

WEEKEND

Maintaining Florence's Quieter Heritage

In the Oltrarno, the Lesser-Known Side of the River, Craftsmanship Blends With Small-Town Living

By Lana Bortolot
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As its name implies, the Oltrarno has always been about being the "other" part of Florence. It's on the other side of the river, it's the other neighborhood, but it's the home of the artisans who shaped the city in the Middle Ages.

The Oltrarno combines the art of craftsmanship and small-town living. Here, artisans work as did masters half a millennium ago. Residents are happily clannish but uninhibited, sharing the streets with dogs, cyclists, vegetable vendors and the rare tourist. It's a place where people seem to please themselves; window boxes go dry in the winter and most signs are in Italian only.

A good approach to this quirky neighborhood is by way of Ponte Vecchio, which, with its crowds of hawkers and tourists, represents everything the Oltrarno is not. Over the bridge, turn right at Borgo Sant' Jacopo, and this street will eventually lead you to San Frediano, the district of textile workers.

Named after important churches, the districts were subdivisions where workers of a certain trade congregated. Wool workers, for example, were at the San Frediano end of the neighborhood. Dyers were nearby, and other textile-

related activities established themselves in the area. Decorative and fine-metal arts were closer to the Palazzo Pitti side.

In between the two, small districts of woodworkers, gilders, bronzers, shoemakers, and print- and papermakers thrived. Today, the districts aren't so rigidly segregated, but it's a badge of honor for many workshops to operate in their historic district.

A small street near the Porta di San

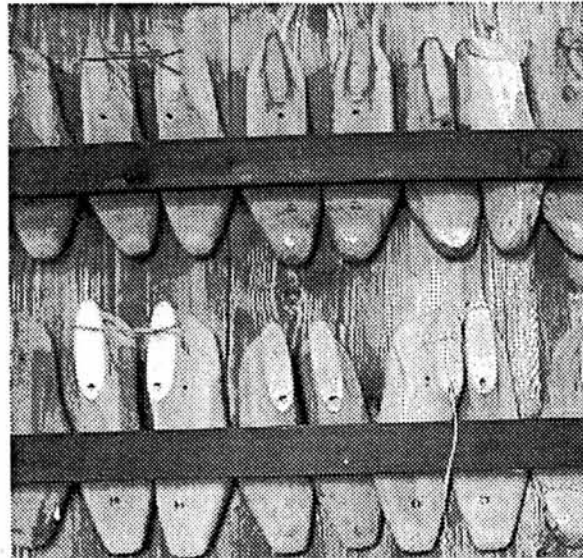
Frediano leads to one such place: Antico Setificio Fiorentino, a *bottega* that is, perhaps the pride of this neighborhood. Since the 14th century, silks have been highly valued in Florence and since 1786, they've been spun in this workshop.

Every silk tells a story. Some have their origins in the Renaissance paintings of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Pontormo; others furnish royal

palaces and aristocrats' homes. One fabric is ordered annually by an anonymous customer known only as "Mary of England." Closer to home, papal vestments and the costumes of Siena's Palio come from these looms.

All the fabrics have one thing in common: they are woven here by craftsmen still trained in the apprentice system. Working on looms

From hand-stitched footwear to glazed floor tiles, the Oltrarno populated by artisans, silversmiths and bookbinders is a veritable museum of Florence craftsmanship.



dating from the 18th and 19th centuries (and a thread-winder designed by Leonardo da Vinci), 15 people do a job no one else in Italy can do. Four apprentice weavers train over two years, learning from the masters. The system endures because Florence is a city where "people still have human scale," says Sabine Pretsch, director of the shop.

Leaving the Renaissance and re-entering Florence, you can find small workshops scattered between San Frediano and Santo Spirito. Indeed, many streets bear the names of the trades once practiced here: via dei Cardatori and via dei Tessitori, for example, were the respective streets of cordmakers and weavers.

Peeking in building doorways, you can see old tiled floors, still intact while the walls above crumble. Chances are the tiles were fired in a bottega such as Sbigoli Terrecotte. The showroom is on via S. Egidio, but you may purchase from the workshop, and see who else does, too, as many local *trattorie* have their tableware custom-made here.

Between the churches of Santa Maria del Carmine and Santo Spirito, a small workshop restores antique church sculpture. It survives as part of the renown L'Opificio delle Pietre Dure, founded in 1588 by the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici for repairing *pietra dura* mosaics. Now under the



auspices of the Soprintendenza di Firenze, wood and marble sculptures from all over Italy are restored here.

On a recent visit, a wooden Christ and a 14th-century statue of St. Francis were under repair. Dismounted from their lofty perches, they looked like oversized, somewhat neglected dolls. While St. Francis was in for a cosmetic touch up, Christ, his arm detached, awaited surgery of some kind. The bottega is not open to the public, but the restorers will politely answer a few questions from a curious bystander.

Anchored by its church, Piazza Santo Spirito has long been the heart of this neighborhood. Restaurants, workshops and a market keep the street lively, as does the interchange between shopkeepers and residents who use the piazza as living room and social club. Members of the "lesser arts," such as cobblers, carpenters, and bakers, formerly populated this area, and their successors still operate shops here.

Near the church, Roberto Ugolini sustains the calzature that has been in the family for three generations. Pictures of family members in the original shop hang on the walls near smooth wooden shoe models in neat rows. Made-to-measure shoes take three months to craft and are for men only. Around the corner, a woodworking shop churns out wooden objects from milliner's forms to table legs. Awns and religious pictures hang above the workbench — a reminder, perhaps, that God is in the details.

The 11th-century parish of San Jacopo Sopr'Arno defines the district where many fine-metal workers congregated. Across the street from the church, the argentiere Paolo Pagliai, one of the oldest silversmiths in Florence, still uses molds handmade from octopus cartilage for casting its pieces.

For three generations, the Pagliai family has reproduced 17th- and 18th-century Italian silver for clients as varied as Tiffany & Co., Prince Charles and the late Princess Grace. They've also been called upon for higher orders: the workshop created a ceremonial reliquary presented to Pope John Paul II.

Like the silk-weavers, the silversmiths look to Renaissance artists for design inspiration, making the shop's work very much a Florentine product. A floral wreath by Andrea della Robbia, for example, inspired the design of a picture frame, and a Tiffany commission was based on an angel candlestick from the Uffizi Gallery. Keeping in the spirit of the neighborhood, the shop is well known among Florentines, whose family heirlooms make the workshop a visual cacophony of silvery bits and pieces. Among the usual things waiting for refinishing — platters, pitchers and candlesticks — there's the unusual: sacred silver, a bust or a penguin-shaped ice bucket.

Several print shops are tucked away in this neighborhood, and at Il Torchio, you can see handmade books in the works. The street eventually becomes via di San Niccolò, one of the most

prestigious streets of craftsmen. The fantastical ring designs of jeweler Alessandro Dari are a dramatic interpretation of the art of goldsmithing.

Some residents are concerned that the artisan tradition eventually will be crushed by the faster and flashier industry of tourism, and an artisans' business association has been formed to protect the heritage of the craftsmen.

The demand for Florence's fine-crafted goods may force some artisans to succumb to mass production in order to stay competitive. But many, like Roberto Ugolini, believe there will always be a market willing to wait three months for a pair of fine handmade shoes.

WHERE TO BUY:

- **The artisans**
Antico Setificio Fiorentino (silks)
Via L. Bartolini 4
Tel. 055-213861
- **Sbigoli Terrecotte** (pottery)
Via di Camaldoli 10r
Tel. 055-229706
- **Roberto Ugolini** (shoes)
Via Michelozzi 17r
Tel. 055-216246
- **Paolo Pagliai** (silver)
Borgo Sant' Jacopo 41r
Tel. 055-282840
- **Il Torchio** (paper)
Via dei Bardi 17
Tel. 055-2342862
- **Alessandro Dari** (jewelry)
Via San Niccolò 115r
Tel. 055-244747

WHERE TO EAT:

- **Trattoria del Carmine**
Piazza del Carmine 18r
Tel. 055-218601
Closed Sunday
Price: 50-60,000 lire for two.
- **Il Cantinone del Gallo Nero**
Via Santo Spirito 6r
Tel. 055-218898
Closed Monday, Sunday lunch
Price: 60,000 lire for two.

WHERE TO STAY:

- **Pensione Sorelle Bandini**
Piazza Santo Spirito 9
Tel. 055-215308
Fax 055-282761
Price: 120,000 to 150,000

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