

Buyer's View: Berluti



Bottier in the Golden Triangle

Towards the end of the 19th century Paris became a world centre for fashion, architecture and style. Under the orders of Napoleon III, Baron Haussman had remodelled the city sweeping away the clusters of narrow streets and alleyways and creating the Grandes Boulevards with their impressive open sweeps of buildings and shops. The world fair of 1889 put Paris firmly on the map as a place to see and in which to be seen. Many craftsmen and artisans were attracted to the capital aware of the growing demands for their skills and products from the fashionable and wealthy visitors and residents.

Many of these craftsmen set up their businesses in an area of the city which became well known for its jewellers, couturiers and specialist shoemakers or "bottiers". This "Golden Triangle", bounded by the Avenue des Champs Élysées, Avenue George V and Avenue Montaigne, is still the place to shop for the very highest quality and luxury articles.

One of the bottiers of the golden triangle producing the very finest of footwear since 1895 is Maison Berluti at 26 Rue Marbeuf (*pictured above*). The company story started in Senigallia in the Italian province of Urbino in 1865 with the birth of the founder

Alessandro Berluti. Alessandro was initially trained in delicate woodworking techniques, which were to stand him in great stead in his later work with leather and shoes. The vibrant stories emanating from the French capital fascinated him and in 1885 he decided to move to Paris, the move taking 10 years to complete as he stopped off on the way to become shoemaker to a troupe of travelling street actors. In 1895 Alessandro arrived in Paris and set up as a boot maker specialising in custom made footwear. If Alessandro is regarded as the trailblazer it was his son Torello Berluti who developed the company and established the trademark styles, still available today. In the early 1930s Torello

created the classic laced dress shoe or Pope's shoe with three eyelets and formed from a single piece of seamless upper leather.

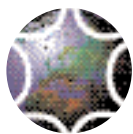
This style plus the Napoleon III shoe with its high cut and elasticised side appealed to the trend setters of the era, such as the Duke of Windsor, and established Berluti shoes as a desirable brand for wealthy connoisseurs.

Torello Berluti was also instrumental in originating the "esprit de Berluti", a professional look at the foot to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, working with the client as an artisan and making suggestions rather than merely following his wishes. It was Torello who found the perfect space for the company in the Rue Marbeuf in the Parisian golden triangle.

Torello Berluti's son Talbinio worked with his father as a designer in the 1940s and their teamwork enabled his designs to be translated into wearable products such as the emblematic laced moccasin. In 1959 Talbinio changed the course of the company's history by launching a range of "luxury, ready-to-wear shoes". In this way Maison Berluti was able to attract a clientele of discerning consumers of more limited means. This, in turn, led to a substantial increase in the numbers ►



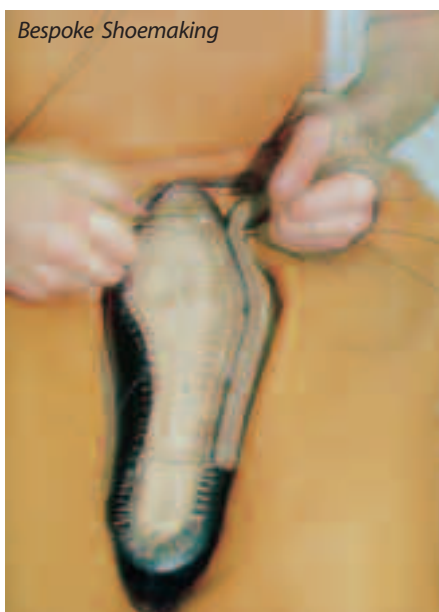
Three Eye Lace Shoe 1895



of people wearing the company's shoes and enabled Berluti to expand its customer base whilst still retaining its exclusivity and quality image.

The period between 1960 and 1980 saw the expansion of Maison Berluti into a larger international concern and, at the end of this period, the current Artistic Director Olga Berluti took over the running of the business. Olga Berluti trained in shoemaking from 1959 in Rue Marbeuf, an apprenticeship which lasted 10 years. During this time she spent many hours in meetings involving surgeon clients with whom she would discuss the physiology of the foot. Using her unerring laser eye for detail Olga was able to identify the posture, shape of the foot and back problems suffered by her clients, from such physical signs as problems of shoe wear. This medical period was instrumental in forming her ability of establishing an intense relationship with individual clients thus, once again, reinforcing the exclusivity and quality image of the company.

Olga Berluti moved Berluti in line with the exciting events of the 1960s, she offered new shapes and new exciting colours such as unusual greens, greys and yellows. One of her clients during this era was the iconic pop artist Andy Warhol and his shoes were the first that she had personally produced from start to finish. She selected the hides and designed moccasins with a purity and modernism that were unique for its time. When the shoes were collected in 1963 she had to explain to Warhol the individuality she had built into the shoes, such as a thick barbed wire scar across the front of one shoe. But

*Andy Loafers**Venezia Leather Toes**Bespoke Shoemaking*

he was delighted with this feature and realised that it gave his shoes their unique character. More than thirty years later the Andy Warhol loafer is still a part of the Berluti Club Collection.

Olga Berluti has used her considerable knowledge of the physiology of the foot to make shoes which fit and support absolutely. She has launched a range of semi-orthopaedic shoes, the "Physiologique" collection, for those clients who require extra support and comfort. These shoes use specially selected softer upper leather, rubber soles and incorporate a leather arch support under the insole.

Berluti still makes shoes rather than manufacture footwear and employs time served shoemakers who use the traditional skills and techniques developed over many years. At its workshops in Paris and Italy it employs around 60 people, producing up

to 20,000 pairs of shoes for 12 stores.

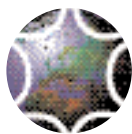
The main upper leather used by Berluti is known as Venezia and was developed in the 1970's by Olga Berluti in conjunction with a dedicated Italian tannery. This leather is the preferred choice for the bespoke and ready-to-wear collections of shoes, and is constantly being refined with subtle changes in handle and colouration. Venezia leather is Berluti's exclusive trademark across all the collections.

The exact details of the leather are a closely guarded secret but it is best described as a specially selected first grade aniline crust with a natural colour variation. Olga Berluti has made the study of leather colouration and patination her particular speciality and has developed a range of oils and finishing products, plus special application techniques. These are used on each pair of shoes producing the

*Olga's Oils*

famous deep Berluti patina and making every shoe unique.

These techniques are constantly under development to take account of the subtle changes in the upper leather and the ➤

*Scalpel Engraved Alessandro III*

demands of each individual client. Olga Berluti has continuously refined the ranges of shoes but the bottier always remains committed to its core values of producing shoes which fit each customer perfectly and are subtly distinctive and elegant.

The majority of Berluti shoes are full grain aniline but it does produce some suede and embossed models. Recent launches include the use of scalpel engraving, tattooing and even piercing.

Berluti will produce anything its customers demand but draws the line when it cannot be done with elegance and comfort. Such a project often takes years of research by Olga Berluti, as its customer base is certainly a demanding one, coming from the discerning highly affluent worlds of royalty, art, finance, media, sport and fashion.

They buy Berluti shoes because of their appreciation of the shoe, its fit and its uniqueness, not because of the label.

*Alessandro Shoes*

Berluti is very rightly proud of its customer relations and in 1992 Olga Berluti held the first meeting of the now famous Swann Club of Berluti shoe wearers. The first soiree was held at the Hotel Crillon in Paris for some twenty specially-selected friends of Olga and, at the end of the black tie dinner, the guests proceeded to polish their own shoes at the table. This was no ordinary polishing session—Venetian linen was used to apply the polish and, at the end, a little Dom Perignon champagne was used to aid the process. Thus a very untraditional tradition was established and the Swann Club, so named after the Proust character who epitomised elegance and romanticism, now numbers around 100 members who travel from all over the world to attend meetings.

Due to its unique upper leather, Berluti also enjoys a very special relationship with its supplier who is an integral part of the process of ensuring that the very best quality materials are used. This relationship is specifically Olga Berluti's relationship with the supplying tannery in Italy.

Berluti was solely a bespoke shoemaker until the 1960s when it introduced further ranges of made to measure products. The success of the company was reinforced when it became part of the famous group LVMH (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton), enabling Olga Berluti to concentrate more on the design and development programme. The incorporation of Berluti into LVMH was a further example of its close relationships with its customers, as this came about partly as a result of the senior LVMH executive being a customer and friend of Olga Berluti.

The Berluti stores reflect the house's tradition and ethos but each one is designed to take account of the cultural subtleties of the host nation. The London store is like a gentlemen's club, the Milan store can be likened to a hidden art gallery and the Tokyo store reflects Japanese spirituality. The original house store in Rue Marbeuf, Paris, is designed as a museum of elegance, with shoes displayed like works of art they undoubtedly have become.

Maison Berluti has carved itself an enviable position in the shoemaking world with its unique leather, its insistence on top quality, individuality and customer relations, and also with its elevation of the shoe into a higher plane than mere footwear. It has plans to open a New York store in Barneys and, with the design flair of Olga Berluti to design and develop new products, its future looks secure. ●