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It's a "Sciura" Thing

"Sciura," the term for Milan's well-coiffed, old-world ladies of leisure, is getting constant traction in the fashion press and social media spheres. What's behind the fascination with Lombardy's grandest dames?

By Mary Gray

Ashleigh, 34, had been living in Milan for nine years when she reached the pinnacle of that experience: A bona fide *sciura* (“sure-ah”) — the word for *signora* in local dialect, traditionally assigned to the city’s well-turned-out housewives of the moneyed, over-60 set — told her she was elegant. (For an Englishwoman.)

Though the caveat would have been insulting in any other context, Ashleigh knew this was still supreme flattery in Milan. She’d met this woman and many others like her through her work as an English tutor to the children of Milan’s upper crust. However retrograde and superficial Ashleigh sometimes found characters like this woman to be, she couldn’t deny the ego boost that came from hearing her words.

“I thought, that’s it, my life’s complete, [the ultimate Milanese *sciura*] has called me elegant,” Ashleigh reminisced recently, laughing but not exactly joking. “Bring me a shovel, bury me, I’m dead.” She moved back to London not long after getting that validation.

DESPERATELY SEEKING SCIURA-DOM

Craving the approval of one’s more sophisticated elders, even while harboring reservations about their

values, is nothing new anywhere in the world. But in Milan in recent years, the natural impulse to do right by Nonna has mingled with social media and globalization, creating a new urban mythology around the *sciura* archetype, one that worships her taste and way of being but arguably undermines her mystique.

“Going back a few decades, the Milanese *sciura* was a particular kind of entity, distinguished for her carefully cultivated elegance and her determination,” the Florence-born filmmaker and visual artist Ippolita del Bono Vennezze, 29, told me. Ippolita directed the music video for the singer Popa’s 2022 micro-hit “Sciura Milanese,” shot with Super 8 film during an unscripted aperitivo-slash-high-tea held among several real-life *sciure* (and one deferential husband in a smashing red sweater). The hypnotic video is just a series of images of at-home patrician Milanese merriment: Campari soda glass-clinking, restrained group laughter on reupholstered antique furniture, jewelry. (Lots of jewelry.) The lyrics are from the perspective of a young woman eager to impress one of the stately *sciure* before her. References to the grande dame’s “dog and beige coat,” her respective appointments at the “boutique,” “[Pasticceria] Sissi” and at “Cova for a nice coffee” alternate with gushing proclamations of *I’ll-follow-you-*

anywhere fandom: *I dream of being like you. You're a crazy level of chic. You're a sophisticated woman.*

THE NEW SCIURA-MANIA

Blanket statements about the elegance of Milan's "sophisticated women" are a familiar fashion media trope, but *sciure* as a group or a concept have never been leveraged as marketing muses, sales gimmicks and "style goals" quite like they have in the past near-decade. Take Jenny Walton, a 30-something American illustrator, fashion influencer and *sciura* disciple who only moved to Milan in 2021 but has already been positioned by *Vogue* as the reigning expert on matters of style and self-care in the city. In an earnest guide in *The Zoe Report* on "how to dress like you live in Milan," Jenny described her taste

as "close to the *sciura* aesthetic." After the jump was an affiliate link to a \$3,750 wool Prada midi skirt.

The growth in this type of affectionate objectification of, and outright capitalization on, the *sciura* has coincided with a period when their high-bourgeois behaviors are increasingly likely to be viewed as passé by the wider world. Ippolita said that the word *sciura* acquired a "negative connotation" in the early 2010s, and told me of her desire to "reclaim the term [and bring to life] an image of a woman who can adapt to change without losing her identity, her authenticity or her timeless, refined sense of style."

It helps that the *sciura* — or the idea of her, anyway — sells, as do her modernized maverick alter-egos.



J.J.Martin has called the gallerist Rossana Orlandi (pictured) "Milan's reigning anti-*sciura*"

J.J. Martin, 49, a longtime American resident of Milan, founded the colorful, maximalist clothing and homeware company LaDoubleJ in 2015. Early adopters of *sciure* shtick as viable business strategy, LaDoubleJ sells silk twill “Sciura T-shirts” for €230 each and regularly name-checks *sciure* (and “anti-*sciure*”) in its promotional emails, driving home the lessons these “wonder women” and “Legendary Ladies” — LaDoubleJ’s wording, LaDoubleJ’s caps — have imparted on J.J., now compiled in her 2023 book *Mamma Milano*. The clearest precursor to the book and epic branding exercise was the “School of Sciura,” an editorial vertical on the company website that gave life advice from local women like the gallerist Rossana Orlandi, women who buck the lady-of-leisure stereotype yet comfortably fulfill elements of it in all the “right” ways. Dames in filigree necklaces and party caftans dispensed tips like: “You can’t go around with short shorts and Botox;” “Wear fur, but make sure it’s edgy;” and “No jeans. Ever.”

“FUR AND CULTURE”

It’s not just fashion-world women who have fueled *sciura*-mania and the figure’s rise to stardom. In December 2016, Angelo, then a dental student who moved to Milan from southern Italy, spontaneously photographed a white-haired Milanese lady in a floor-length fur coat, her back to the camera

as she browsed the bookshelves of the Feltrinelli Foundation. He posted it to Instagram with the caption “Fur and Culture.” That was the birth of [@sciuraglam](#), now casually familiar to many moderately-online Milanese under-50s — and to virtually all of the international fashion world. [@sciuraglam](#) has since amassed almost 300,000 followers for its slice-of-life shots of mink-swaddled, manicured ladies strolling arm in arm down Via Montenapoleone, or of women in quilted tweed twin sets sipping espresso at Marchesi. The locations aren’t secondary to these *sciure*, either: When Angelo is pressed to elaborate on what distinguishes the glamorous Milanese from any other image-focused, etiquette-minded women of the Italian upper class, his answer boils down to setting.



“Milan was the center of the [Italian] bourgeoisie and the economic boom in every decade after the war,” Angelo wrote in an email. “It’s always been the nerve hub of the Italian economy, but Milanese [men] have historically been a bit coy about showing off the wealth derived from their businesses.”

Milanese women — wives, Angelo specified — showed off more readily, and still do. He thinks they consistently pull off “perfect equilibrium” between the fine taste and financial resources their clothing signals and the “discretion with which it’s done.” That, Angelo said, is what distinguishes the *sciura* from other Italian high-society types, and what continues to lure him in.

THE “DISCRETION” DISCONNECT

“Discretion” — *riservatezza* — is a complicated choice of word, however. *Discretion* is hardly the reason I watched transfixed when, on a recent Saturday afternoon at Pasticceria Sissi, a fox fur-clad woman with blood-red nails used a €100 note to pay for her single orange *spremuta*, flirting effortlessly with Maleye, the young cashier and son of the owners, in the process.

What was Maleye’s take on the showiness of certain *sciure*, being behind the counter at a known magnet for the

Milanese elite? “In Milan, there’s a lot of ostentatiousness with little substance,” he told me. “The richest people are usually the ones who flaunt it the least.”

And there, in “flaunting it,” lies the rub. Today’s *sciura*-mania is undergirded by a disconnect between what the archetype has long represented — old-money politesse, *bella figura*, fulfillment of the matriarchal order — and its current overexposure. For every candid shot of street style or Sissi sightings on Angelo’s @sciuraglam feed, for example, you’ll find a high-profile sponsored post in which chic older women shill for major brands. Even when the very idea of pay-to-play social media content, or of social media at all, clashes with the supposed *sciura* value of discretion, some of the featured labels go with the territory (if Milan-based cashmere manufacturer Loro Piana isn’t an ideal advertiser for @sciuraglam, who is?). Others, like promos for Perlana laundry detergent and Telepass mobility services, look like out-of-sync cash grabs.

Angelo keeps busy with advertising deals and doesn’t agonize too much; his models are getting paid, he’s fair. He doesn’t seem to ruminate on the “future of *sciure*,” and doesn’t get defensive when asked how he selects women for branded content (some are models from agencies; some are great-aunts and grandmothers of his followers or employees of the featured brands; some



Jenny Walton has said she feels “close to the *sciura* aesthetic”

have even become his friends). He doesn't fret about the potential for squandered authenticity when a *sciura* — normally a label assigned from the outside, not an openly claimed identity — self-promotes and capitalizes on her status. It's not Angelo's job, after all, to preserve the "integrity" of the classic *sciura* stereotype by ditching the brassy sponsored posts in the name of "discretion." Nor is it the opposite — to "liberate" the most conservative signoras by dragging them screaming into the 2020s by the hems of their mink coats.

Ashleigh, the young Englishwoman simultaneously repelled by the *sciure* and eager to please them, similarly suggested it could be dangerous to overly politicize these women's lives and choices (or to dig too deep into what her Varese husband meant when he confessed he found *sciure* "so exciting"). She remembered something exciting of her own, anyway, from her dense catalog of glam-grandma memories: Once, on a train ride between Milan and Varese, Ashleigh watched a textbook *sciura* rise from her seat to admonish a rowdy cohort of teenagers for thoughtlessly disturbing other passengers and dirtying the train with food, trash and feet plopped in inopportune places. *This is no way to behave!* she exclaimed with a wag of her manicured, ring-stacked finger.

The woman's demand for respect from other people's children was what Ashleigh found so memorable. "When you're old enough to be considered a *sciura*," she

mused, "you're finally able to scream at people the way you've been screamed at your whole life." (Or, as J.J. Martin once put it, "*Sciure* bark sharply and loudly and then briskly return to normal with a dramatic whoosh of their brocade skirt.")

This is no way to behave. Have some pride. The real roots of *sciura*-mania probably aren't about money or minks or even Milan at all, but about the thrilling appeal of seeing senior women so deeply secure in commanding respect and visibility. Earlier this year, the English author and *Sunday Times* columnist Dolly Alderton, 35, wrote of her recurring wish for an "imperious dame" in black cashmere to tell her, with "militant" specificity, how she should live, before arriving at her more evolved wish to *be* that woman of conviction. The dream of finally becoming sure of oneself isn't a specifically Milanese desire, but it may be the real *sciura* thing.

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