dispelled that myth, explaining that the 'Mara' clearly comes from the family's last name with the addition of 'Max' due to Achille's desire for something that was easy to pronounce with an international flair.

For Laura, who arrived on the scene only thirteen years after the brand was founded, Max Mara became like a second home. "I've always liked fashion as I was born in it, it's part of my DNA," says Laura. "I come from a family of retail owners from Guastalla, near Reggio Emilia. My father used to sell fabrics, we had a store since 1911. In the '50s our store turned



into a confectionery boutique and we also bought Max Mara." After her father asked their salesmen if they had a position for his daughter, Laura interviewed with Achille before being brought on board. Referring to him as her mentor, she credits her late boss with educating her in all she knows about the business. "He taught me to always move forward in life and always walk with my head high."

Despite Laura's intricate involvement with every element of the brand, Max Mara has never singled out one designer as the face of the brand. Instead a series of fashion's heaviest hitters have all moonlighted for the luxury label, from Karl Lagerfeld in 1971 and 1972 to Domenico Dolce, Stefano Gabbana,

Giambattista Valli, Narciso Rodriguez and Proenza Schouler's Jack McCullough and Larzaro Hernandez. Their roles have always gone unpublicised, a decision that Laura says drives to the heart of the house's philosophy. "Creativity has never been intended as pure innovation or reliant on the abilities of an individual but developed through a combined production process involving several professionals." Though their collaboration with French designer Anne-

Marie Beretta stands out in Laura's mind as the one she's enjoyed the most. It's clear from the fruit of that project – the 101801 coat – that their clients certainly agree with her.

1965 brought with it the short lived Max Mara Pop, an innovative collection geared towards a younger audience, which eventually evolved into Sportmax in 1969. "Sportmax was the first example of a coordinated, total look wardrobe which originated from the style of sportswear imported from the US," says Laura who admits that throughout her five decade-long (and counting) career at the label, her proudest and happiest moment was when they presented their first Sportmax show in 1976 at the Hotel Principe de Savoia in Milan.

Last year marked a milestone for Laura and the brand as she celebrated half a century with Max Mara. "They prepared a beautiful surprise party for me and I was delighted," says the director. "Yet, to be honest, I wouldn't have celebrated it. I think we shouldn't mark any milestone but keep living just like life was a continuous evolution flow, without giving ourselves limits." Perhaps this sentiment can be applied to the brand as a whole. Despite a seasonal industry and a business model that includes everything from ready-to-wear to luxury leather accessories, Max Mara isn't a trend-driven brand or one that is focused on reinvention. Its heritage is its livelihood and its evolution is subtle but always in demand, just like their classic 101801 coat. ©

[world.maxmara.com](http://world.maxmara.com)

## 64 YEARS OF MAX MARA'S 'MADE IN ITALY'

**1951:**

Max Mara was founded by Achille Maramotti in the town of Reggio Emilia



**1969:**

A dose of American sportswear comes to Europe via Sportmax, an evolution to Max Mara POP



**1981:**

The 101801 camel coat is born and quickly becomes the brand's best-selling piece



**1993:**

The 1990s brought a wave of iconic advertising campaigns shot by visionary photographers like Max Vadukul, who shot Carla Bruni



**2009:**

Max Mara Atelier, a special project that puts variations on the coat centre stage and is only available in 60 stores around the world, arrives



**2015:**

Partnering with the new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, Max Mara launches the limited edition Whitney bag, which sold out immediately ©

