

Shopper's World

Enduring Brass of Florence

By ANNE MARSHALL ZWACK

A DOORKNOB is a doorknob is a doorknob, as Gertrude Stein would have put it — or is it? In Florence, doorknobs are made in every shape and size and style, from blackened 14th-century handles to grandiose gargoyle door knockers on 16th-century palaces, to Empire lyres and laurel crowns, to the bows and furbelows of the Liberty style.

Tuscans have been artists in bronze since earliest times, as the exquisitely wrought Etruscan statues in the Archeological Museum show. Later during the Renaissance, Florentine artists like Donatello and Cellini made masterpieces out of bronze. Today in the back streets of the Oltrarno, Florence's Left Bank, you will still see bronzista (worker in bronze) scrawled on dusty windows while the roar of blow torches and the ringing of hammers on metal issues from dark doorways.

Bronze is in fact a misnomer. The metal that Florentine artisans work in almost exclusively is brass, which can be given a patina in a variety of shades, from the bright yellow of bedsteads to red gold and the dusky black of fire irons, either highly polished or with a satinato, or matte sheen.

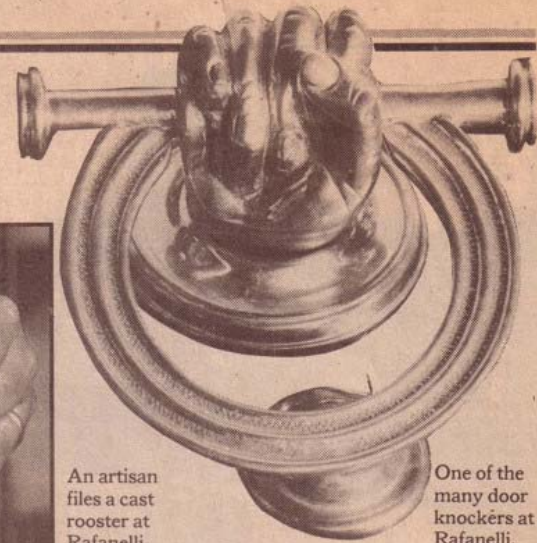
Ubaldo Baldini started working in what is known as the baser metals at the beginning of the century and set up his first workshop when he returned home from World War I. His daughter, Wilma, a vivacious woman who now runs the business, recalls how the aristocratic families of Florence, whose palaces line the city's streets and squares, were regular visitors to her father's shop. Their antique furniture was in frequent need of repair, especially the handles, friezes, knobs and corners. Another frequent visitor was the director Luchino Visconti, such a perfectionist that he would insist on gold plate settings on the banquet tables in his films. He would seek Mr. Baldini's services to provide authentic bronze candlesticks.

The Baldini workshop, in a back street parallel to the river, is still the place to go for a copy of a closet knob or keyhole or Napoleonic frieze of galloping horses for a Directorate commode. In the three workshops behind the store where five artisans are at work, there are drawers full of antique knobs, knockers, key holes and drawer handles, all of which are used as models for the new stock lining the walls of the tiny showroom. A door handle, such as the traditional Tuscan model used in most country houses —

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An artisan files a cast rooster at Rafanelli.



One of the many door knockers at Rafanelli.

an S with seven longitudinal facets — costs about \$62, figured at the exchange rate of 1,300 lire to \$1. Each handle has a matching keyhole (about \$3) and the key itself should be topped with a brass decoration (\$3.75). (Bring your key with you so that the decoration can be soldered to it at the shop.) Potential buyers should know the width of their door and other pertinent measurements. If it is a narrow door, a little pivot is inserted to ensure that the handle does not come away in your hand.

Drawer handles run from \$12 to \$25. If you want an exact copy of an original piece of your own, that costs about \$8 more. Prices rise if the handle or knob is to be an authentic work of art, with gold plating and additional chiseling. The increase might be \$100 or more, depending on the piece. Allow at least three weeks for manufacture. Baldini mails to the United States.

Dolphin towel racks for the bathroom may sound a bit outrageous, but Baldini's dolphins are discreet, silver plated and varnished to protect them from steam. Towel racks supported by two dolphins cost about \$200, matching soap dishes and rings for hand towels about \$140 each. There are also dolphin-bearing toilet rolls and dolphin-spouting faucets.

Enzo and Renato Rafanelli are two brothers who have been bronzisti for the last 40 years, having started as children like most Florentine artisans. In their workshop in a back street of the Oltrarno, they have worked on commissions from all over the world. Their pieces include a chandelier, about 25 feet in diameter, with 360 lights, for a hotel in Kuwait.

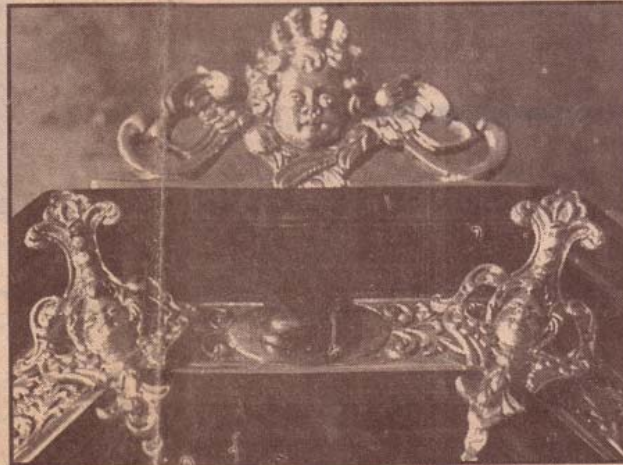
Their showroom, on the other hand, is in the middle of the chic shopping area of Flo-

rence, just off the Via Tornabuoni. The large store is crammed with a bewildering array, not only of knobs and knockers, but fire guards, carriage lamps and bedsteads, while the ceiling is hung with lights and chandeliers. Everything on display can be purchased on the spot or sent to the United States, except the door knobs and handles, which are made to order (\$50 to \$80 the pair) in 15 days or more. It is impossible to price

everything the Rafanelli brothers make. The cheapest bedstead, which they say will last forever, costs \$154, the smallest sconce wall light \$75. A large, bronze-colored, Flemish-style chandelier with six lights costs about \$700. Simpler purchases include bell pushes (\$25) and oval brass plaques for the front door (\$13). Having your name engraved takes a week and costs \$8 extra.

Lamberto Banchi also started work as a

boy apprenticed to a bronzista and has been at the same workbench for 43 years. His diary, written when he was 13, recalling the almost Dickensian working conditions of the time, has recently been published. "You must be like a monkey and steal what I am doing with your eyes," said his teacher, Sor Vasco, who was so strict that he would make the young Lamberto replace the tools he broke out of his meager pay.



Detail of Banchi mirror copied from Cellini original in the Pitti Palace.

Photographs by Marco Bruzzo/Agencia Contrasto

MR. BANCHI specializes in frames in varying styles, from the smallest (the size of a stop-watch for \$16) to the largest (about 18 by 24 inches for \$62). The frames, of which he has quite a stock in his tiny workshop, can be oval, square, rectangular, Empire, neo-classical, Louis XVI or Liberty. All are in bright gold "bronze," some so simple that they are just a square of beveled glass surmounted by a Louis XVI bow. There are twin ovals (\$75) and sets of three small frames (\$62), while some of the designs are more complicated, fashioned like an Empire-style clock (\$40) or framed by a bronze curtain held aside by a pert cupid (\$180). Mr. Banchi makes the model himself, which is then imprinted into terra di Francia, a black earth that can be pounded by a pestle into a hard mold, into which the molten metal is poured. In his workshop he then files and chisels the finished product.

Mr. Banchi is particularly proud of his octagonal, semiprecious-stone-encrusted mirrors, which shine out of the dingy recesses of his workshop in the Via Serragli and which he makes for Christian Dior and others. Mirrors like these, which are copies of a Renaissance

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