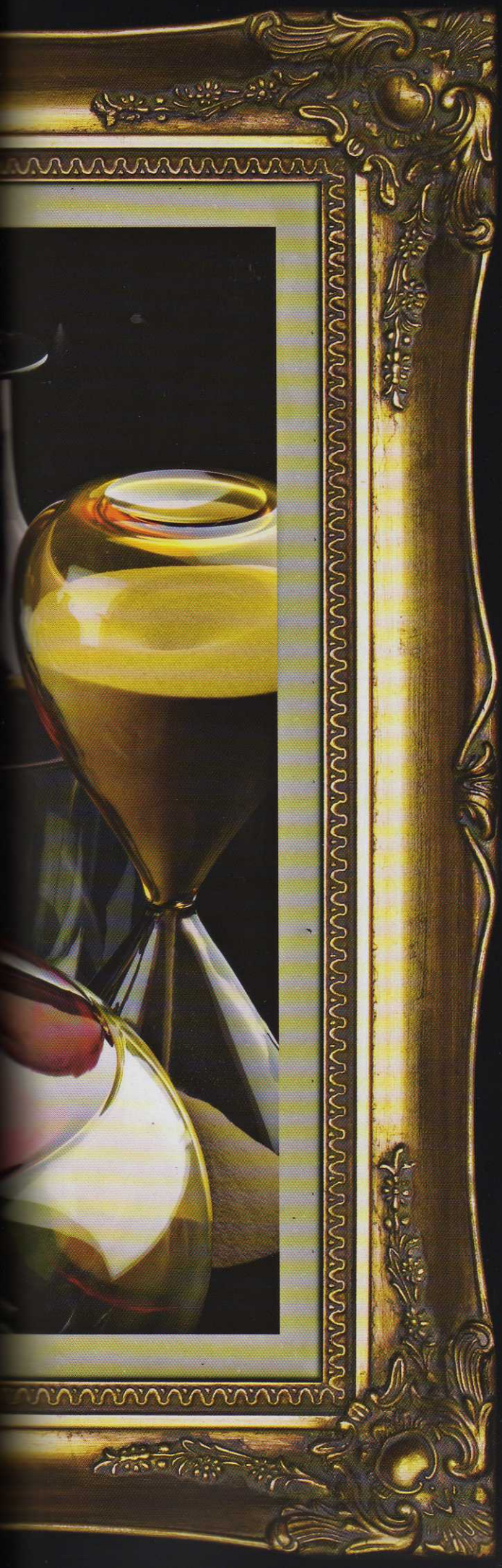
Shine on: Venini's colourful glassware combines exquisite design with skilled craftsmanship



Beautiful MINDS

CREATIVITY IS IN ITALIANS' GENES: THEIR PASSION FOR BEAUTIFUL THINGS SPANS CENTURIES AND INDUSTRIES, FROM GUNS TO GLASS, JEWELS TO LEATHER. THESE TIME-HONOURED TRADES CONTINUE TO UNDERPIN THE COUNTRY'S ARTISTIC CAPABILITIES

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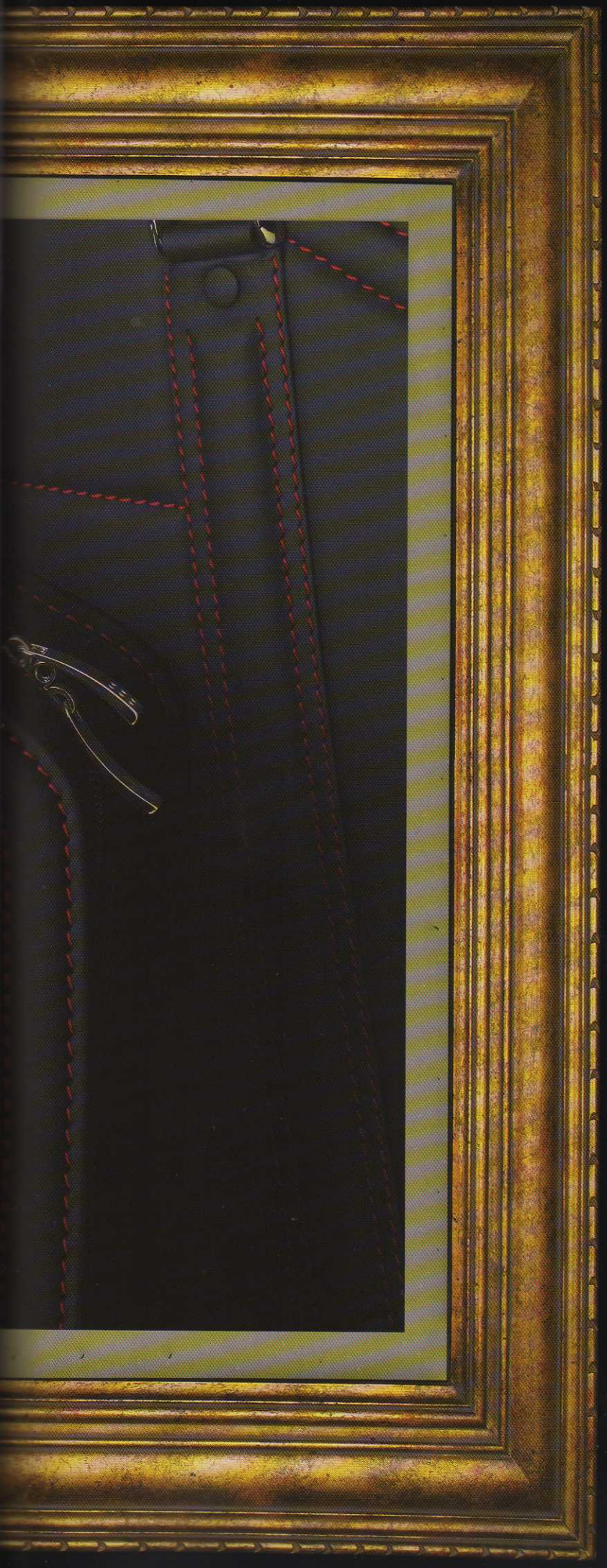
ACCORDING TO visionary designer Gaetano Pesce, creativity 'is Italy's true resource'. Quite right. It's a resource that is a talent, nurtured and developed through knowledge, technique and work. By avoiding distinctions between applied and decorative arts, design and plain art, Pesce maintains that every creation is in part pragmatic – so everybody can understand it – and in part cultural, relating to a particular sensitivity that no longer exists as it once did, and so is timeless.

Italy's 'creativity' has proved unique in combining the imagination and the mastery of realising the idea – both in supremely crafted products and industrially made pieces. There is a flash of genius and a vitality of taste that is very seductive to those not influenced by beauty in its capacity to bring together what appear to be contrasting ideas. Beauty is loved because it has a charismatic value that distinguishes it. As the great critic of taste Gillo Dorfles wrote, a will to differentiate 'is among those which most spurs man on, no matter what social level he belongs to'.

It's a quality from centuries past, that found its apotheosis in the Renaissance atelier, thanks to three elements: a desire to be ever more skilful and inventive; an infinite and ingenious attention to craftsmanship; and a curious and demanding customer-base with wealth of astonishing proportions – notably the courts of the aristocracy. 'No institution,' observes scholar and author Guido Guerzoni, 'was better able than these to promote feverish processes of invention, differentiation, specialisation and perfecting forms, materials and functions: anything and everything became the subject of special attention of proposals and designs, of variants and innovations.' This contributed to the diffusion of a taste for detail and pleasure in those who created and bought perfection. Take Isabella d'Este, who refused a portrait by the great Andrea Mantegna because it did not seem emblematic enough of her position, since the painter 'has done it so badly and does not look like us at all'.

The result? The excellence of the Italian product, confirmed by the success it had, and continues to have, abroad. In the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, the Lombard gunsmiths – from Pompeo della Cesa to the workshop of Missaglia, Aloisio da Boltego and the Brescian school – led the way in Europe, while aristocrats the continent over vied to obtain the leatherwork coming from the factories of the Venetian Republic and Tuscany. It was not just about accessories

Bags of style: Schedoni custom-makes suitcases for different Ferrari models, including these bags for the 599 GTB



to communicate personality. What also counted was the trademarks of the factories. Suffice to say, the successful product was the one that was able to marry the material culture with that of the intangible.

Throughout the centuries this structural, almost genetic, predisposition for high quality was consolidated via a tradition of identification, and a manufacturing and conceptual network, that today is seen as the pulsating heart of Italian style. Methods of production have moved on – they have evolved in technological and managerial terms, and have grown in proportion – but one thing still alive in the Italian production model is a strong bond with the spirit of the workshop. This flexible operating organism is able to make proposals, prepared to tailor, inclined to experimentation and open to the new – because, to quote Pesce once more, 'if the new is missing, so is life'.

Let us return to the theme of gunsmiths – the first stop on our five-leg journey through Italian masters and their secrets. Not, though, to the workshop of the legendary Pompeo della Cesa, but instead, global company Beretta, based in Gardone Riviera on Lake Garda, which can trace its origins back to the 16th century. And no longer are we thinking of swords and fitted armour, but rifles and pistols. And yet the language of luxury is still the same today, just as it always has been – it is innate in the item. Nothing is born as an untamed mechanical structure veiled in an aesthetic cloak, rather the entire piece develops harmoniously, seamlessly entwined.

Let's take, for example, the double-barrel rifles used in shooting sports. Each element is considered in minute detail: the walnut of the wooden components is worked on by skilled carpenters; the stock and the forearms are tailor-made by hand for the customer; the couplings are perfect; the mirrors on the receiver do not have pins, leaving the engraver as free as possible to add his *bulino* decorations (dot engravings) with a point and hammer, and then sign the finished product with pride. Each piece, which technologically speaking is identical to all other such rifles, is therefore different – unique in its finish, because every detail is reflected in and inspired by the tastes and styles of that moment in time.

When the artefact is weighed; when its balanced form or silver shape – recounting a hunting adventure or sporting feat – is admired (Berettas have been used by countless Olympic medal winners), one cannot help but be enchanted. Here one sees the work of the skilled hand that has transformed every technical feature into art; it is a skill passed down from generation to generation, each progressively absorbing the innovations and building on them, without letting them get the upper hand.

We move now from Gardone to Venice, from the virility of arms to the fragility of glass: two contrasting industries and yet the intelligence guiding the creations of Venini is the same as that characterising the Beretta products. The Venetian glass factory cannot boast the centuries-old history of the Brescian arms brand, but it has a long list of achievements in its 87-year history, and has never deviated from the precept of its founder, Paolo Venini, who believed simplicity is closer to art than excess is. The company was the first to open up the Murano glass industry – through its vases, chalices and chandeliers – to the Modern movement by proposing essential forms and, in the words of art critic Claudia Neumann, 'a meditated and weighty use of colour'.

New production techniques were invented to supplement old methods, and the company collaborated with celebrated designers who were attracted by the fascination of the materials. These included sculptor Napoleone Martinuzzi, architect-designer Gio Ponti and architect Carlo Scarpa, who was responsible for the magnificent 'Tessuti' collection comprising hand-wrought blown glass with coloured piping. And who were the big names collaborating with Venini from


Beretta Cordoba VT

Best shot: Beretta's double-barrel rifles, such as this S010, meld aesthetic and mechanical perfection

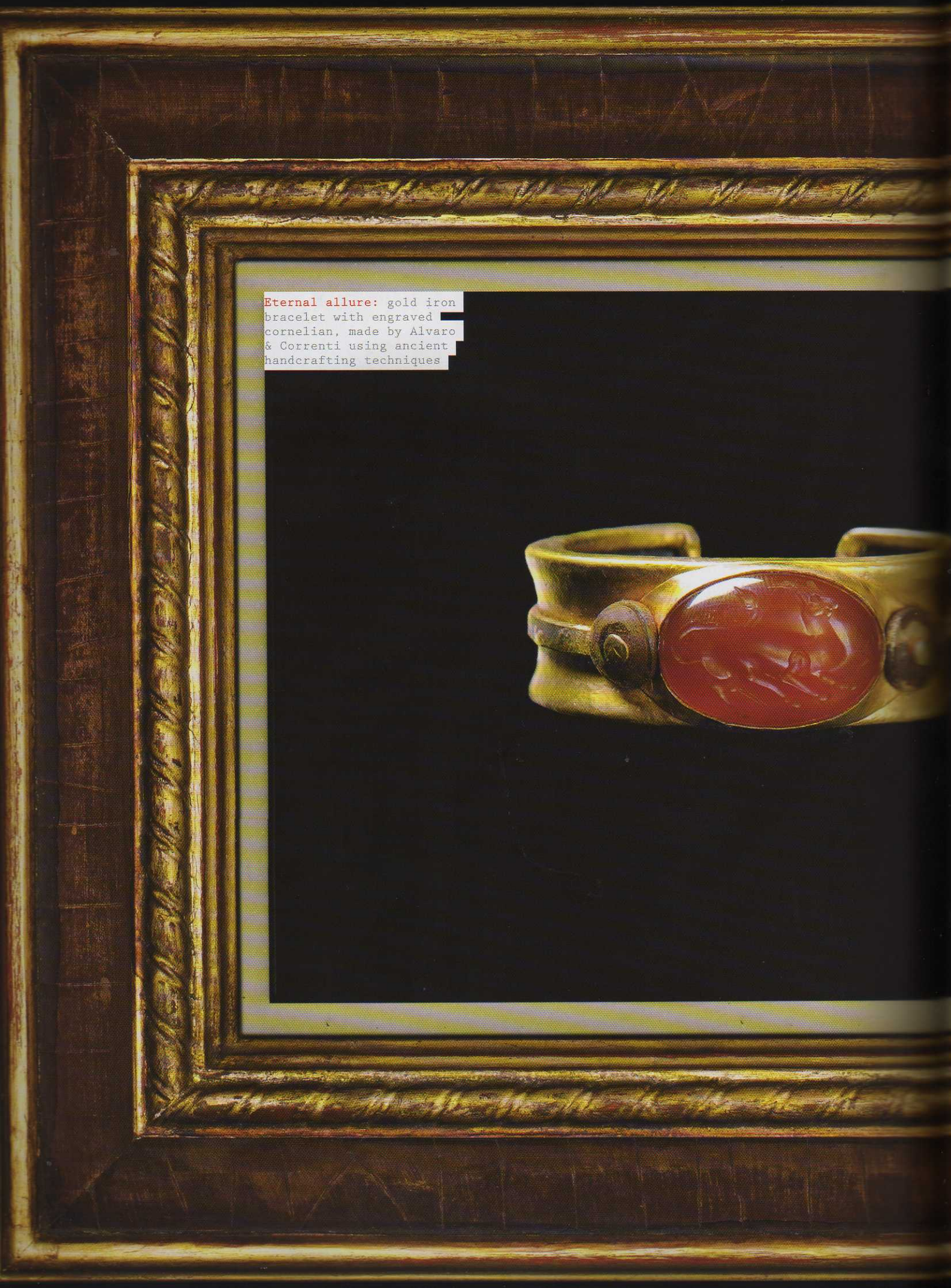
the Bel Design, Post-modern, Nordic Rationalism and Pop Art movements? Franco Albini, Massimo Vignelli, Alessandro Mendini, Mario Bellini, Toni Zuccheri, Ken Scott and Tapio Wirkkala. Not to mention Dale Chihuly, who at this time picked up the secrets of a trade that have made him a star in today's art world; and Fulvio Bianconi, who designed the sensational *Fazzoletto* (handkerchief), one of the most imitated vases ever created. It's a formidable and infinite list that has now been joined by the likes of Emmanuel Babled, Philip Baldwin, Sandro Chia, Sandra Diaz de Santillana, Harri Koskinen and Luca Pancrazzi, creators ready to amaze with phantasmagorical designs that seem to go beyond even the computer's potential.

The stuff this noble company is made of is summed up beautifully by designer-architect Alessandro Mendini: 'It seems to me that Venini's unmistakable style was the fruit of a magic blend of exclusive techniques, a few exceptional designers, and the choice of certain colours. This tradition and these boundaries are the magic formula of Venini.' The talented glassmaker's recipe for proposing a world of iridescence, both allusive and illusive, that mixes sensuality with 'the perfection of the difference', sets his products in a class of their own.

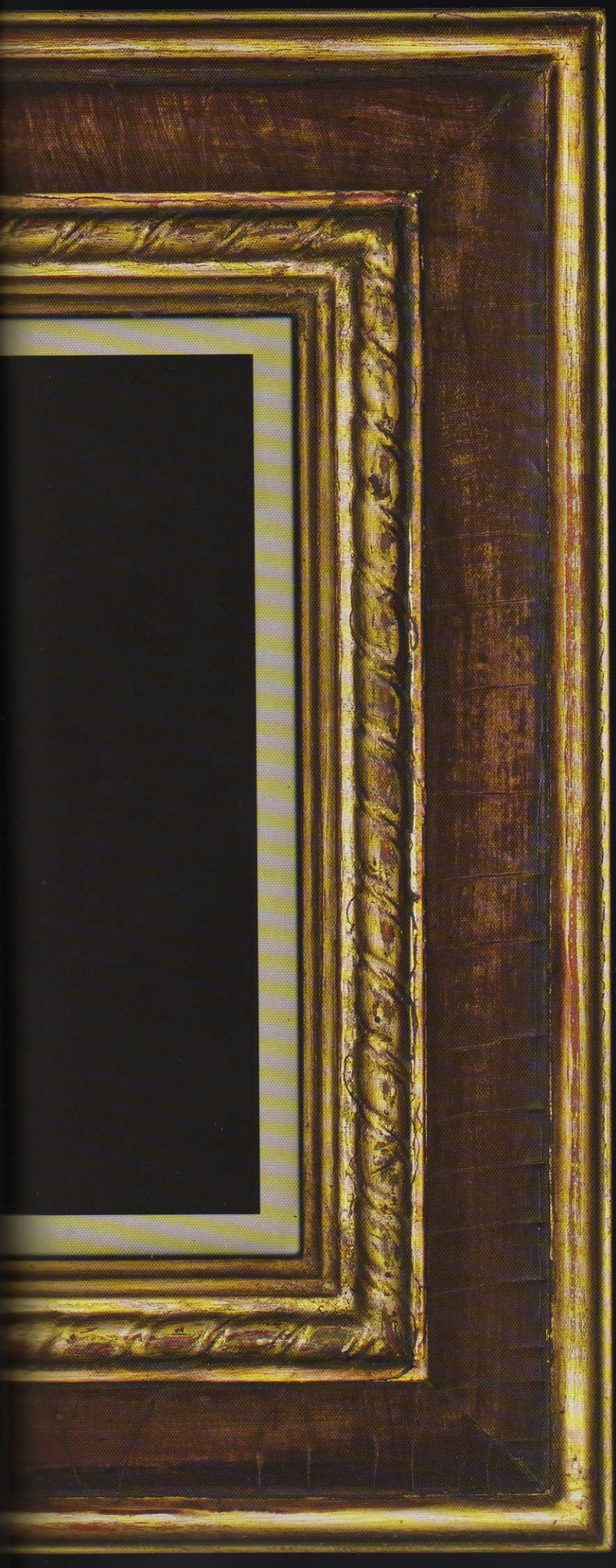
Another address that bears witness to the uniqueness of the Italian art trade is Schedoni, a true dynasty from Modena, established in 1880 with the aim of making exclusive footwear entirely by hand. Today it is a modern company but its roots lie deep in Italy's great tradition of craftsmanship. It is headed up by Mauro, Maria Grazia, Simone and Elisa Schedoni, the third and fourth generations of this family-owned company. Here the material is leather, hand-worked almost as if it were fabric, with an obsessive attention to detail to ensure a seductive softness to the touch. The niche occupied by this category of product concerns items that inspire the owner to dream of far-off lands and sporting feats.

Pride of place in the range are bespoke travel goods; customers include Ferrari, which in 1976 signed an exclusive agreement with Schedoni for it to make suitcases able to adapt to the often limited space in sports cars. Since then it has made 60,000 such bags. Schedoni's catalogue also includes document cases, collections for travel games, wallets and vintage bags, while a contemporary Grand Tour-style set stands alongside bestsellers such as 'Zen', gym and yoga bags, as well as golf bags crafted from 127 pieces of leather, cut and stitched by hand. The brand is also responsible for leather merchandise for Omega, Baume & Mercier and Dolce & Gabbana, as well as the 'leather sets' of many Hollywood films – all outstanding interpretations of the celebrated aphorism by Alberto Arbasino, that 'luxury goes wonderfully as long as it is unbridled'.

Travellers on a tour of all that is beautiful, our next stop is Oltrarno in Florence, the city of craftsmen that also provided the backdrop for many novels by author and screenwriter Vasco Pratolini. The company is Bartolozzi & Maioli, maker of wooden artefacts. Visiting the factory is a unique experience: a feeling of history oozes from every corner, and an all-pervasive scent of sawdust and *encausto* (a wax-based varnish) infuses the building. The craftsmen and women move their hands rhythmically between gouges and hammers; on one side a girl from Hamburg has just finished carving a book into walnut: it is part of her university thesis, she tells us with pride. In the factory's original storeroom, copies or refurbished pieces – candelabras, altar pieces, statues of saints, crucifixes and cornices – are heaped in poetic disorder. The relationship linking Bartolozzi & Maioli to wood is different from that uniting Schedoni to leather and Venini to glass; it is inspired by the Golden Age of Florentine cabinetmakers rather than modernity. The passion for perfection, however, remains the same.



Eternal allure: gold iron bracelet with engraved cornelian, made by Alvaro & Correnti using ancient handcrafting techniques



Frames supplied by Just Good Frames (+44 20 8892 1530); Venini glassware supplied by Skandium, Brompton Road (+44 20 7584 2066)

Founded in Florence in 1938 by two sculptor-designers, Florentine Fiorenzo Bartolozzi and Ravennate Giuseppe Maioli, the company is one of the world's leading wood engravers. In the post-war years it became well known for taking on the recovery and restoration of the choir and sacristy of the Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino. From then on, the company enjoyed one success after another, both in Italy and abroad: wood sculpted, modelled, polished and gilded with a mastery more worthy of a Francesco di Battista or a Giovanni Socci; prestigious orders for restoration work from the likes of the Quirinale (the Italian President's mansion) and the Kremlin. And all supported by the construction of a school for apprentices that has become as famous as the company – one that is fast becoming a cultural magnet on the banks of the Arno river.

In addition to these activities was the formation of a collection of wooden artefacts recovered after the dismantling of various churches in central Italy during the liturgical reform. Almost all the pieces, albeit incomplete, date back to the 18th century and, according to Fiorenza Bartolozzi, daughter of Fiorenzo and now the head of the company, they 'serve as an example of why, in the course of a restoration, it is necessary to recreate a style precisely without making mistakes'. The past lives on here to improve the present and make it richer and more fascinating.

Rounding off our trip is Sicily. After all, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe pronounced, 'Italy without Sicily leaves no imprint on the soul.' The jewels of Alvaro & Correnti are the shining conclusion to our arts and crafts tour. With twin bases in Messina and Taormina, the company's roots go far back in history. One almost feels a sense of rebirth when Leila Correnti, daughter of Alfredo and now at the helm of the company, and Fanny Alvaro, successor to Giuseppe, reveal the collection of jewels – rings, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, earrings and pins – that enchant with the warm, natural colour of untreated, 22-carat gold and silver slightly blackened through ancient techniques. I say rebirth because these beautiful adornments emanate a sinuous softness that is truly feminine – and they are reaffirming and relaunching the Sicilian high-goldsmith's art, something that, in recent years, has been reduced to mediocrity.

Using the ancient techniques of filigree and lost wax casting granulation, the atelier has revived two sparkling traditions, thereby creating, in the words of Giorgio Lilli Latino, 'stylish neologisms'. The traditions mix a host of influences including Catalan, Norman, Lombard, Neopolitan, but above all Etruscan and Greek.

'It is true,' Leila observes, 'fashions and trends do not interest us, our crucible of ideas is the past; we draw inspiration above all from Etruscans and Magna Graecian goldsmiths. We produce single pieces in limited runs: we try to give each item a precise identity, a personality of its own. We love working on commissions because then our passion intensifies and ingenuity sharpens to find the right balance between the wishes of the customer and our age-old experience. Given that gold naturally radiates colour and warmth, this helps us a lot in our creative endeavours. We also limit production: it means that distribution only occurs between November and February. We sell our jewellery through showrooms, galleries and private viewings, in the United States, and now also in the United Arab Emirates and Japan – as well as here in Taormina, of course.'

As Paolo Monelli and Giuseppe Novello were asked at the end of their gastronomic tour of the Italian regions, is there a moral to our tale? Yes: that there is an Italy of excellence, small but in reality much bigger than what we have recounted today. An Italy that makes irresistible things with passion and finesse like no other. An Italy that is virtuous and intelligent, and which deserves greater attention, care and a higher profile.