

A detail of a vintage Louis Vuitton trunk; depending on its size, from 900 to 1,000 brass nails, hammered by hand, are used in the construction of a hard-sided travel trunk.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF LOUIS VUITTON

# The Culture of Vuitton

*As the legendary fashion label opens one of its largest US boutiques at Aventura, we take an exclusive, behind-the-scenes look at the art and craft that remain at the heart of the house Louis built.*

By Laurie Brookins

Patrick-Louis Vuitton's boyhood sounds like the beau ideal, dotted with tales of turning the workshops of his family's business into an impromptu playground, of etiquette-laced lunches with his grandmother on Thursday afternoons—or of accidentally breaking a window thanks to the errant throw of a ball. Could it be he was something of a troublemaker? Vuitton smiles at the memory as he sits just a few yards from that same window, his anecdote all the more notable because it happens to be a museum-quality example of Art Nouveau stained glass. It's among the details that qualify the house and its adjoining workshops as among the most exalted in France.

Welcome to Asnières, a bustling suburb in the northwest section of Paris, considered the French countryside when Louis Vuitton settled here 154 years ago; its landscapes and idyllic lifestyle along the Seine were captured by Seurat and Van Gogh in fanciful paintings. It was precisely this close proximity to the river that Vuitton found so attractive: He transported the wood for his trunks via this waterway, and as the decades passed and the sprawl of Paris crept ever closer to his doorstep, Vuitton saw no need to move. Indeed, if there is any element that gets to the essence of Louis Vuitton, the man and the brand, it's the

steadfast belief that some things should remain exactly as he envisioned them, from the type of wood used in his trunks—poplar, chosen because it's extremely flexible—to the rhythmic sounds of *tic, tic, tic* that fill one corner of the workshop as a quartet of craftsmen tap brass nails, gauged only by the eye yet always equally spaced, through leather and coated canvas into wood.

Like his father, Claude-Louis, grandfather, Gaston-Louis, and other family members before him, Patrick has carried the banner of Vuitton pride even as he's established his own unique corner of the label's luxe universe. As both an ambassador of the house and the head of Special Orders, he travels the world, working with clients to design custom trunks destined to hold items deemed precious enough that only one-of-a-kind housing, swathed in a Vuitton covering, will do. Throughout his 37-year tenure, he has fielded a vast range of requests, from a case to hold a pair of Champagne glasses—the client didn't care for the glasses used in her preferred airline's first-class cabin—to a trunk fitted with solar panels so its owner could access a fully charged laptop and WiFi no matter where he was on the planet. What special-order clients have in common, Patrick says, is “the transportation of a specific belonging combined with a sense of luxury,” regardless of whether they hail from Tokyo, Geneva, Moscow—or, thanks to Vuitton's latest store opening, Miami.



Patrick-Louis Vuitton, great-great-grandson of the house's founder and the head of the label's Special Orders program.

A rendering of the just-opened Louis Vuitton Maison Aventura.



On February 2, Louis Vuitton opened its new Aventura boutique, a two-story statement of sophistication that puts a particular spotlight on handcraft. Designed by Peter Marino (the eye behind many sumptuous Vuitton spaces), Maison Aventura, as it has been dubbed, is among the brand's largest US stores, its second freestanding store in Miami, and offers a complete spectrum of covetable Vuitton, ranging from ready-to-wear and those iconic trunks to watches and jewelry, leather goods, and accessories—all set against Marino's plush surroundings of amber and onyx, stainless steel and glass, with a grand staircase featuring rails wrapped in the label's nomad leather. But the focus is undeniably on a celebration of Louis Vuitton's artisans, seen in four unique offerings brought together under one roof for the first time in the US: the Haute Maroquinerie (the term translates to "high leather goods") program of bespoke, personalized handbags; the Made to Order custom-footwear program for men, the only store in the US to offer the service; the Haute Joaillerie cases intended to house the one-of-a-kind "high" jewels that have rarely found their way to Miami; and, of course, the ability to order a custom trunk that will result in not one but two heirlooms: the treasured case and the watercolor sketch that arises from the initial conversations, realized by the hand of a Vuitton himself.

**Y**ou'll occasionally see Patrick in this Aventura boutique, one of many stops on his far-flung itinerary, and with him he carries a custom Vuitton case containing watercolors, papers, and pens used to sketch for clients—a necessary step to process the order. Patrick built this trunk himself, having entered the Vuitton apprenticeship program at Asnières at the age of 22. (The Asnières workshops, although the most high-profile, comprise only one of 12 such spaces throughout France.) He started in the ground-floor carpentry room before learning other steps, such as how to double-stitch the heavy cotton that serves as a case's hinge (witnessing this causes one to realize that you only see metal hinges on larger Vuitton trunks), on through to the precise placement of a monogram canvas and the shine on the LV-embossed lock.

*Designed by Peter Marino, Maison Aventura is undeniably a celebration of Louis Vuitton's artisans, seen in four unique offerings brought together under one roof for the first time in the US.*

Each member of the Vuitton family has apprenticed at Asnières and must be able to make a trunk from start to finish, Patrick explains, adding that he feels "a strong responsibility to produce luggage that is just as good as my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather." How long might an apprenticeship take? "The average craftsman, anywhere from 10 to 15 years," he says. The education is that lengthy, he notes, "because you must master all the savoir faire: the wood, the leather, the stitching" before you are qualified to produce trunks for sale. Indeed, the exactitude exhibited throughout the workshops is nothing less than inspiring: Flowers on the monogram canvas always match up on a seam, for example, while "LV" is shown only whole because "you never cut through Louis Vuitton." Meanwhile, only those artisans who have demonstrated the most talent are entrusted with custom trunks: "With each special-order project, you have to reconsider your savoir faire, because each project is a new challenge," Patrick says.

Just yards away from trunk production, you'll find the Haute Maroquinerie program. Clients can select from five handbag shapes (three icons of the house—Lockit, Triangle, and Noé—and two newer

shapes, Neo Steamer and Berlingot) and create a highly personalized statement. Different leather types and colors allow for contrasting flaps and handles if so desired, as do different tones and finishes of the hardware. Every Haute Maroquinerie bag passes through the hands of several artisans, such as the cutting of the leather or the crafting of a bag handle, the hand-stitching of its pieces to perfect every detail, or the edge-dyeing that both finishes a bag and protects it from humidity. It can take up to 3,000 steps to craft a Haute Maroquinerie bag, which is why it could take up to six months to complete just one.

Stepping outside the atelier, you can't help but notice the high walls surrounding both the workshops and the Vuitton house. (No one has lived in the home since 1979; it's now used as offices, a reception area, and, soon, a museum.) As the Paris environs encroach on the solitude of these spaces, Patrick explains the importance of remaining in Asnières. "Of course, we could go anywhere, but we would have to bring the craftsmen as well," he says. "For us it's about the people; they are the guarantors of our savoir faire. They put perfection into creation that you just don't find anywhere else."



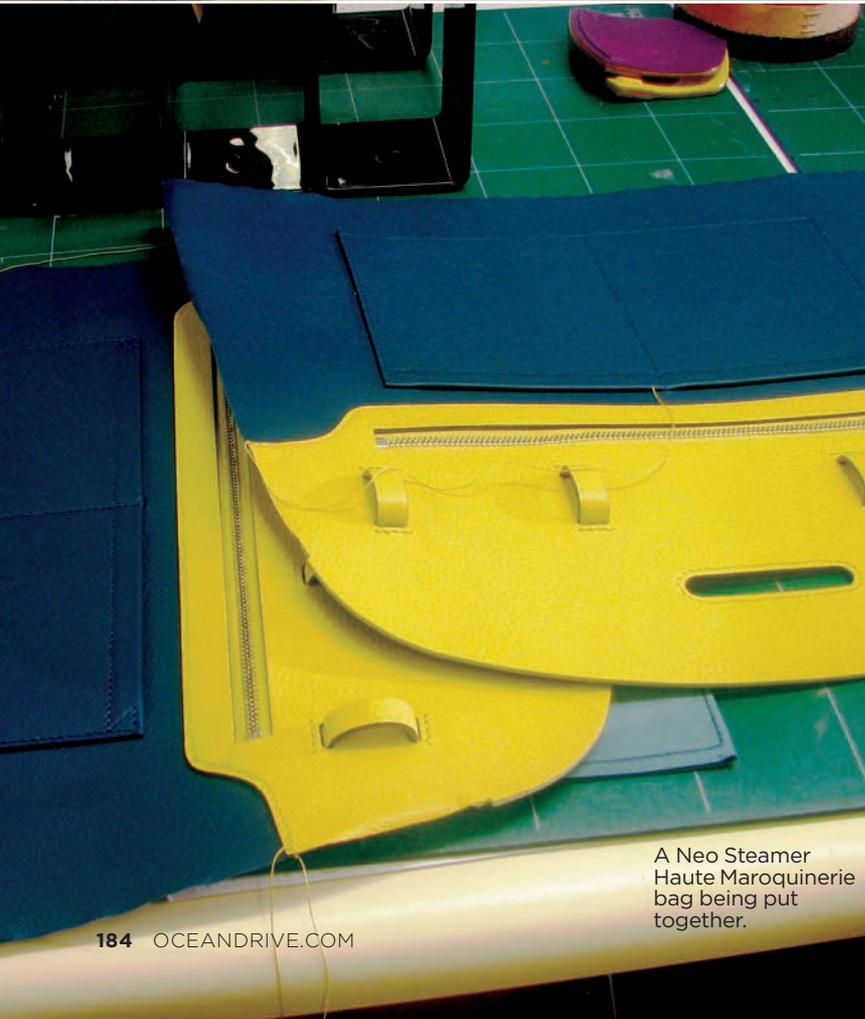
A hat box being crafted in the Asnières workshops.



Master shoemaker Roberto Bottoni in his Made to Order atelier.



Made to Order shoes in the midst of construction.



A Neo Steamer Haute Maroquinerie bag being put together.



Less than 30 minutes away, another Vuitton workshop explores the art of working in its latest métier: gems. In 2012, the label opened its first dedicated jewelry boutique in an 18th-century townhouse at 23 Place Vendôme; the famed square is something of a jewel itself in the heart of Paris, with Boucheron, Chaumet, and Van Cleef & Arpels among Vuitton's neighbors. Like Maison Aventura, Peter Marino also designed this store, choosing luscious neutral tones—tobacco-colored leather walls mixed with golden-hued rosewood paneling—that serve as a rich backdrop for the brilliant pieces displayed under glass.

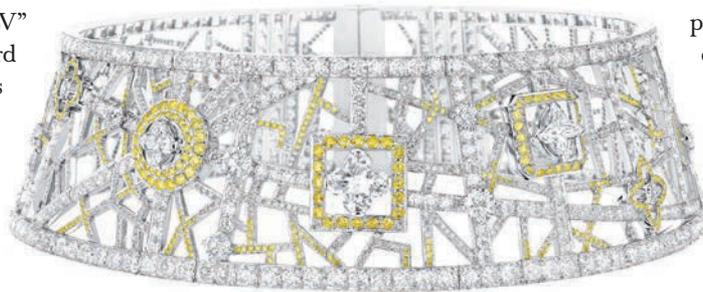
In Vuitton's watches and high jewelry, you again see the codes of the house, as monogram flowers are interpreted in a pair of patented "LV" floral diamond cuts, while its checkerboard Damier pattern adorns the face of a status watch. Among the high-jewelry pieces, a standout is a white- and yellow-diamond choker, its graphic design seemingly abstract, until you realize the artisans have actually replicated the Paris street map, with LV diamonds where monuments would be.

Upstairs, jewelry artisans occupy a rabbit warren of rooms with vaulted ceilings, as skylights and high, attic-like windows allow the workshops to be flooded with afternoon sun. "For jewelry, it's all about light, and in high jewelry, everything is dictated by the stones," explains Hamdi Chatti, Louis Vuitton's director of fine jewelry and watches. Stones are indeed the stars here, with one brightly lit top-floor space dedicated to housing, cutting, and polishing gems painstakingly sought from Russia, Africa, Brazil, Colombia, and points beyond. Here, emeralds, pink and white diamonds, mandarin garnets, and a veritable rainbow of others await their moment to shine in a jewelry design. When Vuitton execs were seeking the ideal location for the boutique and workshop, Chatti says a notation on the Place Vendôme lease indicated "remains" in the upstairs rooms. Among the castoffs, they discovered jewelry benches from a long-ago workshop. Chatti took it as a sign they had chosen the right space and had the benches refurbished for use today.

Vuitton once partnered with outside workshops to create its pieces, but no longer, Chatti

says. "You cannot ask a designer to design, and then send the design out and have it made elsewhere, because it's not the same mood; it's not the same spirit," he says. "The designer and the workshop have to work together, because everything is about this beautiful stone. Our customer understands that. It requires patience and it requires passion because it's a long process. But at the same time, there are beautiful surprises."

About 20 miles west of Venice, the town of Fiesso d'Artico possesses little of the magic and majesty of its romantic neighbor, and yet this comparatively quiet little hamlet enjoys a history as rich in craft as that of the glassmakers of Murano or silk weavers for Mariano Fortuny. It is in this part of Italy where "the culture of the shoe" was born and



*In Vuitton's high jewelry, you again see the codes of the house, with monogram flowers interpreted in diamonds, or the checkerboard Damier pattern adorning a watch.*

the artistry of shoemaking was perfected. For centuries, the privileged classes and royalty throughout Europe have trekked here to order handmade shoes to befit their noble feet.

It's no accident, then, that here you'll find Manufacture de Souliers Louis Vuitton, the shoe workshops, based in Fiesso d'Artico since 2001 (the label added shoes to its repertoire in 1998). "It's the birthplace of luxury shoes," explains Serge Alfandary, the director of the label's footwear division. "Back in the 13th century, the Riviera del Brenta's craftsmen were making shoes for the Venetian aristocracy. There is, in this area, the perfect blend of centuries-old savoir faire and exceptional handcraft."

Within a state-of-the-art building completed in 2009—without coincidence, it's shaped something like a shoe box—Vuitton houses four footwear workshops: Alma, the collective name for the

brand's women's shoes; Taïga, the leather-soled men's collections; Nomade, where artisans hand-stitch rubber-soled moccasins for men and women; and Speedy, which produces men's and women's sneakers. Touring this quartet of workrooms, it's notable how many steps remain performed by hand, with Speedy the only workshop where some tasks are completed by robotic machines.

In a prominent corner of Taïga, you'll find master shoemaker Roberto Bottoni. For four decades, Bottoni has crafted bespoke shoes in this region for a variety of manufacturers before agreeing to come in-house at Vuitton; if you order a pair of Made to Order men's shoes at Maison Aventura, likely they will be made by Bottoni. "The skills and talent of this gentleman who crafts the Made to Order shoes have to be part of what our workshops represent: expertise, savoir faire, and passion for beautiful goods," Alfandary notes.

Bottoni's workspace served as inspiration for the new Maison Aventura, complete with the full breadth of men's sizes, each in its own shoe drawer, a detail meant to evoke the cubbies historically found in Vuitton trunks. Three lines, six models, and 24 constructions are available in Made to Order, and here you'll also find a selection of leathers, sole treatments, patinas, hardware, and stitching. The choices result in more than 3,000 possible combina-

tions, and as an added service, clients can select a matching belt (which is produced in Spain). Made to Order shoes can be finished with your initials embossed inside, while after-sales service ensures their status as a long-term investment shoe. Ultimately, it's the hand of Bottoni that's essential to the process, says Alfandary: "The most important thing remains keeping the human touch."

Back in Asnières, a descendant of Louis Vuitton not only understands this idea more than most, he's also confident such an attitude will continue with future generations: Patrick has two grandsons, both of whom have exhibited a keen interest in the watercolor case he built from start to finish. Once again he smiles as he speaks of the Vuitton métier, employing a favorite phrase used yesterday, today, and in all likelihood tomorrow: "Here, everything is possible." **OD**

TOP: Inspired by a Paris street map, this high-jewelry necklace is set with more than 1,200 white and yellow diamonds, including one 3.05-carat LV diamond.