

View from the show: UK menswear at Pitti Uomo SS20

Although a quieter edition than recent seasons, menswear trade show Pitti Immagine Uomo (11-15 June 2019) still maintained its buzz, reports Paul Alger, UK Fashion & Textile Association (UKFT) from Florence

The June 2019 edition of Pitti Uomo was anticipated with high hopes and mixed expectations by British exhibitors. Pitti Uomo is the first major international menswear event of the season, hot on the heels of London Fashion Week Men's, and ahead of Milan Collezioni Uomo and Paris Men's Fashion Week.

This year, some 97 British brands confirmed their participation at the summer edition of the fair, only three down on the record number set in 2018. Based on this, the UK remains the largest national group after the host country but the number of French exhibitors has raced ahead to almost 90 exhibitors, spurred on by a very generous ongoing grant support scheme, benefitting more than half the entire group, that British brands can only dream about.

The menswear market has not been immune to the challenges of a changing distribution system, a move to multi-channel and online models and the progressive weakening of multi-brand retailers. Matters are made worse for British companies by the uncertainties surrounding Brexit which are a constant topic of conversation and deep concern for companies trying to export goods from and into the UK.

Overall, and all things considered, there was an air of positivity surrounding this year's Pitti Uomo. In general terms, the British exhibitors felt that visitor numbers were down quite markedly (probably by as much as 25%) on the previous summer show, especially from Italy, but the quality of buyers and the show itself were judged to be very high. Most reported having had a positive experience at Pitti Uomo, with some exhibitors reporting their best summer edition ever! Others were more cautious, pointing out that the challenges facing the international menswear industry were making it increasingly difficult for brands to invest in their wholesale business at both editions of the show.

It is important to bear in mind that British exporters invest in the show not to reach Italian buyers but to meet their counterparts in other markets, especially the USA and Asia. With this in mind, the lack of Italian buyers was not a significant issue for UK brands but it may have been for others. Drapers correctly identified this in their "Pitti Positivity" report on 21st June in which Harriet Brown and Grace Whelan reported that "exhibitors praised the turnout at the spring 20 edition of Pitti Uomo and insisted on the menswear show's importance". Buyers from the

UK were out in force with names such as Flannels, Next, Matchesfashion, and Browns being spotted but, for the Brits, the accent was very much on the major internationals, from Mr Porter to Bergdorf Goodman, Tsum Moscow, Ships Tokyo, Noos Shanghai and United Arrows Japan to name but a few.

According to the organisers' official figures, there were 30,000 visitors in total and over 18,500 buyers from 100 countries. The organisers registered good attendances from markets including France, Turkey, Hong Kong, Belgium and Russia. Conversely, and following on with a similar trend from January and 2018, there was a notable drop in visitor numbers from China. There were also drops in numbers from Germany, Spain, Japan. However, the largest decrease was felt in the number of Italian buyers, a reflection of the state of Italian retail and the decreasing number of multi-brand independent boutiques which used to drive the Italian menswear industry.

Raffaello Napoleone, Pitti Immagine's director said: "This is a difficult year. Everyone knows it: the main indicators of the trend of international trade point to a slowdown nearly everywhere, a phenomenon that inevitably occurs whenever the global economy suddenly hits the brakes, starting with key countries like China and Germany". He continued: "As far as Pitti Uomo is concerned, in the past few weeks, we had already predicted that there could be a slight downturn in the positive trend of attendance registered in recent seasons. However it is also true that distribution is undergoing enormous changes before our eyes: today a buyer for a large online platform pulls as much weight as tens of specialist boutiques a few years ago. Therefore we remain optimistic and are putting measures in place with a sense of realism".

Germany once again led the ranking of the top 20 markets (814 buyers at this edition), followed by Japan (684), United Kingdom (503), Spain (499), Netherlands (458), France (403), Turkey (336), China (310), United States (264), Switzerland (255), Belgium (254), South Korea (197), Russia (187), Austria (142), Greece (137), Portugal (126), Hong Kong (122), Sweden (106), Poland (104) and Denmark (94).

As every year, there was an impressive number of events during Pitti Uomo including the Salvatore Ferragamo catwalk show in Piazza della Signoria and the big event at Piazzale Michelangelo to commemorate 90 years of LuisaViaRoma. Whilst these events were popular and visible, for the first time in a number of years, a number of the exhibitors (not just British and Italians) commented to UKFT that these events had had the unwelcome effect of distracting attention away from the important work which needed to be done at the show.

UKFT took its usual stand in Salone M which we used as a base to support and visit the UK companies at the show and support them with Social Media coverage as part of our #britsinflorance campaign. Companies were also offered (and generally took) our UKFT #britsinflorance stickers. From the information stand, we were able to put information on UK brands in the hands of international buyers (approx. 50 visits were made to the stand) and put information in the press office. The information stand also featured information on UKFT's www.letsmakeithere.org site which has been relaunched with support from the Department for International Trade and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and is now available to connect UK manufacturers with their customers in 7 languages: English, Italian, French, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin and Korean.

There was a record-breaking 19 UK companies with TAP grants from the Department for International Trade, organised by UKFT. These were:

1x1 Studio	www.1x1studio.co.uk
Arc Minute	www.thearcminute.com
Baudoin and Lange	www.baudoinandlange.com
Bucklesbury	www.bucklesbury.com
Cambridge Satchel Co	www.cambridgesatchel.com
Crombie	www.crombie.co.uk
Folk	www.folkclothing.com
Foster & Son	www.foster.co.uk
Hemingsworth	www.hemingsworth.co.uk
Holland Esquire	www.hollandesquire.com
Jimbag	www.jimbag.co.uk
Lamler	www.lamler.com
Love Brand	www.lovebrand.com
Mandkhai	www.mandkhai.com
Marcus De'	www.marcus-de.com
RH45	www.rh45.co

TWC The Workers' Club www.theworkersclub.co.uk

Twisk www.twiskshoes.com

Walker Slater www.walkerslater.com

On Tuesday, the British Consulate in Shanghai kindly hosted a networking event to encourage Chinese buyers and press to meet the British exhibitors on the rooftop of the Grand Hotel Baglioni. The event was immensely well received by the British exhibitors and a small (but perfectly formed) number of very prestigious Chinese and Hong Kong stores and guests.

Finally, on Thursday night, UBM, organisers of the MRket and Project shows in New York and Las Vegas hosted a drinks reception for approx. 35 British exhibitors at the stunning Four Seasons hotel.

From an overall business viewpoint, Pitti Uomo did lack some of the “noise” and dynamism we have seen in previous editions, this was very much in line with UKFT’s and the organisers’ expectations. The world is a challenging market at the moment and Brexit only serves to complicate this and make it even harder for British companies to secure orders at the show. Notwithstanding this, there were a number of brands who reported that they had met major new retailers, both bricks and mortar and online and that they had done good business at the show.

Those brands that said they had had excellent or, indeed, their “best ever” summer editions included: Albert Thurston, Barbour, John Smedley (celebrating their 235 year anniversary), Hardy and Parsons, Gloverall, Harris Wharf, Jamieson’s, Raeburn, and Walker Slater.

Paul Alger MBE, international business director at UKFT, commented: “These are challenging times for British fashion and textile exporters made substantially worse by the ongoing uncertainties over Brexit. British companies have shown great commitment by sticking with the show and represent the most innovative and luxurious products at the show. This remains the largest and broadest collection of British menswear to show under one roof and Pitti would not be Pitti without the Brits!”

He continued: "Whilst there have been quiet periods this year, the best and strongest international buyers and platforms have come to Florence: they have looked, sat down, talked, taken notes, made plans and written orders here and (he sighs) the Peacocks also turned up."

Quotes from exhibitors:

Anthony Bingham of Jimbag in My Factory: "We've managed to secure an Italian distributor during our visit this year. Pitti is full of amazing contacts in which has strengthened our business in numerous ways. There's a real buzz and atmosphere about the place and we always look forward to exhibit at Pitti Uomo"

Helen Plummer of Lamler in L'Altro Uomo:: "Pitti did seem quieter this season for sure, however there were still many of the important retailers present, but perhaps with smaller buying teams attending. It continues to be an optimistic show for us even though spring/summer is not our strong season. We have always had a lot of support from Pitti and hope that the next autumn/winter show will pick up in footfall...and people wanting to buy coats!"

Claire Pentony of Walker Slater in Salone M: "Pitti Uomo offered a great platform for Walker Slater to show case our SS20 collection featuring Scottish tweeds, Irish and Italian linens and cotton shirting and lighter weight knits. We met with returning partners/customers and began to look at developing some new relationships in Europe and beyond. We felt we met and engaged with relevant menswear press also. The support from UKFT was helpful from start to finish."

Will Dixon of Raeburn in I Go Out said: "This was our third season in I Go Out which continues to get a very positive reaction from buyers, trade and media passing through. Although quieter than previous seasons, we still believe Pitti Uomo to be an important platform for us to present our seasonal collections and we were very pleased with the quality of the stores we met throughout the week".

Dates for the next edition are 7-10 January. For details on how to apply for vetting, space and/or grants contact paul.alger@ukft.org