

Form Meets Function

Valextra’s minimalist leather goods boldly emphasises on the *extra* when it comes to craftsmanship, quality, and ergonomic design.



Text/
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To Valextra, logo-free wares and quality craftsmanship aren’t just trends. Rather, it’s a mindset that the Milanese leather goods brand has embraced since its founding in 1937. Consider its signature *Millepunte* leather. Treated in tanneries on the outskirts of Milan, this particular calfskin – which translates to *a thousand dots* – sports a durable crossgrain finish that serves as the foundation of its IYKYK aesthetic. Its distinct pebbled texture comes with another surprise element: its valleys create a shadow-like effect that magnifies the brand’s bold hues, from a deep forest *Valextra Green* to eggshell *Pergamena White*. According to Valextra CEO Xavier Rougeaux, this leaves a so-called “strong vibration” that permeates the brand’s designs marked by sleek architectural lines and a unique gold foiled code. Look out for Valextra’s geometric *V-cut* detail which doubles as a no-frills brand signifier across its offerings from the *Hobo Weekend* bag and *V-Line* one-shoulder backpack to wallets. Loyalists will also point out the contrasting black lacquered *Costa* edging that further emphasises the leather goods’ clean-cut silhouettes. The story goes that founder Giovanni Fontana was a perfectionist. Instead of using a matte ink that easily masks imperfections, he opted for a shiny alternative on external seams

so that it purposely renders each flaw visible. Today, craftsmen continue Fontana’s legacy by spending up to two years to perfect this hand-painted five-step technique. “Deeply rooted in the brand is this idea of a timeless product and an obsession with craftsmanship and excellence,” Rougeaux asserts. “Therefore, it is a product that is made to last and that you can pass from one generation to the next.” But don’t let this understated design language fool you. To Valextra, functionality has an equal footing to aesthetics or what it proudly labels as *engineering beauty*. “One cannot be more than the other,” Rougeaux shares. “The *beauty* doesn’t just come from how it looks but also because it works.” Fontana, who is also an engineer by trade, aimed to cater to everyday needs through ergonomic design. His *Tric Trac* bag, which was introduced in 1968, comes to mind. Originally designed for men, the now genderless wrist bag, identifiable by its suave boxy shape, features a patented snap closure that seamlessly mimics the opening and closing of a doctor’s case without the need of a clasp or zipper. Hardware is never purely ornamental either. Observe the *Iside*, another brand icon, with an A-line shape and geometric top flap. Swivel the nifty *Twist* lock sideways for easy access to the bag’s internal compartment. Even

the mod rectangular metal detail that sits on either side features a hidden compartment capable of attaching an adjustable shoulder strap to transform the top handle into a crossbody. Since taking the helm in 2021, Rougeaux has only continued to deepen Valextra’s legacy. Along with new designs such as the *Milano* and *Vivi* hobo bags that embrace a softer take on the iconic *Millepunte* leather, the brand has also made strides in sustainability, even taking home Positive Luxury’s Butterfly Mark at the end of 2023. This July, Valextra commemorated its decade-long presence in Hong Kong by revealing a new 800 square feet boutique in IFC Mall. “In the end, what we create are beautiful objects and we are obsessed with making sure they are perfect both in the making but also in its functionality,” Rougeaux reaffirms. “We want to make sure our consumers don’t leave [our leather goods] in the wardrobe, but instead, see it as their best companion.”



XAVIER ROUGEAUX



MANIFESTO: Congratulations on the new Valextra boutique in IFC Mall! Talk us through the store design.

XAVIER ROUGEAUX: It is very important to me that Valextra’s obsession with excellence, craftsmanship, and quality is encapsulated in our store concepts. I wanted us to work with a Milanese architect to convey the special tension that exists in Milan. Compared to other cities in Italy, Milan might not be the most beautiful at first sight. Its architecture is very monumental, rational, and austere. However, if you enter homes, it is a lot more opulent and warm. This tension is exciting and I really wanted to replicate this by working with Andrea Tognon. There is a nice combination of rougher elements like plaster and stone that contrast warmer tones like the Valextra green in a way that still allows the products to shine.

Valextra is also a brand of culture. To tie this element into each store, we feature a piece of art from an Italian or Milanese artist. In IFC Mall’s store, we have an art piece by Andrea Branzi. Again, I think it conveys that feeling of tension – the rawness and authenticity of wood and marble mixed with refined plexiglass. I was very excited to bring this concept to life in Hong Kong where we are celebrating 10 years of Valextra in the city.

M Apart from Hong Kong, Valextra has recently expanded into other parts of Asia like Taipei and Seoul. Why?

XR It’s always important to listen to your clientele. Since we’re getting a larger customer base of Koreans or Taiwanese, it is important to service them in a better way. In Asia as a whole, the brand has always been appreciated for the timelessness and extreme quality of our designs. I think our obsession for perfection in artisanal craftsmanship also resonates with the Asian mindset.

M You distinguish customers based on lifestyle rather than nationality. What lifestyle attributes uniquely define the Valextra consumer in Asia?

XR Indeed, I feel that we are much more citizens of the world rather than being attached to a certain nation. Of course, we have our own roots, identities, and customs, but in this globalised world, I think that it is more about groups of people having an affinity or a certain way of looking at luxury. If we go back 10 years, Valextra was more focused on types of functionalities. Today, I have tried to open this up to cater to the full wardrobe of men and women with international and urban lifestyles. If you’re going to a birthday or event, you need more of a statement piece like the *Iside*. If you’re shopping with friends, the new *Milano* bag is convenient with a metal clasp that closes on its own. When you travel, you need a strap and a place to put

your phone and passport. Whatever the modern connoisseur’s 24/7 looks like, we are creating different products for different occasions.

M Long before the term *quiet luxury*, Valextra has placed onus on craftsmanship and logo-free minimalism. In this age of micro-trends, why is *quiet luxury* here to stay?

XR It’s true, because of that trend, that there is suddenly more visibility for our brand and it is a good opportunity for us. But, it will never be something that informs a change of direction for what we do from a vision and a product perspective. It’s never been a trend for Valextra. We’ve also just launched



Valextra Spa, a customer care service. You can bring in your product whether you bought it six months or 10 years ago... we will pamper and refresh it. Nowadays, customers are very informed. They want the storytelling and the quality of the product to be authentic and unique. This is what we have always been doing and we will continue to do so.

M Let’s talk about the new *Vivi* hobo bag. Talk us through how it was conceived.

XR When I joined, we wanted to create a full wardrobe for a woman by introducing softer bags. We spoke to our design team. They said our beautiful *Millepunte* leather is amazing for bags that are more structured and stiff in construction. But for more understated and effortless shapes, it will crack and wrinkle. I still feel that respecting our signature crossgrain is very important so I told the tannery that we needed the same grain but softer. It took them a year and a half and they came up with our new soft leather that has opened up the world for us to do more flexible shapes like the *Milano* and the *Vivi*.

M What about the new *Sportami Via* bag that features a special *tombolo* technique. Why promote traditional forms of craftsmanship at Valextra?

XR Milanese are very curious, and when you look at Valextra’s history, there’s always this dialogue with different cultures and collaborations that have enriched the brand. We feel that finding artisans with excellence in their craft or who are relaunching old techniques is really nice, so we decided to work with the Unpizzo design studio to do the *Sportami Via* design. We are also doing special editions with an expert from Kyoto and a bamboo master. These are artisans from other cultures but still share that love for perfection, craftsmanship, and excellence.

M Apart from craftsmanship, sustainability is also key at Valextra.

XR As a person, I truly believe that

if we want to leave our next generation with a lovely place to live, we have to be responsible somehow. It’s a day-to-day mindset – it’s not something you do and then stop. We have the support of Positive Luxury who gave us the Butterfly Mark. It recognises how our practices are getting more responsible. There are two aspects to this: one is about respect for the environment from tracing where our leather comes from to our packaging. The other relates to social responsibility. For that, we are working with design, architecture, and fashion schools in Milan to create an apprentice programme called the Valextra Academy. It recruits young talents to learn from our expert artisans and in turn they will become artisans of the next generation. Already, we have recruited four. One is Korean and the others are Italian. It’s not about nationality but talent and whether they have a common appreciation for quality and a sense of aesthetic.

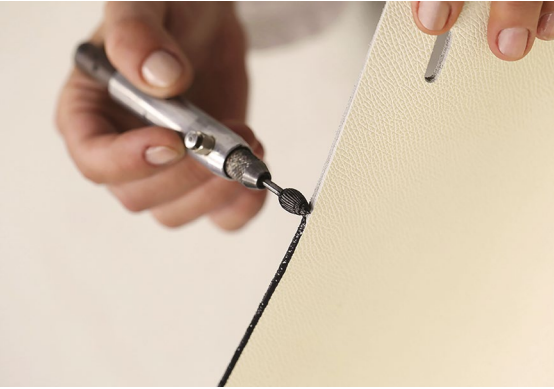
Product-wise, we are using sustainable nylon for a capsule of backpacks, totes, and a bum bag. We’ve added a small tag inside that tells you about our vision. Again, it’s storytelling that is discreet. For me, sustainability isn’t a marketing or communication tool. It should be more of a mindset that relates to how we act. That is why we continue being discreet about it.

M What is the next big innovation that Valextra is working towards?

XR Innovation is part of the brand’s DNA, and we’ve got a few products in the making. More people are looking for effortless products. This side of the brand existed very little in the last 10 years, but we’re evolving with our clientele. We are also developing our travel segment. Valextra has always been a brand to support people when they travel. For me, travel could also be going from work to home everyday. Expect some interesting things in 2025 and 2026.

M What are your hopes for Valextra going forward?

XR I hope that we are able to create more visibility for the brand. This doesn’t mean opening thousands of stores. It’s an asset that we’ve kept the



brand within a tight network of stores so customers can have a very beautiful experience in different places, but it’s not everywhere. Now, it’s a question of making it resonate with a larger audience and making sure that they pass on the information. For me, community is very important.

M What is your biggest takeaway since joining Valextra as CEO in 2021?

XR For me, what I have learnt and discovered is that it is all about authenticity, passion, and teamwork. Everyday, I’m learning how to make a beautiful product that will last.

M It’s amazing to see that you’re so passionate and involved in the design process...

XR It’s very important that we are true and honest with our customers. For me, I want to know exactly what we’re doing on all different aspects to ensure what we are communicating and selling to our customers is right and authentic. And ultimately, we will win their hearts.
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