

In with the old as well as the new

According to Otto Kessler, leather gloves aren't just garments, they are also ornaments and masterpieces.

CREDIT: OTTO KESSLER

Germany-based Otto Kessler has always looked for ways of bringing a modern touch to the ancient art of glove making. The company was established in 1923 by a young but experienced Otto, who opened a small production line in his own barn in Bonbaden, a small town in the Solmsbach valley. Mr Kessler had learned the trade working for a large glove brand but wanted to produce his own range of gloves. He also set up a small tannery to produce the leather he would use for his men's and ladies' glove collections. In the early days he ran the business with the help of just three seamstresses.

Otto Kessler's son-in-law Werner Hofmann joined the company in 1947 and took over the leadership role in 1955. The company continued to grow, employing more than 100 workers by the time of Mr Hofmann's death in 1973. The mantle was taken up by his son, Claus Hofmann, who is now the company's chairman and managing director. As well as being determined to make beautiful, high-quality gloves, Mr Hofmann is very much focused on the customer care aspect of the business, and he believes this is part of the reason the firm has thrived.

"This growth, in a time when even traditional European glove companies had to close their own productions, demonstrates the power of this customer care maxim, which has been critical to the Kessler group success story," Mr Hofmann says. With demand for leather gloves having diminished by the 1980s, it was the companies that could provide the "complete package" that stayed afloat. His aim was to give customers more for their money.

Tradition and technology

According to the company, glove making is all about achieving the right balance. It is about recognising the traditional value of handicraft, which has been around since the time of the ancient Greeks. But it is also about keeping up with new technologies, processes and trends.

Mr Hofmann explains: "Down through the ages, gloves have not only been garments, but masterpieces and

ornaments also...It is not a coincidence that medieval culture, which was synonymous with quality, was closely related to the guilds, crafts masters and their lives. The great technological advances of our age do not mean that the demand for handcrafts has diminished. Exactly the opposite is, in fact, the reality."

The original factory in Germany is now the headquarters of the group and is also the central storehouse for its finished products. The brand's main factory is in Pécs, Hungary, which has been a hub for glove makers for more than 150 years. The ISO 9001 accredited site opened in 1992 and, according to the company, is the world's largest production site for table-cut gloves. "Our unique team of experts in Hungary gives us a professional and technological advantage over our competitors," says Mr Hofmann. "World-famous designers and fashion labels source their gloves here."

The Kessler Group has also been working in Brazil since 1975, in the Republic of Ireland since 1984 and in China since 2005. The newly built China

site is said to be one of the most modern production sites within the glove industry. The company's glove making experts have spent a good deal of time supervising the production in China to ensure that quality levels are kept high.

The handiest part

A huge amount of importance is placed on the human hand at Kessler. "The hand is a remarkable sense organ which we rely on each day without being aware of its prominent role in our lives," Mr Hofmann says. "With 27 bones, over 20 muscles and a multitude of nerves and receptors, the hand is more complex and versatile than other extremities. The human hand has made it possible for us to manufacture and use tools, thereby ensuring the special position of human beings in nature."

With this in mind, the role of the glove is of the utmost importance. According to the company, it must protect the hand from cold and damp conditions without restricting movement. It should "sit snugly like a second skin to allow the wearer to



Colours for men next winter will include burnt sienna, stardust blue, taupe, grey and moss.

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Otto Kessler showcased its latest collection at Micam in September.

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touch and feel," and at the same time be elastic enough to move in the same complex ways as the wearer's hand.

Mr Hofmann explains: "You can recognise a well-cut glove in that it does not pinch the wearer when their fist is clenched, for example when the hand's circumference is [at its] largest, but it does fit close to the skin when their hand is outstretched flat and thus has a minimal circumference. The quality of a leather glove is determined in production, mainly during the cutting process, and by the choice of materials used." While the quality of the leather used is very important, the way it is cut is critical to the whole glove making experience, and this is an area in which Kessler feels it excels.

The latest looks

As well as manufacturing its own-brand gloves, the company also produces for some of the world's top fashion brands, department stores and mail-order firms as well as for the military, police and government agencies in Europe, North America and Japan.

The company's team of designers pays close attention to the trends presented on the catwalks of New York, London, Paris and Milan each year and looks at ways of incorporating these concepts into its new collections. Alongside its large winter range, it offers a small summer collection

as demand for driving gloves and short cut, unlined gloves are always popular, even during warm periods, according to Kessler. The company adds around 200 new glove styles to its range each year and works with external fashion labels and designers to produce many of its models.

"People aspire to the ownership of things that can be looked on with delight; pleasant to touch and that can be appreciated for their value," Mr Hofmann claims. "How these gloves are made is the result of the experience of many centuries; the fine stitches on the finger of a glove are the tokens of the expertise assembled, elaborated on and passed down through the ages. The secret lies in knowing why and how to make the particular moves."

Alongside the traditional blacks and browns, some of the trends for autumn-winter 2011—showcased at Mipel (Milan, September 20-22)—are as follows. For men, there are hints of taupe, including stitch detailing on darker gloves as well as in the leather itself. Burnt sienna and stardust blue are other recurring themes for men with bolder tastes. Grey and moss shades provide a more subtle, but stylish, look. Materials used include sleek, shiny leathers alongside rougher, more distressed leather types. Stitching is prominent and studded straps around the wrist are also important.

For women, various shades of deep red, turquoise and pink come up repeatedly. Metal rings or clasps around the cuffs give the gloves a professional finish. Raised and embossed effects are used for some models, while pleating and quilting detail is used on others. Some of the longer gloves are ruched at the edges and feature tassels to give an elegant, yet playful, feel.

A mixture of shiny and matt leathers is used and, like the men's range, stitching is a very important feature. Also mirroring the men's collection is the use of taupe, moss and stardust blue. Double layers of straps are woven in and out of the cuff areas and clasped with buckle-style fastenings. The most exotic models blend bold colours with black and feature elegant, flowing cuffs to draw attention to the wearer's forearm. ☼



Ladies' gloves range from classic styles to more flamboyant designs and will feature rich reds, pinks and turquoises for winter 2011.

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