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White Show Hypes Women's Wear as Part of Milan Strategy

By SOFIA CELESTE

MILAN — Taking advantage of retailers' desire to unify their buying trips for certain seasons, the White trade show rebranded itself for its June edition, differentiating itself from the men's fashion and trade shows late last month.

Its new moniker, "White Man and Woman," is part of the fair's overall strategy to focus on women's wear, even during men's season.

"Our future is selling women's and men's together because buyers are interested in ordering men's and women's pre-collections together," said Massimiliano Bizzi, founder of White.

September's edition will still be entirely dedicated to women's collections, while January's edition will likely follow the June format — meaning that White will be mostly dedicated to women's wear going forward.

White organizers have experimented with showing collections for both sexes since 2012, but this season was the first time they created "Only Woman," an entire section dedicated to women's wear and designers who only produce women's lines.

Cristiano Burani, Hoss Intropia, Momoni, Laura Strambi and Maurizio Pecoraro were among the guest designers who presented their women's pre-collections.

"It is an opportunity to be seen by buyers who wouldn't normally pass by my showroom," Pecoraro told WWD.

The designer teamed up with alternative fabrics maker Alcantara for the staging of his space, which included furniture from his own showroom. Pecoraro's women's looks were patterned with energetic checks, gypsy prints and ensembles crafted with vibrant bouclé for a contemporary, urban woman.

The total number of visitors at White, which ran June 20 to 22, rose more than 10 percent to 5,000, compared to June 2014. The increased attendance and rebranded format translated to an air of energy throughout the fair. "I saw a new sense of vitality," said Claudio Antonioli of Milan's Antonioli concept store. "In the last few months, I have noticed that [fashion] has a lot to offer."

Overall, the number of foreign buyers rose 5 percent, with a 33 percent surge from Korea and 28 percent increase from China. The number of Russian, Greek and Spanish buyers, however, fell. Domestically, the number of Italian buyers rose by 25 percent.

In terms of trends, buyers at the fair took particular note of looks catering to both sexes.

"I saw a real wave of activewear that is suitable for the running and yoga worlds — for men and women who are focused on the idea of wellness, but who also want to be sophisticated," said Roberta Valentini of Penelope, a multiunit retailer in Brescia, Italy.

With the spotlight on resort collections, feminine looks that recalled the past stood out. "There was a real return to the 1950s with flowing, ample dresses," said Bruna Casella of Bernardelli, a chain of six upscale stores in Mantua, Italy.

Designer Diego Dossola's Ultrachic brand ushered in the summer with button-down shirts paired with floor-length patterned skirts. Ultrachic's sales grew 25 percent in the first half of the year compared to the first half of 2014, helped by growth in China, South Korea and the Middle East. The brand's retail network rose to a presence in 150 stores globally.

"While Pitti is better known for men's, White is a time for men's and women's," said capemaker Angelo Gallamini of the Ermanno Gallamini brand. Gallamini unfurled a collection of shawls and robes, some of which were made with the reserve sail fabric of the historic Italian training ship Amerigo Vespucci.

New York-based jewelry designer Bliss Lau won the fair's Time Contemporary Fashion Award, which was presented by White and the Italian Chamber of Buyers to support small labels. Lau, a native of Hawaii who is known for her romantic bodychains and interchangeable rings, said showing at fairs like White is a way to attract Italian retailers.

"White is a way to catch the eye of buyers here, who don't necessarily book orders as soon as they see your collection. They take a look and then they might buy next time," Lau said.

Noting a turnaround in the U.S. economy, Lau added that her sales grew about 40 percent in the first half of 2015 compared to the first half of 2014.