

40 YEARS OF LUXURY

Luxury brand Stefano Ricci evolved from a tie manufacturing firm into a full-spectrum luxury lifestyle brand, on the basis of serious investment in research and craft-based expertise. After a strong retail footprint of 43 stores across the globe the brand recently opened its first store in Mumbai, India at the iconic Taj Mahal Hotel.

NIVEDITA JAYARAM PAWAR caught up with the founder Stefano Ricci whose mission is to design garments for the wardrobe of a man who already has everything.



The Mumbai store is spread across a sprawling 2500 square feet. The store is divided into 3 broad sections — Stefano Ricci menswear, home décor and bespoke.

In 1972 a young man named Stefano Ricci set out to exhibit a small collection of ties at the Pitti Immagine Uomo fashion exhibition in Florence. The innovative, yet very classic nature of his patterns caught everyone's eyes. He had managed to elevate the tie from a simple accessory to a real protagonist of menswear. Moving ahead he launched the Stefano Ricci shirt collection in 1980. The common thread that linked the ties and the shirts was – hand cut, close control on manufacturing, top quality materials and exclusive designs.

In 1993, after reinforcing the brand's presence in the US, Stefano opened its first mono-brand store in Shanghai, at a time when China was still getting acquainted with high-fashion. Jackets, suits, sportswear and fragrance followed in 1997 and the rest is history. Did he ever anticipate that the brand would one day be synonymous with luxury? "Life can play any kind of joke on you. It took a lot of hard work, passion and a team of people to get here. Some of my competitors were my icons. But they were not lucky to have a change of generation as I did," explains Ricci. His two sons by their own choice are extremely involved in the business. That continuity gave extra energy to Ricci's venture.

Today the company is run by Stefano Ricci, his wife Claudia and his two sons Niccolo (CEO) and Filippo (creative director). Being a family held company is a matter of immense pride and satisfaction to the patriarch. "I had incredible offers to sell my company to big groups. But I never accepted them. These companies are forced by investors to dole out huge profits at the cost of quality. That's what happened to my competitors and they lost their mission. I am in a beautiful position where there aren't too many competitors focussed on quality."

Quality is of paramount importance for Ricci who even now, after 40 years is still excited about finding the thinnest yarn available and exploring new colouring systems. The yarn is woven at the lowest possible speed to avoid any extra stress for the fibre. And just before the finishing of the cloth Ricci removes it from production and keeps it in a room to "decant" it like wine, in order to recover all the sense of the natural fibre. A proponent of all things 'handmade' Ricci believes



The outlet houses a wide range of suits, dress shirts, casual shirts, jeans, polo shirts, casual wear and neckties, in addition to bags and accessories made from exotic leather.

The Stefano Ricci Menswear collection consists of suits, dress shirts, jeans, polo shirts, casualwear and neckties.



that anything made with hands resonates with an energy that cannot be found in technology aided production. "Something made with so much passion and care cannot be put on sale. It's like discounting passion," reasons the 65-year-old founder who has a unique style of working. Instead of hiring a young workforce Stefano invested in masters to craft his shirts and ties. These masters then took on young apprentice to pass the skill sets. "Hiring old people ensured that I learnt a lot from them. That was a good way to start and we continue that practise even today. Some of the young employees have been with us for almost 38 years and are now masters. They are an invaluable asset to the company. I have learnt from them how to select and appreciate beautiful skin (crocodile and calf) with my eyes closed," says Ricci. Creating his own fabric for shirts, ties and suits still remains one of his greatest passions. The extreme pursuit of perfection motivated the company to purchase Antico Setificio Fiorentino in 2010, a factory that produces silk fabrics for noble families throughout the world, since 1786, using antique hand looms.

The world of luxury

The Stefano Ricci menswear collection consists of suits, dress shirts, jeans, polo shirts, casualwear and neckties. In addition, the brand also produces shoes, cufflinks using gold, platinum, diamonds, sapphires and other gems and belts. Croc-skin shoes and bags, and diamond-encrusted belt buckles still remain the company's ostentatious trademarks.

In 2009 the company entered the world of home fashion with porcelain and crystal dinner services, silverware, furnishing accessories, luxury linens and leather goods. What sets these items apart is the use of real gold, silver and platinum. The next step was creating the interiors of luxury yachts. "Though I started with designing ties, I was pulled into shirts and men's jewellery, leather goods and home collection soon after. Today I do yachts. But the next phase is designing private jets. Currently I am working on the right type of crocodile skins for these jets," says Ricci.

The Stefano Ricci Empire is spread across 43 boutiques internationally including Beijing, Beverly Hills, Milan, Florence, Monte-Carlo, Moscow, Vienna, New York, Paris, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore and Abu Dhabi. The flagship store is in Florence. Will he diversify into other categories? "I want to give more energy to what I am doing. Shoes and knitwear segments are showing exponential growth. The company is performing beautifully as far as numbers are concerned. We are a self financed company. My grand child is also named Stefano Ricci and I hope he will realise the responsibility of the culture that I will be leaving behind with him," says Ricci.

Apart from designing, his other passions include hunting which has taken him to Africa over 54 times. "I design every single day in Africa. Sometimes I don't leave the camp for days on end. When the mind is in design mode and the hands works furiously on paper, you don't want any distractions." Ricci designs up to 90 new silk patterns for shirts, jackets and ties for every collection, in up to 16 colour combinations, all made and printed by hand in a small factory in Como. His adventures in Africa find resonance in the signature Ricci croc skin. Around 20,000 ultra-thin, blemish-free skins are sourced from Africa, New Guinea and Australia to turn into jackets, shirts, shoes and accessories like iPad cases and sunglass frames (even the Ricci tracksuit bottoms come equipped with croc trim).

The Eagle comes to India

In India, Stefano Ricci is headed by Jackie Manglani, a veteran in the luxury fashion industry. The boutique at Mumbai's Taj Mahal Hotel, built at a cost of ₹ 50 crore, is spread across a sprawling 2500 square feet. The interiors done up in mahogany and travertine has the vibe of Italy and transports you to the renaissance city of Florence. The outlet houses a wide range of suits, dress shirts, casual shirts, jeans, polo shirts, casual wear

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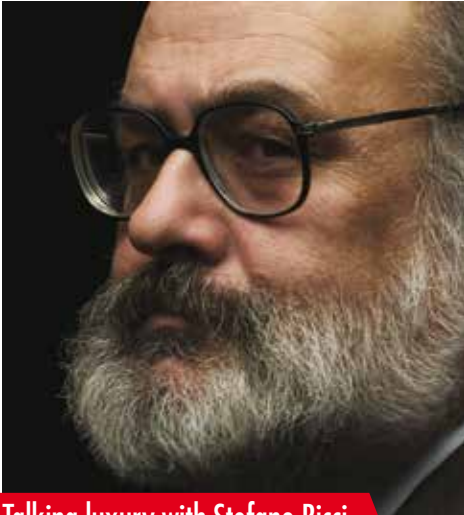
and neckties, in addition to bags and accessories made from exotic leather. There is a limited edition Royal Suite Collection covering various types of porcelain and crystal dinner services, silverware, furnishing accessories, luxury linens and leather goods. The store is divided into 3 broad sections – Stefano Ricci menswear, home décor and bespoke. There is also a VIP enclosure for select guests. As a policy the brand doesn't use any celebrities to promote it or disclose names of its VVIP customers. "Everyone who buys a Stefano Ricci is a celebrity," emphasises Manglani. Fans of the brand include Elton John, presidents of nations, and billionaires.

The uber luxury shirt range starts at ₹ 40,000 onwards, suits from ₹ 3 lakh onwards and shoes start at ₹ 80,000. The iconic eagle encrusted belts are priced at ₹ 170,000 onwards. Delhi is next in line for a Stefano Ricci store next year. "We won't open unless we find the right location in Delhi. We have been looking but nothing has appealed to us so far. We were lucky to find a spot in the iconic Taj Hotel and would look at something as impressive. A lot of people advised us to go to a luxury mall like Palladium. But we don't want to be in a mall. Our brand doesn't belong to a mall. It has to be a destination store where we can give this kind of exclusivity," says Manglani.

Going by his previous association with the brand Manglani expects a fantastic response to the Mumbai store. "That's because I already know the clients who have been shopping with us in London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles. They are very loyal to the brand. Wherever they find a Stefano Ricci they go there." According to Manglani the term luxury in India is quite abused. "There is no real men's luxury brand in India.



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Talking luxury with Stefano Ricci

What's luxury for you?

Luxury is a glass of water in the desert; luxury is friendship; luxury is a grandchild; luxury is health.

Your inspiration

Africa. I love the people and the smell of Africa. The afternoon rain in Africa is fantastic. I have seen many phases of Africa. It's changing. My Masai now walks with a spear in one hand and a mobile phone in the other. That makes me furious. A masai has to be a masai. He's a bush fighter.

Your strength

My family is my strength. We are strongly rooted in Florence, we dine together most nights and we've vacationed together in Africa for three decades.

Indian fashion...

I love the Guru jacket in India. It looks extremely elegant on men. But you can't do business or attend a board meeting in them.

Who's the Stefano Ricci Man

He's discreet, casual, classy, elegant but not loud.

What should a first timer buy from Stefano Ricci?

Don't buy anything. Just leave your size for special order suits.

When not designing

I love vintage cars, hunting and travelling around the world. But now I take it easy. Forty years ago I was climbing mountains!

Business philosophy

I always tell my sons to start from where everyone has stopped.

It's only projected luxury. Nobody does real bespoke, 100 percent handmade and 100 percent made in Italy." The company doesn't believe in franchising but operates under the licensing agreement. In India they have got into a partnership agreement with Manglani. Emphasising on the need for greater ease to do business in India the Finland based businessman says, "There's been enough talk. Now things have to be made easy so that more brands can enter the market and give people good choice of things that Indian elite have been deprived of for a very long time. Infrastructure has been India's Achilles heel. I can't believe that in spite of an English speaking population we are 10-20 years behind China. They get all the big contracts. The only reason is bad policy and bad infrastructure. Otherwise with the smartest brains in the world and a motivated English educated workforce there is no reason why we should be behind China." ❏



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