

SALVATORE FERRAGAMO (1898–1960)

June's essay continues our recent theme of Italian fashion designers. The subject is the life and work of Salvatore Ferragamo, who, like Emilio Pucci (May's essay subject), began his creative fashion work in the United States and returned to Italy where his talent and success developed into world-wide recognition. (This June 5 would have been his 119th birthday.) The company, Salvatore Ferragamo Italia, which he founded in 1927, became one of the most prestigious and internationally known luxury brands, with more than 450 stores in over 55 countries selling his products. In addition to its free-standing stores, there are many shop-in-shops and corners in top American department stores. He and his company have created unique, hand-made designs for many different products: footwear, handbags and small leather goods, scarves and ties, men's and women's ready-to-wear clothing, bijoux, watches, fragrances and eyewear.



Salvatore Ferragamo was born on June 5, 1898 in Bonito, near Avellino. He was born into a poor family, the 11th of 14 children. When he was 9, after he stayed up all night to make a pair of white shoes for his sister Giuseppa's First Communion, young Salvatore realized what he wanted to do with his career. His parents were farmers, and they disapproved when their son told them he wanted to be a shoemaker. (Years later Ferragamo wrote in his autobiography, "To be a shoemaker was a disgrace. It would bring the family into disrepute.")

He left school during the 3rd grade to become a shoemaker. After learning the art of shoemaking and repair for a year in Naples working under a famous shoemaker, Luigi Festa, Salvatore opened a small shop in his parent's house in Bonito. There he offered cheap and comfortable shoes for women. His staff consisted of five boys, the oldest was 18. Soon, he found his space too small and his customers too few to make a financial success of his occupation.

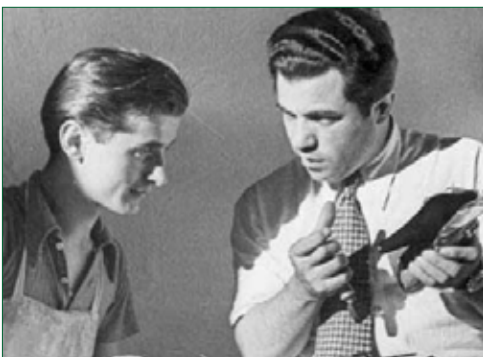
In 1914, he emigrated to Boston, where several of his brothers were living at the time. One of his brothers worked in a cowboy boot factory. After working at the factory for a brief time, he became fascinated by modern working methods and machinery, but he also noticed the limitations in quality of the modern techniques of mass production using machines in the large factory. The best shoes, he began to realize, were shoes that were made individually by hand to fit the particular client's feet, not mass-produced to fit average feet. Ferragamo convinced his brothers to move to California, first to Santa Barbara then to Hollywood, where he could develop his own ideas about shoemaking and his own clientele.

In Hollywood, Ferragamo found success, initially opening a shop to repair shoes and also to make made-to-measure shoes. Soon, his shoes became prized items among the celebrities of the day because of his precise way of working, his individual approach to each customer, the diversity and quality of the materials he used—all this the result of his own skill and good sense.

This popularity led to a long period of designing shoes for film stars to wear generally as well as to flaunt in movies. Eventually, he became known as the “Shoemaker to the Stars.” However, he began to realize that his shoes were only partially pleasing his customers and this made him wonder why his creations only satisfied the eyes and not the feet. He would not be happy unless the wearer could walk as though in bare feet. He felt he needed to understand better what would make a comfortable shoe that was at the same time stylish. To further his understanding in this regard, he began studying human anatomy (especially the foot, ankle and leg), mathematics, and chemical engineering at the University of Southern California.



His work at USC helped him create distinctive shoes from different exotic materials, such as leather from kangaroo and sea leopard, and also ornamentation using crystals, gems, and feathers. Through his research, and by use of a plumb line, he found that the weight of the body goes on the arch of the foot when a person is standing or walking. This anatomical knowledge gave him the idea to add a thick steel layer in the sole that made the shoe more comfortable to wear for longer periods of time. The result of the new design and use of new materials increased the popularity of his brand.



After spending 13 years in the United States, Ferragamo returned to Italy in 1927. In 1929, he eventually settled in Florence and established a workshop on the Via Mannelli. His technique of building shoes required a large number of skilled craftsmen since each particular operation on the shoe was performed by different people, not by machines. He started with a staff of 60 craftsmen that were all personally selected by Ferragamo himself. He also concentrated his efforts on experimenting with shoe design, applying for patents for ornamental and utility shoe models, and patents for some related inventions. Ferragamo’s most important contribution was in the basic structure of footwear, incorporating principles of last design and arch support that are still an intrinsic part of every Ferragamo shoe.

From his factory he began to fashion shoes for the wealthiest and most powerful women of the century, including Lillian Gish, Mae West, Eva Peron, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Queen Elizabeth and Grace Kelly. Later, after his death, his company continued to be the choice of other famous women: Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie, and others. (Interestingly, he provided shoes for Eva Peron, and the Ferragamo Company provided shoes for Madonna when she portrayed Eva in the 1996 movie musical *Evita*.)

In 1933, he was forced to file for bankruptcy due to bad management and the economic pressures of the Great Depression. But by 1938 he had recovered financially and his reputation had grown enough that he was able to take a loan to purchase the *Palazzo Spini Feroni* (right), the medieval fortress in Florence (which still serves as the headquarters for the Ferragamo company) and the Michelangelo Palazzo cottage.



During World War II, supplies of good leather were hard to come by. Ferragamo continued his shoe production, but at a lower level than before the war. He used alternative sources of leather and tried some synthetic leather supplies that later, after the war, continued to be improved and used in different levels and styles of shoes. Following the war, he continued to expand his operation, especially during the 1950s, to a workforce of around 700 expert artisans that produced 350 pairs of handmade shoes per day.

PERSONAL LIFE

In 1940, at the age of 42, he married Wanda Milleti. She also had grown up in Bonito, and was the daughter of the town doctor. She was 24 years younger than Salvatore. She had first met her future husband at the age of 3, when she sat on his lap at a family wedding. Fifteen years later Salvatore returned to Bonito to look for a wife. When he saw Wanda, he turned to his sister and said, “That is the girl I am going to marry.”



For her part, Wanda remembers primping for the meeting by putting on her best pair of silk stockings. “He came like a fairy tale,” she says. “He said to me, ‘Take off your shoes. I want to measure your feet so I can send you a pair.’ I turned red. I was so embarrassed because one of my stockings had a tiny hole in it.” Two weeks later the shoes arrived, a pair of black suede oxfords with tiny perforations shaped like scarabs in the front. “When I opened up the box,” remembered Wanda, “*bellezza!* I had never worn anything so comfortable. I thought I could fly.” They were married five months later.

The Ferragamos raised their 6 children (Fiamma, Giovanna, Fulvia, Ferruccio, Massimo and Leonardo) at *Il Palagio* (“the Palace”), a 30-room villa high in the hills of Fiesole, and four miles northeast of Florence. “When Daddy arrived home, it was a big event,” recalled his daughter Fiamma. “He would blow his horn when he was at the gates, and all the children came running.” Yet Salvatore was a stern parent. “At the table we were not allowed to refuse anything or leave anything on the plate,” his son, Ferruccio, added. “I remember I studied Latin with a priest. I never worked out whether the priest was more severe than my father.”

Salvatore Ferragamo died of liver cancer in 1960 at the age of 62. His company continued to expand and became known worldwide for producing and designing eyewear, footwear, accessories, bags, perfumes, watches and apparel. It was his dream to produce the perfect shoes ever in the world. It then became the responsibility of his family to fulfill this vision and transform the company into an ideal fashion house. His desire included two things: first—to involve his children in the business; and second—to add more products under the brand’s umbrella. Hence his wife, children, grandchildren and other relatives ran the company for years after his death and strove to maintain the quality that Ferragamo had wanted to achieve. Today the Ferragamo house of fashion has grown larger in outlets and luxury items than anything he could possibly have imagined.

LEGACY

Salvatore Ferragamo was always recognized as a visionary, and his designs ranged from the strikingly bizarre *objet d’art* to the traditionally elegant, often serving as the main inspiration to other footwear designers of his time and beyond.



