

BVLGARI and the Apotheosis of Bling

The Bulgari family trace their professional background to Greek silversmiths named Boulgaris. They lived and worked in a mountain village near Greece's northwestern border, in an area controlled by Ottoman Turks. The village was famous for its silversmiths, who manufactured belts, buckles, buttons, earrings, sword sheaths, and cartridge belts. In the 1860s, and '70s, however, this was a politically unstable area; it was unsafe. The future founder of the Bulgari luxury goods business, Sotirios (1857-1932), the only surviving child out of eleven children, thus grew up in difficult circumstances. Bandits, for example, were everywhere. Once, as a boy, taking a shortcut in the mountains, Sotirios himself was robbed of everything he had, even his clothes! Later, transporting silverware in dangerous areas, he needed the help of Turkish gendarmes.

What's more, in the 1870s, local Christians were rising up in rebellion against the Turks. During this conflict, Sotirios's hometown was burned down. The family shop was destroyed. Sotirios and his father, Georgis, had to begin a wandering life, selling their wares wherever they could. Finally, around 1877, Georgis emigrated to the island of Corfu with Sotirios; Mrs. Boulgaris joined them later.

In the autumn of 1880, the 23-year-old Sotirios left home with a business partner to seek his fortune. They journeyed to Naples, where they produced necklaces, bracelets, buckles and belts. Eventually they were able to open a small shop. But then that shop was burglarized! So they went to Rome, where once again they had to work their way up from nothing. At one point they were given space in a sponge shop to sell their own handmade buckles, buttons, and other items. Fortunately, their skills and products were highly valued, and soon they had their own shop. But the partners quarreled. In the spring of 1884, Sotirios set up his own shop in Rome; ten years later he established another. He also opened subsidiaries in other cities and fashionable resorts, such as St. Moritz, San Remo, Naples, Bellagio, and Lucerne. And as part of doing business in Italy, he eventually italianized his name to Sotirio Bulgari. The ancient Roman capital "V" for "U" in the distinctive logo came much later.

By 1905, Sotirio had acquired still better premises in Rome, for a new shop he named "The Old Curiosity Shop" after Charles Dickens's novel. Sotirio was clearly making an effort to attract rich American and British tourists, as well as wealthy Europeans. American patronage became even more important after World War I.

Already by 1905 Sotirio was trading a wide range of goods: not only silver artifacts but antiques, jewels, and "curiosities" (in other words, bric-a-brac). But then he decided to specialize in jewelry and antique silver. So he sold off, or closed, many