

HOW TO TURN HEADS

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PHOTOGRAPHS Jérôme Galland

Block stands are vital tools for milliners who produce the sculpted hats seen on haute couture runways – but little is known about these intriguing wooden creations. *Formier* Lorenzo Ré has magic in his hands

Not far from the lively Bourse quarter of Paris, there is a street where cars never go. Once called Le Petit Chemin Herbu (the little grassy path), it retains an air of relative tranquillity. On this street, the big stone arch and double portal in sculpted wood outside one building signal an eighteenth-century aristocratic residence. Inside lies the workshop of a most unusual artisan, an aristocrat in his domain: Lorenzo Ré. We know everything, or nearly everything, about the milliner (the person who makes or sells hats). We know next to nothing about the *formier*, or block-maker, without whose contribution the milliner would be like a knife without a handle. For it is the formier





who sculpts the wooden block on which the milliner brings his or her creation into being. We are, of course, talking about traditional hat making here – a centuries-old craft – and not industrial production, which has no time for such subtleties.

It was his love of wood that brought Lorenzo Ré to sculpture. Born in Piacenza, Italy, his interest in his vocation was first ignited at the age of 10, when he found himself in a country carpenter's workshop. The young boy sensed the magic of the place, the smell of wood as warm and wholesome as bread baking in the oven. His eyes sparkling like the marveling child he has never ceased to be, Lorenzo remembers, "He was just a rural carpenter who made mainly carts and wheelbarrows, barrels, and even crates for grapes!"

Two years later, Lorenzo started taking drawing lessons on Saturdays. Sculpture soon followed. Eventually, he was admitted to the Visconti di Modrone vocational school in Grazzano Visconti, located in the majestic outbuildings of a medieval *castello*. As a child, the great film director Luchino Visconti stayed in this castle, which had been rebuilt from its ruins by his father, Giuseppe Visconti di Modrone, Duke of Grazzano Visconti, who set up artistic workshops there specializing in wrought iron and sculpted wood.

When Lorenzo left this remarkable school, he mastered the finest profession in the world: sculpting in wood. Hats came into his life by chance, when on holiday in Paris. Again, this new passion started with a visit to a workshop: that of his uncle, a formier. This was the early 1970s, and Lorenzo was 19. He was seduced by what he witnessed and this time decided to spend two or three months working there. He had no inkling that this workshop, founded by his uncle in 1962, would one day be his own, let alone that he would spend his working life there. Back in the 1960s there were maybe eight formiers working in the quarter, nearly all of them Italian, along with other artisans in the hat making business. This particular workshop was previously where feathers were dyed for use on hats, back at the turn of the twentieth century.

A big glass roof lights the two rooms; there are no windows. In one room stand the circular saw, the press, and the thick planks of untreated wood that Lorenzo will cut into blocks. In the other, the sculptural work is done on a workbench that is so pitted and grooved from all the blows, scratches, and notches inflicted on it over the decades that it looks like a medieval relic.

The instructions Lorenzo receives from his clients about the type of block they want him to make can range from drawings of intricate precision to simple

sketches, or sometimes less clear details. He still chuckles about the time an American customer phoned: "I want something like this, with that and that." Perhaps a sketch, he suggested. "No use, I draw badly." Or when a big Parisian couture house asked him to sculpt a series of figures, inspired by the art of a specific African people, around a headpiece. Again, with no sketches to go on, he had to research in the library. Reproduced in the pages of a glossy magazine, this unique creation was seen all around the world.

Lead times are often very short, and as the couture shows near, the candle gets burned at both ends. Lorenzo collaborates regularly with Philip Treacy,



milliner to the stars and star of milliners. "Whenever I get a box from Philip Treacy, I wonder what's inside." Treacy, based in London, is renowned for his extravagant imagination. For him, Lorenzo made what is surely one of the biggest blocks ever: a colossus weighing in at 132 pounds, which took 17 days to create. Most of the hats worn at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton were made on blocks from his workshop.

Working from sketches, Lucie, Lorenzo's wife, fashions a hat prototype in rice straw, using a technique known as *sparterie*. This fine rice fiber is produced and woven by hand in Japan, in what is a costly and now rarely used process. The straw is first moistened, and then shaped using a red-hot iron. This prototype is what Lorenzo uses to create his blocks. In a corner you

Lorenzo Ré creates a great number of hat blocks in his Paris workshop (above), where he works with his wife, Lucie. Opposite: he uses special tools to fashion designs that are used for top hats, elaborate couture pieces, and a leather motorbike helmet (page 27), exhibited in London during the 1970s



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will see sparteries waiting to serve as models for milliners. They are as light as birds, ready to take wing.

Although the blocks for making caps and simple hats can be made from one piece of wood, anything for wide-brimmed hats requires two or more, which are stuck together in a screw-tightened press and left to dry for 24 hours. The reason for this is simple, says Lorenzo: "A single block of wood would split." More complex pieces can take quite a few more parts.

The resulting cube of wood is moved under the blade by deft, expert hands to produce a cylinder. But that is only the artisan's first step. Having transferred the general form of the prototype onto the wood by means of a pencil and compass, he again places the block under the blade and works it closer to the final form. This first phase calls for the nimble virtuosity of a superior instrumentalist, except that in this particular case the slightest fumble could lead not to a sour note but to the loss of a finger.

It comes as a bit of a relief to go from the room dominated by this tall, strident machine, as fearsome as a guillotine, to the sculptor's studio. To refine his work, Lorenzo has about a hundred gouges, chisels,

and burins lined up on a big workbench, like a little army ready to do battle. He may apply them by striking with a wooden or rubber hammer, as required, but in most cases, the sculptor hits and drives the tool with the palm of his hand. Wood is a fragile material and must be treated with respect. For hat blocks Lorenzo uses lime wood, which has a fine-grained texture that is both tender and tough. For other pieces that he makes, such as torsos, presentation stands, and figures, his preference is for samba, an exotic wood that grows in sandy soil. Samba fibers imprison tiny grains of silica that make blades blunt: hence the little whetstone that the sculptor keeps handy on a shelf nearby, ready for the humble task of sharpening them. Only one producer of these magnificent steel tools remains in Paris. After 30 years of use and sharpening, they have been worn down to half their length.

Once sculpted, the form is smoothed with a rasp and sandpaper and, after dusting, is ready for delivery. The wood will be finished simply with a coat of varnish or paint before the milliner is able to "shape" the cone of felt that has been steamed to make it malleable. This felt model is fixed around the block using string and pins; both are then placed in a drying oven. Pricked by thousands of pins and after all those spells in the drying oven, these handsome lime wood models have a life span of between 20 and 40 years. It takes two days to make a simple form but as long as several weeks for the more complex ones with removable parts.

In an age when a mass-produced hat costs less than you would pay for the felt used for the milliner's cone alone, only the big luxury designers and hat makers can afford these traditional wooden forms. Lorenzo's studio works with some of the biggest names in haute couture, from Chanel to Givenchy to Christian Dior, and with milliners all around the world. Where his uncle led a team of four or five employees, Lorenzo is the only formier in his studio. Lucie, his wife, handles customer relations, orders, and, of course, makes the sparteries. One by one, the few remaining formiers in Paris have retired and closed their workshops. Is this rare profession doomed to disappear? Lorenzo proudly shows us the small wooden objects that his grandson has just made in the workshop. Will this young boy, who has fallen in love with wood, as Lorenzo himself did, one day take up the reins? He is only 10 years old. But then, so was Lorenzo when he felt the stirring of his own vocation. ❖

Translated by Charles Penwarden

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Above: Lorenzo at work. To render the delicate lime wood requires a steady, patient hand and steel tools that are only obtainable from one producer in Paris. Opposite: this graceful two-color bust, used as a display for hats and scarves, is made from lime wood and mahogany