

View from the show: UK brands at Pitti Uomo AW19

By Paul Alger, UK Fashion & Textile Association (UKFT)

Pitti Uomo is the first major tradeshow of the season, launching the menswear and accessories selling season. This January, UKFT took an almost record-breaking group of 106 British brands to the fair, reconfirming the industry's commitment to exports in the run-up to Brexit and also to Pitti Uomo itself. The UK remains the second largest exhibiting group after the host country, with our closest rival being France.

Visitors

The organisers' official attendance figures show that the foreign presence closely matched that of January 2018 with in excess of 9,100 international buyers, whereas the number of Italian buyers dropped by 8% although the UK exhibitors felt that the drop was more substantial. This drop had the effect of making the show feel quieter overall at times even though the UK exhibitors confirmed that they had mostly seen their key international accounts, especially from Japan, the USA, Korea and China. Most UK companies show in Florence primarily for their US and Asian markets. The official total number of buyers reached 23,800.

Germany was again confirmed as the fair's top international market (over 800 German buyers attended); there was an expected fall in the number of French buyers (-11%) as well as an equally expected drop in buyers from the United Kingdom (- 5%) albeit the drop was less severe than the organisers had expected in the context of Brexit. Spain and the Netherlands were as the previous year.

There were notable increases from Switzerland (+ 9%), Belgium (+ 6%), the Scandinavian countries, Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Ukraine. Beyond Europe, Japan was confirmed in second place among the most important markets, although there was a drop in the number of individuals coming from each company even though the number of stores represented remained the same. The trend for China was similar, which was encouraging as we had been expecting a substantial drop in line with the slowdown in the Chinese economy. Some countries registered very encouraging increases: Canada (+11%), Hong Kong (+5%), India (+20%).

The top 20 countries in terms of attendance were:

- Germany (810 buyers at this edition)
- Japan (705)
- United Kingdom (570)
- Netherlands (564)
- Spain (540)
- Turkey (398)

- France (366)
- Switzerland (337)
- Belgium (271)
- United States (256)
- China (234)
- Korea (219)
- Russia (195)
- Greece (183)
- Portugal (158)
- Austria (154)
- Sweden (144)
- Denmark (136)
- Canada (104)
- Norway (97)

There were also record numbers on the media and social media front: more than 2,700 international fashion editors, influencers and media representatives; and the four days of Pitti Uomo 95 generated around 9,160 posts and 3 million interactions on social media. The organisers calculate that the event has already had an overall Media Impact Value (MIV) around 10 million euros.

Raffaello Napoleone, CEO of Pitti Immagine, said “For months we have been reading about growth estimates, trading figures, final consumption data for Italy, Europe, the whole world. But instead of locking ourselves indoors and waiting for the critical conditions and bad times to pass, this [international menswear] community has leapt into action in order to give its very best.”

UKFT had a stand to represent the British group in Salone M. The #britsinflurence videoloop was shown on the stand and we were delighted to be visited by HM Ambassador and HM Trade Commissioner for Europe and to take them on an official tour of key exhibitors including [Barbour](#), which was celebrating 125 years, [Oliver Spencer](#), [Lamler](#) and [Walker Slater](#).

UK focus

In addition to the UKFT stand in Salone M, there were a number of British elements during Pitti Uomo.

Firstly, the very popular Department of International Trade (DIT) China networking event at the nearby Grand Hotel Baglioni on Tuesday evening. The event is an opportunity for Chinese buyers and British exhibitors to meet each other even though this time the buyers and exhibitors seemed to be reluctant to introduce themselves to each other.

Secondly, DIT Italy organised a successful Sustainable Fashion event on the Wednesday at the British Institute in Florence entitled “Lessons in Sustainable Fashion”. The event was attended by HE the British Ambassador to Italy, Jill Morris, and HM Trade Commissioner for Europe Mr Andrew Mitchell CMG.

The panel discussions were coordinated by Orsola de Castro, founder of the highly influential [Fashion Revolution](#) #whomademyclothes movement and the speakers included Christopher Raeburn and Bav Tailor as well as representatives from Burberry, Vivienne Westwood and Stella McCartney. Over 90 journalists and industry figures attended the event including journalist Suzy Menkes, who asked the most important question of the day about how the fashion industry should move its important conversation about sustainability to the public who buy the products and bear the ultimate responsibility?

New exhibitors

Especially this season, and in spite of the usual pressure for space, the organisers went out of their way to work closely with UKFT to bring in a number of notable new brands into the show. This was made slightly easier as there were one or two larger Italian brands which did not show, thus freeing up much needed space for exciting new British brands:

[Arc Minute](#) in My Factory
[Baudoin & Lange](#) in Arena Strozzi
[Cottweiler for Allegri](#) in Central Pavilion
[Diego Vanassibara](#) in Arena Strozzi
[Eleanor McDonald](#) (prizewinner) in Unconventional
[Foster & Son](#) in Piano Attico
[Heimat](#) in l’Altro Uomo
[Holland Esquire](#) in Salone M
[Immortal](#) in l’Altro Uomo
[JJS Lee Man](#) in Unconventional
[Marcus De](#) returning to the show in Make
[Matteo Bigliardi](#) in Unconventional

Eleanor McDonald was awarded her stand as a result of winning the 16th International Talent Support Award in Trieste.

There were also some important returning second-timers and brands in some of the newer areas:

- [1x1 Studio](#) at Touch
- [Griffin](#) in I-Go-Out
- [Raeburn](#) in I-Go-Out
- [Whitehouse Cox](#) in Touch
- [Workhouse England](#) in Touch

Mood of the show

Most of the British brands reported good business at the show. It felt generally less crowded than at some previous editions, especially with some of the Italian “noise” missing in action, but the key buyers were definitely there. Most were placing orders although some were only making selections, to be confirmed later. Others expected to follow up with brands and see new ones in Paris, especially at Man Paris, Tranoi and Welcome Edition showroom.

As Pitti Uomo was taking place, all eyes were on UK politics to see how parliament would vote on the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal. A number of the larger brands told UKFT that they have now put their own plan B into progress, effectively warehousing on the continent for distribution to web-based and wholesale EU business based on their no-deal plans.

Most of them said they had come to this decision very reluctantly and that they hoped to be able to revisit this if there was a deal but others accepted that they would probably stick with their continental distribution as they have had to make a substantial investment to secure their businesses in the face of uncertainty over Brexit.

Most British businesses were incredulous at the lack of clarity and planning time left before the UK is due to leave the EU and most privately said they hoped for a postponement (or indeed a cancellation) of Brexit as their preferred option.

Global conditions

Around the world, most parts of the world now have major political challenges which dampen prospects for the industry in 2019: from Brexit and the rise of nationalist parties and policies in Europe, Donald Trump and his federal government shutdown in the US, ongoing tensions and rivalry with Russia and in the Middle East and the Chinese slowdown.

All these elements mean that businesses face major challenges in 2019 and beyond. It was, therefore, all the more reassuring that most British brands saw most of their regular customers, many placing good orders and that those who were going on to Paris Men’s Fashion Week also had their appointments reconfirmed.

“There was a lot of concern about business in the run up to Pitti Uomo,” said Paul Alger, international business director at UKFT. “Most parts of the world are in some form of turmoil and the UK’s relationship with our largest export market is volatile, to say the least. However,

the majority of the British exhibitors have reported good business with new and existing customers in the EU, the US, Japan, China and South Korea in particular and it is fair to say that the season has started on a very positive note in Florence. We look forward to seeing how the rest of the season pans out.”

What the British exhibitors said

Bill Leach, global sales director at John Smedley in l’Altro Uomo, was pleased with the show:

“Overall, we were very pleased with the event. We saw the usual good numbers of high quality retailers, existing and new. The most notable difference this season was a marked increase in luxury retail visitors from China, we assume, directly resulting from our activities within China across the last 12 months.”

Ann Ryley, sales and marketing director at Begg & Co, said after a very busy show on a new stand on the lower floor of the Central Pavilion: “At Begg & Co we had our best Pitti yet. Our stand was very well attended with customers from many markets; Japan, China, Korea, US, Canada, Turkey, Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, Benelux and the UK. It wasn’t just the quantity but also the quality of retailers we saw which was important. We received many compliments about our collection and the new stand. This despite all the uncertainties relating to Brexit and increases in raw material prices.”

Allistair Croot, founder of Croots, showing in Arena Strozzi, said: “The show went well and we are now making good progress with key accounts as a result.”

Matteo Bigliardi, a newcomer, showing in Unconventional, said: “Pitti Uomo was a great platform for my new brand. As a small company, without the help of a large team or backer, this was the right place to meet new buyers and press and there were far more of them there than any other event I have done”.

Shaun Pearce, sales and product manager at Chester Jefferies, a regular in Salone M, said: “This year’s show was an incredible success and had a certain buzz about it, you could really tell the footfall was higher and the right people were attending. We are hopeful to expand into new markets this year because of Pitti Uomo. It remains the most relevant menswear show in the world”.

Paul Walker, designer and founder of Walker Slater, showing in Salone M for the first time, said: “Pitti Uomo offered a great platform for Walker Slater to show case our AW19 collection featuring Harris Tweed, and tweeds from the Scottish Borders, Italian wools and Shetland knits. We met with returning partners/customers and began to look at developing some new relationships in Europe and beyond. The setting and support from UKFT was helpful from start to finish.”

Richard Tyler, co-founder of Tyler and Tyler in the central pavilion Pop Up stores area, said: “This was our third time showing at Pitti Uomo – we were visited by buyers from America, Japan, France, Spain, Portugal, the Far East and the Middle East. It truly is an international show.”

Christian Hoffman, founder of Heimat, showing in l’Altro Uomo for the first time, said: “Pitti Uomo was a great platform to showcase my brand internationally. I made great new contacts especially in Japan, with orders from Beams and Ships in Japan and Trunk in London.”

Martin Gill, representing Oliver Spencer at l’Altro Uomo show, was more cautious: “The show was success in that it has allowed us see international customers we wouldn’t otherwise see but we felt there was a lack of new footfall. Nevertheless, the show represents the largest cross-section of the Men’s market. We expect to be back next season but we are keeping a careful eye on developments around Brexit and there are a few menswear date clashes on the horizon. If we have to travel on an ATA Carnet this would make things very complicated for us and others”.

Chris Jones, representing Corgi in Salone M, said: “As usual this was a very successful show, we saw all the customers we expected to see and some very promising new ones!”.

William Church, joint managing director of Joseph Cheaney, showing in the Piano Attico was quoted in Drapers as saying: “The Japanese have been out in force, as they always are here. We have also seen buyers from Sweden, Italy, Germany and Hong Kong. There have been a few from the UK and Nordstrom from the US. Pitti is our strongest show.”

Anthony Bingham, founder of Jimbag in My Factory was especially pleased: ““Fantastic show! The best in the world! Pitti is full of amazing contacts, which has strengthened our business in numerous ways. There’s a real buzz and atmosphere about the place and we always look forward to it”

Paul Alger, UK Fashion & Textile Association,
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