

A NORWEGIAN IN FLORENCE

He came to Paris with nothing but a sewing machine. 20 years later he is creative director at the prestigious Pucci fashion house in Florence. Plaza tells the tale of Peter Dundas.

TEXT AND PHOTO JOHN WERICH



Office products, abstract patterns and renaissance paintings - fashion designer Peter Dundas's new workplace is a living museum.

Peter Dundas's room with a view of Via Dei Pucci. Notice the Moor, set into the gold table to the right. The man's head, part of the Pucci family's ancient family coat of arms, can be seen throughout the palace.



For his debut collection for autumn/winter 2009, Dundas broke with tradition and created his own Pucci patterns.

PHOTO: SOPHIA SANCHEZ & MAURO MONTELEONE

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PALACE in Florence is a stone's throw from the Duomo: Palazzo Pucci.

Family portraits from the Renaissance peer down from the walls and the chandeliers from Murano provide a magical glow. The floors are covered in carpets with psychedelic patterns by one of the greatest clothes designers of our time, the Marchese di Barsento, Emilio Pucci.

– It's fantastic isn't it? Working in a palace is a dream, and the purpose of fashion is to make people dream, says Peter Dundas, the new head designer at the venerable fashion house.

He's dressed entirely in white and shows me his office with a view of the street, Via Dei Pucci. The modern office furniture looks rather out of place in this living museum that has been owned by the family since the 16th century. That was when the Pucci clan made it's name as advisors to the Medici family. The palace is still run like it was in the old days. Emilio Pucci's widow, Marquesa Cristina, lives on the next floor up. Her daughter Laudomia, Image Director for Pucci, lives with her husband and three children on the top floor. Many greats have been guests here: Kissinger, the Agnelli family (owners of Fiat) and von Furstenberg. Today models are standing on the tables in the big ballroom, surrounded by designers and assistants, amid feverish activity. The collection must be finished in under a week.

– It's top secret, says Dundas from behind his desk, which is covered in paper, magazines, pictures, scented candles and press cuttings.

Several people who have worked with Peter Dundas describe

him as intense, unstructured and stressed. He often works until late at night. But the Peter sitting in front of me is surprisingly calm, and talkative too. He talks about how he misses the light Scandinavian nights, how different Florence is compared to Paris and how he views the legacy of Emilio Pucci.

SO HOW DID A NORWEGIAN end up here, in the middle of the Florentine fashion aristocracy? Peter Dundas was born in Norway in 1965. His father was a Norwegian doctor, and his mother an American philharmonic musician. He moved to the US when he was fourteen.

– I started at the Parsons fashion academy straight after high school. I spent countless hours doing life-drawing, and that was when I became obsessed with the female body. I have never tired of dressing it in colours, cuts and patterns.

Peter Dundas has been to Florence before, then as a designer for Roberto Cavalli. But his history as a designer starts in Paris in 1990, where legend has it that he arrived with nothing but three bags and a sewing machine. His route to the top was the result of plenty of hard work. Ten years as an assistant, first at Comedie Francaise and then Jean Paul Gaultier, led to design work for Christian Lacroix and Cavalli. In 2005 he returned to Paris as the new creative director of the Emanuel Ungaro fashion house.

– There's a big difference between working here and in Paris. I am more comfortable working with Italians, they have a fantastic work culture. But I try to be in Paris every week. I have my home there, and my dog. I have travelled around so much in my life, so I see Paris as my base. ↘



The big ballroom, where the old Pucci patriarchs pored over political schemes. Emilio Pucci invited his clients here for shows back in the day. Today it is a studio.



Palazzo Pucci was built by Renaissance sculptor and architect Bartolomeo Ammannati in the 16th century. The palace has been owned by the family ever since.

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Italy and Florence have a completely different work culture than hectic Paris. In Italy people take it easier. There is always time for the essential things in life. Like food, drink and good friends.

– That’s one of the best things about Florence, the food really is much better here.

Despite its small size, Florence is also a world class fashion hub. It was here and not in Milan that the Made in Italy culture was founded. This is where you will find the headquarters for Roberto Cavalli, Salvatore Ferragamo, Gucci and Ermanno Scervino. The majority of the bags and shoes for the world’s biggest fashion houses are still made in the area.

Emilio’s spirit still inhabits Palazzo Pucci even though he died over 20 years ago. Like many other Italian fashion houses, they cherish the memory of their patriarch. Emilio Pucci was a jet-setter, an elite sportsman when he was young and a politician when he was older. He was also a fascist during the Mussolini era, and is said to have had a romance with the dictator’s daughter Edda.

They say that his fashion career started in December 1947 when Pucci and a lady friend, styled by him, were discovered by

a Harper’s Bazaar photographer in Zermatt. The magazine’s editor Diana Vreeland asked Pucci to design a ski fashion collection for a feature the following year. Later Pucci opened a shop in the fashionable resort Canzone del Mare on Capri. There he designed and sold colourful holiday clothes that were popular with tourists like Jackie Kennedy and Sophia Loren. Emilio Pucci had arrived. Not least thanks to his patterns, inspired by everything from Sicilian mosaics to batik from Bali. In the sixties and seventies his designs were worn by icons like Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly. Marilyn Monroe, a dedicated Pucci collector, wore a green Pucci dress to her own funeral.

– The patterns are, and always will be, a major part of Pucci. I’m not going to change that. But I don’t want the Pucci girl to disappear behind prints. I use the archives to a certain extent, but in an organic way, says Dundas.

It was when Emilio Pucci died of a heart attack in 1992 that his daughter Laudomia took over, and Pucci experienced a boom. In the early noughties this renewed interest led to LVMH buying 67 percent of the company. The luxury conglomerate thought that the company had stagnated however, and hired Christian Lacroix as creative director.

”My Pucci woman is rock’n’roll. I see her as someone who likes to have fun, who travels a lot and is international.”

IN OCTOBER 2005 Matthew Williamson took over. He was famous for his feel for colours and patterns. Back then Dundas was considered for the post as creative director, but he was working for Roberto Cavalli. His sexy, rock’n’roll style made a deep impression on the LVMH decision makers.

– I was very happy when LVMH contacted me about Pucci, because it is a label that I like a lot. We had been in touch before but then I was already finalising my negotiations with Ungaro.

What’s it like working for a big group like LVMH?

– Great, especially in times like these. LVMH has a special relationship to its designers. They place a lot of emphasis on designers expressing their vision and retaining their individuality. They also expect product development to take place at a high level. You have security, while you also have freedom. A designer can’t ask for any more than that.

Peter Dundas’s Pucci debut, the autumn/winter 2009 collection, is a clear departure from previous designers’ interpretation of Pucci. His vision was braver, darker and sexier. The lack of references to Pucci’s classic patterns is striking.

– I try to see the whole concept as a little more abstract and

not just about prints. It’s more about what the prints mean to me. Colours, patterns, freedom, rock’n’roll, glamour. To me the collection was very Pucci. I think that every designer has to give their version of what a fashion house is.

– My Pucci woman is rock’n’roll. I see her as someone who likes to have fun, who travels a lot and is international.

How do you work with Laudomia Pucci?

– We have very close contact. It’s amazing to work with someone who has such great knowledge of the house’s history. She also has advanced technical know-how about everything to do with prints.

So will the next step be men’s clothes?

– I’m not ruling it out. But at the same time it’s important to take one step at a time, focus on that and do it well before moving on.

Pucci started out making skiwear and resort clothes. He was inspired by places like the Alps and Capri. Where do find your inspiration?

– I have always liked to be active, go diving, surfing and so on. The first time I discovered kite surfing in the Caribbean and saw all the kites up in the sky, the first thought that occurred to me was that I would have made kites with Pucci patterns – if I was Pucci. ©