

“Building a Furniture Empire” for *Vie* Magazine  
By Sallie W. Boyles

“Made in Italy” has, for centuries, signified to collectors that objects would be beautiful and impeccably crafted. Italian artistry, however, is far too complicated to summarize in a few words on a label, even for a specific category of products made today. Furniture makers, for instance, replicate an array of styles—from the elaborate Baroque era of the 1600s to the stark Rationalism of the 1920s—while continuing a tradition of innovation regarding both form and function. Consequently, for delivering quality, variety and so much more, Italy is the world’s third largest exporter of furniture.

Achieving a presence in more than fifty countries (predominately Germany, Russia, the Middle East and the US), SELVA AG is among Italy’s prominent, high-end furniture manufacturers for the home and hospitality segments. Since establishing SELVA in 1968, founder Joseph “Peppi” Selva, who worked for another prestigious furniture and textiles company before embarking on his own, aimed to build an international business. Headquarters are in Bolzano, a city in northern Italy’s German-speaking Province of South Tyrol, while the production facilities are in Isola Rizza near Verona, Italy, and the company’s core strengths seem to stem from a cross-cultural blend of Italian artistry and German precision.

Carrying out his father’s vision, present-day president and CEO Philipp Selva grew up in the family enterprise. “My father brought me on many of his business journeys,” says Philipp, “and I saw many foreign countries while still in my young years.” Officially entering the company in 1994, Philipp was named president of SELVA in 1998, when he also took over the company’s German subsidiary. “In those years, my father fell ill,” explains Philipp, “and I felt the responsibility to go on with what he created.”

*What* Peppi Selva created had a great deal to do with *where* he sought to establish a presence, including the Russian market while the country was still part of the Soviet Union. “SELVA was furnishing some of Moscow’s nicest hotels by Red Square—Hotel Metropol, the Savoy, and Hotel National— in the middle of the 1980s!” says Philipp. When the USSR officially dissolved two years later, the company was ideally positioned to launch retail operations in Russia. “We were the first Italian company to open a shop in the very center of Moscow!” Many other export success stories landed SELVA a well-deserved Marco Polo Award in 1989.

While those who embrace SELVA don’t all speak the same language or share the same aesthetic, certain hallmarks of the brand strike a universal chord. “Our DNA remains classical,” Philipp says, “but in the last ten years we have developed more transitional and modern collections. They still take inspiration from past and glorious eras, but are adapted to a modern lifestyle.”

Styles are varied according to regional preferences. “Being in over 50 countries worldwide, we are faced with different tastes in terms of design, fabrics and dimensions of furniture,” Philipp says. Collections displaying simpler lines, for instance, reflect the preference in Central Europe, while Russian and Arabic clientele inspire the more majestic pieces with highly refined details.

To accommodate a broad customer base, the active product line is extensive. SELVA offers approximately 850 models with about 25 different finishes and 130 separate fabrics. Remarkably, the company continues to make every piece by hand. South Verona is known as a hub of Italian craftsmanship, so SELVA can be selective in working with a number of small artisan companies that utilize traditional handicraft techniques in furniture making.

“Each one specializes in a particular producing process,” says Philipp. “Once production is completed, the furniture is moved to our establishment in Isola Rizza, a small town of 3,000 inhabitants in the outskirts of Verona. Here we go further with the tailored finishes of the surfaces, and the installation of the hardware and glass doors.” The final stage entails precise packaging to ensure the furniture arrives at the destination in perfect condition.

Before the first prototype is made, however, a complex design process transpires with numerous proofs, comparisons, market analyses and trend discussions. “This is the most exciting part of our job,” says Philipp, “to give shape to our visions and inspirations!”

Occasionally, SELVA develops one-of-a-kind items for prestigious projects. “Many years ago we customized a piece for the Kremlin,” Philippe reveals. Some models are also limited editions, like a solitaire cabinet that was nominated as one of Harrods Design Icons in 2008. Whether a SELVA cabinet, bed, table or chair is deemed groundbreaking or simply good-looking, a distinguished designer has played a role in conceiving the piece.

“We have been lucky to work always with renowned and appreciated designers,” says Philipp, who makes a point of acknowledging his in-house designer, Tiziano Bistaffa, for maintaining the “SELVA spirit” in every new creation. Tiziano has led the company’s Design and Development office since 1984. “For that reason,” adds Philipp, “the products designed by him—the fruit of his passion and experience—embody the company history in a very special way.”

SELVA further enjoys a longstanding relationship with renowned Italian architect and designer Lorenzo Bellini. “He has created several outstanding collections for SELVA, such as Downtown, Heritage J. S., and Vendôme, as well as some new items, which we presented at the international furniture fair in Milano and will display at the upcoming High Point [North Carolina] Market,” expresses Philipp. Notably, the Vendôme collection won the H&D (*Home & Design* magazine) award in 2013.

“Lorenzo designs expressive, top-quality furniture that is conceived for customers who are seeking something extraordinary and timeless,” adds Philipp. “Like a passkey, his pieces can be effortlessly integrated into any context—in a modern loft or with antiques and vintage furniture.” As an influential architect, Lorenzo is also a valued asset to SELVA on projects in the hotel industry.

The latest addition to SELVA’s design team, Peggy Norris, based in Charleston, SC, began working with the company in 2012. In her initial capacity, she assumed responsibility for redecorating SELVA’s High Point showroom for a relaunch of the brand. “Peggy was able to create a stunning new look most suited to the American market,” says Philipp. “This year she designed five selected, top-quality pieces of furniture with which she unites delicate lightness and feminine lines, creating an interplay between fresh design and coziness. Peggy,” he continues, “completely shares the SELVA philosophy: ‘to please people with

lasting beauty.' Her pieces were very successful at the last international furniture fair in Milano, and I hope they seduce the American market."

A number of retailers in the US carry SELVA's collections, namely Robert Allen in New York, Las Vegas and San Francisco; Unique Interiors in Cherry Hill, New Jersey; Furnitureland South in Jamestown, North Carolina; Design Resource Center in Florida; Noel Furniture, Inc in Houston, Texas; and Flegels in San Francisco. SELVA's website offers more information to guide consumers and commercial clients.

Philipp would also like to introduce mono-brand stores that sell only SELVA furniture to the US. The strategy has been successful in the Middle East, Far East and in Europe. "We believe in mono-brand stores," says Philipp, "because the client can live the brand and the products more deeply."

Growth throughout the US and in other countries remains important to SELVA, yet regardless of how much the company expands relative to the enterprise his father started 45 years ago, Philipp believes in preserving a close-knit culture. "It still belongs to my family," he says. "I also consider my company and employees a big family of sorts."

Together, they have built a furniture empire, but as Philipp reflects upon SELVA's milestones, he proudly mentions a street in Isola Rizza that the local government renamed for his father, who passed away in 2009. "Via Joseph Selva" honors his many accomplishments at home and abroad. He clearly had a zest to travel the world and then return to the comforts of home—the ultimate lifestyle to inspire a furniture brand!

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