

Unequal Atmospheres: Italian Fashion Museums and Digital Imaginaries

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Abstract

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The digitisation of cultural heritage is commonly described as a democratisation of access, but it profoundly transforms the atmospheric dimension through which heritage is experienced and imagined. Drawing on the 'atmospheric turn' (Anderson, Böhme) and studies of the imaginary (Castoriadis, Durand), this article investigates how Italian fashion museums and archives, with a focus on those in Tuscany, translate institutional atmospheres into digital environments. Based on the mapping of over 1,200 Italian institutions from the CHANGES project, a qualitative sample is analysed along three axes: representational, narrative and affective. The results suggest that the atmospheric inequalities observed across the sample cannot be explained solely by technical differences. They appear, particularly as differences in the capacity to produce atmosphere within a digital environment. It is argued that digital platforms operate as selective atmospheric infrastructures, amplifying certain imaginaries of Italian fashion while marginalising others.

Keywords

Fashion Heritage | Social Imaginary | Cultural Inequality | Atmospheric Infrastructures | Affective Atmospheres

1. Introduction

Florence, December 2025. The Palazzo Pitti is a large palace that was built over centuries, by ruling families from the Medici to the Savoy. In one of its side wings, in the *Palazzina della Meridiana*, sits the *Museo della Moda e del Costume*, founded in 1983 as Italy's first state run museum of fashion.

I enter a room with high ceilings and walls covered in red damask that become nearly invisible in the low light. The only illumination comes from floor-level where visitors walk, and from spotlights pointing at a golden wedding dress. A glass pane separates me from the garment, and I get as close as I can. The silk is gold, with peonies and tiny embroidered daisies. Gigot sleeves, a V-neck bodice. A small plaque informs me the dress is Italian, made by an unknown designer, and belonged to Angiola Polese, born in Livorno in 1808, married to Giuseppe Ascione (Gallerie degli Uffizi, n.d.). The fabric is still here. The body is not. In its place, a headless mannequin in flesh-coloured linen.

I am, as Elizabeth Wilson (1985) would say, in a room inhabited by ghosts. Only the fabric remains. The body, the life, the wearing are gone. For a moment I am alone in the room, without the sound of other visitors, and I try to imagine the dress in motion. The big sleeves and skirt bubbling as someone walks. I circle the glass case once again and continue my visit to the museum, which is part of the Uffizi Galleries.

This museum has a particular atmosphere, not because of the curator's exhibition design, but because of the palace itself. As Ben Anderson writes, "atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with" (Anderson, 2009: 80).

On this occasion, I had visited the institution with a group of students from Sapienza Università di Roma, almost at the same time as we were concluding the project *Fashion Cultural Heritage: Memorie, musei, esperienze*, developed within the framework of the PNRR CHANGES project. The survey, coordinated by Professor Romana Andò and Professor Samuele Briatore, carried out over three years by a team (including me) from the department of *History, Anthropology, Religions, Art, Performing Arts* (SARAS), produced the first systematic mapping of Italy's fashion heritage, cataloguing over 1,200 museums, archives, foundations, and private collections across the country. The survey included major historic fashion houses and large museums, but also small textile museums, ethnographic collections, archaeological and ecclesiastical museums. What did not fit into any of our records was the atmosphere I experienced standing before the dress and the glass dome in Florence, nor that of the other museums. The difference in atmosphere between the museum environments, those we were able to visit in person, is evident, and even more so when we speak of atmosphere in the infosphere, which was visited and revisited daily throughout the project.

Days after the visit to Palazzo Pitti, I open the same collection on the Uffizi website. I see a white interface, a grid of photographs on a neutral background, buttons that take the user to the ticket office, and a short institutional text. I see the 1836 wedding



dress on a black background, still on the mannequin, but in a photo where it seems to float. The light is weaker here, and the gold I had seen close up looks darker, like aged gold. The material is still there. The atmosphere is not. Or it is different.

The dress is on the screen. What is missing is harder to name. This gap, between what migrates intact to the digital and what does not, runs through the recent debate on heritage digitisation (Parry, 2013; Padua et al., 2021). Digitisation is often described as a way to democratise access, and the gains in scope are real. What is less often said is that the atmosphere of heritage, the dimension that allows a collection to be felt and recognised as such, changes deeply in this transition. Fashion heritage is a complex case, since it brings together material culture, craft knowledge, national identity and the creative industry. These layers depend less on documentary precision and more on the affective resonance they produce. This article is guided by the following research question: how do Italian fashion museums translate institutional atmospheres into digital environments, and what forms of atmospheric inequality emerge in this translation? To answer this question, the article examines five Tuscan museums, asking how objects, narratives and affective¹ cues are reorganised across websites, Instagram accounts and other digital touchpoints.



2. Affective atmospheres and the social imaginary. The atmospheric turn

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Returning to the *Museo della Moda e del Costume* and to the atmosphere of the room with the golden wedding dress, the question is how that atmosphere is built. Gernot Böhme (2017) writes that objects radiate in space and thus contribute to the formation of an atmosphere. The notion of 'tuned space', also from Böhme, helps to think of the museum room as a tuned environment, in the musical sense. Just as an instrument is tuned to produce a certain resonance, a space can be tuned, using light, distance, silence and the arrangement of objects, to produce a specific affective tone. The room at Palazzo Pitti is an example. The dim light, the glass pane around the dress, the red damask dissolving into shadow, the spotlights on the fabric, each element produces an atmosphere that precedes any conscious interpretation by the visitor. The curator tunes the space, organising the conditions of its affective resonance.

Ben Anderson (2009) sharpens the point further. Atmospheres, for him, are not stable qualities fixed within environments, but form and dissolve as bodies interact within a space (Anderson, 2009: 79). The museum room is no exception. Therefore,

¹ A short note on the word *affective* is needed here. When this article speaks of affective atmospheres or affective charge, *affect* does not mean private emotion or personal feeling. It names something that moves between bodies, spaces and devices, and can be felt before it is put into words. Anderson (2009) defines it as a trans-personal intensity that emerges as bodies affect one another, at once impersonal, because it belongs to collective situations, and intensely personal in how it is felt. Brennan (2004) adds that affect is physically passed between bodies sharing the same space, through rhythm, breath and proximity. An atmosphere, on this reading, is not only felt, it is also carried, intensified or silenced.

atmosphere is not something visitors simply encounter upon opening a door, as a given fact. It is remade with every new configuration of presences: the group of students walking together, the silent couple pausing in front of a display case, a room that suddenly empties, leaving the visitor alone with the object.

What had been a marginal vocabulary in the 1990s has now become what Soentgen (1998: 72-73, as cited in Griffero, 2017) calls an 'atmospheric turn' in aesthetics and philosophy. For Griffero (2017), virtually no situation is wholly devoid of atmospheric charge. Perceiving an atmosphere means grasping from the surrounding space a feeling that precedes any sensory or cognitive precision. Griffero, incidentally, coins the term '*atmosferologia*' to name this field of study and introduces a distinction relevant to museum analysis. On the one hand, there are prototypical atmospheres, easily recognisable by anyone, such as those, for example, of a church or a classroom. On the other, there are derived atmospheres, more specific, which overlap with the former and distinguish them. For Griffero, atmospheres are ultimately 'feelings poured into space'.

This distinction is useful for this analysis. A "museum" itself is a prototypical atmosphere. But the *Museo della Moda e del Costume* at Palazzo Pitti adds to this basic atmosphere a more specific Florentine *ducal* layer, which comes from the fact it was a palace and from the nature of its collection. When this layered atmosphere moves into the digital medium, there is a sort of flattening of the derived layers. The museum's prototypical atmosphere, translated into the interface's visual conventions (neutral background, grid, catalogue entries), survives in part. The *ducal* and Florentine singularity, however, which depended on the palace, on the high ceilings and on the dim lighting, is harder to keep legible.

Vincenzo Susca (2022) proposes thinking of digital culture as '*technomagic*', that is, as a system of totems, rites and myths in which the subject loses and rediscovers themselves, in a regime of affective resonances that goes beyond the communicative function of platforms. The digital atmospheres of heritage examined here belong to this regime. They amplify, select and reincarnate certain imaginaries, while leaving others at the margins, in a game in which symbolic capital and accumulated institutional resources determine who manages to sustain coherent affective climates online and who does not.

Social imagination and collective tones

The heritage atmospheres described in the previous section do not float in a semiotic vacuum. They resonate with meanings that precede the encounter between visitor and object. When, in the dim room of Palazzo Pitti, a visitor recognises Angiola Polese's wedding dress as part of Italy's fashion heritage, this recognition is not produced only by the lighting, the silence and the glass case. It is also produced by a set of already established social imaginary meanings, which make that fabric something more than fabric. It is this dimension, the imaginary substrate that sustains the atmospheric charge and allows it to be recognised and shared, that Castoriadis's (1975/1987) concept of the social imaginary helps us to consider.





The notion of the imaginary mobilised by Castoriadis sits within a wider tradition. For Durand (1960/1972), the imaginary is a constant exchange between inner drives and the world that surrounds the subject, what he calls a 'trajectory of anthropology' (Durand, 1960/1972: 31). Part of these collective meanings, he argues, takes shape within a nocturnal regime, organised around descent, intimacy and shelter (Durand, 1960/1972: 47, 51). Read alongside Castoriadis, this points to two sides of the same symbolic operation: the institution of collective meanings and their rooting in gestures of care and containment that the fashion museum also performs.

In *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cornelius Castoriadis argues that the socio-historical is not a reflection of a prior reality but an ongoing act of creation. He distinguishes two moments within this process. The instituting society is the anonymous collective power that produces new forms, figures and meanings. The instituted society is the set of meanings already crystallised in institutions, languages and objects. Every society lives in the tension between the two, in what Castoriadis calls "the union and the tension of instituting society and of instituted society" (Castoriadis, 1975/1987: 108), and it is in this interplay that things come to exist as things for a collective. For Castoriadis, objects do not come first and meanings later. The very selection of what counts as an object, as valuable, as worth preserving, is the work of the social imagination.

Returning to Angiola Polese's silk wedding dress, the question that this formulation poses concretely is what makes that fabric heritage and not merely a piece of nineteenth-century attire by an unknown Tuscan tailor. The answer cannot be derived from textile properties or chronological age. It must be sought in the imaginary significations through which, in Castoriadis's terms, a society institutes certain objects as worthy of preservation and others as residual. In the same chapter where he explicitly includes clothing among the domains in which this operation becomes legible, Castoriadis writes:

We know of no society in which food, dress and dwellings obey strictly 'utilitarian' or 'rational' considerations. [...] This choice is driven by a system of imaginary significations that value or devalue, structure and hierarchise an intersecting ensemble of objects and corresponding lacks; and it is here that one can discern, more easily than anywhere else, what is just as uncertain as it is incontestable: the orientation of a society. (Castoriadis, 1975/1987: 150)

The fact that Castoriadis names 'dress' among the domains in which the social imaginary becomes legible is, for this research, more than a coincidence. It means that clothing is not a derivative or ornamental aspect of culture, but one of the key domains in which a society inscribes its own imaginary orientation onto objects. The wedding dress at Palazzo Pitti is not read as generic nineteenth-century clothing, neither by visitors nor by the institutional narratives around it. Before any empirical encounter, it carries a social imaginary significance that we might provisionally call 'Made in Italy', as secular artisanal continuity, in which manual skill, Tuscan dynastic genealogy, nuptial femininity and Italian cultural identity are linked. This significance is neither an illusion nor an invention of the curator or the institution. It is the imaginary fabric that makes

that dress legible as heritage, and it is this fabric, too, that the digital environments of museum institutions try to reinstate, with very uneven results.

The distinction Castoriadis makes between the instituting and the instituted matters for this article in a second way. Every time the museum exhibits, catalogues, photographs and digitises, and every time a visitor, in person or online, encounters an object within these frameworks, the social imaginary is not simply passed on. It is made again. Heritage does not sit ready in the objects, waiting to be communicated. It is instituted anew, with every museum operation and every act of digital mediation. Here the question of the imaginary meets the question of atmosphere once again. How are the shared affective ways of feeling and recognising Italian fashion heritage carried, amplified or silenced when this remaking happens online? Before going to the cases, it is worth looking at the museum itself, at what kind of institution does this work, and at the atmosphere it builds.

The museum as an imaginary institution and atmospheric device

In previous study, developed with Romana Andò and Samuele Briatore, we argued that fashion museums should not be understood as neutral containers of objects. We maintained, drawing on Bennett (1995) and Hooper-Greenhill (2000), that museums and exhibitions operate as epistemic dispositifs actively involved in the construction of fashion history, hierarchies of value, and interpretative frameworks (Andò, Briatore & Kroeger, 2026). This formulation, taken here as a starting point, engages directly with the discussion on the instituted imaginary developed in the previous section. If instituted society crystallises imaginary meanings in objects, languages and institutions, the fashion museum is one of the places where this crystallisation appears in a dense form, because it combines archival operation, spatial organisation, a regime of visibility and curatorial narrative.

Tony Bennett, in *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), gives the classic frame for this reading. For him, the modern museum is a technology of governance that produces a specific kind of subject, one who learns to look, to stay silent, to move at a measured pace, to recognise some objects as worth attention and others as not. The rope barrier, the glass pane, the label, the grand architecture of the palace turned into a museum, all of these work, in Bennett's reading, as silent lessons for the gaze and the body. The room at Palazzo Pitti described at the start of this article is a clear case. The visitor is taught, even before reading any label, to recognise Angiola Polese's wedding dress as heritage, and not as an old piece of clothing. The prototypical museum atmosphere, in Griffero's (2017) terms, is also, for Bennett, a disciplinary atmosphere.

Among the possible readings of this device, the one offered by Elizabeth Wilson, mentioned earlier, is worth coming back to in more detail. In *Adorned*



in *Dreams* (1985), Wilson describes fashion museums as places of ghosts, spaces where the textile lives on while the body that wore it, the life that used it and the gesture that moved it are no longer there. The formulation has a specific atmospheric force. Unlike other kinds of heritage, fashion heritage lives a constant tension between presence and absence, between fabric that endures and a body that does not. The headless mannequin at the *Museo della Moda e del Costume* holds this tension in material form. It gives the visitor the outline of Angiola Polese, but not the whole. The dress is still here; the body that wore it is not. The atmosphere of the fashion museum is, in this sense, an atmosphere of the presence of the absent.

The museum does not just preserve the object. It holds, in material form, the tension between what is still here and what has gone. The display case, the low light, the mannequin and the label work together to turn an empty dress into heritage, into what Castoriadis (1975/1987) calls the imaginary institution through which a society decides what comes to exist as a thing for a collective. The atmospheric core of fashion heritage is in this tension, not in the textile alone. The question that follows is what happens to this tension, and to the ghosts that live in it, when the museum extends into digital environments?

Hartmut Rosa (2019) gives us a useful vocabulary for what is at stake in this tension. Rosa defines resonance as *“a specific mode of relating to the world, a particular way in which subject and world come to relate to each other”* (Rosa, 2019:195). Unlike recognition, which works through competition and can be given by one side only, resonance is always two-sided; it is an event in motion, *“the expression of a vibrant responsive relationship”* (Rosa, 2019:196). Brought into the field of heritage, the idea helps to make clear what sets a working heritage atmosphere apart from a simple display of objects. It is not enough to show Angiola Polese’s silk wedding dress. The dress, once shown, must respond, opening a two-way emotional tie between itself and the visitor. This is the work that the physical museum, with varying success, holds together through its atmospheric composition. And it is the same work that changes deeply when heritage moves online.



3. Italian fashion heritage and the Tuscan case

To see how this remaking works, we must move from theory to concrete cases. This study looks closely at Tuscany, and within it at a qualitative sample of five institutions that can show how museums change in a digital environment and what inequalities this process produces.

Tuscany is central to the story of *Made in Italy*, and the choice was not random. As Paulicelli reminds us, Italian fashion identity rests on a "multi-locality" of cities and traditions that resists any monolithic reading (2014: 163). Tuscany is one of these dense local nodes. Prato is a hub for textile production, with a focus on wool and fabric restoration. Florence is the symbolic birthplace of post-war Italian haute couture and today is home to some of the most well-known fashion brands and museums in the world. Pistoia, in turn, has maintained a centuries-old tradition of women's embroidery, originally passed down in cloistered monasteries and workshop-schools. Across these three cities, there is a fabric of institutions, from state museums to maison museums, civic foundations and small museums tied to local craft traditions. In this sense, Tuscany is a region where the heritage atmospheres of fashion are dense in physical space and reach, to very different degrees, into digital environments.

From the census carried out by the CHANGES project, which listed over 1,200 Italian institutions linked to fashion heritage (Andò & Briatore, 2026), a sample of five Tuscan museums was chosen. Together they let us examine differences in atmospheric capacity by type of institution, type of collection, symbolic capital and level of investment in digital mediation. There were three selection criteria. First, heritage relevance, that is, the place of each institution within the field of Italian fashion heritage. Second, a clear digital presence, that is, at least one active institutional channel that could be examined between December 2025 and March 2026. Third, a diversity of types, on two levels: nature of the institution and type of collection.

The first museum is the *Museo della Moda e del Costume*, in the Palazzina della Meridiana of Palazzo Pitti, run by the Uffizi Galleries, with women's and men's clothing from the 18th to the 20th centuries. The second is the *Museo Ferragamo*, a fashion *house* museum in the Palazzo Spini Feroni in Florence, dedicated to the brand's footwear and leather accessories. The third is the *Palazzo Gucci*, a hybrid space combining museum and brand experience in the Palazzo della Mercanzia in Piazza della Signoria, with a collection of contemporary luxury clothing and the fashion house's historical archive. The fourth is the *Museo del Tessuto di Prato*, a civic museum on the textile history of the Prato district, the largest textile centre in Europe, with fabrics, samples



and machinery. The fifth is the *Museo del Ricamo* in Pistoia, a small civic museum in the Palazzo Rospigliosi, with embroidery, embroidered garments, sacred vestments and tools. The five institutions are all in Tuscany, but they differ in legal status, symbolic capital, type of collection and capacity to produce digital mediation. The empirical argument of this article rests on these differences.

4. Framing and perspective

Out of more than 1,200 institutions in the CHANGES survey (Andò & Briatore, 2026), the sample was built in two steps. First, the regional focus was narrowed to Tuscany, for the reasons given in the previous section. Next, from this subset, five institutions were chosen on the basis of heritage relevance, a clear digital presence, and diversity of types.

Diversity of types included two linked levels. At the institutional level, the sample combines five different models of heritage stewardship: a state run museum, a *maison* museum dedicated to footwear and accessories, a hybrid space between museum and brand experience linked to a fashion house, a civic museum with a territorial focus tied to a textile district, and a small civic museum tied to a local tradition of women's craft. As for the collections, the sample covers different material categories, from historical garments to leather footwear, from contemporary luxury clothing to industrial fabrics and machinery, and embroidery and sacred vestments.

This dual diversity (institutional and material) is intentional. It lets us examine whether atmospheric capacity varies with the type of institution that holds the heritage, the type of objects held, the symbolic capital built up over time, or the interplay between these elements. Thus, this is not a representative sample in a statistical sense. It is a set of contrasting cases, designed to bring out systematic differences in the institutional capacity to produce and hold atmospheres online. The findings that follow are exploratory, and their aim is to open a field of reading, not to set up statistical regularities.

This selection sits within a wider debate that has reshaped fashion museology over the last two decades. The recognition of fashion as a legitimate field of cultural heritage, rather than a passing commercial novelty or an appendix to the history of costume, has only recently been established, with the rise of fashion exhibitions in major museums and the slow inclusion of *dress* in the canon of objects worth curatorial attention (Steele, 2008; Petrov, 2019). In Italy, this process has gone hand in hand with a long-standing ambivalence. There is a long tradition of collecting garments and accessories as ethnographic curiosities, examples of local craft, or as biographical traces of historical figures, although Italy still lacks a single national institution dedicated to its fashion (Segre Reinach, 2018). A second line of work in the literature has looked at how the digital turn meets this uneven recognition. Digital platforms work as archives that turn the material into a structure of files and metadata, with real



effects on how the materiality of a garment is experienced (Calanca, 2020). And in the case of fashion, the grim atmosphere of the costume museum, where clothes sit behind glass without body or motion (Wilson, 1985), is being reshaped by digital and immersive technologies that try to give back narrative density to objects that risk staying inert (Andò, Briatore & Kroeger, 2026). This article sits in that conversation but reframes its central question. Rather than asking how technology can close the gap between the physical garment and the digital interface, it asks what atmospheric inequalities appear when this passage is unevenly distributed across institutions of different sizes, governance models and symbolic positions.

Methodological strategy

The research combines two complementary strands, underpinned by an explicit autoethnographic approach in the sense developed by Bochner and Ellis (2016), in which the researcher's own embodied experience is treated as a methodologically productive site of access to atmospheric and affective dimensions that are otherwise difficult to register. The first strand consisted of in-person visits to the five institutions, carried out between December 2025 and March 2026. During each visit, ethnographic notes were taken on the atmosphere of the space, paying attention to lighting, the arrangement of display cases, the flow of visitors, silence or noise in a room, the presence or absence of textual mediation, the type of mannequins, the building's architecture, and conditions of access (visiting hours, availability of free admission and advance booking). In the design of this article, the in-person record does not function as a baseline against which the digital version would be judged deficient. Rather, it functions as *an atmospheric anchor*, a point from which it is possible to identify, within the digital environment, what persists, what transforms, and what is lost from the derived atmospheric layer (Griffero, 2017).

The second strand consisted of systematic netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2020) of each institution's digital touchpoints during the same period. For each museum, three touchpoints were analysed; namely the institutional website, the official Instagram account (where available), and a third channel varying by institution (virtual exhibitions, curatorial videos, digital catalogues, thematic microsites or, in the case of institutions with a more limited digital presence, pages on institutional aggregator portals such as *Visit Tuscany*, the Ministry of Culture's portal or the municipality's website). The variation in the third channel was adopted as a deliberate analytical choice. What each institution prioritises as its additional digital showcase, or the absence of such prioritisation, is itself an indicator of its atmospheric strategy. Screenshots, records of stories and posts, descriptions, catalogue texts and audiovisual materials were organised into a visual and textual corpus, dated and archived. Unless otherwise indicated, all quantitative observations reported in the analysis that follows (number of posts per institution, frequency of publication, engagement metrics, exhibition durations, presence and absence of dedicated channels) were generated by the systematic observation conducted between December 2025 and March 2026, and the descriptive and historical information



attributed to specific institutions is drawn from the corresponding institutional websites consulted within that same window (see Bibliography for details).

The link between the two strands (in-person and digital) can be described as a visit-anchored netnography. An observer does not enter the digital environment as any user might, but as someone who has already felt in person the atmosphere that the digital is trying to mediate. This position is not neutral, and it is exactly for this reason that it is useful for analysis. It lets us see the atmospheric breaks that a purely remote reading would miss.

Three axes of analysis

The material put together this way (visit notes, digital captures, institutional texts) was read along three axes. The *representational axis* looks at how heritage objects are visually rendered in the digital environment. It looks at photographic treatment, lighting, framing, background, typography, colour palette, and rhythm of publication. It draws on Böhme's (2017) idea that objects radiate in space and take part in the formation of an atmosphere and asks how this radiation is reshaped when the object moves to the screen.

The *narrative axis* looks at the presence, coherence and tone of the curatorial voice: who is speaking, with what authority, and with what continuity across the different channels of the same institution. It also looks at the relation between the catalogue record, the institutional text and the more informal social media posts, paying attention to shifts or breaks that show different degrees of investment in digital mediation.

The *affective axis* looks at the capacity to hold resonance (Rosa, 2019) and atmospheric continuity between points of contact. Here, the comparison with the in-person visit is key. What stays and what is lost of the derived atmospheric layer when the room becomes an interface? To what extent can the digital revive, in Castoriadis's terms (1975/1987), the social imaginary meanings that underpin the recognition of that fabric as heritage?

5. Unequal digital atmospheres

The five Tuscan museums chosen here, when placed side by side, do not line up on a single scale from most to least digital. They spread out across different atmospheric regimes, each one repeating in the digital space a different symbolic position of the objects it holds.

Museo della Moda e del Costume

The *Museo della Moda e del Costume*, in Palazzo Pitti in Florence, is part of the Uffizi Galleries. Entry to the museum is included with the ticket for the palace, there is no separate ticket. The museum also has no Instagram account of its own, no website of its own, and no YouTube channel of its own. Everything is found within @uffizigalleries, uffizi.it, or the Uffizi TV channel on YouTube. Across these digital platforms, the fashion

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museum exists as a sub-collection of a larger structure, with no independent institutional presence. This is the structural condition that frames everything that follows.

Let us return to Angiola Polese's wedding dress, which in the physical space is treated as a work deserving prolonged attention and displayed like a classical painting. In the digital space, this atmosphere loses its derived layer, in the sense Griffero (2017) gives the term. The prototypical museum layer holds up in the visual conventions of the interface. But the ducal and Florentine singularity, which relied on the building and the dynastic layering of the rooms, struggles to come through.

Technical quality online is high, with photographs and video reels shot professionally. The curatorial voice is present, well-developed in theoretical terms, but concentrated in a single video on the Uffizi TV YouTube channel, with just under two thousand views, and was later cut into shorter versions (Gallerie degli Uffizi, n.d.). In that video, the curator speaks openly about the long-standing classification of fashion as 'arts décoratifs' and its historical position behind the so-called higher arts, and argues that the museum is dedicated to rethinking that status. On the Gallerie degli Uffizi's Instagram, however, this voice is silent. The fashion museum appears in only three of one hundred and nineteen posts over four months (from 1 December 2025 to 30 March 2026). These three Instagram posts followed two specific hooks. The first is a reel about what to wear on New Year's Eve, the other two concern the Valentino Garavani dresses on display at the museum, posted after the designer's death. Therefore, a rich body of institutional discourse exists that hardly reaches the everyday user.

Thus, there is no technical or curatorial deficit online. What is missing is distribution, which is a structural issue, related to the status that fashion still holds within the Uffizi, where it appears as one collection among others, in a collection that has long emphasized Renaissance painting and classical sculpture. The silent pedagogy that Bennett (1995) describes in the physical museum works here within the digital architecture itself. The user learns that fashion is a brief stop, not a destination. The theoretical aim presented in the curatorial video (which acknowledges fashion's historical position behind the so-called 'higher arts' and proposes to rethink its place) is contradicted by daily editorial practice, and the one affected is Angiola Polese's dress, which travels less than it could.

Ferragamo Museum

Walking from the Palazzo Pitti towards the Arno and crossing the Ponte Vecchio involves walking into a different atmosphere. The *Museo Ferragamo* occupies the old cellars of the Palazzo Spini Feroni, a medieval building bought by the *maison* in 1938 and turned into a museum in 1995 (Museo Ferragamo, n.d.). The atmosphere is cinematic, built through chromatic and scenographic means, with deep red walls in the rooms presenting the founder's Italian-American period, bright yellow in the materials rooms, and deep black in the room where a large film reel runs across the wall. There is a free one-hour guided tour in four languages, that is, a curatorial voice in the body of a guide who sets the emotional pace of the visit. The chromatic design





of the rooms, the live human voice of the guide and the texts on labels and panels speak to each other and produce a guided affective atmosphere that depends on physical proximity, with the visitor standing a few centimetres from shoes worn by Hollywood divas, free to read the surface of the leather, the stitching, the wear of the sole. Unlike at Pitti, where the visitor reads the silence on their own, here the visitor is led by an emotional structure prepared by the *maison*.

The museum's own channel constructs a strong link between the physical and the digital, though by translation rather than by reproduction. The website museo.ferragamo.com uses the same colour palette as the rooms, and the product photography frames each piece on a scale close to that of a painting. The page dedicated to the current exhibition opens with a video that walks the online visitor through every section of the show, with piano music in the background and no narrator voice. Its technical quality is undeniable, yet the experience produced is structurally different. In the museum, the visitor stands a few centimetres from shoes that carry the memory of cinema. Online, the same exhibition becomes a smooth panoramic glide that never lets the eye rest on a single detail. The atmosphere does not disappear, it is reorganised, from proximity to distance, from material presence to cinematic flow. The institutional text on the site is theoretically dense, and worth following step by step. It opens by placing Salvatore Ferragamo in Hollywood in 1923, linking fashion with cinema, theatre and ballet. It represents a paradigm shift, from the exhibition of shoes as autonomous works of art to the exhibition of shoes as socio-cultural documents that show entrepreneurial capacity, anatomical knowledge, artisanal skill and material research. And it acknowledges, with rare transparency, the two-sided role of the institution, defining the museum itself as a "reel of memory", a retrospective investigation into the role of the museum, while also stating that this work keeps the company's dialogue with its target audience alive (Museo Ferragamo, n.d.). The *maison* does not try to hide the tension between heritage and brand, it affirms it.

There is, however, a structural imbalance. This voice exists on its own channel, on the dedicated website run by the fashion house. On corporate channels, it disappears. The brand's Instagram account, with over seven and a half million followers and more than six thousand posts, did not publish a single piece of content about the museum in the period analysed. The brand's YouTube channel is filled with fashion shows and products. The fashion house keeps the separation between heritage and brand where it has direct control and gives up that separation where it would have to compete with commercial products for attention. It runs two parallel atmospheres that do not cross paths. At Palazzo Pitti, the hierarchy is symbolic, with the Renaissance placed above fashion. At Ferragamo, the hierarchy is commercial, with the product placed above heritage. In both cases, selective atmospheric infrastructures work through different means, yet they produce a similar form of marginalisation.

A second tension lies inside the museum's own discourse and is worth a short note, because it offers a direct empirical anchor for Castoriadis's split between the instituting and the instituted. The page *Archivio Mostre* on museo.ferragamo.com states that each year the museum chooses a research theme that encompasses art,

architecture, design, economic and social history, and philosophy (Museo Ferragamo, n.d.). The stated programme is one of constant renewal, of an instituting horizon kept open. The actual practice during the fieldwork was the opposite. The biographical exhibition on the founder, opened in October 2023, was extended until April 2026: more than two and a half years with the same exhibition on view. In its own narrative, the museum sets itself up as creative and in motion. In its daily life, it settles into something commemorative and repeated.

Palazzo Gucci

Crossing Piazza della Signoria towards Palazzo della Mercanzia involves walking into a third regime. On paper, *Palazzo Gucci* is a museum, but it is a museum in constant change. In 2011 it opened as the *Museo Gucci*, in 2018 it was renamed the *Gucci Garden*, with an experiential-artistic model. In 2024 it became *Palazzo Gucci*, with a hybrid model that mixes museum, restaurant and brand experience. On 9 March 2026, the exhibition space was closed for the time being, with only the *osteria* and the *boutique* left open (Gucci, n.d.). Each renaming follows a change in the *maison's* creative direction. This museum works as a brand tool. Unlike the *Museo Ferragamo*, *Palazzo Gucci* has no independent website or Instagram account. Its digital presence is entirely absorbed into the fashion house's corporate channels.

The atmosphere is built to be photogenic and immersive. Brightly coloured mannequins on silver platforms, silk scarves hanging on a black background, walls with the GG monogram and rectangular mirrors in which visitors see themselves framed by the brand's logo. The handbag becomes an environment; the monogram becomes architecture. Running alongside is a playful digital layer. The *Gucci Garden* on Roblox has been active since 2021. In mid-March 2026, at the same time as the physical museum closed, the game *La Famiglia, Mystery Unfolds* was launched, built with Google Gemini and integrated into the official website (Gucci, n.d.). The illustrations are generated by artificial intelligence, and the narrative, with its dynamic interrogations and search for clues, runs on the real-time language model.

The timing has a strong symbolic charge. The physical museum is on pause, the algorithmic museum is open. Anyone who walked to Piazza della Signoria in April 2026 would find the *boutique* and the *osteria*, but not the museum. Anyone playing *La Famiglia*, or exploring the *Gucci Garden* on Roblox, will find a rich digital atmosphere. The museum leaves physical space and takes shape instead in playful digital environments, curated by algorithm. Susca (2022) gives the most useful vocabulary here. The idea of *technomagic* describes well the atmospheric-narrative ecosystem the *maison* builds. The museum stops being a cultural-pedagogical device, in Bennett's sense, and becomes a *technomagic* platform run entirely by the brand, with no public cultural institution acting as mediator.

Edmondo Grassi (2024) provides a vocabulary that helps sharpen what is specific to the algorithmic layer. In his proposal for a symbolic epistemology of intelligent algorithms, an algorithm is not just a computational tool; it works as a social agent that holds, and continuously reshapes settings of power, knowledge and cultural expectation, and calls up an imaginative force that turns the technological object into



something close to a totem (Grassi, 2024). This describes what is at stake at *Palazzo Gucci* better than a flat description of the Gemini-driven game could. Users are not only taking in content generated in real time. They are placed in a relation with the maison in which the brand takes on the affective weight of an iconic universe, and the algorithm becomes the silent curator of that universe.

Museo del Tessuto di Prato

A twenty-minute drive from Florence along the motorway towards Prato yields the sharpest contrast with everything that has come before. The *Museo del Tessuto* occupies four thousand square metres of the former Campolmi Textile Mill, a site of industrial archaeology whose architectural history dates back to 1326. The other half of the building houses the Biblioteca Comunale Lazzerini (*Museo del Tessuto di Prato*, n.d.). Here, the industrial building is part of the museum's identity, and the layering of seven hundred years of productive memory is, in itself, curatorial content. The museum is a permanent, non-profit private institution, with its own headquarters, its own ticket, its own Instagram account, its own website and its own YouTube channel. It is not part of a larger institution, and does not depend on a corporate brand. The museum is the institution.

Digital capacity is high and steady across all levels. In four months, there were forty-nine posts on Instagram, that is, one post every two and a half days, compared with one every forty days at the *Museo della Moda e del Costume*. The difference is of an order of magnitude. The curatorial voice is spread evenly, with long captions, precise dates for each piece, historical comparisons between Balenciaga and Alaïa, direct quotes from the couturiers, and named institutional partnerships with the *Fondation Azzedine Alaïa* and the *Balenciaga Archives Paris*. The tone is academic and museological, and the posts with the highest engagement are those that are densest in editorial work.

There is also an atmospheric polyphony that splits the channel into seven linked themes, each one with named institutional partners and concrete operational details. Textiles, in Prato, have never been a minor art form. The atmospheric success is not the work of a single talented team. It is a structural effect of the symbolic status that textiles hold in the Prato imagination.

Read side by side, *Palazzo Pitti* and *Museo del Tessuto* reveal the underlying argument. The two museums are not doing the same thing with different levels of quality. They are doing structurally different things, because fashion holds different symbolic places in each institutional imaginary. At Pitti, fashion is 'arts décoratifs' subordinated to a Beaux-Arts hierarchy organised around the palace. At the *Museo del Tessuto*, the textile is the conjunctive tissue of a territorial-productive identity. The digital architecture of each museum reproduces and amplifies that position.

Museo del Ricamo di Pistoia





The fifth museum challenges the comparative analysis that had been taking shape. According to its own website, the *Museo del Ricamo di Pistoia* (Pistoia's Embroidery Museum) occupies several rooms on the ground floor of Palazzo Rospigliosi. It was founded in 2004 as a joint initiative of the Province of Pistoia, the Municipality of Pistoia and the Italian Housewives' Movement, known as MOICA (Museo del Ricamo di Pistoia, n.d.). This co-founding is unique in our sample. The *Museo del Ricamo* is the only museum in the series whose governance includes a movement representing women's domestic practices. The gendered nature of the work preserved by the museum is neither avoided nor disguised; it is politically institutionalised. Admission is free, opening hours are minimal, five hours a week, the listed telephone number is a mobile phone, and the email address is a generic Gmail account. The 'tickets' category simply does not appear in the website's information architecture, and this absence is telling.

It is worth pausing on this absence, because read across the five museums the ticket itself becomes a small but important symbolic device. The *Museo del Tessuto* charges twelve euros, the *Museo Ferragamo* ten, the cumulative ticket at *Palazzo Pitti* ranges between sixteen and nineteen euros depending on the combination. Industrial-productive heritage has a price, the maison museum has a price, the palatial collection has a high price tied to institutional prestige. The *Museo del Ricamo* is free and the very category of ticket is missing from its website. The work that has long been done without pay inside the home remains outside the market in its musealisation as well. The contrast is sharper still in the institutional digital infrastructure around each entry: the *Museo del Tessuto* runs on an institutional switchboard, an email under its own domain and a PEC address; the Ricamo lists a personal cell phone number and a generic Gmail account. Two regimes of digital institutional existence, not just two budgets.

The digital representational capacity is low and static. The website has five pages; the Gallery contains six images. There is no official Instagram profile, no YouTube channel, no newsletter, and no in-house catalogue. And yet, the textual curatorial voice on the website, though confined to the '*Il Museo*' page, is comparable in discursive density to that of the *Museo del Tessuto*. The text works in four linked registers. The documentary register, in which it states that the documents, sources and many items preserved from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries confirm a deeply rooted embroidery activity in the city. The institutional register, which names the convents and cloistered monasteries as the first organising places, then the *conservatori di istruzione femminile*, then the workshop-schools of the 1920s and 1930s sponsored by *benefattrici* and noblewomen, and finally the contemporary MOICA. The socio-economic register, which affirms that Pistoia developed in this sector a vital source of female employment, supporting a flourishing artisanal and industrial activity between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And the technical-typological register, which identifies typologies such as *sfilati*, *punto antico* (also known as *punto toscano*), *punto Casalguidi* (originating from the small locality near Pistoia of the same name) and the contemporary *punto Pistoia*, invented by today's *casalinghe* (housewives) (Museo del Ricamo di Pistoia, n.d.).



Unlike the other museums in the series, where the narrative focuses on named author figures, at the *Museo del Ricamo* there is no author to celebrate. There is technique, territory, community, institution, and transmission. *Punto Casalguidi* takes its name from the place, not from a person. *Punto Pistoia* is given to the Movement, not to a single author. The object resists, by its very nature, being tied to one author. And the affective core of the museum, the *comunità di pratica* of the MOICA embroiderers who actively embroider in the physical space, is invisible online. This atmosphere is, in part, hard to fit into the photographic-editorial form that Instagram asks for. It depends on shared physical presence, gesture, slow repetition, on a domestic and conversational kind of time.

Following Maffesoli (1988/2004), one could say that the *comunità di pratica* of the MOICA embroiderers shares features of what he calls a neo-tribal emotional community, with its shifting membership, local roots and everyday structure built on shared presence and proxemics (Maffesoli, 1988/2004: 38, 42). Read this way, the digital invisibility of the *Museo del Ricamo* stops looking like a simple lack of modernisation. It points instead to a form of the social that works in a register different from broadcast logic.

The affective layer of the museum, in person, works on two levels. The first is the exhibition route itself, with display cases, an Empire dress from the Sozzifanti family, an altar frontal in polychrome silks dating from 1601, working tools shown as specimens (needles, scissors, thimbles, embroidery hoops, books of designs). This is the standard museological layer. The second is the *comunità di pratica*, the combination of exhibition activities and embroidery workshops led by the MOICA casalinghe, who actively embroider in the space, teach, transmit techniques across generations, and execute the *punto Pistoia* they invented. This second layer is, in practice, the affective soul of the museum. The digital continuity of this layer is zero. The MOICA workshops are not documented in photo or video, do not appear in any editorial flow. Anyone who is not part of the local MOICA network in Pistoia, or does not visit the museum during the five hours a week it is open, has no way of knowing that this community of practice exists. The affective soul of the museum is practically invisible online.

Read alongside *Palazzo Pitti*, this gives the series a third paradox. At *Pitti*, the curatorial voice does not circulate because it is hosted within an architecture that follows another symbolic hierarchy, in which fashion is 'arts décoratifs' held below the Beaux-Arts. At the *Museo del Ricamo*, the voice does not circulate because the architecture has simply not been built, and has not been built because the object, embroidery as collective, anonymous female labour, has not yet entered the field of what is held to deserve its own digital architecture within the established social imaginary of legitimate art. The difference between *Palazzo Pitti* and *Museo del Ricamo* is telling for this very reason. Both have a sophisticated curatorial voice that does not reach a wider audience. The causes, however, work on different layers of the symbolic hierarchy.

Even so, the object's resistance does not rule out careful digital mediation. Other anonymous and community-based practices have built specific digital architectures,

with collaborative ethnography, sound archives, collective portraits, and slow process documentation. Their absence at the *Museo del Ricamo* is not an inherent clash between the object and the digital. It is a reproduction, within a digital architecture, of the symbolic place that domestic-feminine labour holds in the established social imaginary. It can be kept at a minimal museological level, and is not yet worth full cultural amplification: this is the position the Ricamo occupies. The digital invisibility of collective and anonymous feminine labour continues, in the twenty-first century, the historical invisibility of that same labour in the public sphere.

Five regimes, one inequality

The five descriptions show a pattern which, at least within this sample, would have been hard to anticipate from the literature on the digitisation of cultural heritage. The atmospheric differences between these museums do not line up on a single scale. They spread across structurally different regimes. The *Museo della Moda e del Costume* works by dilution, the *Museo Ferragamo* by separation, *Palazzo Gucci* by gamification and reach into the metaverse, the *Museo del Tessuto* by territorial integration, and the *Museo del Ricamo* by anonymity. The five regimes do not form a linear scale. They turn around symbolic hierarchies that precede digitisation and that digitisation then amplifies. The hierarchy between high art and low art at *Pitti*. The hierarchy between heritage and product at the *Museo Ferragamo*. The hierarchy between public cultural institution and brand platform at *Palazzo Gucci*. The hierarchy between male entrepreneurial textile work and female domestic craft, between the *Museo del Tessuto* and the *Museo del Ricamo*. In the cases analysed, digitisation does not seem to create these hierarchies. It carries them forward through new technologies and new regimes of visibility. As Castoriadis (1975/1987) suggests, the established social imaginary works at the very level of what counts as an object worth preserving and amplifying. The five digital architectures analysed here are five ways of setting up, within the digital space, symbolic positions that had been held up, through other technologies, for centuries.



6. Discussion: platforms as selective atmospheric infrastructures Inequality beyond the technical

The five cases described suggest that the atmospheric inequalities between Tuscan fashion museums cannot be reduced to the technical side of digitisation. Server resources, specialist staff, photographic equipment, these things matter, but they explain less than they seem to. The *Museo della Moda e del Costume* has plenty of technical capacity, yet fashion remains, in its editorial architecture, a sub-collection. The *Museo Ferragamo* has a high quality of representation on its own channel but is silent on corporate channels. What emerges is a problem of a different order. Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe how platforms turn human experience into an extractable resource, and van Dijck (2013) shows that this happens through architectural and

algorithmic selection. For fashion heritage, this means that the move from physical to digital space is not neutral. It is not just a question of institutional competence. It is a question of which atmosphere manages to survive the dominant informational infrastructure and which does not. Technical inequality is, at its core, a sign of a symbolic inequality already in place, which the digital infrastructure then amplifies.

Selective atmospheric infrastructures

Susca (2022) offers a vocabulary for this mechanism. The idea of *technomagic* describes digital culture as a regime in which totems, rites and myths circulate by algorithm, and in which the affective experience is managed by architectures that go beyond simple communication. Applied to fashion museums, this reading suggests that digital platforms work as selective atmospheric infrastructures. They do not amplify all atmospheres equally. They select, rank, soften and erase. The image of Italian fashion that comes out of this process is, in the cases analysed, biased. It puts forward individual couturiers, commercial brands and spectacular exhibition regimes, while pushing community practices, anonymous crafts and slow atmospheres to the side. Here, Wilson's (1985) metaphor of fashion museums as places of ghosts takes on a new meaning. If the physical museum already worked with the presence of the absent body, in a stronger sense the digital museum risks being an atmosphere without bodies. Without the bodies of the *ricamatrici* gathered around the embroidery table. Without the body of the guide leading the tour at the *Museo Ferragamo*. Without the body of the visitor standing in front of the glass case at the *Museo della Moda e del Costume*. When this removal is selective, and amplifies some imaginaries over others, atmospheric inequality also becomes political.

Massimo Airoidi's (2016) study of recommender algorithms on YouTube gives an empirical complement to this argument. He shows that recommendation systems do not simply distribute existing content; by linking items together, they actively help to build the symbolic webs through which cultural meaning now circulates, and they do so with measurable effects on which artists, genres and references gain visibility (Airoidi, 2016). Read alongside the Tuscan sample, the implication is clear. The dilution of the *Museo della Moda e del Costume* inside the Uffizi feed, the absence of the *Museo Ferragamo* from the brand's corporate channels, and the digital invisibility of the MOICA embroiderers are not only the outcome of curatorial choices made by each institution. They are also the outcome of the algorithmic logics that decide what comes to the surface and what does not on each platform. The selective atmospheric infrastructure works at the same time through institutional editorial decisions and through the recommendation architectures that shape how those decisions reach the user.

Implications



Three implications can be drawn, for now. The first concerns heritage policy. Investment in equipment alone cannot maintain an institution's atmospheric presence online. What is missing at the *Museo della Moda e del Costume* and the *Museo del Ricamo* is not digitisation. It is the architecture of affective mediation that Seyfert (2012) describes as a trans-individual quality moving between bodies, environments, and devices.

The second concerns imaginaries. Fashion house museums currently hold in the digital imaginary of Italian fashion a structural space that is broader than that of many public museums. That space works by the logic of branding, not of shared heritage. The imbalance is worth considering.

The third relates to the promise of democratised access. Digitisation keeps that promise only in part. Where the atmospheric infrastructure is unequal, access to an archive is not access to an atmosphere. Describing this difference is the task that a sociology of the imaginary attentive to the digital is starting to take on.



7. Conclusion

Between the silent room of *Palazzo Pitti* and the Instagram feed, the material remains and the atmosphere changes. This article is located in this passage. The digitisation of fashion heritage does not work as a simple technical extension of the physical museum. By moving objects, narratives and gestures into the digital environment, it changes the conditions under which heritage can be experienced. What is at stake, at least within this sample, is not just online presence, and not just technical investment. It is the capacity to hold an atmosphere, that is, to keep a resonant link between object, narrative and audience that allows this heritage to remain recognisable, online, as heritage.

The five regimes described suggest that this capacity is uneven. Some institutions combine representation, curatorial voice and editorial rhythm. Others become diluted within larger architectures, scattered over low-visibility channels, moved into brand-managed playful environments, or are simply silent. Digital platforms take an active part in this distribution. They do not just circulate content. They select, give priority, and play down. They amplify some aspects of Italian fashion (individual couturiers, fashion houses, spectacular exhibition regimes) and push others aside (community practices, anonymous crafts, slower atmospheres). The promise of democratised access is complied with only in part. Access to the object is not access to its atmosphere, and it is in this gap that a less visible layer of inequality appears, one that may be decisive for how fashion heritage is now seen, shared and imagined.

The Tuscan map traced here is small, and what it suggests is small with it. The affective atmospheres in which the social imaginary takes shape, in Castoriadis's sense, do not move freely in digital space. They move within infrastructures that select what can be felt. Describing these infrastructures, and the imaginaries they sustain or silence, is the task that remains.

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