

Q&A - NERI FIRENZE

INTERVIEW WITH RAPHAELA HERMES, FOUNDER OF NERI FIRENZE

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CAREER PATH?

I have lived and worked in Florence since 1999. Before that, I worked for several big luxury labels. In 2005, I embarked upon a new adventure by creating my own label: Neri Firenze.

WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE YOU CREATE NERI FIRENZE?

I wanted to create quality products promoting my region's local expertise. An exclusive product entirely designed by craftspeople from Florence according to local traditions. I embarked upon this adventure with the desire to promote European craftsmanship while having the luxury of personally choosing my suppliers.

WHAT IS YOUR BRAND PHILOSOPHY AND IS IT ALSO A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE?

Generally speaking, my objective is to create a product that is warm, comforting and offers a feeling of security. We all need to be reassured, especially given the uncertainty of today's world. **I don't really follow trends; I like to do what pleases me: objects full of character and unique know-how.** It is very important to me that each product should procure this feeling of authenticity and quality. I want the customers to sense that the object in their hands has been made with passion and love.

CAN YOU BRIEFLY DESCRIBE WHAT MAKES YOUR WORK SPECIAL AND WHAT DIFFERENTIATES IT FROM THE REST?

Neri Firenze is currently the only leather goods label to propose a collection entirely made in Florence by top class craftspeople who want to pass on an ancestral know-how. I don't look at the cost of the materials and the time that each hand-crafted object demands. I never neglect the quality.

WHICH LEATHER DO YOU MOST ENJOY WORKING WITH?

I really love working with vegetable-tanned leather which is any leather dyed with plant oils and natural pigments. The whole process takes place in Tuscany. The skins are not subjected to any chemical treatment and keep their natural sheen throughout their lifetime.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF YOUR ACTIVITY?

I began with accessories (belts, gloves, etc. and then scarves and knits). In response to the real demand amongst my clients, I gradually enlarged my offer. We are now able to offer a full look by Neri Firenze, from knitted items to gloves as well as bags and shoes. My aim now is to find the best craftspeople and manufacturers for each category of products. I also like to release exclusive lines produced in limited editions. Lines that are generally made traditionally with machines that you won't find anywhere else. My clients are connoisseurs, I am on a constant quest for perfection and the very best for Neri Firenze, I want the name to continue to be synonymous with quality.

FROM AN INTERNATIONAL STANDPOINT, WHAT PARTS OF THE WORLD ARE MOST REACTIVE TO YOUR LINE OF WORK?

The list is long! France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the United Kingdom but also Japan, the United States, and so on. Neri Firenze tends to appeal to a clientele who likes pure and timeless design combining tradition and quality. Brazil is also becoming an interesting market for us and for luxury in general.

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HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE LUXURY?

For me luxury is definitely being able to do what I love! I also consider my life in Tuscany as a luxury... the beauty of the landscape is breathtaking. I am happy to work so closely with the local community, the suppliers have become my friends. Working with people that you like and respect is precious.

WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR?

Obviously a new collection! For the winter, I am going to focus on completely hand-knitted styles and create an element of surprise by combining cashmere and leather. I also want to develop a line devoted to travelling and to propose different sized bags: from shoulder bags to overnight bags, there will be a wide choice! But I am sure that other ideas will come up...

AS WELL AS TOP-END LEATHER GOODS, YOU ARE ALSO FAMOUS FOR YOUR KNITWEAR WHICH YOU ALSO DESIGN IN A TOTALLY UNIQUE WAY?

I work the knitwear and all the other items that come out of our workshop in the same way: with the desire to design exceptional items by working with the best craftspeople in the region whose know-how is universal and in danger of dying out. For the knits (cashmeres, different wools, silks and cottons): firstly I find the best suppliers in the world, then I work with craftspeople, often old ladies who have worked with the top luxury houses in the past and who are the only ones to still master certain stitches which are so complex that they prevent them from working with big clients because the techniques take too long to allow them to make large quantities.

But that suits me just fine for two reasons. Firstly it guarantees that no one can 'copy' my goods, and secondly I don't want to produce large quantities. I think that the essence of what I do, in leather and knitwear, is its rarity.



RAPHAELA HERMES