



MASARU OKUYAMA SHOEMAKER

DISSATISFIED WITH THE DIRECTION OF HIS COMFORTABLE BUT ULTIMATELY UNFULFILLING LIFE, MASARU OKUYAMA SET OUT TO PURSUE A PERSONAL DREAM OF BECOMING A BESPOKE SHOEMAKER. TODAY HE RUNS A WORKSHOP IN HONG KONG, CREATING REFINED, ELEGANT SHOES FROM THE FINEST NATURAL MATERIALS.

After graduating from Nihon University College of Art, Masaru Okuyama began working for a Japanese jewelry brand, but despite the good salary and a comfortable life, he felt something fundamental was missing. That's when he decided to become a shoemaker. After an intensive two-year program at a Japanese shoemaking school, and an apprenticeship under master craftsman Chihiro Yamaguchi, he set up his own business in 2008 focusing on bespoke shoemaking, with a belief that "A pair of shoes is the attire that expresses your seriousness about life."

Like all great creatives, he experienced moments of doubt on his journey, even travelling to Paris to try and secure an apprenticeship with one of the renowned European shoemaking houses. After a series of disheartening rebuttals, a chance encounter with shoemaker Ricardo Bestetti in Milan led him to his current path. Bestetti reassured him that as a fully trained shoemaker, Okuyama could create a bespoke pair of shoes entirely scratch—from taking the customer's measurements to creating the last, and then

crafting the shoe and polishing it to completion. If he trained with one of the more established names, he would become an expert at one stage of the process, but lose the rest of his accumulated knowledge.

After moving to Hong Kong, Masaru started working from the balcony of his apartment, and through referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations, his bespoke business was born. Today he has two apprentices under him and they work solely on bespoke shoes, a painstaking method that isn't for the faint of heart. The entire process, from taking measurements and choosing materials, making the lasts, checking the fit and designing a trial pair, making adjustments for comfort (often several times), then making and delivering the shoes can take from six months to a year. Working like a sculptor to create the perfect last for each foot, he is inspired by the curves of nature, noting that there are no straight lines on a shoe. "The design of shoes is all about curves," he says. "Lasts are like sculptures made for your feet. Even when there's a straight line in the design, it

Bespoke shoemaker
Masaru Okuyama.



HIS SHOES ARE CONSTRUCTED ENTIRELY FROM LEATHER, WITH THE SOLES USING TRADITIONAL ENGLISH AND GERMAN OAK BARK TANNED COWHIDES WHICH THEMSELVES TAKE AROUND 12 MONTHS TO PREPARE FOR USE.

left: Semi brogue, black French box calf, bevelled waist shoe.

above: Masaru Okuyama uses a wide variety of leathers for his bespoke shoes, including sheep, goat, cordovan, lizard, alligator, lama, and shark, to name a few.



becomes a curve when it's on the last." His shoes are constructed entirely from leather (with occasional rubber soles on request for the wet Hong Kong climate), with the soles using traditional English and

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German oak bark tanned cowhides which themselves take around 12 months to prepare for use. When it comes to the upper of the shoes, the options are almost endless. While French box calf leather is the material he uses the most, Masaru has also been known to create shoes in sheep, goat, lizard, ostrich, alligator, and even shark leathers. Usually a single cowhide can provide the material for four to five pairs of shoes, but Masaru prefers to make only a single

pair from each hide, ensuring his shoes are constructed from only the finest part of the hide. He notes that each individual hide has its own characteristics, a personality even, and when cutting it and moulding it to the shoe shape, it's very important to understand this character to bring out the best of the leather and create a shoe that is both beautiful and durable.

Striving to combine the stylish elegance beloved of French shoemakers, with the simplicity and dignity of the refined English aesthetic, Masaru's work features a strong traditional influence, with small, almost imperceptibly playful details like brogueing around the top of the shoe's tongue, creating shoes that are at once classical and contemporary. While one day he may seek to create a second line of custom-made shoes at a more accessible level, and even a ready-to-wear collection, the most important consideration for Masaru is that he can continue to craft shoes using his own hands, honing his skills, and further mastering his chosen vocation. *



above: Masaru Okuyama shoes combine meticulous Japanese savoir-faire with French elegance and a refined English aesthetic.