

CLASSIC DRIVER

The leather-workers of Tolentino: A visit to Poltrona Frau

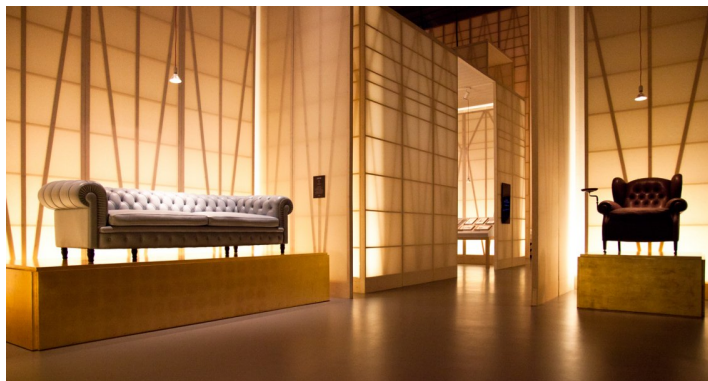
Lead

From Ferraris to the EU Parliament - many of the most exclusive places in the world offer leather seating by Poltrona Frau. But what is really behind the Italian name on some of the world's finest furniture? We were curious - and so we headed for Tolentino... in a Ferrari FF.

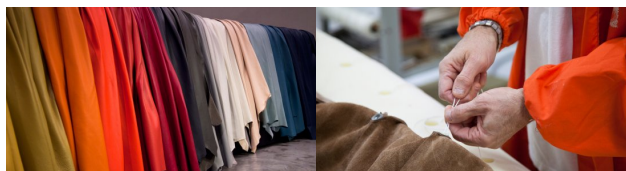
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Sometimes, Italy can be like this: dark, leaden skies over the Adriatic Sea, pouring rain and endless construction sites. For a 660-horsepower Ferrari, these conditions are hardly ideal, but our reasons for driving one today are not to test its acceleration. Instead, we aim to revel in its interior - the leather in particular - and that can be quite happily achieved at relatively low speeds. Ah, the deep, cognac-coloured brown; the impression of natural warmth when you slide your fingers over the surfaces and seams; the strong, spicy scent. This is leather of particular sensuality, the sort that is only found in Italy. It comes from Poltrona Frau in Tolentino on the Adriatic coast, an hour south of Ancona - and all the world desires it.

From lounge chairs to helicopters



In 1912, a leather workshop was established in Turin by Sardinian-born Renzo Frau, a workshop that produced such gorgeous, classical items of furniture that 100 years later the same designs are still on sale. Under the name of Poltrona Frau - poltrona is the Italian word for armchair - numerous design icons were born. In the 1960s, the company began to commission renowned designers to bring fresh ideas on board: famous names such as Gio Ponti, Marco Zanuso and Ferdinand A. Porsche designed contemporary seating, starting a tradition that continues to this day. In the last few days alone, an aluminium chair created by VW designer Walter de Silva was unveiled.



But Poltrona Frau is no longer confined to the living rooms of the rich and famous, with ever-larger, ever-more daring projects. Since the 1990s, the leather design house and furniture-maker has been working with architects such as Renzo Piano, Santiago Calatrava and Herzog & de Meuron, with high-profile results. Hence visitors to the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles now sit on Poltrona Frau seating, as do the members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. By investing in material research and development, Poltrona Frau had made its leather finer and more durable than ever, until the company is now considered one of the best leather-processing manufacturers in the world. Meanwhile, planes, helicopters, yachts and luxury trains are equipped with beautiful, long-lasting leather from Tolentino. And, of course, there are the cars.

'Made in Italy'



In 1984, the Ferrari-engined Lancia Thema 8:32 acquired a sumptuous leather interior by Poltrona Frau, a feature which became a selling point for the luxury automobile. But this was just the start. In 1998, Poltrona Frau was asked to upholster its first series production Ferrari, the elegant 456M, shortly followed by the 550 Maranello. When, in 2000, the prolific British company Connolly Leather ceased production, it opened up a whole new world of opportunity for the leather-workers of Tolentino: Lancia, Fiat, Maserati, Alfa Romeo, BMW, Mercedes, Jaguar, Land Rover and Bugatti – suddenly, all were being finished in leather by Poltrona Frau. VW today offers its Phaeton to the Chinese market with a ‘Made in Italy’ optional extra, which includes a matching armchair for each new customer. And Audi is about to release a limited edition of 50 examples of the A8 with exclusive Poltrona Frau leather.



What’s more, anyone who buys a current Ferrari will find themselves sitting on Poltrona Frau's luxury leather. The close cooperation between the two companies is no coincidence – as a child, Luca di Montezemolo played on a Chesterfield sofa ‘race car’ and in 2003 took over the Poltrona Frau Group, which incorporates other Italian design brands such as Cassina and Cappellini.

Bear in mind that processing leather is anything but simple: the Italian hides are tanned according to strict quality standards, and split, dyed and cut without losing any of the leather’s natural feel. Compared with leather chairs and sofas, which are processed in the same workshops, car leather needs to be significantly stronger and thicker. In Poltrona Frau’s own, in-house laboratory, the leather is also put through endless ‘stress tests’, ensuring that even after 200,000 movements and 300 hours of sunlight, the leather remains colourfast and wrinkle-free.

A question of individuality



The secret of the success of Poltrona Frau, however, lies in understanding the mystery of individuality: every Ferrari FF has the same technical specifications, the same silhouette – but its unique personality comes from the detail. Which leather, which tanning process, what colour, what thread will the customer choose? Even the stitch density of the seams can be specified in Poltrona Frau's individualisation department 'Interiors in Motion' – and, if you still fail to find something you like, you can (as one Japanese customer did) order a leather interior tailor-made to match your beloved crocodile-leather slippers. "In Italy, there are many companies that can be compared with Ferrari," said Luca di Montezemolo recently. "They might not appear in the headlines and in the news, but the talent of their employees, the level of their craftsmanship and their exclusivity is on a similar level. One such company is Poltrona Frau."

Photos: Jan Baedeker

Gallery

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