



Traditions live on at the Berluti bespoke footwear workshop in the rue Marbeuf in Paris

CREDIT: LVMH

The secrets of the rue Marbeuf

A workshop that luxury shoe brand Berluti set up in the rue Marbeuf in the heart of Paris in the 1940s is still the place that brand's most discerning (and patient) customers go to for handcrafted bespoke shoes.

Now part of the LVMH group and based in Paris, luxury shoe brand Berluti can trace its roots to the Italian region most closely associated with the craft of making footwear, Le Marche. Founder, Alessandro Berluti, came from Senigallia near Ancona.

He worked first as a coachbuilder and mastered wood-carving for the coaches and leatherwork for the seats in learning his trade. Making friends with a master shoemaker close to his home and spending much of his spare time with him, Alessandro Berluti soon discovered that his skills were, as we say today, transferrable, and aged just 17, he made his way to Paris in 1882 to carve out a name for himself as a provider of artisan shoes and boots. He set up the Berluti maison in 1895 and soon built up a considerable clientele, attracted by new styles such as the Alessandro, a men's lace-up made from a single piece of leather and with no visible stitching.

Berluti remained in the control of the founder's family until LVMH acquired it in 1993; Olga Berluti, Alessandro's great-niece, arrived in Paris from Italy in 1959 and still remains involved in the company. Premises it acquired on Paris's rue Marbeuf, a stone's throw from the Champs-Élysées, in the 1940s are still home to the brand's workshop for bespoke shoes, a service that has attracted big-name customers, including Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Jean Cocteau, Alain Delon and Robert De Niro over the years, and is still in demand today.

Twelve craftspeople work there today and take clients through the whole process, from measuring the feet in 12 places and producing a personalised last from new wood, designer's drawings and a prototype, all the way through to the finished product. Berluti "normally requests" six months to produce a pair of bespoke shoes, one of the Marbeuf artisans, Jean-Michel Casalonga, explains, and longer for a pair of boots.



Berluti's bespoke shoe production process involves 50 different steps and usually takes six months to complete.

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Around 50 operations are involved in total.

In 1962, Olga Berluti developed a technique for applying a special patina to the leather on a finished pair of shoes, which quickly became an integral element of the brand's shoe designs and remains part of its offering now. Alessandro Sartori left his role as creative director of Berluti after five years in 2016, returning to the Ermenegildo Zegna group where he had worked before. He has said of the patina with which Berluti presents its shoes that it is an effect that will, upon seeing it, give any trained observer "the immediate feeling that this product is Berluti".

It is a technique that the artisans apply by hand, naturally; it earned Olga Berluti the title of "high priestess of patina" from *GQ Magazine*. She speaks of applying waxes and polishes to shoes as being "a pleasure of extraordinary sensuality, an enchantment". She likes to listen to Mozart or Chopin as she carries out this procedure, but she also reaches a point at which she prefers to turn the music off and listen instead to the noise the leather makes when the soft cloth in her hands moves over the shoe. "There is nothing more amazing than hearing leather underneath your fingers," she says. "It's wonderful."

Mr Sartori said before leaving Berluti that he believes intense dialogue with customers over new styles, new designs and new ideas will be important in the future, but that craft and quality will necessarily continue to be the foundation of the work that Berluti does. "We are not working with machines," he said of the rue Marbeuf workshop, "but with hands because, when we design [a shoe] we are already thinking about the customer who is going to wear that single piece, produced for him."

There are millions of things machines can do; keeping the customer, the wearer, in mind throughout each step of producing a beautiful shoe is not one of them. 🌐

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