

- 1) A selection of female faces from the collection
- 2) Company founder, Romano Bonaveri
- 3) Sanding a definite plaster mould
- 4) Factory on the outskirts of Cento, Italy
- 5) Collection of hands
- 6) Inside the factory, which shows the range of models' poses
- 7) Legs akimbo waiting to be painted



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Timeline:

- 1950: Romano Bonaveri makes the first papier-mâché mannequins covered in cloth.
- 1953: Founds Bonaveri Artistic Mannequins.
- 1958: Exhibits at Milan trade fair and secures first foreign clients.
- 1968: Builds a new factory and the company begins making plastic models.
- 2001: Buys out Swiss mannequin maker Schläppi.
- 2005: Inaugurates state-of-the-art factory and showroom.
- 2009: Mannequins feature at "Model as Muse" exhibit at Metropolitan Museum of Art.

SPECIALIST: 01

Plaster People

PREFACE: Mannequin maker Bonaveri has been in business for 56 years, championing a clean, chiselled look for its models. So successful is the factory that wherever you are in the world, its mannequins will be watching from a shop window near you.

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Though they are regularly showcased in high-street windows, shoppers are unlikely to recognise a Bonaveri even when one is staring them straight in the face. But the company, and its clients, prefer it that way. Since 1953, the Italian mannequin maker has supplied leading retailers, fashion designers and museums with elegant but understated models to show off the drape and folds of their garments.

The driving force behind the business is the tireless Romano Bonaveri, the firm's 81-year-old owner and founder. A self-taught sculptor and portraitist, Bonaveri got the idea to translate his artistic pursuits into a commercial venture from parade floats he worked on at the carnival held annually in Cento, a town north of Bologna where the company is based. These floats sported human caricatures built from papier-mâché, a material then used for store dummies.

Soon the enterprising Bonaveri was making busts covered in cloth and visiting local boutiques to consult with clients. Today, most of his models are forged in fibreglass or shockproof polyurethane, though the company offers pieces crafted from beech, complete with bendable joints, and sculpted torsos wrapped in leather.

"We've always been in the vanguard in terms of materials," says Bonaveri, as he leads a tour of the company's 17,000 sq m factory and showroom that doubles as his residence (he lives above the shop floor). Innovation has helped the manufacturer win key customers at home, particularly fashion houses, but the bulk of business is abroad – exports account for 80 per cent of sales, with big orders arriving



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from the US, Germany and France where retailers aren't above spending €1,000 on a single Bonaveri.

While the state-of-the art assembly line rolls out 20,000 models a year, the design of a new mannequin remains an artisanal skill. Whether the company is adding a new shape to its in-house collection, which ranges from lingerie busts to full-length statues, or making bespoke models for fashion designers, who periodically update their male and female silhouettes, the first step always involves wet clay and a sculptor's hands.

Once the facial features and other anatomical bits fit the desired look, plaster is poured over the sculpture. Craftsmen then chisel away to break off the mould, which is used to create a last. After busts, limbs and hands are reproduced,



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a team of 70 craftsmen get to work on the models' finishing touches.

Torsos and limbs are joined together and gaps are filled in with stucco. Pieces are sanded until silky smooth and receive two base layers of ivory paint before the final colour is applied – while white is the favoured choice, clients can select any colour. The process takes upwards of two months but clients are happy to wait, whether it's for a bespoke plastic Adonis or one of the standard models. The company's catalogue boasts dozens of lines ranging from shapes that mimic the human form to more stylised mannequins such as the popular 2200, with its futuristic face and slender shape available in a variety of dynamic poses. And unlike competitors such as Brussels-based New John Nissen, the firm doesn't add makeup to its models, preferring not to draw attention to its creations. "The mannequin has to be beautiful, but at the same time it can't be the protagonist," explains Andrea Bonaveri, who, together with his brother Carlo, helps his father manage the business. "It has to be seen and then vanish." — (M)