Zegna Puts Artistic Side on Display

By LUISA ZARGIANI

ROME — “Culture is important for the country. There is no growth without culture and any development,” said Gildo Zegna, chief executive officer of the Ermenegildo Zegna Group, following the unveiling of a work commissioned from artists Lucy and Jorge Orta, "Fabulous Romanians," and presented on Wednesday at the Maxxi, Rome’s National Museum of the 21st-Century Arts.

“The public opinion is taking more interest in culture. Customers want to know more, it’s more than just about fashion,” Zegna added.

The project, part of the new ZegnaArt venture revealed earlier this month, is entirely in line with the identity of the group.

“This is not a marketing tool, it’s about customer experience and delight, and beyond selling a product,” explained Zegna in an interview at the brand’s boutique on Via Condotti here.

Zegna silks, ties and fabrics are juxtaposed with military blankets and flea-market shirts in a site-specific art installation, inspired by Rome’s history and contemporary life, and hinging on themes dear to the Orta, such as sustainability, extreme living conditions and preservation of the land — similarly to the Zegnas and their investment in Italy’s Casi Zegna, for example.

“I enjoy working with textiles, the association of fabrics and colors, and different textures,” said Lucy Orta, who until 12 years ago worked in fashion.

“I feel that the Medici are back. Luckily we have people that through culture know they can see the world in a different way,” declared Orta.

Zegna declined to provide financial details about the investment in ZegnaArt, which includes three divisions: Special Projects, such as the collaboration with Maxxi; Public, which combines the commission of a public work with an international institution in a selected emerging country and a residency to a local artist invited to study in Italy, and Art in Global Stores. The executive underscored ZegnaArt as a medium- to-long-term project with an international perspective, noting that for this reason it’s not only a financial investment, which he defined as “relevant,” but also one in terms of time and human resources.

“Both are very valuable. This is a serious project that needs backup support and dedicated activities. We are sure to invest more in time,” he said.

For the Maxxi presentation, the company organized a 500-guest event the same evening, following a dinner for 150, including members of the press, the previous night.

Zegna conceded there will eventually be some kind of return on the firm’s investment.

Lucy and Jorge Orta and works commissioned as part of the ZegnaArt venture.

Zegna was upbeat about the performance in that region, adding double-digit increases at retail, which accounts for 50 percent of revenues there and solid gains in the wholesale channel, too.

He expressed confidence for 2012 and pointed to the revamping of the Los Angeles and South Coast Plaza stores and expansion and refurbishment of the Chicago venue this year. These follow openings in Las Vegas, Short Hills, N.J., and Manhasset, N.Y., last year. There are also plans to unveil a new store in the Miami Design District in the near future.

Zegna said group sales totalled 1.12 billion euros, or $1.55 billion at average exchange, in 2011, which he said was a “record year.” Profit figures will be released in April. Given Italy’s lackluster consumer spending and difficult economy, Zegna was especially grateful for exports, which accounted for 85 percent of business. “It’s going to be a challenging year, with peaks and downs, unexpected situations, currency fluctuations and countries slowing down. Japan is flat and Europe is a question mark,” he remarked.

“Things are very positive and we have a strong core,” said Italy’s new Prime Minister Mario Monti’s reference. “He has a great team, he’s taking action, and it’s a credible government, but the country is in recession.”

Once again, Zegna dismissed any interest in a public listing for the family-owned, 102-year-old company. “There is no reason to list. We are growing organically, we are financially sound, there are many opportunities and the family is united,” he said.