

NAPLES' KING OF THE MADE IN ITALY LABEL

by GOFFREDO LOCATELLI



ITS like turning the leaves of an illustrated fairy tale. You walk through the noisy streets of the typical, densely populated Sanità quarter of old Naples, with its characteristic delapidated buildings, a picturesque market and a hospital, and at the end of Via Fontanelle you find an enormous gate. Beyond it stands an ultramodern glass building, and within reigns the shoe king of Naples and of vast dominions in the rest of the world.

His majesty, a man of actions rather than words, is the sixty-year-old son of a Neapolitan cobbler, and his name is Mario Valentino. His realm spreads outward from five factories in different parts of Italy. Here in Via Fon-

With a shoe, bag and fashion empire that girds the globe, Mario Valentino has diversified his interests, and most notably with the creation of the Aliblu Airways.

tanella he manufactures shoes and bags; at Agnano, outside Naples, men's and women's prêt-à-porter; in Florence small leather goods; in Varese, in the far north, luggage. His chain of retail shops runs the length of the Italian peninsula and then girds the globe: Capri, Venice, Florence, Santa Maria Ligure, Milan, Paris, New York, Margarita Island, Guam, Singapore and Hong Kong. In New York the Mario Valentino shop is at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-first Street in the elegant Olympic Tower building, across the street from Saint Patrick's Cathedral. His goods are also sold through some two hundred shops across the United States.

After high school, Mario Valentino

At left: Mario Valentino and the members of his family. Mario and his wife Bianca are at center front in the photo. The others are, from left to right: Annabella, wife of Mario's son Gianni; Gianni Valentino; Mario's son Enzo; Enzo's wife Cira; Mario's daughter Fortuna. Right: A Mario Valentino original, soft, supple, short and characteristically in leather.

decided to leave the small factory in old Naples where his father produced elegant handmade shoes and set off on his own. His mother encouraged this enterprising spirit with a modest gift of three hundred thousand lire, which he used to start his own workshop — in Via Fontanelle. There, with a handful of workers, he produced twenty pairs of shoes a day. Soon, however, artisanship gave way to art as Valentino's creative impulses urged him toward new, extravagant and bizarre designs.

His first notable creation was an all-pink spike-heeled pump. But it was a pair of sandals made with coral that in 1954, at the Grand Hotel in Rome, made the nabobs of haute couture really sit up and take notice. Valentino's coral sandals were such a stunning success that they were next seen, adorned with a flower and a Cartier bracelet, on a Vogue cover signed by Gay Bourdin. Then famed fashion writer Irene Brin asked to have a pair for the Museum of the History of Footwear in Schönwerd, Switzerland, where they can still be seen today in a glass case along with the shoes worn by Queen Elizabeth II for her coronation. The coral sandals launched a career, and the name Mario Valentino quickly crossed the Atlantic.

"At a clothing show, I met one of the directors of the major U.S. shoe manufacturer I. Miller," recalls Valentino. "He was enthusiastic about my designs and offered me the earth to work in the United States." The Neapolitan designer began his travels to America, which soon became his second home. For several years he designed I. Miller's deluxe collections, and among the famous clients of this inventor of vertiginous spike heels were such



celebrities as Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor. But nostalgia for Naples kept Valentino from becoming American: "At the time, New York was for me a difficult city, and I often felt lonely there. I was impressed by the Americans' extraordinary organizational abilities, but it wasn't enough. I decided to go back. Max Chairman, the real head of I. Miller, slid a blank check into my hand and told me to fill in the sum I wanted to stay. I said no and returned to Naples."

Back in his native city, Valentino continued on the road to success. His women's shoes of ultrasoft nappa or woven leathers, his low heels, his spike heels, and bags to match, enchanted customers. He also tried his hand at

men's clothing and turned thin, soft leathers into luxurious trousers and jackets. Two women helped Valentino along the road to the high-fashion shows and international fame — his wife Bianca and his daughter Fortuna. "My wife," says Valentino, "is a perfectionist, the right person for the many responsibilities that I have given her at the Agnano factory. Fortuna works here in Via Fontanelle and sees to the shoes and bags." His sons Enzo and Gianni work with him too. Gianni is in charge of clothing and takes care of relations with the Armani designers (women's line) and the French designer Claude Montana (sportswear and sweaters). Enzo is business manager.



TODAY Mario Valentino has a solid company which provides employment for five hundred people, exports ninety percent of its production and, in 1986, invoiced 81.6 billion lire (about \$63 million). The company produces 150 million pairs of shoes a year and 300,000 belts and bags a month, and the Mario Valentino label appears on ties and scarves, bathing suits and umbrellas as well. Within two years the company expects to be quoted on the

Milan Stock exchange. Not even the tempest of currency fluctuations that has recently shaken the industrialized world has managed to make the Valentino empire waver.

With the growth of the last years, the Neapolitan industrialist has diversified his interests. Together with another successful entrepreneur, Eugenio Buontempo, Valentino formed Aliblu Airways, a regional airline that already this year expects to carry twenty

thousand passengers. Aliblu, which has bought four Jetstream 31 18-seaters from British Aerospace for 17 billion lire (\$13 million), will launch a series of national and international connections on June 16: Rimini-Milan Linate, Naples-Brindisi, Brindisi-Catania, Brindisi-Corfu, Milan-Hannover, Milan-Luxembourg, Milan-Basel, Naples-Marseille. Another wave of new routes will be inaugurated on September 15: Rimini-Rome, Rome-Foggia, Naples-Bari, Fog-

gia-Naples, Bari-Palermo. Finally, on October 1, Pescara-Naples, Naples-Reggio Calabria, Turin-Bologna, Bologna-Pescara, Bologna-Turin, and Lyon-Turin will join the roster. The airline will be based at Naples' Capodichino airport, and the national airline ATI will undertake the maintenance. The peregrine falcon has been adopted as the company emblem.

Another venture with Buontempo is the purchase of fifty percent of the

Helene Curtis cosmetics company, which had been in receivership as a result of financial difficulties. Valentino and Buontempo already have a plan for getting the company back on its feet — guaranteeing employment for one hundred and fifty into the bargain — and have stipulated an agreement to that effect with the American company that owns the trademark. In addition, Valentino has interests in financial companies and has invested in tourist marinas.

Here above: The unmistakable Mario Valentino flair in leather fashions for both men and women is seen in these creations from his 1987 spring collection. Opposite: Patent leather miniskirts and elegant high-heeled shoes was a striking, leggy combination that Valentino featured in his 1985 fall collection.



Aliblu airways S.p.A.

His love for Naples, attested to by his commitment to the preservation of the city's artistic heritage, was demonstrated last year by his sponsorship of the restoration of precious 16th-century frescoes in the Convent of Santa Chiara. He is now involved in the commemorative festival for the 250th anniversary of the city's historic opera

house, the celebrated Teatro San Carlo.

Last February the company opened a new shop in the historic center of Zurich, as well as two more franchised shops in Hong Kong, two in Singapore and six on Taiwan. Now Valentino is looking toward South Korea, where the next Olympic Games are scheduled to be held. "It's a virgin market with great

Map of the national and international routes of the newly formed Aliblu Airways, which are scheduled to be inaugurated between June 16 and October 1 of this year. The newborn airline, a Mario Valentino and Eugenio Buontempo venture, is expected to have carried twenty thousand passengers by the end of 1987.

prospects. In twenty years Korea will be like the Japan of today. It's taken me twenty years to make it in Japan. In Korea, with the Olympics, I believe that we will be able to invoice at least twenty billion lire." But is it not just exactly from the Far East that all the cheap imitations come? Is Valentino worried? "No," he says, "the imitations are so different from the pieces we make that they almost help us. I appeal to a particular public and have no direct competitors. On the other hand, Italian taste, refinement, and design in the high fashion sector continue to be world winners."

Security, ability, optimism — this Neapolitan with the lean, angular face has it all. He even became a Cavaliere del Lavoro, or Knight of Labor, a few years ago, thus achieving the recognition of the Italian government for his contributions to his country's economy. To what does he owe his success?

"In general," Valentino explains, "I can say that success is a mixture of contentment and precision. Without these two ingredients, and especially without precision, I would never have attained success. Today, fortunately, I work only nine hours a day. I'm an optimist and I see a rosy future, with lots of companies all on center stage. I foresee opening many new shops all over the world. But the future is, above all, my children. The decisions will depend on them. My father did the same with me." □