



CREDIT: MICHELE BAGGIO

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ALBERTO GUARDIANI

The song of the south

It's not a question of money—the wages on offer in tanneries and leathersgoods factories are decent—but it's becoming difficult for this industry to hire younger workers in northern parts of Italy.

This is a tragedy as the craftsmanship on offer in Italy is second to none. Even non-Italian brands, including the big-name, Paris-based fashion houses, have their high-end production done in the land across the Alps. The quality of leather and the skill of the craftspeople available in Italy have largely been responsible for the rise of the global luxury leathersgoods market, a real bright spot for the entire leather industry in recent years. The big brands and the whole of the leather sector cannot afford to lose the vibrancy and beauty of the products coming out of factories across this area.

The issue is that many young people in the north now perceive factory work as being a bit too sweaty and tough, a poor and undesirable option compared to a comfortable position in an air-conditioned office or design studio, all prosecco-and-canapé receptions and public relations launch parties.

In the face of this, one influential figure in the north—Giuseppe Baiardo, owner of footwear company Calzaturificio Iris and current president of ACRIB, the Footwear Manufacturers' Association of Riviera del Brenta—has begun to spread a message that some of his colleagues regard as heresy. He's urging companies to give up any thought of further expansion in traditional northern centres of production (across Lombardy, Tuscany, Veneto and so on) and to set up new facilities in the south of Italy instead.



Giuseppe Baiardo (left), president of the Footwear Manufacturers' Association of Riviera del Brenta, celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of his industry association at GDS in September 2007 with Frank Hartmann of Messe Düsseldorf. Mr Baiardo is now spreading a message that some in northern Italy regard as heresy. CREDIT: MESSE DÜSSELDORF /RENE TILLMANN

Against the grain

This is controversial because it seems to fly in the face of conventional northern thinking, that the south, the messy Mezzogiorno, is a land apart, where the people who are willing to get out of bed in the morning at all want nothing more from their working lives than a nice, easy public-sector position, with plenty of days off, a pension and no commercial pressure.

Here's why it's a smart idea, though, according to Aldo Premoli, footwear fashion consultant for the National Association of Italian Footwear Manufacturers (ANCI). He's been part of the Milanese glitterati for decades, but his wife is Sicilian and Mr Premoli believes the idea of

taking production to the south has great potential. It would solve the problem of finding new recruits without sacrificing the special qualities that Italian workers have to offer.

He explains that there is something in the soul of Italian people that makes them naturally gifted craftspeople. "There is art everywhere you look in Italy," he says, "it's in the architecture, the food, the way people dress. You grow up with an appreciation of it. This makes Italian people more suited to this kind of work than anyone else, in my opinion, and, by going south, companies will find young people with these talents who really want to do the work."

There is an important tanning cluster at Solofra in the province of Avellino, of course, and Naples has long been a centre of leather excellence, especially in the production of leather gloves, but Mr Premoli and Mr Baiardo are talking here about something new.

Self-sacrifice

You can hear echoes of this in the recent outpourings of top designer Ermanno Scervino. "Fashion is a hugely important industry," he said during a presentation at the latest Lineapelle in April, "but it's so hard to get people to work in a tailor's shop. You have to have a great love for fashion and a great spirit of self-sacrifice to do that. And it's even more difficult today. Young people all seem to want to be architects or actors now."

The president of ANCI, Vito Artioli, is greatly concerned about Italy's ability to stay competitive and it's clear to him that finding new people who want to work in the industry and learn its traditional skills as well as modern technological advancements is critical. "There's a technical and scientific emergency here," he says. "Let's face up to it. What our young people experience in school and university is that everything is geared to passing exams. It should be geared towards preparing young people for work. That's the real problem of this country and we should face up to it."

He wants to bring young people in who genuinely want to spend their time "giving our society something it wants", beautiful shoes and leathersgoods. As leader of a national association, Mr Artioli wants to spread craftsmanship and skills right across Italy and he shares Aldo Premoli's view that the whole of Italy has the ability to appreciate properly the beauty of a shoe or any other well designed leather object. "There is beauty everywhere in our country and in our culture—for example, we have magnificent wines and 365 different menus for the 365 days of the year, with each one better than the last—and we want to reflect that in our manufactured goods."

Musical interlude

This notion of innate Italian artistry extends beyond footwear.



The Teatro Massimo in Palermo. Art is everywhere you look in Italy, giving people in all parts of the country a head-start when it comes to creating beautiful objects from leather. CREDIT: BERNHARD J. SCHEUVENS

A difference of opinion came to light recently between two of the leading figures in the world of music. One has said that it's impossible to achieve perfection in performing a piece of music, that the only way to absorb completely what the composer meant is to sit in silence and read the score.

The other is certain that perfect execution is achievable. An orchestra, a soloist, a conductor may, perhaps, only hit these heights four times a year or four times in a lifetime, but it is not beyond the bounds of human ability to perform at that level.

The first point of view comes from Daniel Barenboim, the musical director of the Berlin State Opera, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1942 to parents who were Russian Ashkenazi Jews. It should come as no surprise to learn that the second comes from an Italian—iconic pianist Maurizio Pollini—who was born in Milan in the same year.

He says: "Performing at that level is very difficult and I think it happens very seldom. Daniel Barenboim says it never happens because the idea is always superior to any practical realisation. I think that it happens, but very seldom. Thinking that you can reach this level of performance, that it is available to you, gives you a certain level of enthusiasm. The fact that it is possible is very important. This is what one tries to do always."

Artistic movement

The head of footwear and accessories at the Polimoda design school in Florence, Diane Becker, is originally from New York and can, therefore, give an informed but objective view. She says she does believe there is a 'genius loci' in Italy, something about the spirit of the whole place that gives it an artistic advantage.

She has worked in the south of Italy and says she could imagine "cultural difficulties" in setting up there. Then she remembers a young handbag designer from Tuscany who set up operations in Palermo for the simple reason that she could not find any manufacturing space in Florence; no one would give her any. "She's now doing well and has offices in

“...and it should be noted...”

The Bari region of Puglia has the largest concentration of shoe manufacturers in the deep south of Italy. Filanto S.p.A. is the largest and celebrates its 60th Anniversary this year. Like most people in this part of Italy, Antonio Filograna, Filanto's founder, came from a farming background but he wanted something different. So, after spending time at a handicraft centre in Casarano, he took himself off—still in his late teens—to study shoe design in Milan and actual manufacture in nearby Vigevano, the centre of Italy's footwear industry.

While most young men would have stayed in the more prosperous north, Antonio missed the south. He also believed that industry should be brought to under-developed Puglia and, thinking shoemaking ideal, he returned to Casarano in 1948 and opened his own factory. It was a risky step but he made it work through his own personal dynamism and, today, Filanto has over 3,500 employees producing 60,000 pairs of shoes per day which it sells in 60 countries.

Although costs have always been lower than in the north, Filanto has always had ultra-competitive pricing. With the fall of Communism in Albania, a few factories opened in the early 1990s to use the country's low costs to sub-contract to the huge Italian shoe industry just across the water. Filanto was an early taker and over the years has formed alliances with a number of Albanian suppliers. Foremost among these is Berttoni which has grown steadily as a result and now employs 900 people and produces over 80,000 pairs per month.

While Giuseppe Baiardo's suggestion has met with the usual prejudice of northern Italian's for the South, who's to say he's not right? After all, Antonio Filograna proved shoemaking can thrive there and, 60 years on, his company is now one of the largest footwear producers in Italy.

Florence,” Ms Becker explains, “but she is keeping production in Sicily.”

Certainly in terms of footwear, any manufacturers taking Giuseppe Baiardo's advice will be expanding an industry that is already established in some parts of the south rather than setting it up from scratch. The province of Bari, for example, has 15 active companies at the moment, although many of them will come under the jurisdiction of a new province, Barletta-Andria-Trani, when it is established next year (see box). Other regions are footwear-free zones at the moment, so there is plenty of scope for businesses to take the search for new artistic talent to the sunny south. 🌞

SOUTHERN PLAYERS

Province	Number of footwear manufacturers
Bari	15
Naples	9
Caserta	6
Siracusa	2
Cosenza	1
Salerno	1

Source: ANCI