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The crafts behind the masterpieces of Florence

Posted on October 20, 2020 by bestregardsfromfar

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Florence is the artistic capital of the Renaissance. The Italian city is world famous for its museums and masterpieces by some of the most revered artists of all times. However, the unspoken stories of its craftsmen need to be told. Without them, most of these masterpieces would not have existed as it is thanks to their technical skills that Florence became a powerful trading place for high quality products. Moreover, Renaissance masterpieces would not have been executed with such maestro nor restored the way they are to this day if it were not for the talent of these workers of the shadows.

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Since the 12th century, the traditional crafts or "arti" have been organized into guilds, from the seven major (*arti maggiori*), to the nine minor (*arti minori*), and the five middle (*arti mediane*)

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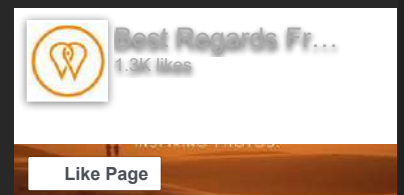
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guilds. Every craft was categorized into one of these guilds, and had to operate within a set of strict rules. For instance, at the end of the 15th century, tanneries had to be located along the Arno River. Goldsmiths occupied the Santo Spirito neighbourhood, before the Medici decided to move them to the Ponte Vecchio area to replace the smelly butchers a century later. Many other artisans occupied the poorer sections of the Oltrarno district on the southern bank of the Arno River that remains a cluster of craftsmen to this day.

Let's peep into some of the finest workshops of Florence...



One of the finest goldsmiths of Florence [Nerdi]

Working precious metals was one of the major crafts. If today we think jewellery, back then religious artefacts such as reliquaries and chalices were actually the main commissions. The Ponte Vecchio neighbourhood has remained the goldsmith area since the Vasari corridor was built, well represented by the many jewellery stores located on the iconic bridge. Hidden in a side street, the humble goldsmith Lucca works on his own creations often inspired by ancient Florentine designs. In this small workshop, everything is done by his skilled hands. His fingers are darkened from decades of work with precious metals.



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Lucca is working on one of **Nerdi's** collection designs: simple, elegant and timeless. Daniela, who has been heading the shop for years following the family tradition explains the consecutive steps: "Lucca starts with this silver wire that he wraps as a spiral around a stick." With precision he saws the spiral in the middle, creating silver circles which he closes one by one by melting silver in a flame. With dexterity, he flattens them with a hammer and links them together before working the metal with a smaller hammer to create a texture that reflects the light once finished.

Many of Nerdi's designs are custom-made. Daniela opens a drawing book. The most important part of her job is to truly understand her customers who may come to refit a precious stone on a more modern fitting piece of jewellery. She translates it all thanks to her beautiful drawings before Lucca makes it the magic happen...

The art of *Comesso Fiorentino*

Often wrongly referred to as *pietre dure* or Florentine mosaics, *Comesso Fiorentino* is actually the art of assembling precisely cut semiprecious stones in a complex puzzle in order to realize a stone painting. The end result is baffling! Entering the **Scarpelli Mosaici** workshop feels like visiting a painting gallery. I focus on a specific one presented in a one-meter wide frame depicting the Ponte Vecchio and the heart of Florence. "It took over 13,000 hours of work!" Renzo details with pride. "It is not for sale. It is part of our collection, but when exhibited it gets insured for one million Euros..."



What is your interest?

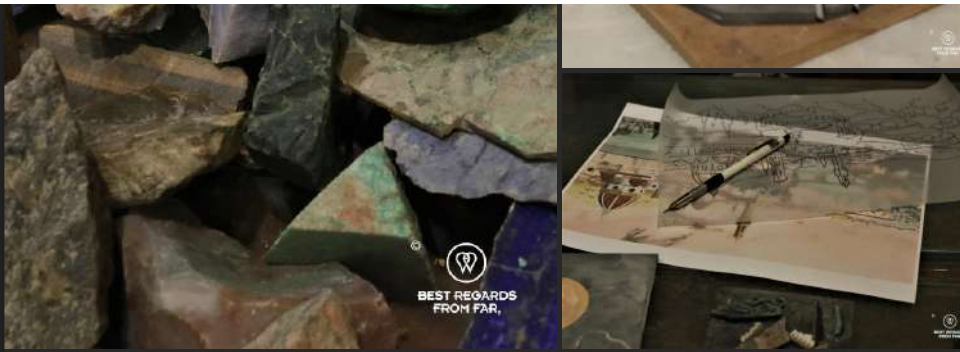
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Renzo learnt his craft from his father. It all starts with a sketch that is reproduced on tracing paper. Then, Renzo looks for the right colours in his extensive stone library. The only machine that is used is a diamond disk to get thin stone plates. They are then hand-cut along the patterns of the sketch with an iron thread connected to a handmade chestnut bow. The thread is dipped in abrasive silica to cut the stone precisely and at a slight angle so that it fits perfectly in the final puzzle where bee wax glues it all together. The end-result is perfectly smooth and it is hard to believe it is made out of hundreds of tiny hand-cut stone pieces!

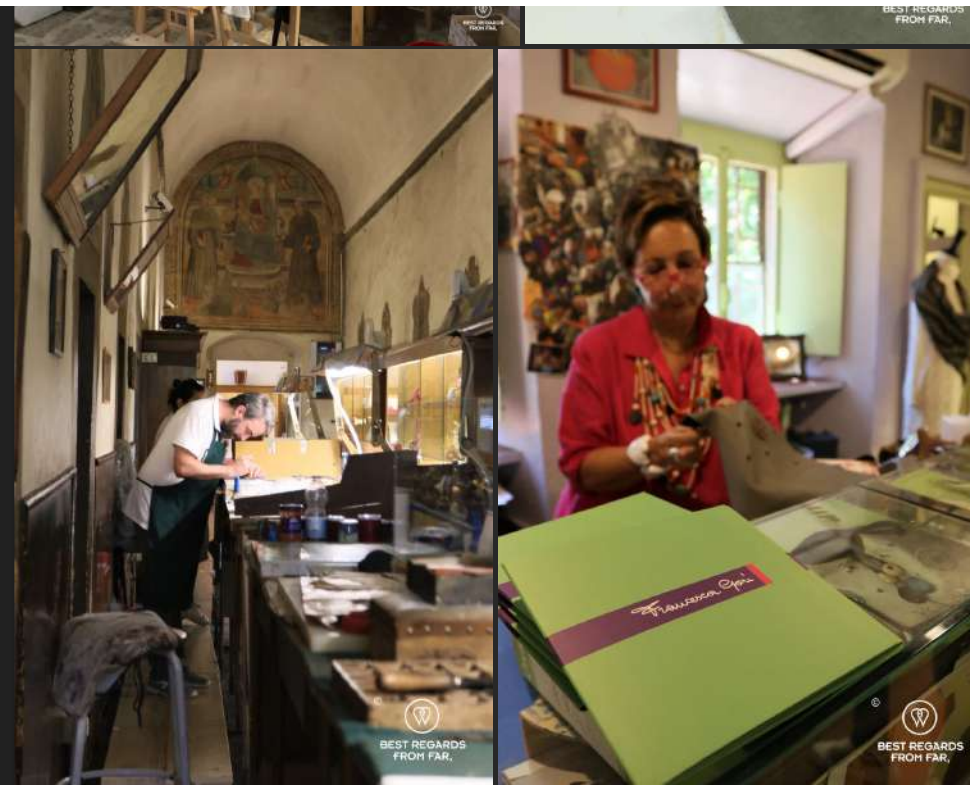
Leather town!

Leather was the most important traded good in Florence thanks to the Arno River that supplied the great amount of water needed to tan the leather. When the city gentrified, the stinking leather area where horse urine was used to treat the skins was moved out of town. The Medici created a new city: Santa Croce sull'Arno, where the tanneries are still operating and supplying the quality shops of Florence and the whole world for that matter. However, many touristy shops sell leather that is not always of the best quality. Let's focus on the school of leather and one of the finest shoe stores of the city.

Scuola del Cuoio [The Leather School]

Taking their inspiration in the Florentine tradition, the Franciscan friars of the monastery of Santa Croce decided to start a leather school after the Second World War to provide skills to the many orphans dwelling the city. They gave their dormitory to a respected craftsman, Marcelo Gori, as the space with its frescoes seemed too opulent for the monks. His trainees learned fast, and he soon opened a store to sell their products in order to be sustainable. The *Scuola del Cuoio* has remained a family matter. Beatrice, the grand daughter of the late Marcelo is running the show. With pride, she walks us through the workshop where craftsmen work on special orders or products sold in the onsite shop. Her aunt, Francesca Gori is a valued name in handbags. Each one is unique and all are made, sewn and embroidered by hand, often with bright colours – her favourites – and pieces of jewellery from India and China she finds on flea markets. Today, she is sewing colourful decorations on an ostrich leather skin: as long as the leather is tanned and dyed in Italy, it can be called "Italian leather".





Downstairs, in the former stables of the church, students are carefully listening to the advice of their Japanese master. The school is very international, and adults from all over the world come to spend weeks or months learning the skills.

Some of world's most exclusive bespoke shoes [Stefano Bemer]

Making a shoe is based on the same principle as a handbag: pieces of leather are cut according to a template and then sown together. For bespoke shoes, [Stefano Bemer's](#) specialty, the story is a lot more complex. Tommaso Melani Gori, CEO and founder of the company, welcomes us in his beautiful store highlighting his artisan's know-how on the south bank of the Arno River. For Tommaso, working leather is also in the genes as his grandfather was Marcelo Gori, the founder of the School of Leather. He passionately describes the process that makes his shoes so exclusive. If templates are also used to cut the leather – that is thicker and sturdier than for handbags – it all starts with properly taking measures of the foot for bespoke shoes and understanding the customer's specific need and taste. Then, the shoe is fully engineered from the last. A ready-to-wear shoe can be customized too: the lining, the sole, the leather. In both cases, acquiring such a pair of shoes is all about the experience provided, the know-how unmatched fit.



Alluring perfumes

The affinity for perfumes and herbal medicine dates back to 1221 when Dominican friars set up [Santa Maria Novella](#). They started a pharmacy thanks to the medicinal herbs they grew in the monastic gardens to make medications, balms and pomades for the monks' infirmary. The fragrance came into prominence in the early 16th century when Catherine de Medici commissioned a perfume to the monks of Santa Maria Novella in honour of her marriage to Henry II, King of France. The monks created a special perfume, *Acqua della Regina* (Water of the Queen) that can still be bought today at [Officina Profumo Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella](#) one of the oldest running pharmacies in the world. Only the name has changed: simply ask for *Acqua di Santa Maria Novella* to smell like a queen!



Oro e Colore restoration workshop

From woodwork covered in gold leaves to paintings of the Uffizi and other first-class museums or private customers: in this workshop restoration is an art merging with the history of Florence.

Carlo Martelli has been working in theatres and palaces, on paintings, sculptures, corniches and frames. He also loves transmitting his passion and opens his workshop to students from all over the world.

Despite the increasing bureaucracy that forces him to spend less time actually doing what he likes best, his passion is intact. When asked what he is the proudest of, Carlo's eyes lit up and he comes back with a precious binder. He shows us photographs of *Lo Scoppio del Carro*, the oldest Florentine tradition dating back to the first crusade (1097) that celebrates Easter. A massive float – called the *Brindellone* – is pulled through the city by a pair of oxen before it is set off in a fireworks display. The float itself was built in 1622 and completely restored by the *Oro e Colore* workshop.



Carlo's work is really one of the shadows, as the best restoration is the one that is not noticed. He uses exclusively reversible techniques and special colours and varnishes.

Behind his table, a painting awaits. It is usually on display at the Uffizi and it is in need of a serious restoration...

Violin maker

A tiny door in a Florentine street, a stone's throw away from the Uffizi. In the window, a few violins. Inside, hung on a narrow wall, photos of some of Jamie's customers: Itzhak Perlman, Sarn Oliver (to record the soundtrack of Star Wars), or president Barack Obama for his daughter. Jamie is one of world's most skilled **violin makers**: her waiting list for a violin is no less than 4 years! Quality takes time, and Jamie does it all by hand with Italian woods such as maple wood. It takes her about three months to make a violin, and four to varnish it. Today, she is working on restoring a 17th century violin. When Jamie needs custom made metal parts, she goes to the best goldsmith in town... Nerdi!





Meeting the craftsmen, one of them explained to us that meaningful buying is triggered by emotions. One sure is certain, visiting these workshops scattered all over Florence, and seeing the passion and hard-work put in each handmade object evokes a wide array of emotions!

Travel tips:

- Check out this interactive map for the specific details to help you plan your trip and more articles and photos (zoom out) about the area! Here is a [short tutorial](#) to download it.
- To enjoy Florence in style, stay at the [Hotel Bernini Palace](#) in a 15th century palace full of history and luxury in the heart of the city!

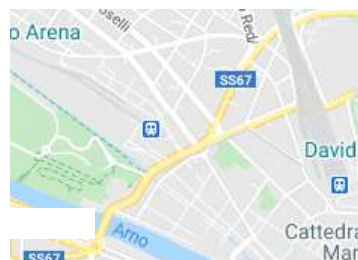


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