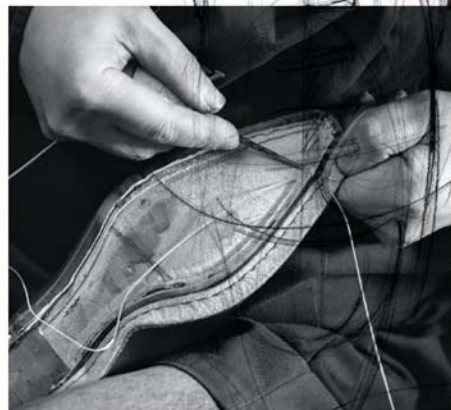




Clockwise from top left: A craftsman shapes the shoe's upper around the last; the stitching of the outer sole to the inner sole will be completely hidden when the shoe is finished; architect Jean-Marc Sandrolini designed the steel, cement, concrete and glass Manufacture de Souliers to resemble a shoebox.



Sole Searching

Louis Vuitton's exclusive Made to Order custom shoe service puts you in the designer seat. | By Laurie Kable |

Working alongside cutting-edge machinery in Louis Vuitton's manufacturing facility—the Manufacture de Souliers in Fiesco d'Artico on the Riviera del Brenta near Venice—master shoemaker Roberto Bottoni, practicing a centuries-old technique, hand-stitches a pair of alligator oxfords in a production-floor corner. With a young apprentice

observing, Bottoni's weathered fingers fluidly guide the needle and thread, creating a Norwegian-stitched sole with a trio of stitches. His specialty suturing—mastered by only the most consummate craftsman—adds both flourish and functionality (and, here, heightened waterproofing).

"An artisan needs to do everything else incredibly well before

moving to that stage because it's so intricate and complicated to do it with such quality," explains Luchino Visconti di Modrone, ambassador for Louis Vuitton's Made to Order custom shoe service. The tailor-made program now benefits from Bottoni's expertise, thanks to Serge Alfandary, the brand's head of shoes, who, after a long search, discovered

the shoemaker working in his own shop—its location, a closely guarded secret—and convinced him to join the LV team.

Art, along with craft, is prominent throughout the facility; its impressive edifice easily passable as a contemporary art museum. Designed by architect Jean-Marc Sandrolini to aptly evoke a shoebox, four specialties are

fashioned here—classic men's leather-soled shoes (including Made to Order footwear), hand-sewn moccasins, sneakers and elegant women's shoes. Encasing an inner courtyard sculpture garden, it also houses a gallery, offices, meeting spaces and open production areas.

And, in a decidedly 21st century workspace, Bottoni, like generations



in Milan and Sydney, the Made to Order program will make its U.S. debut this month at Louis Vuitton Aventura Mall in Miami, with openings for other markets slated for the end of 2013. All stores offering custom footwear will boast a private salon in the likeness of a Louis Vuitton shoe trunk interior—think one wall covered in caramel-colored leather and lined with built-in drawers holding various shoe samples, with a second displaying myriad personalization possibilities (styles, skins, finishes and constructions).

The comprehensive selection process involves three instep widths, six style models (including brogues, oxfords and

by hand, are presented for picking. “There are more than 3,000 variations because of the combination of material, style and color,” Alfandary explains. “And then there is the possibility to hot stamp initials into the interior to make your pair unquestionably unique.” Once an order leaves the store, it’s in the hands of Bottoni and his team, who perfect the individual specifications. Post final inspection and polish, the shoes are placed in a velvet-lined felt bag and boxed with a booklet on their fabrication.

Costs range from \$2,650 and \$12,700, with an estimated 12-week wait for a pair of leather shoes, or up to six months for its exotic-skins counterpart. Accessories—a matching belt, perhaps—may also be commissioned.

“There’s nothing more luxurious than having a pair of beautiful shoes made for you,” says former Chairman and CEO of Louis Vuitton Yves Carcelle. “The process of selecting everything yourself—the shape, the sole, the skin—and then waiting three months is part of the luxury. The lack of immediacy, the delayed gratification, is intrinsic to the experience.” **M**

of artisans, crafts by hand. Watching him, one suspects he draws inspiration from the province’s shoemaking legacy. Here, in the Veneto region, craftsmanship is culturally ingrained—with fine footwear for Venetian aristocracy (fanciful ladies shoes, specifically) dating to the 13th century. To consolidate its shoemaking expertise at Manufacture de Souliers, Louis Vuitton traveled Italy’s historic men’s shoemaking capitol (around Ferrara and Bologna) to recruit the region’s top talent.

“You are talking about craftsmanship that is being handed down from one generation to the other, starting from the Renaissance,” Visconti explains. “In Italy, [there’s] a tradition of how [to] cure the leather and, consequently, how [to use it]. This is something that definitely belongs to the Italian culture.”

Customization is a longstanding tradition for Louis Vuitton, which boasts a department at its Asnières-sur-Seine, France, facility devoted to creating trunks that satisfy the whims of its discerning clientele—from a special

iPod docking station for Karl Lagerfeld to a toiletry case commissioned by the late silent-film star Douglas Fairbanks. In 2011, with the launch of the brand’s Made to Order program, men’s footwear was added to its bespoke offerings. “Shoes are a recent activity for Louis Vuitton, with just 13 years of savoir faire, compared to the history of the brand, which was founded in 1854,” Alfandary says. “We wanted to add a level of sophistication to what we do, and we thought a made-to-order service was the way to go.”

Already introduced



spectators) and four separate sole designs (such as the Goodyear welt, with a breathable cork insert that molds to one’s foot shape). Once structure is determined, eight materials—from calfskin to python to ostrich all hand-cut from premium hides—and eight different hues, rendered to a fine patina