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## Fine footwear for men

At a time when priorities are changing and life is becoming more complicated, an upscale shoe brand for men has taken the brave step of opening a boutique on our shores.

Its bold move seems to be paying off as well-heeled walk-in customers are walking out with its signature Alessandro Oxfords tagged at about RM10,000 a pair and exotic kangaroo leather loafers priced at approximately RM5,000 a pair.

"These well-shod gentlemen who mostly happen to walk past our store are pleasantly surprised to see that we've opened in Kuala Lumpur. Obviously, they are familiar with the brand and we're very happy about that," said its assistant retail manager, Robin Koh.

Alessandro Berluti established his namesake brand in Paris in 1895 and it has since grown under the helm of four generations of shoemakers in the family.

The French brand's story with the late flamboyant pop artist Andy Warhol is particularly interesting, considering that in the early 1960s it was the shoemaker by appointment to distinguished figures including the Duke of Windsor and former president of France, Charles de Gaulle.



Exotic kangaroo leather loafers in blue.

In 1962, when Warhol walked into Berluti's posh Paris shop in his rugged leather jacket and sunglasses with his signature messy mane, glances were exchanged, naturally.

"At that time Warhol was a successful commercial illustrator, celebrated for his ads for shoe brands. Privately, Warhol had a fascination with feet and shoes, an obsession that continued to influence him throughout his career. He stepped into Berluti to order a pair of bespoke square-toed loafers.

"Alessandro was not at the shop so he was greeted by his granddaughter Olga, who was 17 years old at that time. When Alessandro came back, she told him about Warhol's visit but in her excitement she had forgotten to ask for a deposit from him. Alessandro then firmly told her 'no deposit, no shoes' not knowing that his granddaughter had already undertook the task to make shoes for Warhol in secret."



The new Berluti store in Suria KLCC.

### **WHAT MAKES IT UNIQUE**

When Warhol came to collect his made-to-order shoes, Olga noticed that there was an obvious flaw on the hide of one of the shoes.

"Olga explained that the pair was not like any other, and that the leather she had chosen came from a "subversive" cow that liked to scratch herself on barbed wire. Warhol understood immediately that this uncommon element made his pair of shoes unique. He loved the surreal nature of it, saying that, "from now on, I only want shoes made from the hides of subversive cows".

This style, christened the Andy, was fashion forward in 1962 and still looks contemporary today. It remains the brand's hallmark design, which portrays Maison Berluti's creativity, craftsmanship and innovation, noted Koh.

The brand, which prides itself in having more than 30 shoe lasts, is also known for its "comfortable and perfect fit".

Then there is the other Berluti appeal where its Venezia leather shoes, crafted using a top-of-the-range calf hide, can be treated to take on a unique colour gradient through a special technique called the patina, which Olga had developed in the 1980s.



The famous square-toed loafers first custom-ordered by Andy Warhol.

"Patina is the result of many techniques for colouring and bleaching leather, through the application of solvents, essential oils, pigments and dyes," Koh explained, adding that the process takes about two weeks and can be done in-store.

This means if you have a pair of Berluti's Venezia leather footwear in black, you can choose to transform the shade into tints of navy, green or deep purple even.

The patinas also add a distressed appearance, which resembles leather that has evolved with time.

Its range of colour gradations include Autumn Leaf, Caviar, Saint-Emilion Red, Nero Grigio and Tobacco Bis brown, a homage to the warm amber of the first lace-up Oxford shoe designed by Berluti in 1895.

"For ultimate audacity, a recently perfected Golden Patina makes it possible to give a red or dark brown leather shoe a beautiful 'antiqued gold' transparency, as if patinated by time."

While some may shy away from the vintage look, Olga feels that nothing's more beautiful than a pair of shoes that have already been worn. Shoes burnished by time add character and memories that only the wearer would know.

"Only those possess a soul," she said.

Apart from footwear, Berluti's 105 square-metre space in Suria KLCC is also home to a selection of bags, accessories and ready-to-wear.

(Source: <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/flair/2020/12/653131/fine-footwear-men>)