

## Salvatore Ferragamo and the Dreams of a Shoemaker

At an anatomy class at the UCLA night school, a young foreign student named Salvatore kept peppering the professor with questions about the human skeleton, even after the class had moved on to other topics. The professor asked, “Why are you so interested in the skeleton?” Salvatore replied, “I am a shoemaker and I am interested in the feet.” The professor said, “My dear boy, this is a University class where you are supposed to use your head, not your feet.” Everyone laughed; Salvatore blushed.

But the professor then helped Salvatore, even lending the young man some books. Salvatore studied the skeleton, the muscles, the movement of the human body. He realized that when people walk, their shifting weight falls on the arch of the foot, so he made a lifelong study of the arch. He developed his own system for measuring feet and hand-crafting shoes. He made innovative and elegant shoes that were actually comfortable to wear.

Style and comfort. Both principles mattered to Salvatore Ferragamo (1898-1960), throughout his career as a shoemaker. He always dreamed of “the perfect fit.” But achieving that—not to mention an incredible level of craftsmanship and artistry—took effort as well as genius.

Born in a village near Naples, the 11th of 14 children, Salvatore had known what he wanted to do from the age of four. At nine years of age he was apprenticed to a cobbler in Naples; at age 12 he opened up his own shop in his home village, employing two men as assistants. When he was 16 years old he emigrated to America to join some of his brothers: first in Boston, then in Santa Barbara, California. Santa Barbara was home to the booming film industry before it moved to Hollywood. Salvatore made footgear, especially cowboy boots, for the movies, becoming famous for the shoes and sandals he made for Cecil B. DeMille’s 1923 Hollywood blockbuster, *The Ten Commandments*. Then the stars of these pictures, such as Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Gloria Swanson, came to young Salvatore to have him make their own shoes. When the film industry moved to Hollywood, Salvatore followed it there, as “shoemaker to the stars.” Later he established himself in Italy, and worldwide.

Early on, Salvatore’s extraordinary skills and charming manner won him both customers and friends. Yet he was nagged by the realization that although his shoes were stylish, they were not consistently comfortable. He felt that the traditional way of measuring feet, and then translating those measurements into shoes that fit, was