



Kevin Bonnaud is hiEurope's France correspondent. He reports on new and unknown places for you to discover.

Capital of Luxury Shoes

By Kevin Bonnaud

What do Massaro, Hermès, Vuitton, Roger Vivier, André Péruvia, Carlo Pompei have in common, apart from having designed the world's most fashionable shoes? All of them have models on display at the International Footwear Museum in Romans-sur-Isère, the historic capital of luxury shoes. hiEurope's France correspondent went to visit.

The building is a former 17th century convent where 16,000 art pieces are stored. The atmosphere is a little less quiet than usual on October 25 as the museum marks Saint-Crepin's Day, patron saint of cobblers. Today, former employees of the leather industry teach the next generation about the traditional shoe making that made the city famous.

Today's Saint-Crepin's Day is a reminiscence of what the annual event looked like when more than 6,000 people worked in the city's 250 workshops in the first half of the 20th century. That's a significant number for a population of 20,000 inhabitants.



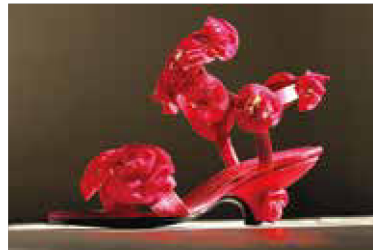
feathers used for aboriginal rituals, Fakir sandals with spiked nails, Chinese bound feet shoes, African slippers and Geisha sandals. The historic section starts with Egyptian sandals made of papyrus, Crackow shoes from the Middle Ages which had a long-pointed toe and Venetian Chopines with a 50-cm heel, popular among women courtesans.

The collection of shoes from French aristocrats with beading, gold-embroidered velvet and lacework is amazing. "Wearing shoes was about pomp and circumstances, clothing and public appearances. The more elongated or higher the shoe was, the richer or socially elevated the person was," Véronique Garcia-Marti told hiEurope.

every shoe to make sure there is no defect. The lining needs to be thinned out, glue traces and pencil marks removed. "I have been doing this my whole life. I could not imagine doing anything else," one worker told us.

The production is limited - roughly 5000 pairs each year - models are classic and timeless. "Our goal was to put some people back to work by renewing the tradition of shoemaking in Romans, maintaining the local knowhow and offer high-quality footwear," says Emmanuelle Benoit, executive assistant in charge of public relations.

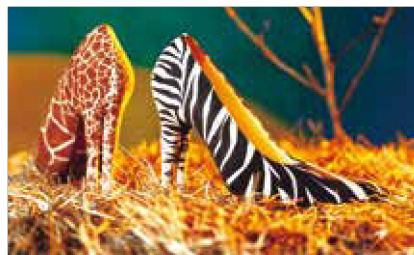
Thomas Huriez, a young shoe-shop owner, launched his textile brand in 2013 after losing his suppliers. His sneakers look like the ones you see in global retail stores with two exceptions: the stitching form a dotted line and the manufacturer tag represent a red mile marker. It's a reference to the brand's name, 1083, the longest distance between two French cities. "We use a limited number of components, organic line laces and recycled products to reduce waste and pollution," Thomas Huriez says.



Thomas Huriez says.

In 2020, the workshop plans to move to Jourdan's abandoned factory in the old town. The production facility will include a shopping mall with stores selling products made in France. "It's quite extraordinary to give a new life to such an iconic place," Huriez says.

For the moment, apart from visiting the shoe museum, the two million people who visit Romans head to Marques Avenue outlet mall. Here, factory outlets are crammed with gorgeously made shoes by Stephane Kélian, Paraboote, Charles Jourdan, Accessoire Diffusion and newcomer Laure Bassal, whose colorful flapper-era-inspired designs are something to put in a museum also.



A 4000 Year Old Shoe Collection

Romans has been a fertile ground for tanners and furriers since the 15th century because of the Isère river flowing through the city, and the good quality hides from calves and cows from the Vercors massif. Wandering in the paved streets of the tanners' district, next to the must-see Collegiate Church of Saint-Barnard, you see narrow sloping passageways between houses. "These paved paths led to the river, so tanners could clean pelts, remove animal flesh before immersing them with chrome or aluminum salt into large barrels," says Véronique Garcia-Marti, marketing manager from Romans tourism bureau.

The footwear museum offers a fascinating journey through time and space with 300 shoes of diverse shapes and materials. You see heavy postilion boots, witch shoes from Australia made of human hair and bird



Made in Romans

The industrial success of Romans began in 1895 when Joseph Fenestrier came up with the idea of using the leather that was produced by local tanneries. He created the first hobnailed shoe factory and soon turned to manufacturing bespoke and high-end shoes. The inter-war years saw Romans turn into the 'shoe capital', but with the development of international trade, from the end of the 70s onwards, this industry literally collapsed. The biggest blow to the town came when the iconic Jourdan factory closed its doors in 2000. However, the leather and shoemaking industry has reincarnated itself with high-quality artisan production for niche markets with a strong emphasis on creativity and innovation.

The museum is also a showcase of these contemporary creations with an exhibition of the latest models from local manufacturers. Made in Romans is one of the first brands to relaunch the footwear production. Visitors can see workers in their workshop, cutting every piece of the future shoe by hand, putting them together on molds, peeling away leather excesses before fixing the sole and caressing

Tips

📍 www.museedelachaussure.fr

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