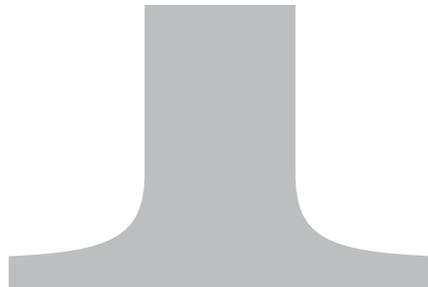




ORIGINS

## SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

TOD'S. JUST ONE SYLLABLE CAN CONVEY A SENSE OF REFINEMENT, UPPER-CRUST AMBITION AND UNHURRIED STYLE. NEARLY FORTY YEARS AFTER DIEGO DELLA VALLE TRANSFORMED A SIMPLE LOAFER INTO ONE OF ITALY'S MOST SUCCESSFUL LUXURY EMPIRES, THE PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER PROVES ADAPTABILITY IS ALWAYS AN ASSET.



It isn't hard to imagine the sighs of relief models must expel backstage at a Tod's runway show. After a packed fashion week schedule that involves squeezing their battered feet into heels of every conceivable height, the Italian luxury purveyor's buttery soft calf-leather loafers must undoubtedly feel like Shangri-La. This physical rendition of utopia, called the Gommino after the 133 rubber pebbles that line the flexible sole, is a staple at a Tod's show. For Spring Summer 2015, creative director Alessandra Facchinetti introduced a new term into the brand's design dictionary - the "spilla", or the pin. The addition of this golden embellishment onto the vamp of the hand-sewn moccasin could serve as a symbol for Tod's as a whole: Heritage is at their heart but adaptation is always on their mind. From the many reincarnations of the D-Bag to the hiring of buzz-worthy creative directors to oversee their ready-to-wear line (in which leather, the house's founding fabric, is unfailingly incorporated), Tod's has found firm footing in the theory of evolution.

"It is natural," says Tod's president and founder Diego Della Valle from his office in Brancadoro,

Italy. "Maintaining the DNA and heritage of our brand means keeping it alive forever." The outspoken entrepreneur has built one of Italy's finest luxury empires with one well-heeled foot pointed towards the future and the other deeply rooted in the artisanal past of his shoe-making ancestors, starting with grandfather Filippo Della Valle.

In the early 1900s in the Adriatic region of Le Marche, Fillippo launched a small cobbling business. It was there, in the basement of his family's factory amongst the piles of cowhides where he used to nap as a child, Diego soaked up the ingredients that would eventually become part of Tod's secret recipe - "Be refined [with] timeless luxury, impeccable taste and enviable quality," says Diego. At 15, under the stewardship of both his grandfather and father Dorino, the budding businessman designed his very first pair.

His father grew the family business steadily, forging manufacturing deals with Calvin Klein, Azzedine Alaïa, Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue. It wasn't until the end of the 1970s however, after dropping out of law school in Bologna, that



Diego made a purchase that would change both his family's life and Italy's definition of luxury.

On a visit to New York, his eyes honed in on a pair of leather moccasins in a shop window. Crafted from rigid leather, the quality of material was as poor as the manufacturing. What interested the astute young businessman was the concept. Attached to the sole were a grid of rubber nubs used to grip the pedals of a sports car. Packing the driving shoe into his suitcase, he returned to Italy where despite his father's assertion that the shoes were horrible, he recreated the loafer using the supple glove-like leather his family had become known for in addition to re-engineering his own premium gommini grid.

The result was more than just a driving shoe. It was Diego's way of bringing the informal preppy style and casual elegance that had been dominating American country clubs to his Italian counterparts. The image that luxury goods should be saved for special occasions was shattered. Daily use was Diego's vision. "I developed the idea of a driving shoe that could be worn in a

**Above:** Tod's SS15 collection marks Alessandra Facchinetti's third season as creative director. **Below:** The Mini Cape bag incorporates production techniques used by saddle makers.



professional, elegant or casual environment," says Diego. "I think this is the secret of the initial phenomenon and nowadays, the lasting success."

Legend has it that the name J.P. Tod's (the J.P. having since been dropped by the brand) was selected by Diego at random from a Boston telephone book at the company's inception in 1978. He has since dismissed this rumour, insisting he wanted a name that was charming yet still user-friendly, i.e. easy to pronounce. With a clear head for marketing, Diego developed a clever plan to bring his new product to the masses. He convinced a friend who was a protégé of Fiat patriarch Gianni Agnelli (who often wore driving shoes to televised races and football matches) to present his boss with a pair of Tod's. And thus, a brand was born.

Capitalizing even more on celebrity, photos of notable loafer fans Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant began appearing in ads, creating a visual history of a heritage brand overnight. It wasn't until 1997 that Tod's expanded into handbags and other leather goods with the launch of the D-bag. After Princess Diana adopted the structured ▶



tote as her bag of choice (not as a gift from Tod's; the trendsetter selected it on her own), they posthumously bestowed the now iconic bag with her initial. "These relationships [with celebrities] are absolutely important, especially if they are friends with Tod's. They wear our products because they truly love them," says Diego.

Family remains at the core of Tod's. Until his death last year at 87, Dorino oversaw quality control, riding his bicycle around the factory to monitor production. Diego's wife Barbara Pistilli, an architect, designed the company's 85,000 square metre headquarters that includes an auditorium for lectures and exhibitions, a kindergarten for employee's children, a gym, full restaurant and a replica of a Tod's boutique. Younger brother Andrea is the vice-chairman of parent company Tod's S.P.A. And on display outside Tod's design workshop are Filippo's original wooden workbench and his tools, the tools that started it all.

It was this family dynamic that designer Derek Lam has said kept him at the helm of the brand's ready to wear line from when it was introduced in 2006 until his departure in 2012. With a family motto of dignity, duty and fun (also inscribed on Diego's private jet), it's easy to see why.

Alessandra Facchinetti filled Derek's shoes in 2013. After stints at some of Italy's top fashion houses including Prada and Gucci where she took over for Tom Ford, she was a clear successor. Mixing the couture techniques she learned as creative director at Valentino with her passion for unexpected colour combinations – a takeaway



**Above:** A craftsman selects the hides used to hand-stitch a pair of Gommino loafer (middle). **Below:** Inside Tod's Brancadoro headquarters.



from her time at Miu Miu – she has cut, moulded and stitched her way into the hearts of leather lovers around the world. The re-emergence of leather (which Diego often refers to as the brand's "religion") as a seasonless material is in part due to Alessandra. The designer has incorporated supple hides into everything from tri-leather moto jackets to light-as-air tank dresses created with the same laser-cutting technique used to carve the sole of a Gommino. Bridging old world craftsmanship with modern technology is almost always an element of a Tod's product.

Despite the trend of many other esteemed brands to move manufacturing to less costly regions of the world, Tod's remains Italian through and through. "The production is still based in our factory in the region Le Marche," says Diego. "It has been improved in the last years, but it is still there - 100% made in Italy by highly skilled artisans. It is a duty for us as entrepreneurs to protect them and their skills, which are becoming rare nowadays." These craftsmen hand-stitch 35 pieces of leather to make up a classic Gommino while exotic python, alligator and crocodile hides are reserved for premium handbags and their made-to-order J.P. Tod's Sartorial Collection.

His unwavering passion for the highest quality in the land means that Diego often uses his own two feet to test out new models before giving the ok for production. It's these small, yet extremely meaningful, details that customers recognize when they slip into a pair of Tod's loafers. "We have loyal customers because we are loyal to them." ☺