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Talking Fashion



The Merchants of Venice

Viola and Vera Arrivabene bring a touch of their beloved Venice to the world with their ViBi Venezia collection of gondoliers' shoes. By Hamish Bowles.

FOR VIOLA AND VERA ARRIVABENE—THE BEAUTEOUS patrician sisters behind the uniquely Venetian shoe brand ViBi Venezia—the city is in their soul. “It’s like growing up in a small village,” says Viola. “Everyone knows each other, and it’s a lot of fun. And you’re surrounded by beauty.”

Viola, 26, and Vera, 24, always adored the market vendors on the Rialto Bridge, many of whom sold the city’s famed furlane shoes, which are durable enough to pace the streets for hours on end but soft enough to be worn like slippers at home. These shoes were born of necessity after World War II as Italy struggled with poverty and a lack of basic materials (the soles were made from bicycle tires, the uppers from any available scraps of fabric).

“They became the gondoliers’ slippers, as the soles didn’t ruin the paint on their gondolas,” Viola explains. “But our favorite story is that they were used to sneak around bedrooms, because the sole doesn’t make a noise on creaky Venetian floors!”

The shoes became such emblems of the city that the sisters found themselves besieged by requests for them from friends living abroad—but after the merchants were banished from the Rialto and the shoes became far more challenging to find, Vera and Viola researched a local producer and, in short order, were designing their own, branching beyond the traditional velvets.

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PALACE INTRIGUE

ABOVE: VIOLA (LEFT) AND VERA ARRIVABENE AT HOME. RIGHT: THEIR LILY OF THE VALLEY FURLANES; A BUST BY THEIR FATHER RESTS IN THE SHADOWS.



Talking Fashion

TWO IF BY SEA

RIGHT: VIOLA AND VERA ON THE DOCK OF THE AMAN VENICE HOTEL, WEARING DIOR DRESSES AND THEIR OWN FURLANES. BELOW: THEIR SISTER MAFALDA'S BEDROOM, WITH METALLIC FURLANES AT THE FOOT OF THE BED.



VENETIAN HERITAGE

LEFT: FAMILY TREASURES CROWD THE LIVING ROOM AT PALAZZO PAPADOPOLI.



ViBi Venezia debuted in 2014 with a holiday capsule collection for Yoox put together in a frantic three weeks, using decorating textiles sourced in Padua. “We wanted to create something new—something younger and more fun, along with the traditional furlanes,” Viola says. “It was very fun, but we had no idea how to run a business. It started all as a game, but eventually we had to expand the website and show the world that we exist. Vera is the brains of the operation,” Viola adds. “She does the stock, the shops, the orders, the customers, the invoices, the payments.” Viola, meanwhile, designs the collections and works on the brand’s social media.

Along with their siblings, Mafalda, Maddalena, and Leonardo, Viola and Vera grew up on Venice’s Grand Canal, playing soccer and roller-skating through the vast, empty rooms of their family’s magnificent Palazzo Papadopoli, which was completed by the architect Giangiacomo dei Grigi around 1560 and luxuriously embellished in subsequent centuries—the nineteenth-century Papadopolis even acquired some neighboring houses to demolish and replace with gardens. “We had the best parties ever there,” Viola confides, “but we never told our parents about it!”

By the turn of this century, though, family funds had largely evaporated and the hulking beauty had become something of a white elephant for their parents, the legendary charmer Count Giberto Arrivabene Valenti Gonzaga and his dynamic wife, Christie’s representative Bianca di Savoia Aosta Arrivabene, who with

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NACHO ALEGRE; SITTINGS EDITOR: HAMISH BOWLES; HAIR: NOELIA CORRAL; MAKEUP: ARIANNA CAMPA; DETAILS: SEE IN THIS ISSUE

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their children had retreated to an apartment under the eaves, where gleaming terrazzo floors reflect a lattice of attic beams and a series of oeil-de-boeuf windows looks onto the palace's gardens and the waters below. Photographs of beautiful ancestors from the Arrivabene and the royal Savoia and Orléans families are glamorously showcased in picture frames of spun glass designed by Count Giberto, whose self-titled line of glassware reflects the legendary skills of Murano's glassblowers and now includes goblets—replete with a discreet drip of ruby “blood” at the rim—fit for a Borgia, along with exquisite beakers etched by hand with the facades of Venice's notable palazzi.

The count and his wife eventually found a suitor in the Aman group, which took out a long lease on the property

and, in a dizzying two years, renovated the palazzo to gleaming perfection to create one of the most luxurious hotels in a city long famed for the splendor of its hospitality. (In 2014, George Clooney and Amal Alamuddin held their wedding at the newly refurbished space.)

It was during the renovations that Viola was living in London to study fashion, while Vera studied marketing and communications. Now, with pop-up shops at fashionable watering holes from Positano to Patmos, ViBi Venezia is selling as far afield as Isetan in Tokyo, McPherson Ave. in Canada, and Alex Eagle in London.

The sisters' ultimate mission, though, as Viola puts it, is simple: “We want to bring this little bit of Venice that we have everywhere around the world.” □ TALKING FASHION>136

The Magic Numbers

Dries Van Noten is marking his hundredth show with *51–100* (Lannoo, \$90), an overview of his last 50 collections and a companion to his earlier *1–50*, which is being released in a new version. It contains all his prints that are fit to print—even if this ever-modest designer questioned whether everything was worthy of inclusion. (Yes, Dries, it is!) And while his book may be personal, it also tells a bigger narrative. As he notes, the audience at his shows, glimpsed in many of the pictures, went from sketching runway-side to snapping his work on their smartphones.—MARK HOLGATE

“Amber [Valletta] is an icon, but a very real one. Along with many of the women in our hundredth show, we'd worked with her a long time—there were others, like Mica [Argañaraz] and Hanne Gaby [Odiele], as well. Some of the younger people in the audience were surprised when [model] Kristina de Coninck came out smiling and making eye contact with them—they're not used to that today!”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ZOE GHERTNER, SEPTEMBER 2017.



“The inspiration for this collection was the work of artist Bridget Riley—graphic, monochromatic—so putting this dress in a field gave it a very different context, but one that's very us. Gardens, flowers, plants . . . they're so much a part of my world.”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID SIMS, SEPTEMBER 2014.

“This was the first time I'd used digital, as opposed to silk-screen, prints. I'd found vintage fabrics in a mill in Como and combined three or four of them—ones we thought were beautiful or interesting—into one piece.”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVEN MEISEL, JANUARY 2008.

