

travel

LET A SENSE OF ADVENTURE GET THE BETTER OF YOU

fashion

FIRENZE

REVERED AS THE CENTRE OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE, FLORENCE IS ALSO A STYLE CAPITAL — HOME TO GUCCI, PUCCI, CAVALLI AND, OF COURSE, FERRAGAMO.

PHOTOGRAPHER TONY AMOS PRODUCER/WRITER LEE TULLOCH



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE: on the streets of Florence; photographs from 1950s couture showings are dotted around the Portrait Firenze hotel; the Salvatore Ferragamo boutique in the city's historic centre; 'Nina' cap-toe pumps.



Salvatore Ferragamo liked to call himself, humbly, a “shoemaker”. And yet he was among the most innovative designers the world has known, inventing such classics as the cork wedge-heeled shoe and the ‘cage heel’, a hollow heel encrusted with rhinestones.

He was the first Italian to export shoes to the world and his faithful customers included royalty and aristocrats as well as Hollywood stars such as Audrey Hepburn, Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe. (Today's clientele includes Nicole Kidman, Angelina Jolie and Drew Barrymore.) Avowedly apolitical, Ferragamo also made shoes for Eva Braun and Eva Perón, and boots for Mussolini.

The Ferragamo name is closely associated with the high culture and great artisan tradition of Florence. This is where, in the 1930s, the designer bought the renaissance-era Palazzo Spini Feroni that now houses the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum, its showroom, the flagship boutique and corporate offices. And while today the company has 14 factories throughout Italy, its premium lines still come from Florence.

Ferragamo took his first step towards fashion stardom in 1910, when at the tender age of 11, he opened a cobbler's shop in his parents' house. And although the designer died in 1960, his widow Wanda and their descendants continue to run the various arms of the business — including the Lungarno Collection of luxury hotels overseen by Leonardo Ferragamo, one of the couple's six children.

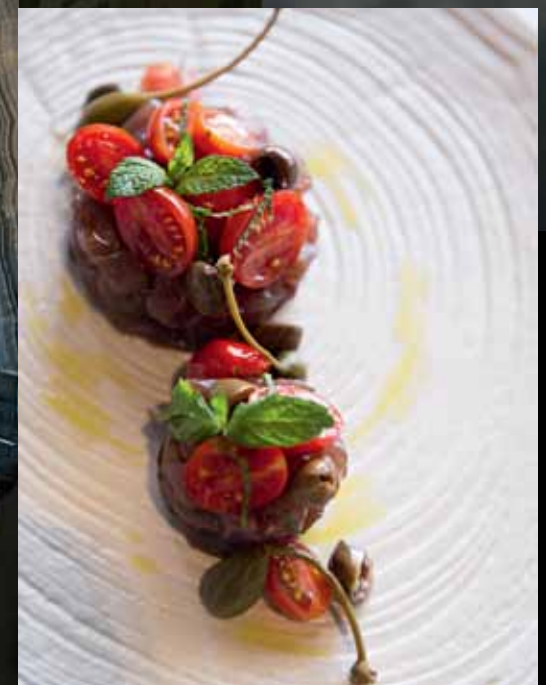
The division has just added Portrait Firenze, a beautiful new 34-suite hotel overlooking the Arno river, to its portfolio of properties in Florence, Rome and Tuscany. Anyone who has stayed at the first Portrait hotel — the 14-suite Portrait Roma in Rome — will have seen the framed Ferragamo memorabilia, including sketches of shoe designs and pages from order books, that line its walls. >



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE: the Caffé Dell'Oro (named after the goldsmiths on the Ponte Vecchio) is excellent for breakfast; a view of the Ponte Vecchio from the hotel terrace; tuna tartare at the Caffé Dell'Oro; lounge on sumptuous sofas among candles and artworks at the Portrait Firenze hotel.



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The rooftops of Florence seen from the Continentale Hotel, which is also part of the Lungarno Collection.

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CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE LEFT: The Salvatore Ferragamo Museum holds the 'lasts' of numerous Hollywood stars; a replica of the 'Equilibrium' two-piece shoe; the designer's iconic creations are displayed in the museum's *Equilibrium* exhibition; the 'Rainbow' wedge created for Judy Garland in 1939; the 'Invisible' nylon sandal from 1947.

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: 'Varina' ballerina flats; the museum displays no more than 70 of its 14,000 pairs of shoes at a time; archivists Francesca Piani, Irene Zoppi and Maria Teresa Giovannini; Ferragamo platform peep-toe pumps; shoemaker Stefano Frasconi in the factory; 90 per cent of the work is still done by hand.

< For the Portrait Firenze, art historian Nina Screti has combed the archives of the Alinari photo agency and of Florentine couturier Giovanni Battista Giorgini for black-and-white images of parades and galas held in the city from the 1950s to the 1970s — among the first teetering steps of the modern Italian fashion industry. These are now exhibited in the hotel's suites and hallways, making it a 'portrait' of stylish Florence.

"In the creation of Portrait Firenze, an inspiration was definitely the location that hosts it," says Leonardo Ferragamo. "Florence is a special city that carries an important and valuable cultural heritage, above all an enlightened spirit and intellectual panache that still characterises it. This is one of the few cities where craftsmanship and the value of all things handmade still have a meaning that has been handed down for over 1000 years, and has been enriched adapting to modern times. Walking through the streets of the centre, it is still possible to find workshops where leather, marble, raffia, gold and semiprecious stones are worked by hand. The past becomes present... and the future!"

Portrait Firenze's interiors — a palette of pale greys and dark timber floors with some black lacquer, and gold or brass highlights created by revered Italian architect and designer Michele Bönan

OUR SUITE HAS A LONG TERRACE WHERE WE CAN SIT AND LOOK OUT OVER THE RIVER

— are chic enough to rival the creations of Florentine-based fashion houses such as Gucci, Roberto Cavalli and Emilio Pucci. We have a fifth-floor suite with a long terrace where we can sit and look over the river and the Ponte Vecchio — a view that's better from a height, away from the hordes of tourists that clog the streets in summer.

The rooms are spacious and sumptuously decorated, mixing vintage styling with the latest technology. There are *two* walk-in wardrobes and the marble ensuite is stocked with Ferragamo amenities. Even the keycard is elegant — attached to a square of black plastic, which I slip over my wrist like a bracelet when I go down to the hotel's superb Caffé Dell'Oro for breakfast.

Salvatore Ferragamo is never far away; photographs of him with famous clients

are hung throughout the hotel. The designer's personal history is as remarkable as some of his wildly inventive shoes. He emigrated to the US in 1914 at the age of 16, encouraged by a brother who was working in a Boston shoe factory. But disgusted by the poor quality of its shoes, Ferragamo moved to California, where two other brothers had jobs as handymen at the American Film Company.

The talented young man started making his handmade footwear for the costume department, becoming the favourite

shoemaker of silent-era stars such as Clara Bow, Jean Harlow, Theda Bara and Gloria Swanson. But Ferragamo's desire to increase production led him back to Florence, where his export business became a huge success — until in 1933, during the Great Depression, he went bankrupt. But through incredible resolve, the designer built the business back up again and managed to keep afloat during World War II and ensuing hard times.

The Salvatore Ferragamo Museum, in the basement of the Palazzo Spini Feroni, will attract not only people fascinated by shoes, but also anyone with a interest in art and craftsmanship. (Guests of Portrait Firenze can arrange a private visit outside visiting hours.) The museum, which opened in 1995, has 14,000 pairs of shoes, of which only 50–70 pairs are displayed at any one time, mounted on a wall. These include the 'Rainbow' platforms created in honour of Judy Garland in 1939, the 'Unica' boot from 1939, a black and cream suede wedge that looks totally current, and the 'Invisible' sandal, with straps made of transparent nylon, which won Ferragamo the prestigious Neiman Marcus plaque for 'distinguished services to fashion' in 1947.

Also on display are the wooden 'lasts' of many of his famous clients, which included Bette Davis (size 4½ B), Audrey Hepburn (7½ AAA) and Lauren Bacall (9AAA). A tiny pair of models for a baby hang with them — these are recent additions, made for Prince George. Another display shows his models in red with

various heel heights — Ferragamo doesn't make a heel higher than 11 centimetres, which is the point where equilibrium is challenged.

All of the company's shoes are still made in Italy; its high-end factory is about 30 minutes drive from the museum and flagship store. These days machines are used for some of the process, but about 90 per cent of the work is still done by hand, meaning only about 40 pairs of shoes are finished each day.

When we visit for a private tour, the workshop is busy with expert shoemakers cutting, sewing, stretching, trimming, sanding, tacking and hammering. Depending on the model, there can be 220 stages of production, from choosing the leather to packing the finished shoe in a box. The 1939 'Rainbow' shoe is still made in a limited edition. It has 20 separate pieces, all of them constructed by hand, and costs €1600 (\$1870).

In his autobiography *Shoemaker of Dreams*, Ferragamo writes, "I love feet. They talk to me. As I take them in my hands, I feel their strength, their weaknesses, their vitality." Watching the workers cradle the shoes as they carefully fashion them, you know his legacy is in good hands. **VL**

Portrait Firenze has studio rooms from €450 (\$650). To book, visit lhw.com. VL flew Cathay Pacific Premium Economy class to Rome and drove to Florence courtesy of Drive Away Holidays, which offers discounted self-drive options in more than 130 countries. To book, visit driveaway.com.au or call 1300 723 972.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GUILLEMO DE MICHEL; COURTESY OF SALVATORE FERRAGAMO (ARCHIVISTS AND SHOEMAKERS: FRANCESCA PIANI, IRENE ZOPPI AND MARIA TERESA GIOVANNINI); FERRAGAMO PLATFORM PEEP-TOE PUMPS; IMAGES COURTESY OF SALVATORE FERRAGAMO