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FANCY FOOTWORK

The best-dressed feet in the world find their way to Massaro, where shoes always fit like a glove.



Raymond Massaro has had his hands on the most beautiful and famous feet in the world. And from the looks of the new thigh-high velvet boots he's crafting for Chanel, he's had his hands on a lot more than feet. He will not comment, though, beyond a sly smile and bemused twinkle in his eye.

Discretion is of course de rigueur for those who cater to haute couture and the world's glitterati. Massaro will, however, admit that during his 56-year career, he has handcrafted shoes for the likes of Marlene Dietrich, the Duchess of Windsor, Claudia Schiffer, Morocco's King Hassan and fashion houses from Vionnet to Alaïa. One can only imagine what other famous feet have climbed the stairs to this dusty second-floor atelier on the rue de la Paix.

It's the same cluster of rooms where Massaro's relatives, immigrant shoemakers from Italy, set up shop in 1894. Today the front rooms are crammed with row upon row of models displayed on lasts. There is every type of fabric, color and style imaginable, from demure pumps to outrageously high platform sandals. Tucked in among them are the designs that have made Massaro famous: the "ballerine" created for Madame Grès in 1955, the slingback pump with contrasting toe fashioned for Chanel in 1957, **the Pope's red mules** and a pair of impossibly high pumps with heels carved into the shape of a woman's derrière and legs. Massaro designed them for Alaïa in 1992 and still chuckles when he shows them off.

He talks about his long career with the detached calm of someone who has seen it all. "Things were very different when I started in 1947," he says. "Fashions changed less quickly, and women dressed up more and wanted a pair of shoes to match every outfit. Usually, they were made out of the same fabric as the dress." Those were the days when Barbara Hutton would order a hundred pairs at once, and Mona Bismarck would order three identical pairs for the same soirée. "She used to say that valets just weren't what they used to be, so she needed several pairs in case one was soiled during the course of the evening," recalls Massaro.

That was before May '68 and women's lib put the nix on elegance—especially the ostentatious kind. But rather than go into ready-to-wear, Massaro instead cultivated his haute-couture clientele—his partnership with Chanel notably became one of the most successful in fashion history. "My father used to have 300 customers, and I now have about 3,000," he reveals. "But I still make fewer shoes than he did."

Although society and fashion have changed considerably during the past half century, the techniques used in the Massaro workshop are still much the same. Here, 10 employees sculpt lasts in the shape of clients' feet ("left and right feet are never the same"), then cut patterns, assemble the upper shoe, then the sole. It takes at least 10 years of training and 40 hours of work to make a pair of Massaro shoes, which start at €2,000 a pair.

Comfort is of course an integral part of the design process, and Massaro confides that the secret to great heels is not so much the height but the proper arch. But he insists that his most valuable savoir-faire comes into play well before he even begins to design a shoe. "I dress a woman's head, not her feet," he likes to say. "What's most important is to understand why she wants a particular pair of shoes. A heavysset woman once came to me asking for heels that I thought would be too high for her. 'Look,' she said, and she sat down and lifted her skirt, showing off very attractive crossed legs. I immediately understood that she wanted these shoes to seduce."

Massaro's talents have won him considerable fame and so many accolades and awards that one is tempted to ask what he considers his greatest accomplishment. His answer is immediate: "I have earned my father's name," he beams.

Massaro, 2 rue de la Paix, 1^{er}. Tel. 33/1-42-61-00-29; Fax 33/1-42-61-19-55.

<http://www.massaro.fr>

