



Footwear fairs offer autumn cheer

With the footwear industry still swallowing up by far the greatest proportion of the leather tanners produce around the world (47%), Europe's main autumn footwear fairs are an important opportunity to take the sector's pulse.

To say the same thing a different way, a buoyant and vibrant footwear industry is good news for the leather sector.

The September shows this year—GDS in Düsseldorf, Micam in Milan and Modacalzado in Madrid—certainly appear to have achieved pass-marks.

The GDS event (including GLS and Global Shoes and Accessories), the first of the season, had almost 1,400 exhibitors from 45 countries presenting new footwear and accessory collections. The organisers said afterwards that 33,500 visitors had come through the doors over the three days of the fair, and that more than half had come from outside Germany. The numbers are more or less the same as the event achieved in the autumn of 2006.

Good orders

Maximilian Müller, managing director of Lloyd, one of the important footwear brands exhibiting, said afterwards that the

event had gone well for his company. "We took very good orders, particularly from Scandinavia and Russia," he added.

In on-site feedback, 70% of visitors said they believed the 'concept areas' the organisers had incorporated into GDS—such as 'Prime Square' for classical elegance and 'White Cubes' for progressive, high-end fashion ideas, and the extensive children's section—were a success.

Most observers agree that these ideas—the work of GDS project director, Kirstin Deutelmöser—were successful in bringing back some buzz to the event. However, there is some anecdotal evidence from the exhibitors taking part in 'White Cubes' in particular that control over which visitors were able to gain access to their sectioned-off stands was too tight.

Visitors were also positive about supporting events at the Düsseldorf, which included daily fashion shows—with former Miss World, Rosanna Davison in attendance—and discussion and conference sessions on the floor of several halls.

Another highlight was the stunning Carmen's Shoes exhibition, showcasing footwear that 25 top Spanish designers produced with the eponymous heroine of Bizet's 1875 opera in mind.

Quality and content

From here, the industry's attention turned to Milan for the Micam event the following week.

Here, visitor numbers were up by almost 5% to 46,313. Almost half came from outside Italy, with Japan, Germany, Spain, France, Russia and the UK the best represented other countries.

The president of the National Association of Italian Footwear Manufacturers (ANCI), Vito Artioli, said at the end of the event: "This is my first MICAM as president of ANCI. I'm proud to be able to say that we Italians are still undisputedly the first in the world. We are the leaders in the top sections of the market thanks to our product, which combines quality and fashion content."

The trends information that emerged from Micam suggested that elegant, streamlined heels are in for women, and ballet pumps are still popular. Sandals were also on show from many of the 1,667 exhibitors. Some of the sandals were reminiscent of the cocktail styles of the 1950s while others were jewelled or had slashed wedges. There were also ultra-flat and flip-flop style sandals.

The leathers used in the women's footwear on show at Micam were glossy and softened, with bold colours and high-impact accessories.

Sharp styling was back for men. Spring-Summer 2008 will offer them moccasins and lace-up shoes with high-quality leathers, treated to give a sporty look. There were lots of leisure collections on show. Trend experts at the show described this as "casual but always with an eye to elegance".

Dynamic business

Madrid's Modacalzado event followed at the end of September. It was the twentieth edition of the show.

The event attracted just over 17,000 visitors, all but 3,000 of them coming from the different regions of Spain. Numbers were down, even from the spring edition of Modacalzado in March, a 7% drop.

The organisers said afterwards that this reflected the decrease there has been across Spain in the numbers of retail outlets specialising in the footwear and leather sectors. However, they said this did not detract from "dynamic business activity at the fair".



Lower numbers at the Madrid fair reflected a fall in the number of footwear retail outlets across Spain, the organisers said. CREDIT: IFEMA



Caption: Supporting events at GDS, such as the stunning Carmen's Shoes exhibition, were a great success. CREDIT: GDS

One of the most dynamic visitors was Spain's minister for industry, tourism and commerce, Joan Clos. He used his whistle-stop tour of the event to confirm that a new state plan to help the country's footwear and leather sector was "in the final stages of negotiation" with industry players and the trade unions.

The agreement, worth €49 million in aid to companies and workers, became formal at a signing ceremony in Elche a month later.

At Modacalzado, Mr Clos said the programme was certain to provide a boost to Spanish footwear brands and manufacturers. "This is a sector that has already shown signs of becoming stronger after something of a crisis," he added.

Recent figures from the Spanish footwear industry federation (FICE) show that between 2002 and 2006, Spain's leather footwear production fell by 35.7%, from more than 127 million pairs to 82 million. In terms of value, the drop over the same period was 29.6%, from €2.5 billion to €1.8 billion last year.

Recent export figures suggest that the situation may be improving: export values are up by 4.3%, representing what FICE has called "a slow but ongoing recovery". Mr Clos echoed this idea at Modacalzado. He said the plan would address specifically the need to promote greater consumption of Spanish-made shoes among the country's buying public, but said a FICE

initiative called Zapatos de España, aimed at raising the profile of the country's footwear products inside Spain itself, was already bearing fruit.

Benefits of being less busy

Another story from Modacalzado concerns Tuscan footwear company Scene. It has three brands: Scene (for women's fashion footwear), Boemos (for "more basic" men's and women's shoes) and Mos (for more sporty shoes).

Word went round the fair that this small Italian company, surrounded by Spanish competitors, tucked out of the way at the side of Hall 8, had attracted the attention of important international buyers visiting the show.



"Dynamic business" continued as normal at Modacalzado this autumn.

In fact, a buyer representing a small group of footwear shops in Chicago placed an important order with Scene at the show. She had attended Micam in Milan the week before and kept her order-book in her pocket. Ironically, Scene had a stand at Micam.

No numbers come into the conversation, but Salvo do Verde, the company's agent for Spain and southern Italy confirms that the deal went through.

He explains that the buyer may have found it difficult to get a proper look at the company's offering at Micam as the stand was busy the whole time. The smaller, quieter show in Madrid served her purpose better.

Mr do Verde feels that the attraction of Scene is that it can produce the same style and the same quality of footwear as other Tuscan manufacturers, but can afford to charge a cheaper price, perhaps as much as €10 less per pair than some rivals.

"This is an extremely well run company," he says. "We have a tannery next door and we are in a healthy financial position, which means we don't have to add money to our asking price to finance bank loans. That's an important difference."

There is no compromise on the quality of raw material the company uses, or the quality of craftsmanship. Open the box and the smell of high-class leather hits you right away, he points out. And one of Scene's shareholders is a qualified stylist.

"But we also have humility," he continues. "Everyone sticks to what they are good at and it works well."

He suggests that recent export growth figures from the industry in Tuscany—of which this new Chicago deal is a good example—prove that the traditional ties between Tuscany and the United States are building back up again. Italian shoes, in general, are still synonymous with quality in the US market, the biggest in the world.

For some buyers, and some consumers, price isn't everything, even though Scene's ability to charge less, at a time of record exchange rates between the high-flying euro and the US dollar, is an obvious advantage.

Quality still counts, Salvo do Verde insists. He adds: "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the way Chinese footwear manufacturers operate. Their employees clearly work very hard and they have invested heavily in machinery. But if you look at 100 pairs of Chinese shoes, every pair is exactly the same. They lack spirit, character, soul." 🌐