

A Moving Experience: The Lifecycle of a Coat



by C.Flisi

A wardrobe is in constant flux. When you change jobs, lifestyles, climates, and countries, you should rethink the clothes in your closet. This is especially true when you are moving TO or FROM a country like Italy, arguably the most clothes-conscious country in the world.

My lesson came early when I moved from the US to Milan and realized that the secretaries in my firm were better dressed than I was. It's not that they spent MORE per capita than I did, since Americans spend more for clothes and shoes on a per capita basis than any other affluent nation (Italians are fourth, after the UK and the Netherlands). The difference is that Italians spend BETTER. The fabrics are finer, textiles last longer, garments have more inherent quality sewn in, and the tailoring is infinitely superior.

Coats took on a greater importance in Italy than I had assigned them in the US. Stateside, a coat was primarily a practical piece of clothing. It kept you warm in the winter, dry in the rainy season, and didn't matter much the rest of the year. In Italy, practicality was secondary. The important thing was the statement the coat made about you when you wore it.

Among the outer garments I brought from the States to Italy was a grey down coat—not a long-ish jacket but an actual coat that covered my knees. Unusual for the time, it was semi-fitted and tucked in at the waist, something that most puffy outerwear didn't do back then . . . and still doesn't. Probably the coat was European in origin because it was well cut and had a real down lining, not the artificial stuff that fills most down items today. I don't remember its pedigree because it came from the discount rack of a favored wholesaler. When you saw a good price there, you bought first and asked questions never.

That coat served me well for its cut and its color, grey being an all-purpose shade that worked with most of my wardrobe. Because of its adaptability, I literally wore it to death during my first few years in Milan. When the feathers began exiting *en masse*, I knew the time had come to good-bye, but that decision was a hard one. Among other problems, I didn't know how to replace it.

My husband eased the pain a little by bringing me a full-length fur coat from one of his business trips. Not entirely extravagance on his part, but more an arrangement with a client whose business included designer furs. I didn't complain because fur coats were well-viewed in Italy. They are less so now, but back then, to wear one was to make the right kind of statement about one's social status, and *bella figura* mattered. I personally would never have asked for a fur, since I am a PETA kind of person, but consoled myself with the fact that mink are nasty little critters anyway.

The problem with my fur was less the ethics than the fact that the coat was two sizes too big. The sleeves flopped down, the shoulders hung loosely, and the already-long coat dragged on the ground unless I wore spiked heels, which I was little inclined to do during the cold and often icy Milanese winters of that time. Yes, I wore it every so often, but it was not an everyday garment.

So I turned to the other coat I brought from the States. This was a classic black reefer with a velvet collar. It was elegant enough by Italian standards because it was pure wool and cut slim. But the slender line meant it did not drape well over sweaters and suit jackets, precisely the clothes indicated for cold weather. The result was a less-than-soignée fashion statement and, more practically, the loss of several buttons and the visible fraying of buttonholes.

My coat conundrum was put on hold for 10 years when we moved to the South of France. *Bien sûr*, the French are fashionable, but the mild climate ensured that coats were secondary to other apparel.

My return to the north of Italy rekindled the coat issue. It was exacerbated by a canine addition to our family. A dog has to be walked three (or more) times a day, every day, rain, shine, sleet, or snow. The reefer was not appropriate, the fur coat less so: hunting dogs and full-length furs are not a wise combination. Plus, dog walking requires many pockets, preferably zipped ones: some for the pooch (poop bags and treats) and some for me (tissue, phone, sunglasses, change, gloves).

I found my first solution at a discount store—a black flared jacket made of treated cotton. It was European cut so not offensively bulky to Italian eyes, and it had an inner zipped pocket and three outer ones. Bingo. It was perfect for shoulder season and generous enough to drape well over heavy sweaters, but it lacked a hood for the rain.

Not long after, while attending the Verona Horse Show, I wandered by a booth featuring riding gear, including a rack of loden-green garments labeled as “riding jackets.” Because I am short, I could never have worn one on a horse—the cut was way too long and the super thick composite material way too rigid. But it was faux-fleece-lined, hooded, and had LOADS of pockets, a total of seven inside and out, mostly zipped, some snapped. No shape to speak of because the material was so heavy and unyielding that a bulky box was about the

best it could evoke. But perfect for cold temperatures, with or without a dog.

Those two jackets, black and green, became my go-to garments for every season except summer. I wore them into oblivion. In their final days, the pockets hung by threads, the elbows were tattered, the zippers jammed. I knew I wouldn't be taking them with me when I moved back to the US. But I left them behind with a heavy heart, almost a sense of abandonment.

I have since bought a grey down coat that vaguely suggests my grey down outerwear from decades ago. I bought a shiny black-leather flared jacket that evinces my black jacket worn for so many years. Both these items sported higher price tags than their predecessors, but neither one is made as well, and I have no illusions that they will last as long. Nor do I care.

The only outer garment that warms my psyche these days is a red coat bought 15 years ago in Uzbekistan. Like my former black and green jackets, it is fraying with age and wear. It is ridiculously impractical but is entirely hand-embroidered and one-of-a-kind. I may revamp the contents of my closet to adapt to US or European climatic realities, but I refuse to abandon that one item. A wardrobe fluctuates but some things in life, even in the life of one's closet, should remain. It a combination of art and history, and what better expression of "fashion" can there be?