



The perfection of luxury

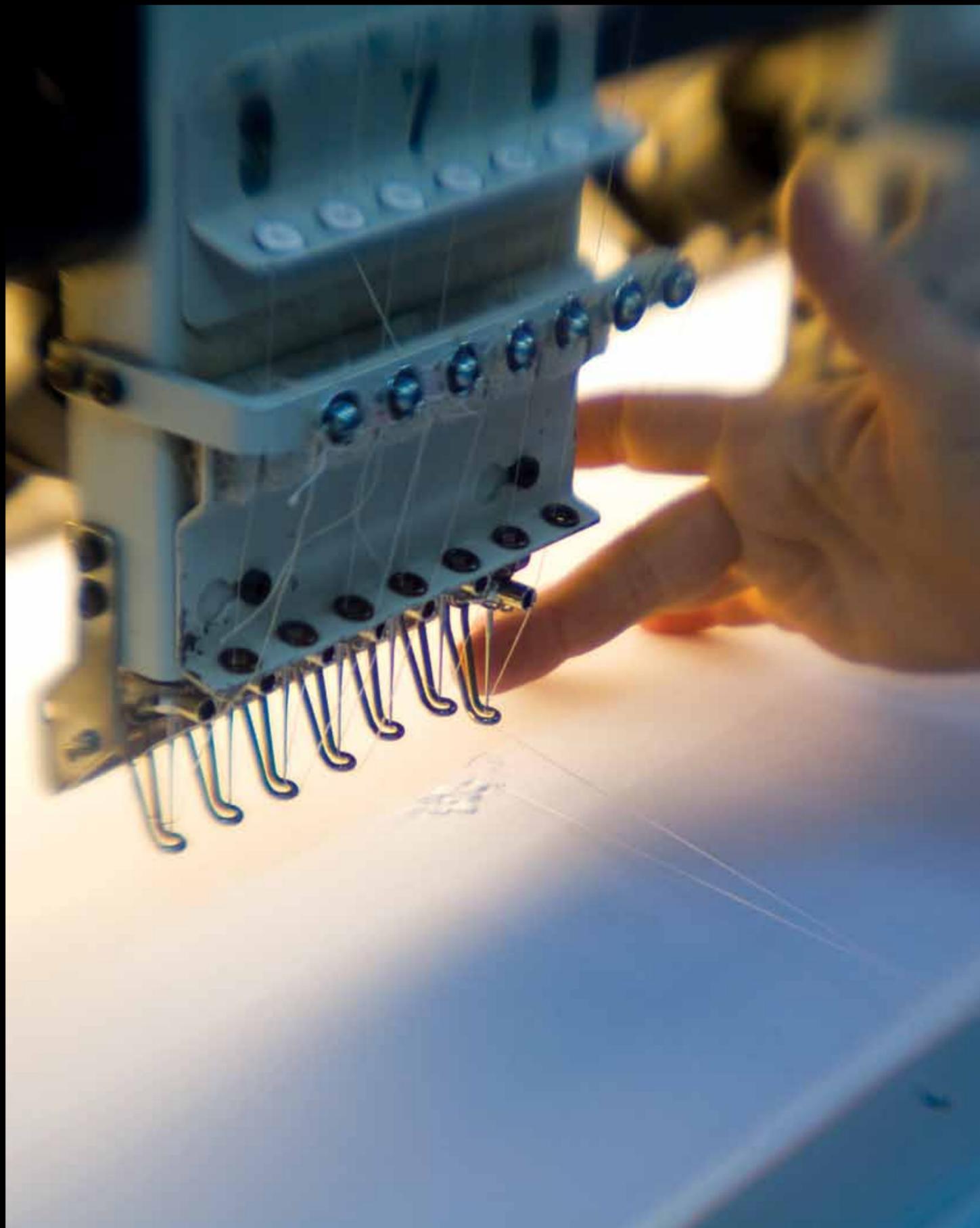
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In 1906, when Remigio Pratesi opened his first embroidery workshop at Casalguidi, near the Tuscan town of Pistoia, he knew he could count on local women to produce the finest needlework obtainable anywhere. Patience, skill and inventiveness were common in that part of Tuscany. Close to Leonardo da Vinci's birthplace, creativity was in the air. In next to no time, Pratesi had become the haute couturier of bed linen. Everything was made to order and the quality throughout was supreme.



Federico Pratesi at his Italian office; **Opposite:** Athos and Dede Pratesi.



Opposite: The Pratesi brand is constantly searching for perfection. **Above:** Athos Pratesi mingles with the likes of Andy Warhol and Liz Taylor.

“WHEN YOU SEE SOMETHING OF GREAT BEAUTY, YOU CAN’T KEEP YOUR EYES OFF IT”

- Federico Pratesi, Pratesi’s executive director

Five generations later, the company has expanded its range of products and now has flagship stores across the globe. The company’s executive director, Federico Pratesi, oversees all aspects of manufacture with the aim of reconciling the Pratesi tradition with the desire to innovate. In his constant search for perfection, he also feels strongly about what producing luxury goods should mean in today’s world.

“When you see something of great beauty, you can’t keep your eyes off it,” says Pratesi. “I think the reason for this is that we have an innate sense of beauty and when we see it we are reminded of perfection, which I consider a state of mind, something that makes you feel good. I’m a practising Catholic, so I believe this perfection is not just an expression of life, but also an expression of God. A walk in a field full of flowers can be perfection and this is a form of perfection that is accessible to everyone.”

Pratesi believes the perfection of luxury products is different. “First of all, it’s obviously exclusive because that is the nature of luxury goods,” he says. “But the very fact that it isn’t accessible to everyone undermines its intrinsic perfection. That’s all a bit philosophical, but if you bear with me I’ll pick up this thread again after describing how I think of perfection in my role as a manufacturer.

“For us, perfection is an inspiration, it’s striving to turn an idea into a form of concrete reality that couldn’t be bettered, at least not at that particular time. Even something as ordinary as a towel can embody this sort of perfection. Our products are the

best expression of ourselves that we can give and they require so much commitment, truly a huge effort on our part.”

In a simple way, Pratesi says the specialised worker who does the embroidery on the company’s products already produces perfection. But, in a more complex system, other elements come into play. “I think that as a firm, to use the word perfection we should make greater effort to develop a concept of contributing to social wellbeing, to the common good. Luxury, yes, but not detached from reality.

“Luxury can range from the sort of excess that borders on bad taste to an apparently simple object that embodies perfection in the details you don’t even see. This is the finest kind of perfection. But all these beautiful things are better if the company that produces them has a social commitment.”

Pratesi says this obviously includes paying the farmers who grow the cotton a fair wage. “In our case, that means the communities in Egypt, near Sudan, who provide us with the fibres with the longest, finest staples,” he says. “Let’s be honest, there’s a degree of self-interest in paying these people properly. They’re working exclusively for us and we want to preserve that special relationship. It’s reciprocally beneficial. And I’m not talking about doing good so that you can tell everyone how virtuous you are either because that’s self-serving.”



“PRATESI’S URGE TO PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRANSLATES INTO WHAT HE VIEWS AS A FIRST STEP IN THE PURSUIT OF A BROADER CONCEPT OF PERFECTION”



What Pratesi is concerned about is a bit different. He believes that successful companies producing luxury goods should show sensitivity to the needs of people who don't have enough. If that message comes from above, it has a better chance of being heard, and followed. "We can make other people aware," he says. "Things aren't going too well in the world at present, physically and ethically. So if a product could be a vehicle for greater responsibility, but not in a heavy-handed sort of way, then I think everyone would stand to benefit."

Pratesi's urge to promote social justice translates into what he views as a first step in the pursuit of a broader concept of perfection. The family firm is involved in raising money for The Heart of Children, a charity that provides children suffering from heart disease with the surgery they would otherwise be unable to find in their country. The medical team visits various parts of the developing world, taking the necessary equipment with them as a contribution to the infrastructure in the host country. The first part of their stay involves operating on the most urgent cases, while the second is devoted to teaching advanced surgical techniques to local doctors so that they are able to continue the good work.

