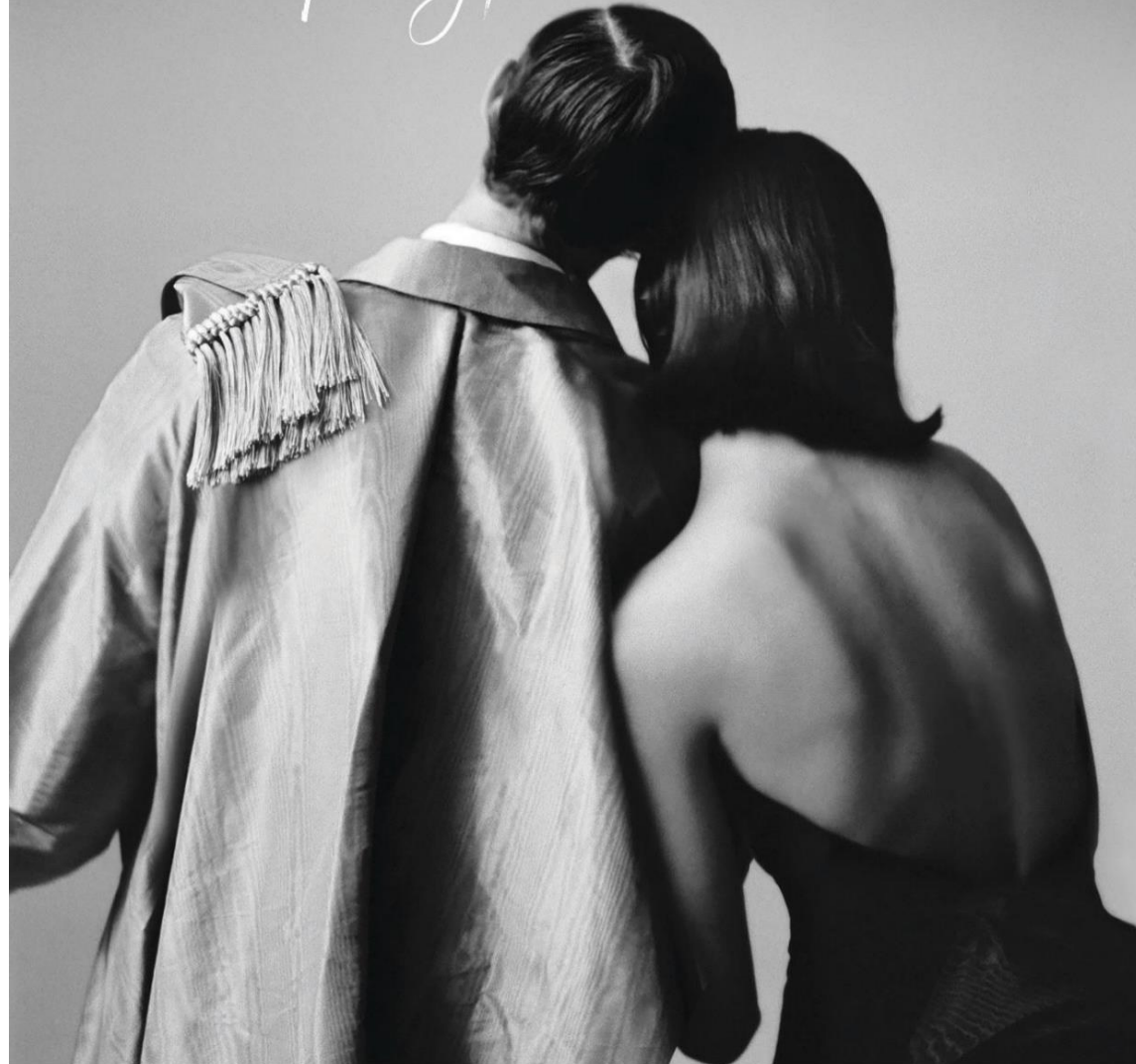


NOVEMBER | DECEMBER 2020

DEPARTURES

The Holiday Issue





Brunello Cucinelli in Solomeo, Italy.

The Good Fight Brunello Cucinelli's response to fashion's most challenging year? Give away \$35 million worth of clothes.

by Lee Marshall. Photographs by Danilo Scarpati

DURING THE FIRST SIX MONTHS of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered high streets around the globe, fashion brands were left with thousands of unsold garments on their hands. Some dealt with the problem by offering serious discounts online or at their physical stores once they reopened. Brunello Cucinelli, the founder, creative director, and president of the Italian luxury brand that bears his name, took a different approach. He decided he would simply give all of those clothes away—to people who can scarcely afford a \$30 top, let alone a \$3,745 cashmere sweater.

The idea came, he tells me, from a story his 98-year-old father, Umberto, told him while both were in strict lockdown this spring in Solomeo, the Umbrian village where the label is based. “During those two months I

developed a really intimate rapport with my dad,” Cucinelli says. “We spent time together each day and went through the important events of his life.”

When Brunello was born in 1953, Umberto was a farmer, eking out a living from a plot of land near the village of Castel Rigone, a rural community in the hills above Lake Trasimeno. It was a hardscrabble life, where a small disaster could mean the difference between eating and going hungry. One such disaster came in June 1963, when the ten-year-old future fashion CEO was one of 13 family members living in a farmhouse without running water or electricity. “My dad asked me if I remembered a hailstorm that destroyed all our crops in ten minutes,” Cucinelli tells me. He did. The women of the family, he recalls, were all in tears, while the men sat in gloomy silence. “I couldn’t sleep that night,” Cucinelli says, a catch in his throat.

Five years later, tired of constantly living on the breadline, Umberto would throw in the towel, moving his family into a suburb of the nearest city, Perugia, and knuckling down to work in a cement factory. But in that summer of 1963, there was a more pressing problem. The hailstorm had just wiped out the family’s wheat and olive harvest, one of their main sources of food for the coming year. Remarkably, however, the wheat crop on the adjacent farm was untouched. Cucinelli quotes an old farmers’ saying, “Hail never brings famine”; then, by way of explanation, starts sketching on a large sheet of white paper that an assistant had placed on his desk at the beginning of our chat. He draws a patchwork of fields, hatching dark lines across them. “Hail can fall here... but not here. It goes in stripes, in swaths. Hail doesn’t cause famine, because it doesn’t destroy everything, unlike frost.” But how was a neighbor’s good fortune going to help Brunello and his clan? “He lent us 20 bales of wheat to tide us over until we could pay him back,” Cucinelli



Project for Humanity labels were sewn into pristine unsold garments by hand.

explains. Which they did, promptly, the following year.

Trim and tanned, in the open-necked white shirt that he wears by default, Cucinelli looks up from his sketch and fixes me straight in the eye. “So I started to ask myself,” he says, pausing for effect: “What if this”—referring to COVID-19—“were a hailstorm for humanity?”

This is the second time that I’ve interviewed Cucinelli and my third visit to Solomeo, the *borgo*, or small village, that his company has turned into what the self-made entrepreneur presents to the world as an ideal community of happy subjects under the tutelage of a benevolent philosopher-prince. There’s a Renaissance-style theater, a library, a Cucinelli-sponsored School of Arts and Crafts, and a company canteen that serves up the kind of good, organic, local food that many trattorias across Italy struggle to emulate. In 2018, the company completed its Project for Beauty, through which the valley below the town once blighted by factories and warehouses became a 250-acre park that includes the main company campus; the Agrarian

Park, planted with olives, grapevines, and other crops; sports and leisure facilities aimed at, among others, the children of employees; and the Tribute to Human Dignity, a semicircular travertine exedra approached by a monumental flight of steps designed, the brand’s website asserts, to last “for centuries on end.”

One of my favorite Italian expressions is just eight letters long: “*Ci è, o ci fa?*” It translates roughly as “Is he/she for real?” It’s a question I’ve often asked myself of Cucinelli, who, during our interview, name-checked or quoted Confucius, Pericles, Xenophon of Athens, Marcus Aurelius, Saint Augustine, Thomas More, Christopher Columbus, Mozart, Jeff Bezos, and Sharon Stone. But I’m coming around to the idea that for the 67-year-old Italian fashion entrepreneur, there’s no difference between the show and the reality. He is equally sincere about both.

In his office, a wall of bookcases filled with texts by great thinkers faces a wall of his own framed press clippings. The same contrast between idealistic visionary and canny businessman is evident in his description of the unsold clothes initiative, which the company calls the Project for Humanity. On the one hand, Cucinelli talks of it as an opportunity to “give back” to mankind, one that he compares to the Biblical story of the manna from heaven. On the other, he backs up his plan with a series of sound strategic arguments. One is that you can’t sell this year’s fashion next year: “Fashion is called fashion for a reason, no?” Another has to do with the damage aggressive discounting can do to a brand’s image and reputation. The final one is even more straightforward: It’s pretty great PR. “If I were to make a book of clippings” about the program since it launched, “it would

be this thick." He holds thumb and forefinger up to demonstrate.

Here's how it will work: The unsold garments from the first half of 2020—an exact number of which was not available at press time, but the industrial cost of which was estimated to be around \$35 million—are currently being returned to Solomeo from the brand's 136 stores around the world. Once the clothes have arrived, they will be sorted by territory, with warmer items destined for colder climates, and an appropriate mix of sizes made for each country. They will then have Brunello Cucinelli for Humanity labels sewn on by hand below their existing labels. Finally, once the recipients have been identified, the clothes will be sent to them directly, in exactly the same luxury packaging that the

brand uses for its e-commerce deliveries, accompanied by a letter written by Cucinelli. For him this project is not just about making someone happy on the other side of the world. He talks with pride of the day he announced the initiative to his employees. "There were people with tears in their eyes," he tells me, "because it's all about the product that you made with your own hands finding a home with someone who will treasure it...It's about that garment not losing its nobility."

As for the recipients, the company is asking its managers, distributors, store staff, clients, and friends to identify suitable beneficiaries in each country. Suggestions will be vetted in Solomeo by a ten-person Council in Support of Mankind. One of its members, Cucinelli's

son-in-law and the firm's co-CEO, Riccardo Stefanelli, tells me that rather than send clothes to be distributed by large NGOs, they will be sent either to small charitable institutions that have nominated worthy cases or direct to needy individuals or families identified by the brand's global network and approved by the committee. In the first scenario, the charities are being asked to brief the



Artisans in Brunello Cucinelli's Solomeo workshop began working on the project in July.



company on the number and gender of recipients, and their sizes. Cucinelli's eyes light up as he imagines the scene: "I love the idea of a package being sent to, say, four people in Kansas City with 40 garments inside, let's say 15 for men and 25 for women!"

I can't help wondering, as I leave his offices, what prompted Cucinelli to choose Kansas City, of all the places in the world. Then I remember that it was a tornado that swept Dorothy away from Kansas to the Land of Oz, where she met a wizard who, for all his humbug, had a good heart. Here in Solomeo, a life-altering hailstorm is—thanks to a wizard of fashion—turning into a perfect storm of gifts.