



UNSTITCHED

Santoni CEO Giuseppe Santoni, with his father, Andrea, the company's founder, in the company HQ's slick reception room.

PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS

THE RAKE visits the HQ of handcrafted-shoe giant Santoni, and finds ancient methods observed, with almost religious fervour, on a vast industrial scale.

by **nick scott** photography **sam finson**

Nestled within an industrialised valley, close to the rustic Central Italian town of Corridonia, the Santoni shoe factory is a sprawling, brilliant-white, three-storey edifice, seemingly drafted by a cubist visionary in an oddly pragmatic mood. On the bleak Wednesday that I visit for a tour, the Italian shoemaker's rain-pummelled headquarters has an air of rumbling, repetitious industry about it, which is starkly at odds with my mood because today — thanks to my being a cordwaining enthusiast of vaguely tragic proportions — I feel rather like a diabetic cacaophile standing at Willy Wonka's rococo factory gates, clutching a golden ticket.

It is from this humble little nook of Lo Stivale that Santoni produces footwear of unparalleled calibre, which is purveyed in the glitziest shopping malls of retail hotspots including Milan, Moscow, Tokyo and, now, Singapore. But what's truly intriguing about Santoni is its unique mode of operation, which runs in strict accordance with a philosophy whereby centuries-old, high-precision methods of artisanal shoemaking are employed to create around 1,000 pairs of exquisite quality shoes every day. In lesser hands, mass-scale artisanship is a perennial oxymoron, but thanks to the ingenuity and vision of the father-and-son partnership behind this remarkable enterprise, it is — under this roof — an entirely plausible proposition, executed with aplomb on a daily basis.

Having taken a stroll around the reception and the conjoining showroom — a brilliant-white suite with the feel of a trendy Brooklyn gallery, where the spring/summer collection is on display — *The Rake* ventures downstairs to meet up with Andrea Santoni. Despite being the founder of the whole enterprise, Andrea is never to be found presiding over boardroom meetings or patrolling the Apple Mac-strewn design studios. Rather, the 74-year-old spends each day on the shop floor — indistinguishable from other workers in his white overalls — running his hyper-critical eye over some intricate seamwork, or flinging some poor alligator's hide back in the direction of Louisiana, from whence it came, on the basis of it having vaguely inconsistent graining.

Andrea started out as a leather-cutter for a major shoemaking corporation before moving on to being a stitcher, then Production Manager. Then, in the mid-'70s, he and his wife Rosa decided to found their own company near the city of Macerata, close to Italy's Adriatic coast. From the beginning, Andrea insisted that

the artisanal traditions of the region were strictly adhered to, and employed older, highly skilled shoemakers to carry out the company trademarks: handsewn seams and the much-celebrated 'anticatura' — the rustic finish which comes from applying multiple coats of leather dye to the finished shoe.

"Today," he explains via a translator, "we take on young people as trainee leather-stitchers so that this tradition does not die out." And, indeed, this labyrinth of organised chaos — the Santoni shop floor — is today populated by over 400 staff from all age groups, labouring away to a deafening soundtrack of heavy machinery. Having taken *The Rake* down to the cellar store — a vegan's Room 101 filled with the finest-quality cowhide, horsehide and rare skins such as crocodile, iguana, toad, ostrich and eel, sourced from around the world — Andrea leads us through the production line, starting with the section where individual parts of the shoe's upper are cut before being stitched together. This is a typical instance of the Santoni ethos at work: most companies outsource this part of the job, but Santoni insists on everything being done within these walls.

As we progressed through the various stages of manufacture — the uppers being stitched together, the sole being attached on the last, the fitting of the heels, the applying of patinas and so on — it becomes apparent that no one in the room, bar our touring party, is uttering a word. This is partly because it's deafeningly loud. It's also fortunate, I surmise idly, as the Italian propensity to gesticulate three sweeping limb movements per syllable would be fairly dangerous around all this rutting, pummelling, piercing and smoothing machinery. But the main reason for the all-pervading atmosphere of the mute industry is that everyone is in a zen-like state of deep concentration. Only one worker even acknowledges us — a burly individual who is blithely guiding a pair of handsome brogues beneath the jackhammering six-inch needle of an industrial-sized sewing machine, with no protective gloves on. His stitching doesn't stray a nanometre as he glances up and gives us an affable, lingering smile.

The Santoni obsession with perfection is evident everywhere. Dotted around each of the three plants are quality-control stations with dazzling spotlights and magnifying lenses. The person manning the station which monitors the leathers will reject 30 percent of the skins he examines each day (Andrea — a leather connoisseur who can tell at a glance whether the hapless



Clockwise from top left: The effect of handmade patinas; the leather warehouse; the handstitching of the welt; patina application station; colour mixing; old-school brass stamps, used to place size numbers on the soles; more intricate handstitching; the trademark Santoni orange sole; hammer shaping; a 'cork mud' allows the foot to breathe.



Giuseppe Santoni: CEO of an outfit that has rewritten the footnotes of shoemaking history.

croc that supplied the skin in his hands was snared on the banks of the Nile or the Mississippi — insists that every skin entering his factory be scrutinised for suppleness and consistency, as well as grain).

Meanwhile, every new last and every new shoe shape is personally tested by Andrea, while the department responsible for edging the shoes, which is run by his wife Rosa, is manned (so to speak) by women. Charles Darwin might have a field day explaining why, but the female psyche, it would seem, is better equipped for such an assiduous task, the importance of which might be underestimated by an antsier worker.

Symbolic of the entire company's philosophy is the 'manovia' — a manually operated carousel that transports the shoes from each part of the production cycle to the next. Its not being automatic means that each artisan passes each shoe to the next one by turning a handle. Only when he has finished his work to his own (ie Andrea's) satisfaction does it move along the cycle. "If you want a masterpiece, you have to work in the ancient way — you can't sprint in pursuit of perfection," says Andrea. As a result, the 16 stages required to create a single standard Santoni shoe take over a week of total human labour.

So important are hand-sewing techniques considered in the Santoni world that Andrea recently established a school within the factory, where older craftsmen pass on the techniques to their younger charges. As a rule of thumb, Andrea believes that six years are required on the job before the staff can carry out the work unsupervised. Knowing how fanatical the management is about stitching techniques, the staff here have a collective regard

for horse's rump, as its being so pliable makes it conducive to the kind of fiddly craftsmanship that is Santoni's stock-in-trade (alligator leather, conversely, is very delicate, so the slightest deviation from the pattern means that the skin — each one being enough to make a single shoe — is wasted). Human error is not at home here. It speaks volumes that the women who apply the final patinas to the shoes have all been to art school.

You'd be mistaken to think that the Santoni ethos is from a bygone era, though. What they've done is to retain the time-honoured principles of shoemaking — the ones that are about as likely to be reinvented as the wheel — and import them into a super-efficient environment, in which high-tech wizardry is by no means frowned upon. For example, the factory actually generates more energy than it uses, thanks to the photovoltaic panels on the roof, while all the used water is collected in underground basins. The Santoni methodology is one that respects both the past and the present, and executes a kind of healthy control-freakery. Nothing bar the raw materials — not the heels, the laces or the lasts — is imported in. "It's the only way we can guarantee the quality we want to upkeep," explains Giuseppe Santoni to me later on. Andrea's 44-year-old son, having developed the export side of the business, now serves as the company's CEO. "If you leave anything up to external parties, you've lost control. So what we've done is adjusted old traditions to modern market needs. New ideas, new trends, new materials, new constructions — you have to interpret all of these things without ever forgetting the fundamental things."

Perhaps the most fundamental thing is the materials used. “When it comes to leather, we know all the origins, all the provenances, where and how the animals were killed,” Giuseppe says. “We have some control over the rearing of the animals. My father and his team go to the supplier — the largest is in France — and are shown 10,000 skins, and they will choose them, one by one, eventually selecting 2,000 or 3,000. The Santoni stamp only goes on the ones they like.” And that, remember, is before 30-percent more are rejected on the shop floor. So, where does innovation come in? “Well, you can change the lines, the proportions, the materials, the style, the design,” he says, “but you need to respect the basic things such as the last fitting, the quality of the leather, the time required. Our designers have a fairly free rein to propose new ideas, but they know that some rules must be followed — there are boundaries.”

Unsurprisingly, Andrea and Giuseppe are just as fastidious when it comes to selecting human resources as they are when it comes to materials, and are firm in the belief that top-grade personnel is not just about training, attitude and diligence, but also innate ability: nature as well as nurture. “Our staff have to be mentally precise,” he says, “otherwise they’re like me trying to get into a top-flight soccer team — I don’t have the physique, the speed, the skill. A moment of mental precision makes the difference of 1/10th of a millimetre in stitching. Besides, once you have someone doing something that runs against their natural aptitude, they lose motivation: imagine a watchmaker who lacks patience trying to put 600-plus pieces together? My staff can stay focused for hours on one thing.”

Giuseppe is also conscious of the need to perpetuate excellence in very specific areas, through the generations. “There are a lot of young people working here,” he says, “and the



UPPER CLASS

Santoni introduces its new bespoke service.

Admirers of the hyper-diligent Santoni manufacturing process can now have their own vision of the perfect shoe refined by the company’s classic-with-a-twist design ethos, then handcrafted especially for them, thanks to their new bespoke service. There is already one master artisan traversing the globe, taking measurements and offering dedicated counsel to customers on a quest to create the perfect shoe for their needs and tastes. Customers are guaranteed that as many fittings as required for perfection will be taken (the craftsmen do the travelling, not the customer), and that each production task — from the selection and cutting of the leather, to the handstitching, to the hand-colouring of the leather — will be allocated to the most experienced and skilled craftsmen. “People these days love individualism,” says CEO Giuseppe Santoni of their decision to start offering bespoke. “We couldn’t resist the urge to make unique pieces for unique people.”

Prices start at €4,500. See www.santonishoes.com for more details.

skills they’re learning are very niche. You’ll never find any one individual who can perform even most of the skills necessary to make a good pair of shoes. That would be like finding an Olympic athlete who can win gold at every event.” The staff also have to know the Santoni story and ethos inside out, he says. “We call it a brand religion — people who work here need to follow it as such.” Are they easy to convert? He smiles. “Some of the quality-control staff are now even more stringent than my father.”

It was at a precocious age that Giuseppe began showing managerial nous. “I remember my father’s first day with his new business,” he recalls. “He had two workers — one of them still works with us. I watched them work in the garage below the house all morning, discovering new things, learning all the techniques. Then in the afternoon, my father needed to go off to buy skins, and I said to him, ‘Don’t worry — I’ll watch over the workers.’ I was seven years old.”

In decades since, he has learnt plenty more, but the key thing he has picked up — the philosophy at the core of this remarkable hub of sophisticated manufacturing — goes completely against the commercial zeitgeist in the post-crash world. “Making things more cheaply won’t sell more shoes,” he says. “What sells more is making them right, making them beautiful, making them different. In short, making them special.”

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