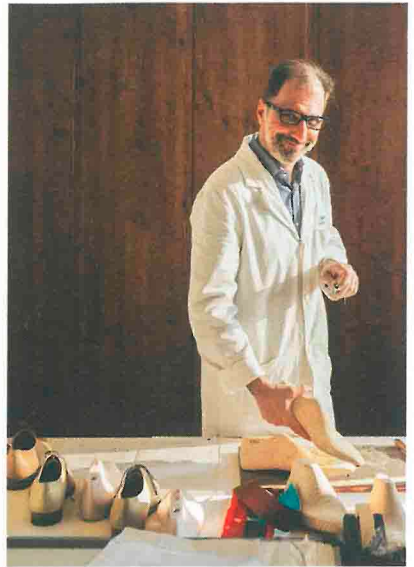




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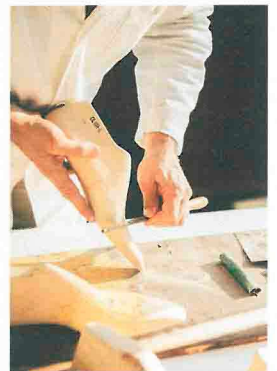
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[FOOTWEAR]
**HOT ON
THE HEELS**

Ferrara

● **Preface**

Training the next generation is a key objective for Parisian fashion brand Berluti, which has invested in a state-of-the-art footwear showcase and school for would-be cobblers.

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Nestled in the Po Valley, the town of Ferrara is renowned for its stunning *palazzos*. This January, on the outskirts of the Renaissance city, masterpieces on a much smaller scale were put on show in a new 8,000 sq m complex dedicated to high-end shoemaking, owned by the Paris-based menswear label Berluti.

The two-storey factory clad in cedar has a glass roof with crisscrossing planks resembling interlaced shoestrings. It is home to workshops and, most importantly, a school where the brand's Italian craftsmen pass on their expertise to the next generation. Though part of a French luxury group, Berluti has strong ties to the *bel paese*. Its founder, an Italian cobbler from the Marche region, set up the company in the French capital in 1895.

While it boasts a team of *mâtres botteurs* in Paris doing bespoke footwear, the brand has relied on Italian artisans to deliver the vast majority of its elegant lace-ups and loafers. "If you travel up and down Italy you see a tradition of making things well, making things that last," says Alessandro Sartori, Berluti's Italian artistic director.

Keen to retain this old-world craftsmanship the company, under CEO Antoine Arnault, started a course to attract a new pool of artisans in 2012. "You need to invest in the territory and this heritage that has given you so much," says Sartori. Arnault's move coincided with the brand's decision to acquire French bespoke tailors Arnys three years ago to ensure the specialist clothier's suiting mastery wasn't lost and could bolster Berluti's presence in the top-end menswear segment.

Investing in teaching craft, from leather goods to tailoring, is a growing trend for many European luxury houses (see box) in need of a skilled workforce, especially since the European luxury sector is enjoying double-digit growth.

Three brands investing in tomorrow's artisans

1 Brioni

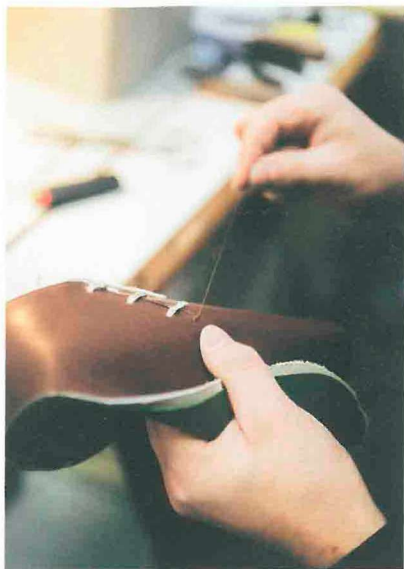
Started in 1985, the menswear label operates a school for aspiring tailors in Penne, Italy, the same town where its factory is based.

2 Prada

This year the Italian fashion house breaks ground on its Prada Technical Academy in Tuscany, where attendees will learn the skills to create bags, footwear and clothing.

3 Bottega Veneta

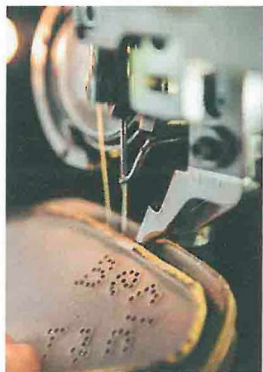
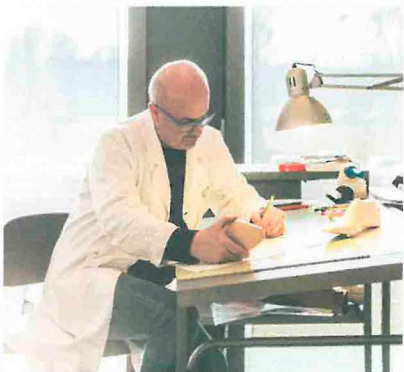
Opened in 2006, the luxury brand's programme offers would-be artisans hands-on education in handbag design and product development.



- 01 Berluti's factory, Ferrara
- 02 Berluti factory foyer
- 03 Last-maker in his atelier
- 04 Leather swatches
- 05 Sketch of a new shoe
- 06 Carving a shoe last
- 07 Berluti's shoe archive
- 08 Model-maker

- 09 Sewing the leather upper
- 10 Students learn about leather bagmaking
- 11 Perfecting a design
- 12 Stitching upper and insole
- 13 Craftsman's workstation
- 14 Berluti students
- 15 Alessandro shoe

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In Berluti's case, students get a hands-on experience in their own workspace, which is located across from the company's production area. Trainees, identified by their crimson aprons, work under the supervision of tutors and are exposed to all aspects of the trade.

They inspect precious fine calfskin and crocodile hides from the tannery for defects and learn the art of cutting and skiving (as in paring leather rather than avoiding work). Students, mostly in their twenties, enrol in a 400-hour course lasting two to three months and are introduced to the many steps required to stitch and affix uppers to soles using techniques such as Goodyear welting. "It's an eye-opening experience for them," says Sartori. "They see the effort that goes into each phase of shoemaking and have a tangible product in their hands at the end of the day."

To date more than 150 students have completed the course with some 90 already finding work at Berluti. The company's factory has space to accommodate more than 200 new hires should business continue to boom.

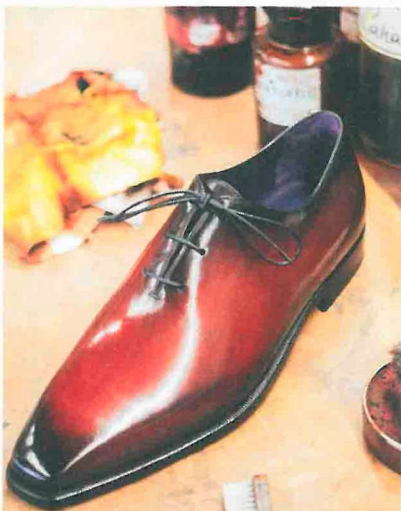
On a visit upstairs to an atelier devoted to colouring pairs of finished lace-ups and loafers, a trio of students observe staff in white coats consulting a book of colour "recipes" used to create rich patinas that have become a signature of the brand's footwear. Lining the shelves and resembling a chemist's lab is a mix of carafes, jars and bottles each filled with a

specially made house dye, many labelled with indicative names such as Rothko blue.

Trainees watch an expert colourist use a cloth and a bit of elbow grease to apply coats of a tobacco hue to an Oxford upper made from the firm's supple Venezia leather. For student Sabrina Gratti, 21, a Ferrara native, the opportunity to spend time side by side with master craftsmen from the get-go was a big draw. "I prefer to work with my hands rather than sit in an office cubicle. It's rewarding and you see yourself as part of this 'Made in Italy' tradition that has a long history."

Her colleague Alice Ferri, also 21, nods in agreement. Ferri enjoys the precise work of the last- and model-makers. Working with a zen-like calm, their job starts with a hand-drawn design furnished by Sartori and ends with the brand introducing a new product, such as this year's Alessio casual city shoe.

Artisans shave minute layers off a wooden form, making notations for the placement of the tongue and eyelets with a pencil, to arrive at the proper fit and ensure the model is ergonomically correct. From there the 3D-form is painstakingly transferred into a 2D pattern of pieces to be passed on to the shoemakers. "There's great attention to detail, which I like," says Ferri. "At the end of the day you come away with a lot of satisfaction seeing the final product come to life." — (M)



15