Cashmere and Compassion

Brunello Cucinelli has designs on better wardrobes and a better world.

BY WILLIAM KINSF

The sounds of tapping hammers and buzzing saws echo through Solomeo, Italy, as they have for much of the past two decades. On this summer day, construction crews are on schedule to complete the hilltop village’s first public theater, the Teatro delle Arti, for its September 2008 opening performance.

Some of these craftsmen have been working steadily in Solomeo—in Italy’s Umbria region—for 22 years, moving from one project to the next. They began by restoring the 13th-century castle that dominates the village, turned their attentions to reconstructing the Church of Saint Bartolommeo, then moved on to building a school.

A double-breasted gray flannel jacket, cashmere sweater, and calf-length cotton trousers embody Brunello Cucinelli’s sporty style.
the Accademia Solomeo, and now they are working on the theater.

The construction is not the mandate of the local government; it represents the mission of clothing designer Brunello Cucinelli, who vowed to restore the hamlet—where his wife, Federica, was born and raised—to its picture-postcard state. Cucinelli is revered here as much for rebuilding the town as he is for producing some of Italy’s finest cashmere clothing.

In 1985, Cucinelli moved his fledgling cashmere business from the nearby city of Perugia to Solomeo (located about 90 miles southeast of Florence, near Assisi) with the intention of establishing more than just a corporate headquarters (which he set up in the medieval castle, with his office on the top floor); he envisioned a kind of utopian society where culture and a sense of community would coexist harmoniously with commerce. The construction projects are part of that vision. “The buildings we live and work in were built 700 years ago, when they built beautiful things to last and help nurture the people who live in them,” says Cucinelli. “It’s important that we do the same for future generations, regardless of whether we are talking about clothing or architecture or anything else we enjoy.”

Cucinelli, whose boyish good looks belie his intensity, is dressed in one of his hallmark ensembles: trim-cut, cream-colored corduroy slacks with a knit shirt and a pullover sweater, topped with a gray cashmere blazer with suede elbow patches. “I like to look and dress as if I were younger,” says Cucinelli, who claims to be 49 but actually is 54.

His jacket’s collar is turned up, revealing an embroidered image of the domed Accademia Solomeo. Cucinelli had the school built so that locals could learn about cashmere and clothes making. He also envisioned the school as a place where people could gather and exchange thoughts and ideas, like the coffeehouse in Perugia he frequented during the early 1970s, when he was a young engineering student. There he would play cards and share stories with friends, would-be philosophers, and even a prostitute. “That was a great way to learn about life; that openness to new ideas is what I want to bring to Solomeo,” says Cucinelli, who regularly reads works by Rousseau and Socrates. He lists Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Charlie Chaplin among an eclectic group whom he calls his “mentors of life,” noting, “Chaplin was a great observer of humanity.”

During the 2006 holiday season, Cucinelli gave copies of the Koran to his employees, to facilitate a greater understanding of the Muslim world. “I’m always looking for ways to encourage a dialogue,” he explains. “We don’t speak anymore as a society.”

As he speaks, Cucinelli pulls sheets of paper from a neat stack on his oversize desk and meticulously sketches cryptic symbols and diagrams: a vertical line that divides the page in half, a half circle that stands for the Accademia’s domed roof, and a few words in Italian that he vigorously underlines.