

B Cucinelli's Creed

An ardent student of philosophy, Brunello Cucinelli contemplates how looking to the past can help the fashion industry—and humankind—map out a better future *By Rosana Lai*

Brunello Cucinelli is as much a philosopher as he is a designer, only cashmere is the medium through which he imparts his beliefs. It is not unusual to hear the venerated Italian designer, renowned for high-end knitwear, quote everyone from Confucius to Xenophanes in any given conversation, as he did with me the day after he opened Pitti Uomo with his latest menswear collection. "Plato, followed by

Aristotle and then Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were the first to introduce the idea of a social contract," says Cucinelli, while explaining the writings he ruminates over during lockdown last year. "I'm confident now more than ever that we need a social contract, this time not just between human beings, but with the animals and our environment, to strike a balance between profit and giving back. That must be the

legacy of this pandemic."

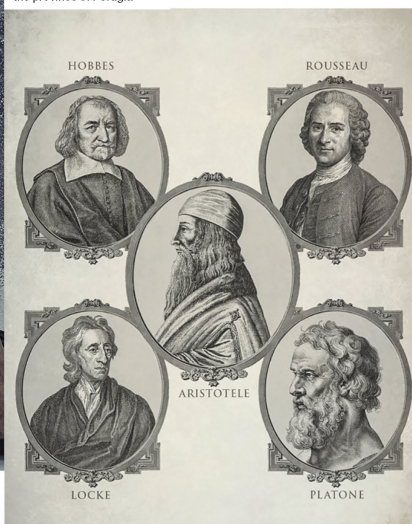
The 67-year-old designer spent much of the past year secluded in Solomeo, Italy, a utopia of sorts, which he bought in 1985 to serve as his family home and "business village" of 800 employees, complete with a kindergarten and restaurant, as well as a school of arts and crafts and an idyllic garden lined with busts of philosophers for meditation. He penned open letters



From left: Designer Brunello Cucinelli; an outfit from Brunello Cucinelli's fall-winter 2021 collection



Clockwise, from left: Brunello Cucinelli fall-winter 2021 outfit; portraits of philosophers Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Aristotle, John Locke and Plato; Brunello Cucinelli fall-winter 2021 looks. Opposite page: The Italian village of Solomeo in the province of Perugia



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that were published on his website, sometimes showing gratitude for a people (like the Chinese and Mongolians for sharing their wool with him), sometimes waxing poetic about his grandchildren, and sometimes reflecting on the state of the industry, on which he has many thoughts. As fashion businesses screamed to a halt and brands were brutally forced to reassess their values, Cucinelli—who has always prided himself on creating a “humanistic enterprise”, which highlights craftsmanship and sustainable modes of working—was able to largely operate as usual, without laying off a single staff member or implementing any extreme policy changes. If anything,

Images: Alinari Taylor-Young (models)

the company expanded. Cucinelli opened its London Bond Street store in early 2020, Paris Avenue Montaigne store in December and has plans to double its stores in New York, St Petersburg and Tokyo this year.

That's not to say the pandemic didn't take its toll; sales suffered double-digit losses throughout the year. But rather than destroying its wares to maintain scarcity, Cucinelli and a council made up of ten members of his family and staff chose organisations around the world to distribute thousands of dollars' worth of excess stock to those in need. He was reminded of a childhood incident when a hailstorm destroyed his family's

entire harvest, and a neighbouring farmer loaned them 20 bales of grain. After that, Cucinelli's grandfather would offer the first bale of his harvest to the community as a gesture of gratitude, one that the designer now wants to emulate.

His fall-winter 2021 collection, too, titled *The Synthesis Of Yesterday and Tomorrow*, aimed to recontextualise the future through its past. Without the ability to travel to New York and Tokyo, places Cucinelli and his team habitually visited for inspiration, they instead took to reinterpreting the brand's codes for the future. For example, with men gravitating towards sweaters rather than

jackets, Cucinelli designed 100 per cent cashmere outer-shells filled with down feathers as its version of a super-luxe *piumino*, and hybrid trainers, like British derby shoes with athletic soles. It's this unrelenting pursuit of ultimate comfort and understated elegance that has made him the designer of choice for many tech billionaires today (Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs are said to be fans).

“This collection epitomises my point of view; it's expensive but it's made with natural fibres gentle on nature and the highest-level craftsmanship because it's meant to be worn well into the future,” says Cucinelli. “I want them handed down to the next generation.”

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Brunello Cucinelli shares his philosophy, honed through years of wit and wisdom

ON HIS FAMILY

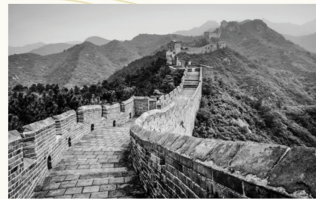
"Last Sunday I was home arranging my archive and my granddaughter, who is ten, took my first cashmere pullover, the first real English cardigan I made, and she put it on. Of course, it was down to her knees it was so big on her, but she spent the whole day at home wearing it and smelling it, saying it smells of grandpa. It reminded me of the purpose behind how I construct my clothes—so that they won't be thrown away. This is what I want my children and grandchildren to continue to do."



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ON BATTLING COVID-19

"February was the most painful time for me, because I saw what was happening to my team in China early on in the pandemic. I was very concerned and on edge seeing my Chinese staff all wearing face masks. I remember the blazer I was wearing at the time, and when I put it on again I feel anguished, so I told myself I never want to wear it again—I'll put it in my archive, but I won't wear it, because it brings back a rather painful memory."



ON A NEW COLLECTION

"The inspiration for this collection is the early Twenties of last century because after the World War and the Spanish flu, Prince of Wales Edward VII said: let's all dress up again! And that's where the love of dressing well resumed. I believe we, too, will want to dress well again after only being able to see each other from the top up. We need to see the whole body again, with footwear!"

Image: Ingmar/Ga/Getty Images (Great Wall)



He can still hear the sirens from the bombings in those five years he suffered. I compare it to what we are going through now and it gives me perspective. The vaccine is coming in a few months and my father says what is two months in relation to a lifetime?"

ON BEING CULTURED

"I've always had a fascination for Chinese culture. When I go to China, I love the bird's nest soup, Beijing duck and sweet and sour pork. Every time I come, I put on one kilo. Here in the village we choose to honour a country every year at a festival in July and this year it's China, so we've invited Chinese theatre companies to come perform at our theatre, and we'll be exchanging cultures and learning from each other. It's part of my belief in universalism and humanism."

ON CONFUCIUS

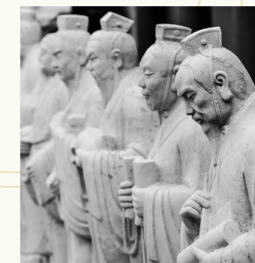
"When I first began reading Immanuel Kant, I remember he said the Chinese empire is

Image: Keith Levit/Getty Images (Confucius)

ON BEING COURAGEOUS

"My father continues to give me courage. He was a humble farmer and is now 99 years old, and in the past seven months he's been a great advisor. He's not traditionally educated but with just a few sentences he can often teach me a lot based on his past. He said in 1945 he had been at war for five years, but as soon as the war was over he had nothing but he had joy and hope. He was once again able to flirt with the ladies because for five years he could not have the pleasure to flirt with somebody."

the most educated and well-read of mankind, and I think he's right. Confucius had a communal and eternal vision of the world, which I admire. Something he said resonated with me, which was: 'When I was a teenager, I was focused on studying and learning, at 30 my personality was fully formed and shaped, at 40 I found my balance, at 50 I settled my issues with the heavens, and at 60 I only do what my soul demands



me to do.' If you come to Solomeo, you'll see that I have busts of Socrates and Plato in the garden of wise men, and there's also Confucius and they look at each other, contemplating the answers to the world's problems."

ON CORRECTNESS

"Even if you want to dress casually in these times, I have always thought that first and foremost you should still wear a blazer. Whatever you're wearing in whatever time of day, if you have a blazer, you're chic. And anywhere you go you must always be groomed and looked after and after that, with a blazer, 90 per cent of the time you'll be considered well dressed."

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