

## CROWN JEWEL

The time has come again for Italian hatmaking company Borsalino — who were at one point producing an astounding two million hats per year — as headwear returns to its erstwhile position at the summit of a gentleman's ensemble.

by **nick scott** photography **jason michael lung**

Sometime in the postwar era, following a protracted but passionate love affair lasting several centuries, gentlemen and their headwear decided to take what consumers of fatuous daytime television might refer to as 'some time out'. And, as is always the case when a relationship expires, casual observers have struggled to agree on what exactly caused the union to dissolve.

Two US presidents are, in different quarters, considered culpable: John F. Kennedy, for removing his traditionally obligatory topper before making his inauguration speech in 1961; and his predecessor Dwight D. Eisenhower, for building the interstate highway network that allowed American men to travel to work with just an inch or so between their crowns and the roofs of their Chevys or Fords, as opposed to the several feet afforded in a bus, tram or subway carriage.

Surely more instrumental in making men hang up their fedoras than any individual effort (or lack thereof), though, were historical and social factors. Soldiers returning to Britain from the war, weary of their cumbersome steel helmets, encountered a society in which hats, being considered a boon to morale, were excused from the rationing programme made compulsory for other garments due to a shortage of dyes and fabrics. The resulting 'hatigue', if you will, would be compounded a decade and a half or so later, when a tsunami of counterculture that swept through the Western world caused a rejection of any kind of class delineation — and, for centuries, in diverse cultures the world over, the hat had denoted status, power or military rank. (The association between headwear and success in prewar England was neatly encapsulated by the Hat Council's ad slogan, "If you want to get ahead, get a hat!")

However, we at *The Rake* would posit that the relationship is not dead: it has merely been experiencing a hiatus — one that is about to come to a long-overdue end. Allow me to explain further. Core to this magazine's ethos, as long-term readers are well aware, is the happy truth that classic, virile male elegance is coming in from the cold. We are immensely proud of our own role in ushering it indoors, and kicking the emasculating sartorial whimsy that took classic menswear's place at the hearth for far too many decades out into the arctic hinterland of obsolescence. We strongly suspect the rekindling of men's relationship with stunning, beautifully crafted headgear — such as the stunning, large-brim, straw Panama to the right — to

be precipitated by this paradigm shift. We will surely soon be admiring Don Draper's fedora without having to shed a tear of wistful nostalgia.

And any encomium to this happy development in the history of men's style would be incomplete without a doff of the proverbial cap — we also expect verbs invented solely to express the link between a gentleman's hat and his codes of etiquette, also including 'to don', to return to common parlance — to the company behind the stunning headwear on these pages: Italian hatmaker Borsalino.

The remarkable story of the eponymous hero who founded it, Giuseppe Borsalino, begins in 1850, when his 16-year-old self set out for France — then considered to be the hatmaking centre of the world — from his home city of Alessandria, Piedmont, a 12th-century town southeast of Turin. Virtually penniless, the young Borsalino did have a few strings to his bow: entrepreneurial torque, a sixth sense when it came to the fickle rips and tides of fashion and, most importantly of all, what contemporary aficionados came to refer to as "the most skilled hatter's hands ever seen".

As luck would have it, he also came of age at a time when the top hat was a status symbol throughout northern Europe. And so, finally settling into Paris's Le Marais district — a destination ripe for his talents — Giuseppe set about learning the rudiments of felt- and fur-based hat manufacture at the venerable Casa Berteil hat company on Rue du Temple. Within a few years, he'd accumulated the expertise to return to Alessandria and founded his own establishment with his younger brother, Lazzaro, in 1857. Barely a decade and a half would pass before the siblings saw the company expand into a facility with 130 artisans who produced 1,500 hats per week.

Observing the Industrial Revolution hitting its stride to the north, Giuseppe scaled up his production scale using machinery imported from England. By the 1920s, Borsalino was not only the world's most famous hatmaker, but easily the most prolific; the company was producing around two million hats a year at its peak in the 1920s and '30s. Ownership has changed several times in the years since, but — astonishingly — the basic production techniques employed at the company's factory in Spinetta Marengo, a town in Alessandria, have not. "We're still crafting hats using the same techniques that the founders used," a spokesman for the company's creative division tells *The Rake*. "Nothing has changed — not the processes used, not

UNSTITCHED

Borsalino's classic Panama straw hat with a grosgrain band.





The rabbit and hare fur used for Borsalino's felt hats are sourced from Australia and Belgium.



At Borsalino, rather than the use of a conveyor belt, hats are passed from one craftsman to another. Production techniques used in the factory at Spinetta Marengo have also remained unchanged over the decades — for instance, the use of wooden blocks (top left) and steam (below left) help shape the hats.



A black Borsalino fedora with contrasting white stitch forming a striped pattern.



A bust of Borsalino founder Giuseppe Borsalino stands in the original company headquarters in Alessandria.

the machinery employed in every single step. The ones we use are the original ones from the Industrial Revolution, complete with steam engines.”

The felt versions of the 100,000 or so gentlemen's hats produced annually by Borsalino use the finest rabbit and hare fur sourced from Australia and Belgium. Their unimpeachable quality is the result of around 50 different production steps — including blowing, basting, hot-water blasting, fulling, dyeing, shrinking, blocking, sanding and shaving — which altogether take over seven weeks, before going through a rigorous finishing procedure whereby emery paper and dogfish skin are used to ensure a flawless finish. Needless to say, the same rigorous approach is used for the company's current crop of straw hats, with tender, flexible layers of Ecuadorean toquilla palm being boiled, wind-dried, washed and placed above a sulphur brazier for two hours (this gives it that crisp ivory colour), before

the intricate weaving, finishing, blocking and trimming takes place. Suffice it to say, one of Borsalino's classic Panama extra-fine hat takes around six months to create. Food for thought, as the linen-blazer months approach.

The roll call of notable Borsalino customers from the past is as eclectic as it is geographically widespread, what with past punters including princes and popes, emperors and entrepreneurs, gangsters, industry titans and silver-screen giants. With the hat set to return to its rightful place as the classically elegant gent's crowning glory, it is makers like Borsalino, the ones who approach their stock-in-trade with artisanal diligence, who will reap the benefits. We'll happily tip our hand-made brims to that. 