

Making the FUTURE



Florence has been a hub for artisans and craft for hundreds of years. But how does this continue in an era that prizes fast fashion? What can we do to promote craftsmanship and change our buying habits so that we value timeless design? *Konfekt* hosted a group of movers, makers and shakers to discuss the way forward.

Photographer — James Mollison
Writer — Laura Rysman



Laura Rysman (host)
Journalist

An American based in Florence, I'm a contributing editor at 'Konfekt', the Central Italy correspondent for 'Monocle' and a journalist for 'The New York Times' writing about all things beautiful in the Bel Paese.



Sabina Corsini
Patron

My mother founded Artigianato e Palazzo, an annual fair at our home in Florence that brings together top artisans, 27 years ago. I took over two years ago.



Jacqueline Harberink
Ceramist

A potter from the Netherlands, I make ceramics by hand at my workshop and new shopfront in Florence, as JHA Porcelain. I used to be a lawyer. When I moved to Italy with my husband I couldn't practice law anymore, so I studied ceramics.



Michele Am Russo
Bespoke tailor

A native of Rome, I'm a trained tailor and oversee the business at Atelier Bomba, a shop my mother founded in 1980, where we offer a timeless wardrobe of artisan- and custom-crafted items in extraordinary fabrics.

A TOAST TO CRAFT

Laura Rysman: Welcome everyone. I'm very happy to have lunch with a group of such interesting people, each working with craftsmanship in unique ways. Before we eat, I thought we could have a glass of Franciacorta here in the garden. We'll start with a toast. To craftsmanship and to everyone carrying it on... Cheers!

Sabina Corsini: To the craftspeople then. And to those who are co-branding and collaborating – that's the future. We need more designers working with artisans so that you have someone with a contemporary vision to reach the client.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: Yes, the reason I created my co-branding project was to give the public a peek at who was actually making these things. It gives visibility to the artisans who really have the knowledge and craftsmanship but it also offers them a chance to make something more modern and unique. I wasn't sure customers would wait six weeks to receive shoes, for example, but it worked well and we had a lot of orders for these sandals I'm wearing, our Mary Janes and a simple boot we make. I did a lot of storytelling to show the craftsmanship behind the styles, and people responded really well.



Allison Hoeltzel Savini
Designer

An American designer in Bologna, I'm the founder of the Officina del Poggio line of bags, to which I added a capsule collection of goods made in collaboration with Italian craftspeople.

and craftsmanship. I see that in what you're doing, Allison, and I feel we're there at Bomba as well.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: I also worked with Schiaparelli and I see how they work; there are some luxury houses that are still faithful to craftsmanship. But often today people think that luxury and craftsmanship are one and the same, when a lot of brands are manufacturing things in China – it's so disappointing to see that the general public doesn't recognise that. During the pandemic we learned to need less and I saw that there are people who were willing to wait for something good.

Sabina Corsini: So like "slow food", we need to emphasise "slow making" and "slow buying", which means you buy conscientiously, mindfully.

THE NEW AGE OF ARTISANSHIP

Laura Rysman: "Slow buying" is a really nice concept. But where does the digital world fit in with all of this? Is social media compatible with the slowness but also with the tactility and physicality of craft?

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: Michele, how do you feel about technology? Do you sell online?

Michele Am Russo: It was my idea for Bomba to have an Instagram account in order to be more inclusive. I liked the concept of showing more of what we do and what we are, which doesn't compromise the level of our work. So our e-commerce mostly functions on a made-to-order basis. We photograph our perennials, the pieces we love most, and only when we get the order do we cut and sew the garment. It takes anything between two weeks and three months to deliver.

Laura Rysman: And has this changed your business model?

Michele Am Russo: At the moment, it's small-scale. We realise that there could be a good business of its own there, but we would

have to invest the resources and we're not interested in doing so. There is a necessary limit to quantity to maintain quality.

Sabina Corsini: We need help from the new generation like you, Michele, to get all the 80-year-old artisans to show their work online. They have no idea how to use social media but it's fundamental for their survival.

THE RISE OF THE POSTMODERN ARTISAN

Laura Rysman: What do you all think about the fact that we suddenly have a new generation interested in artisanship? Previously there was a long period when no one wanted to work with their hands.

Michele Am Russo: We have a huge generational gap. No one wanted to learn what their father was doing – it wasn't cool; it wasn't profitable. We were about to lose direct learning from craftspeople and just be left with books on the subject. But now there's a tailoring trend and a wider craft trend; it's cool again.

Laura Rysman: I'm originally from America, where there's a huge trend towards artisan knowledge and artisan-made things but we don't have that generation of craftspeople to teach the young generation. We have to recover that knowledge.

Jacqueline Harberink: It's the same in the Netherlands. We had lost so much to industrialisation by the 1980s.

Sabina Corsini: That's why all the shoemakers here in Florence have foreigners studying with them. They're the last ones maintaining the craft.

Laura Rysman: Italy industrialised late, and, ironically, that slowness has helped craftsmanship survive here.

Sabina Corsini: The advantages of being provincial...

Laura Rysman: Who do you think is doing a good job offering some solutions

Laura Rysman: It's a great stimulus for artisans to have designers like Allison collaborating with them so that they can make something more up-to-date. It was quite common here in previous decades that creative people worked closely with artisans and seamstresses. That was how Italy's design boom and ready-to-wear began.

Michele Am Russo: In a very practical sense, you're also giving artisans an outlet and a platform, and bringing these products to a larger public through your website and connections with shops.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: The artisans I work with love the challenge of figuring out how to apply their methods to create a style they haven't made before...

Sabina Corsini: You often have to convince them to do something different but with the same know-how and techniques they've always used.

Jacqueline Harberink: This transformation from traditional to contemporary is also so important to make young people want to buy these products and maybe to want to learn to make them as well. In my new shop, I've dedicated two walls to showing other people's work on a rotating basis and we can do collaborations. The co-branding idea can be a really creative process that gets you out of your normal path of doing things as a crafts person. Collaborations are key.

Laura Rysman: Thanks for refilling our glasses, Michele. This Franciacorta is great.

Sabina Corsini: Is it OK if I smoke a cigarette before we have lunch?

Laura Rysman: Of course, let's enjoy the garden a moment longer and then we'll move to the terrace to eat.

CRAFTED FASHION

Laura Rysman: Everyone take a seat. We can start with some amberjack and pesto.

Michele Am Russo: To begin with, we need to point out that luxury is so important today but not everything that's offered on the luxury market is actually craft. You have more and more people like us who are interested in the way things are made, who have a vision of what we want. We're craving something in between fashion



Previous spread

1. From left: Michele Am Russo, Sabina Corsini, Laura Rysman, Jacqueline Harberink and Allison Hoeltzel Savini

This spread

1. Am Russo's artisan-made shoes
2. Conversation flows in the garden before lunch





1. Villa San Michele
2. The day's menu
3. Lunch is served

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here? Chanel has been buying up workshops to keep them on their feet and using its Métiers d'Arts presentation to showcase the craftspeople involved in the brand. What else works? Italy should be on top of this because, as the maker of the world's luxury goods, it's not just heritage but the economy that depends on continuing the craft tradition.

Sabina Corsini: Artigianato e Palazzo is doing just that with Blogs & Crafts, a prize for craftspeople under 35 funded by Ferragamo and other institutions. The winners often go on to have successful workshops. Plus Italy's trade schools are really high level for craft.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: But a lot of people don't want to work independently or be in these small workshops because the taxes are so punishing and job security is so important in Italy. The big brands are luring away a lot of artisans working in small factories because they can offer fixed contracts. We need to give more incentives to artisan businesses and independent workers. But there is hope. My shoe-maker's granddaughter joined him in the business and said she wanted to because of the rebirth in craft. She sees the respect that craft is getting now in the media and from a certain segment of society. So esteem and storytelling are fundamental.

LONGEVITY IS SUSTAINABILITY

Laura Rysman: If we're going to truly regenerate craft, will our consumer habits have to change? The modern industrial era teaches us to go for what's as cheap and fast as possible but these things have a high cost to our planet.

Sabina Corsini: We should stop using the word cheap because things aren't cheap; they're just more convenient.

Michele Am Russo: Even if you're buying fast fashion, in the end you're paying a high price because you're buying things that don't last. And what are you feeding? You're putting your money into a machine that doesn't pay a fair wage and gives you something you care about only momentarily. It's cultural ignorance about what you pay for when you pay for a garment. Informing and teaching might be what we need...

Sabina Corsini: We need to educate people about the real costs of making.

Laura Rysman: And educate people to understand a different way of calculating what's worth purchasing. Most people have lost the habit of buying things that will last them 10 to 15 years.

Sabina Corsini: I'm in touch with all kinds of artisans and this is an issue across the board – they say that most people don't

appreciate the timelessness of the quality they're producing.

Jacqueline Harberink: Timelessness is the very thing that makes their goods more sustainable – you're not throwing things out every season and the producers are getting an honest wage.

Laura Rysman: Currently most goods in the world are produced by workers who aren't getting an honest wage, which skews the market towards items that are artificially cheap and not sustainable, not made to last. That's not going to change until people acknowledge the true cost of what they buy and until we deliver more information to people about how things were made, like through the digital labels being introduced.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: You should have to pay for your environmental footprint. Eco-Age [the sustainable business consultancy] has a great maxim that you should wear everything you buy at least 30 times.

Laura Rysman: We need these sorts of rules now. When Formafantasma [a research-based design studio] did an exhibition on wood in the design world, it presented this idea that every piece of wood furniture you buy should last you as long as it took for the tree to grow that provided the material – so it should be a piece of furniture that lasts you for 50 to 70 years. A lifetime piece. A piece to pass down.

Michele Am Russo: The way things used to be done was sustainable, from farming to tailoring, before we got into this new way of doing things and over-producing. But the past is not the future either. Unless something drastic happens, we're not going back to that kind of sustainability.

“My shoe-maker's daughter joined him in the business and said she wanted to because of the rebirth in craft. She sees the respect that craft is getting now in the media and from a certain segment of society”

Jacqueline Harberink: Well, things are changing with the new generation but it's a niche.

Laura Rysman: What can cities such as Florence do to make an impact? Is there a role for tourism? There's an irony that visitors are mostly buying souvenir trinkets made abroad instead of anything that represents the local craft and tradition.

Sabina Corsini: We ask too much of tourists. When I go to Greece, I don't buy craft; I buy a little model of the Parthenon.

Jacqueline Harberink: But I'd say that 80 per cent of my clients are foreign.

Michele Am Russo: We're still talking about just a niche that's interested in what we make but people are doing more of the research needed to find us after coronavirus, after having to wait to travel. Knowledgeable people are looking for this kind of quality that they don't find elsewhere. They're fed up with the shops on Via Condotti in Rome, which are the same shops in every city and every airport in the world.

Jacqueline Harberink: I've been trying to create a map of artisans making nice things in my area. It's hard to find good ones to connect with but I have clients who are interested in craft and if I can point them to other interesting makers, it's going to help us all to keep doing what we do.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Laura Rysman: Well, we've seen how much the food world has changed with the interest in slow food. We've become so attentive to farmers' markets and where our food comes from, and it's fascinating that people are willing to pay more for their food in these situations because they are assured that they're getting better products. We need a parallel experience with artisans.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: It's important that people can get more first-hand knowledge of craft. I'm happy to be opening an atelier where I can do more direct storytelling about the artisanship behind the products.

Jacqueline Harberink: People are still very moved by witnessing craft. I can see the reaction people have when they watch how I make things; they understand why they should buy from a craftsman rather than Ikea. But I'm not great at the kind of marketing and storytelling you need

to reach out to the world. I'm just a small artisan and I would like to be part of markets but also a network. I would love to be a part of a family of sorts, a collaborative group of artisans.

Laura Rysman: Artigianato e Palazzo is a great example of the elevated sort of market, inspired by farmers' markets, that puts people in contact with artisans and the story behind the craft but it's only once a year in September and only in Florence.

Sabina Corsini: Yes, we need more networks that put artisans in touch with the clients so that they see what the client actually wants and can give their products a contemporary

twist without losing the heritage. They need to pay attention to what's going on in other cities and other countries in terms of style and find ways to make the current taste their own. They can't keep making the same old stuff and expect that a customer today will be interested in those grandmother styles.

Jacqueline Harberink: Homo Faber [The Michelangelo Foundation's craft organisation] hosts an event in Venice that is really successful at presenting things in a modern way. I think it's very important to be in a network like this; it gives you legitimacy. Homo Faber is also doing everything in a very beautiful way and in craft today your goods have to be at a luxury level; otherwise you can't survive.

Laura Rysman: For the public to discover you, it's really key to be part of something larger: a market, a guide or a network. It's hard work finding out which artisans are working – and where.

Jacqueline Harberink: It's important that we look at what's going on in other cities and across the creative fields as well.

Laura Rysman: So artisans need to survey what's happening in fashion and design in order to create something more modern and to have more collaborations with designers. Like Carlo Scarpa in Murano in the 1940s with Venini: his involvement and collaboration there completely updated the glass craft for new tastes. He turned his contemporary eye for colour and form to the technical possibilities the glassworkers of Murano possessed, so they didn't have to make only the same old-fashioned chandeliers they were known for.

FINAL FANTASIES

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: Talking about the food world, there's a correlation between waning artisan numbers and how the hospitality industry can't find workers.

Laura Rysman: The salaries are low, there's no chance to advance and there's no glory in working in restaurants. People only want to be chefs, even though it's such a tough job because it's a really admired position.

Jacqueline Harberink: It's cool to be a chef, especially after *Masterchef* and these other TV shows.

Laura Rysman: Nobody has ever done *Master Waiter*.

Sabina Corsini: What an idea! Let's make a TV show to make it sexy.

Jacqueline Harberink: And we need one about artisans.

Michele Am Russo: Let's take a little of the glory from chefs and give it to artisans. We're missing the connection with our hands today. That's why you see people taking up gardening, knitting and other hobbies. They need the meditation and satisfaction that working with your hands can provide.

Sabina Corsini: And we need the artisans to maintain our heritage. We won't get this back if we lose it.

Laura Rysman: Everyone please try some of the vanilla tart and, before we wrap up, I'd like to hear what your dream change would be to help artisanship flourish.

Sabina Corsini: I would love bureaucracy to stop weighing artisans down because it makes things complicated, expensive and impossible. They can't even have apprentices in their workshops any more because of all the rules, and the technical schools are not enough to ensure that skills are passed down.

Jacqueline Harberink: During lockdown I had the idea that we artisans need to start doing more videos to show people



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1. Host Laura Rysman
2. Amberjack tartare
3. Designer Allison Hoeltzel Savini
4. Tailoring expert Michele Am Russo
5. Waiter keeping The Conversation flowing



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“We're missing the connection with our hands today. That's why you see people taking up gardening, knitting and other hobbies”



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how things are crafted and offer more visual storytelling about the objects. It might inspire young people to become artisans too.

Michele Am Russo: That seems quite realistic to me.

Jacqueline Harberink: It takes some money to do it well.

Michele Am Russo: My fantasy is to educate people to have more awareness about purchasing clothes and objects. I'd like to see everyone buying something that reflects who they are and their own style instead of what they see on the street and on billboards.

Allison Hoeltzel Savini: Related to Michele's idea, it would be to change the mentality of the public so that they would stop focusing on what's new and focus instead on what's made to last. That shift in consumer habits would encourage people to buy wisely and it would give more business to artisans. The dream is something like the farmers' markets that made an alternative way of buying cool.

Jacqueline Harberink: It has to be cool, exactly. It has to be sexy.

Sabina Corsini: Sexy, yes. And slow. Slow buying! Yes, I really think that's going to be the new term. ——— K

The venue
Villa San Michele occupies a 15th-century former monastery with sweeping views over the whole of Florence's Renaissance centre. After recently becoming part of the LVMH luxury group, the hotel has transformed its garden and common areas with Italian architect Luigi Fragola, in collaboration with a group of Italian artisans. The property's petite church now serves as the reception area, with carefully restored antiques. From the cloister lounge to the terrace dining room and new poolside bar, the furnishings have been artfully hand-upholstered, the lighting delicately crafted in bronze and parchment, and the garden seating – by legendary landscape designer Pietro Porcinai – lovingly restored by an ironworking atelier. The hotel's special tour, “The Art of Making”, immerses visitors in the best of Florence's artisans, including the eyewear-maker Antica Occhialeria, box-maker Paolo Carandini and Antonio Gatto and his hats. “Florence is renowned for its high-end craftsmanship,” says Sofia Peluso, general manager at Villa San Michele. “Many small ateliers have been passed down through generation after generation. We share their story of passion, heritage and uniqueness.”

The menu
Amberjack tartare, basil pesto and charcoal cherry tomatoes
—
Mugello potatoes and pasta, mussels and smoked provolone cheese
—
Vanilla shortcrust tart with apricots

Wine
Santa Lucia Franciacorta
Ca' del Bosco Curtefranca