

*Demand for bespoke fashion still has a place in a changing city*

# Vienna Made to Measure

by *Duncan J. D. Smith*

Vienna's retail landscape is changing rapidly, especially around Graben, Kohlmarkt, and Kärntnerstrasse. Venerable old stores, such as the clothier Braun & Co. and photographer Siegfried Wachtl, have recently been ousted by global brands. Perhaps in a decade or so the city centre will be no different to that of any other other European capital?

But all is not lost. In amongst Gucci, Cartier and H&M there are still some traditional family firms, where for over a century hand-crafted suits, hats and shoes have been made for the sartorially select.

## Fit for a Sultan

A fine example is Knize at Graben 13, which has been tailoring bespoke men's suits for over one hundred and fifty years. The company was established in 1858 by the Czech tailor Josef Knize. The present shop was opened in 1913, its marble frontage and panelled interior a pristine example of the work of Austrian modernist architect Adolf Loos.

The intriguing crests either side of the name (one emblazoned with a crescent moon, the other with a scimitar-wielding lion) recall that Knize once supplied dress uniforms to the Sultan of Turkey and the Shah of Iran respectively. And while the name of Knize may no longer pack the same punch as Savile Row, the end result is more than a match for any of the custom suit made in Mayfair. Knize produces around a hundred each year, using cloth imported from Italy and England, each suit taking ten days and seven thousand stitches to make. A thousand more are made-to-measure an-

nually from a standard-sized base pattern. Not for the faint-hearted the best of them sell for around five thousand Euros each.

## Sixty hours of labour

Around the corner at Bräunerstrasse 4 is one of Vienna's oldest bespoke companies. Rudolf Scheer & Söhne have been making shoes since 1816, and from 1878 onwards some were worn by the emperor himself. Such royal and imperial patronage explains why the phrase K. u K. Hof-Schumacher is proudly displayed in gilt lettering on the frontage. In the window below are displayed row upon row of wooden forms known as lasts, around which hand-crafted shoes are created.

The shop appears much as it must have a hundred years ago, with its elegant ground floor waiting room in which one could hear a pin drop. Around the wall are pairs of shoes and boots, their perfect shine reflecting the elegant light fittings. At the back a creaking wooden staircase leads up to a first floor fitting room. This is where the shoes are made, mostly from calf leather, with each pair requiring three fitting sessions and around sixty hours of labour. Much of it is done in monastic silence. The finished product will set the client back at least three thousand Euros, so it's reassuring to know that all shoes come with a lifetime guarantee.

## Good enough for Brad

The same production standards but in a very different setting are to be found in the Mühlbauer millinery studio at Seilergasse 10. This company may have been making hats the old-fashioned way



*Rudolf Scheer and Söhne have been making shoes since 1816*

Photos: Rudolf Scheer

since 1903 but since 2007 they have been selling them in the most modern surroundings. The minimalist premises consist of little more than a white-washed room, with a small display of merchandise and a large mirror.

The hats themselves, of which an astonishing thirteen thousand are created each year, are manufactured in a second floor workshop near Schwedenplatz, where their flagship store closed in 2009. Here they are made in all shapes and sizes, mostly from rabbit fur felt, using a hundred year-old steaming machine and traditional wooden moulds, over which they are stretched. One made to order costs around two hundred Euros and can be ready in a fortnight. Both Brad Pitt and Meryl Streep admit to having Mühlbauer hats in their wardrobes.

## A thousand fabrics

Grandest of all, and perhaps the most traditional of Vienna's made-to-measure family firms, is Wilhelm Jungmann & Neffe at Albertinaplatz 3. The finest suit fabrics have been retailed here since 1881, in an oak-lined room worthy of any country house. Well over a thousand fabrics are available,

including not only Harris Tweed and cashmere but also vicuña fleece taken from Peruvian llamas!

Jungmann also displays its imperial and royal credentials, and their success accounts for the opulence still in evidence at the shop today. A roundel on the ornate ceiling represents an allegory of the silk trade. Of course the location was all-important, and being close to the Hofburg, the State Opera, and the Hotel Sacher (a preferred meeting place for the local aristocracy) was good for business. The shop's visitor's book reads like a Who's Who of high society, from the Empress Elisabeth and Baroness Mary Vetsera to Arthur Schnitzler and Thomas Bernhard.

Looking back, Vienna's bespoke shops have shown the same tenacity as Vienna itself. Both have survived world wars, changes in fashion, and competition from cheaper brands. In a fast changing world perhaps tradition really is something people like to cling on to. So long as they can afford it.

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