

IN FASHION IN FIRENZE

At the 2012 Oscars, Cameron Diaz wore a Gucci dress with Ferragamo shoes. Both items may find their way into the brands' museums in the future, adding to the rich fashion history of the Italian town of Firenze

A STUNNING BLONDE IN A RED DRESS DANCES UP A SET of golden stairs with her best friend by her side. She is wearing a pair of red Ferragamo four-inch pumps; shoes she is credited with putting on the map. The year is 1953. The woman is Marilyn Monroe in the film adaptation of the 1949 stage musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

It's been over fifty years since Monroe's tragic death. Italian fashion house Salvatore Ferragamo marked the anniversary with an exhibition of classic memorabilia and previously unseen photographs of the screen icon at the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo.

Housing a priceless footwear collection assembled over the decades, Museo Salvatore Ferragamo documents the story of the designer's career. The museum is located in the Italian city of Firenze, just across the street from a Versace store. Down the street Tiffany, Yves Saint Laurent, Cartier, Dior, Prada, Bulgari, Gucci, Armani and other fashion merchants welcome the well-heeled, testifying to the city's unique place in fashion history.

In 2012, Global Language Monitor crowned London the Top Global Fashion Capital, edging out New York for the second year in a row, thanks largely to the Olympics and Kate Middleton. Barcelona, Paris and Madrid followed, with Rome, Sao Paulo, Milan, Los Angeles and Berlin rounding out the top ten. Firenze ranked sixteenth, above Tokyo and Sydney, leaping fifteen places since 2011.

Milan and Rome may be the better-known icons of Italian fashion, but Florence is the birthplace of many of Italy's famous designers and fashion houses. Gucci, Roberto Cavalli, Emilio Pucci, Salvatore Ferragamo and Patrizia Pepe all originated here. Gucci has also chosen to locate its museum, Gucci Museo, in the city.

Firenze has a rich, yet understated history in fashion and luxury. It is the home of Polimoda, one of Italy's most famous design schools that hosts numerous fashion events, such as Pitti Immagine's immense trade fair, devoted to promoting the fashion industry worldwide.

These shows are direct descendents of the first fashion shows staged in the Sala Bianca in Palazzo Pitti back in the 1950s. It was these soirées, held by Giovanni Battista Giorgini, which pushed Italian designers into the limelight to compete with French haute couture. Italy's reputation soon shifted from being a place where fashion nations such as France manufactured their goods to a country with a thriving fashion culture. Ferragamo and Gucci quickly became fierce competitors for Chanel and Dior. ▾

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PREVIOUS PAGE: The city of Florence has a rich fashion history.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Marilyn Monroe memorabilia inside the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo; vintage Gucci on display at Museo Gucci in Florence; at the 2012 Oscars, actress Cameron Diaz wore a Gucci dress with Ferragamo shoes; red Ferragamo pumps; Monroe in her prime.

“From the personal experience of Salvatore Ferragamo it can be recognised that Florence stands for art and craftsmanship,” says Stefania Ricci, director of the Salvatore Ferragamo museum. “The city is a source of inspiration for fashion designers and [this is] why Italian fashion was born in Florence in 1951, thanks to Marchese Giorgini and the first show in Sala Bianca, Pitti.”

The Florentine equivalent of New York’s Fifth Avenue is a trio of streets – Via Tornabuoni, Via della Vigna Nuova and Via Strozzi. The Museo Salvatore Ferragamo is located on Via Tornabuoni, while the Gucci Museo is a

few blocks away at Piazza della Signoria. On the other side of the River Arno, a short stroll across the Medieval Ponte Vecchio bridge, is The Costume Gallery, another fashion museum housed in the small building of the Meridiana at the Pitti Palace.

Salvatore Ferragamo has called Firenze home since 1927. After spending thirteen years in the USA making a name for himself as the “shoemaker to the stars”, Ferragamo returned to Italy. He set up his business in the city, attracted by its skilled craftsmen, particularly leatherworkers.

“Salvatore Ferragamo’s decision to settle in Florence was born of the need to find expert craftsmen who could produce his shoes by hand,” explains Ricci. “However, his desire to find authentic sources of inspiration in the local artisanal and

artistic culture also played its part.”

“In Florence, Ferragamo was awed not only by the city’s famous monuments, celebrated around the world,” she continues, “but also by its public and private collections providing an extraordinary documentation of applied arts, to which Ferragamo, by his nature, was deeply attracted.” It is somehow poetic that the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo is now counted among these artistic collections.

Firenze is a city full of museums. From the Uffizi Gallery to the Palazzo Vecchio, inspiration lies around every corner. Ricci draws a clear connection between fashion design and the arts.



GUCCI CLAIMS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF “FOREVER NOW” ACROSS ALL UNDERTAKINGS

“The Frederick Stibbert collection, an eclectic and tasteful assortment of works, gave Ferragamo ideas for the shapes of shoes, the weaving of uppers, and even embroidery designs, which he faithfully drew from clothing conserved in the collection,” she points out. “Archaeology collections, the Ethnography Museum and the Museum of Natural History also served as wells of inspiration, spurring ideas, intuitions and creative experiments.”

“Ferragamo was also fascinated by the experiments in materials and colours that avant-garde artists – first and foremost the Futurists, but also Thayaht, Sonia Delaunay, Duchamp and Giò Ponti – were conducting in the 1920s, as Florence was becoming an important cultural epicentre.”

The House of Gucci was similarly influenced by Firenze’s prolific arts scene. Florentine by birth, Guccio Gucci founded the brand in 1921. While working in exclusive hotels in Paris and London, he developed an interest in luxurious luggage. The rest is history. The city’s reputation for high quality leather production successfully lured the soon-to-be famous designer. Gucci quickly established a name for fine leather goods with classic styling, which maintained many of the traditional aspects of fabrication.

Gucci claims a guiding principle of “Forever Now” across all undertakings. This somewhat ethereal phrase is defined as “re-interpreting the creativity of the past as inspiration for future enterprise”.

The past influences the future. The permanent exhibition at the Gucci Museo, presenting items from Gucci’s archive, along with contemporary art installations supported by the Pinault Foundation, highlights this theme.

Ricci agrees with this sentiment. “Ferragamo’s shoes reflect world history very strongly,” she says. “Salvatore Ferragamo lived completely and richly [in] his historical period: Ferragamo’s mind was open to the spirit of the time and continued thus throughout his career, revealing not only his influences, but also analogies with contemporary artists and designers working in a multitude of different fields, discovering aesthetic and technological solutions that were very similar to those used by Ferragamo.”

As proof, Ricci cites the example of Jacobsen’s famous egg chair, designed the same year that Ferragamo patented his leather shell sole, a transposition of the chair’s ergonomic shape to the sole of a shoe. In 1956 Andy Warhol’s gold leaf shoes, mirrored Ferragamo’s eighteen-carat sandals created for the wife of a wealthy magnate.

The Ferragamo museum’s footwear collection spans not only Salvatore Ferragamo’s career, but also production to the present day. Salvatore started the archive by always making double models, leaving 8,000 pairs of shoes in his wake, a figure that puts Imelda Marcos to shame.

The Ferragamo family continued the tradition, boosting the archive to more than 14,000 pairs of shoes. Even the expansive halls of the Palazzo Spini Feroni do not allow the entire collection to be on display, so selections feature biennially in exhibitions presenting human history through Ferragamo footwear.

There is no doubt that Ferragamo has had an immense impact on fashion, from the invisible sandal that won the Neiman Marcus Award in 1947 for innovative design to the rainbow wedge created for Judy Garland in 1938. Marilyn Monroe’s pumps are incorrectly credited as being responsible for her sensual walk.

In 1999 the Museo Salvatore Ferragamo bought fourteen pairs of Monroe’s shoes, paying US\$54,000 for the infamous red pumps covered in Swarovski crystals. At the Museo boutique, limited edition handmade replicas of these pumps, complete with the special half-wood half-metal construction that made them comfortable in spite of the extreme thinness of the heel, command a more modest price.

The Museo Salvatore Ferragamo and the Gucci Museo offer lessons not only in the history of these iconic brands, but also in the history of Firenze and the emergence of Italian design as a force to be reckoned with.

Ferragamo may have been the most influential shoemaker in history, but on the other hand, the Gucci loafer is the only shoe in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Firenze claims both. 🌐

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Images: Getty Editorial & Ferragamo.