

Robb Report

RobbReport.com



A VERY SPECIALE 458

Ferrari's Extreme
Take on the
Elegant Italia

High-Art
Watches
& Jewelry
with an
Edge



NOVEMBER 2014



A CURTIS MEDIA PUBLICATION \$8.99

Plus
HAUTE HOSPITALITY
LVMH Redefines Our Concept of the Luxury Hotel

Great Strides

DIEGO DELLA VALLE TAKES STEPS TO BUILD TOD'S AS A MODERN LUXURY BRAND WHILE MAINTAINING ITS OLD-FASHIONED VALUES.

BY JILL NEWMAN

Located in Casette

d'Ete, a town in Italy's Marche region, Tod's sprawling headquarters—a pristine composition of glass and white-washed walls—contains a curious assortment of displays, including large contemporary-art installations and paintings, a mounted Grand Prix-winning Ferrari, and a small, decrepit cobbler's workbench with a weathered box of timeworn tools. This relic, which belonged to the grandfather of Diego Della Valle, the company's chairman and CEO, was placed among the more impressive exhibits as a permanent reminder of the family's humble roots. "Our brand is a family of three generations of shoemakers," says the 60-year-old executive. "We have worked in the same region for over 100 years, and our dream has always been the same—to make the best leather products."

Della Valle's first exposure to shoemaking came when, as a boy, he would return from school to the





OPPOSITE: Diego Della Valle, THIS PAGE: Tod's modern glass-walled headquarters features a winning Ferrari race car in the foyer and contemporary art throughout; the company's first full-scale clothing collection reflects a casual elegance; the brand's signature Gommino driving shoe is its most popular model.





Suede and leather are the foundations of the new ready-to-wear collection; fall offerings include a wide assortment of men's bags and totes.



familiar smell of leather and sit beside his grandfather, father, and uncle, who made shoes in the family's small home. "I'm the last generation that saw this," he says, "and I have to make sure we don't forget our past."

This passion and unwavering commitment to handcrafted Italian products drive Della Valle and the business. When he is not in the Milan offices or traveling globally to oversee the organization's expansion, Della Valle can be found in the factory. "My favorite part of the job is to control production," he says. "It is the soul of the company. There are many luxury brands today, but the difference behind them is whether they have a soul or not, and we have a soul; nothing is outsourced." Della Valle himself approves every new design. "Nobody," he asserts, "can change the direction or the DNA of the brand."

As large conglomerates continue to swallow up boutique luxury brands, Tod's determinedly maintains its independence—and keeps a tight hold on its image, even as it expands into fresh markets. Despite his regard for tradition, Della Valle has been a proponent of growth from the time he joined the business in 1975. He made his first mark on the brand in the late 1970s, when he designed what is now Tod's most popular model, the Gommino driving shoe, which has 133 rubber pebbles strategically positioned on the sole for balance and comfort. "I came up with the idea for this driving shoe and gave the drawing to my father, because he was a great technician. It was considered very wild at the time." After a year on the market, the shoe finally took off; for all its hundreds of available variations, it remains the company's best-selling style. Della Valle proudly



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Leather and exotic skins are meticulously inspected before being selected for production; the hand-sewn Gommimo shoe includes 133 rubber pebbles on the sole; shoes from the J.P. Tod's Sartorial Collection are hand-polished over a few days to create an artisanal finish.



places the driving shoe in the company of such iconic fashion accessories as Ray-Ban sunglasses, Rolex Submariner timepieces, Hermès Kelly bags, and Burberry trench coats. What connects these items, he maintains, is great design and perfect functionality.

With the Gommimo, Della Valle combined casual style with the level of fine artisanship that

discriminating buyers expect from a luxury product. This combination has redefined Tod's, which eschews stiffly traditional handmade shoes and leather goods in favor of what Della Valle calls relaxed Italian elegance—a description that applies to his own sartorial preferences. His daily uniform consists of jeans, a blue blazer, a button-down shirt, and a large silk scarf wrapped loosely around his neck. "I feel more free without a necktie," he says, "but at the same time, I want something, and this is a compromise." Other accessories include his Rolex watch, a stack of leather bracelets, and ever-changing leather shoes.

The brand's image reflects Della Valle's own *modus vivendi*. His

"This isn't something you buy off the shelf. You need to experience the leather, make your selections, and wait for it."

—Diego Della Valle, chairman and CEO, Tod's

interests include boating (he owns John F. Kennedy's mahogany boat, *Marlin*) as well as collecting art by the likes of Alexander Calder, photos by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Ferrari motorcars. Della Valle and his younger brother Andrea, who serves as vice-chairman of the company, own the Florentine soccer team AGF Fiorentina, and together they play a role in preserving Italian culture and history. The senior Della Valle demonstrated his dedication to this cause three years ago, when he pledged \$33 million to restore the crumbling Colosseum in Rome. Still, his reverence for the past is also present each day at the company's expansive headquarters, where 900 employees continue

FROM TOP: Tod's created the J.P. Club for VIP clients to relax and enjoy fine wine or a cocktail; J.P. Tod's Sartorial Collection monk-strap shoes and bags are made and polished by hand.



traditional Italian leatherworking techniques by training the next generation of practitioners to embrace both time-honored methods and the latest technological advancements.

Indeed, while he respects the past, Della Valle also welcomes change with clear enthusiasm. In June, Tod's named Andrea Incontri as its first men's creative director and unveiled a line of leather clothing items and such core wardrobe pieces as cotton shirts and wool trousers. Last year, the company embarked on two new ventures, the J.P. Tod's Sartorial Collection and J.P. Club, both of which deliver an even higher level of quality and service to its customers. The made-to-order Sartorial Collection offers seven shoe models (\$1,300 to \$1,800) and three bags. The pieces start with carefully selected skins of the highest quality, which workers dye in multiple layers over several days, and their forms are constructed entirely by hand. The products are then finished using a series of different polishing techniques and can be embossed with the customer's monogram. "This isn't something you buy

off the shelf," notes Della Valle. "You need to experience the leather, make your selections, and wait for it."

The J.P. Club is an exclusive floor located in the brand's Milan and Beverly Hills stores. "We created these clubs for men to have a special moment and enjoy something luxurious," Della Valle says. In these welcoming precincts, clients can relax, enjoy a glass of fine wine, and order a pair of Sartorial Collection shoes.

For the Tod's CEO, shoemaking is much more than just a business—as it was for his father, Dorino, who came to work nearly every day until he passed away at age 87 in 2012. "Everybody has a special relationship with shoes," Della Valle says. Unlike other items of clothing, which one can throw over a chair, a shoe is a sculpture that has shape and texture. Della Valle even admits to taking some satisfaction in shining his own shoes on his rare free afternoons. "I might shine several pairs on a Saturday," he admits, as though this humble occupation were a guilty pleasure. ■

Tod's, 310.285.0591, www.tods.com