



FAMILY TRADITION:
Brothers Tony, left, and Tom Rago in their busy Morristown repair shop.

Sole Men

Rago Brothers has built a national reputation for shoe and leather repair on the strength of its team of skilled craftsmen.

BEHIND THE LARGE WINDOWS OF Rago Brothers Shoe & Leather Repair, a smiling Manuel Reiban looks up from his sewing machine to wave at a passerby on Morristown's busy Speedwell Avenue. Reiban, who learned to sew as a boy in his native Ecuador, has been repairing jackets at Rago for 14 years. "He's been a coat maker all his life," owner Tony Rago, 55, proudly declares. "Everyone here is the best of the best at what they do."

Reiban is just one of the many skilled specialists who have helped Rago earn a national reputation for being able to fix anything. Shoe, coat and bag repairs form the core of the business, but Rago craftsmen have re sewn arms on favorite dolls, healed a bruised accordion and restored an

antique fireplace screen. They once repaired an Alfred Dunhill box for an \$80,000 pen. Stitching worn baseball and hockey gloves for local athletes is routine.

On the same block in Morristown since it opened in 1911, the third-generation family business is redolent of leather and chemicals—a sharp contrast to the Latino neighborhood's aroma of chicken empanadas frying a few doors down. Tony Rago's large personality commands the counter; he doles out orders while taking phone calls on his ever-present earpiece, laughing deeply while delicately handling a torn shoe. His older brother, Tom, 57, is the calmer presence, exuding quiet confidence and efficiency. A photograph of the two brothers and their late

BY JOANNA BUFFUM
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NOAH RABINOWITZ

TRADITIONALISTS: Rago swears by vintage cobbler machines like the Landis McKay Model 88, above. Clockwise from top left, Victor Perez resoles a boot; a pair of red-soled Christian Louboutin stilettos; resoling specialist Ramon Guapizaca; Perez grinds a heel; Manuel Reiban repairs a jacket at his sewing machine; a craftsman measures a length of leather; Tony Havatian touches up a bag strap; Havatian hammers the edge into shape.

father is proudly displayed in the customer waiting area, along side a grainy snapshot of the first generation, Louis and Thomas Rago, standing outside the shop in 1911.

Rather than resting on their father's laurels (and his father's, and so on), the brothers have elevated the shop from local resource to the hub of North America's luxury repair.

"Thank God for the Short Hills Mall," says Tom. As the brothers tell it, the upscale mall's proximity (about a 20-minute drive) fueled their strong relationships with high-end manufacturers.

The Mall at Short Hills is anchored by Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue, and includes chic retailers like Miu Miu, Prada, Gucci, Cartier, Jimmy Choo and Bulgari.



Tony, who worked as a commodities trader on Wall Street before joining the family business in 1988, sniffed an opportunity in the mall, which had debuted several years earlier.

"Kenneth Cole had just opened, so I went to the mall and asked if they had any repair guys coming in," says Tony. "I said I would do all the repairs for free, and if they liked our work to keep using us instead. Well, the manager at Short Hills moved on to be the regional manager for Kenneth Cole and took our business with him."

The same arrangement fell into place with other stores in the mall. When a manager moved across the country or was promoted, he or she would recommend Rago Brothers to the new manager. "That's how it grew," says Tom. "All of a sudden they want us doing repairs for the whole East Coast. 'Okay, Delaware called!' and then

IT'S IN THE DETAILS: Ferragamo supplied Rago with custom drawers, right, for storing their hardware. Raul Bermeo, below, mixes a custom color in the dyeing and refinishing studio for an orange Prada bag.



RAGO WOMEN: Hannah Schleer, right, worked in the hand engraving department of Tiffany's until she came to Rago nine years ago. Now she handles the Michael Kors and Burberry accounts. Employee Anna Kasperowitz, above left, frequently has her hands full.



two weeks later, 'Washington called! We were getting phone calls from new stores every day. It's still exciting when we get a new one.'

"Louis Vuitton has their own repair center, but people around the country still send things here," says Tony, who had received a call earlier that day about an incoming damaged piece from Louis Vuitton Las Vegas. "If you walk into the Louis Vuitton in Short Hills, they'll tell you to come here."

These days, Rago has exclusive repair contracts with most of the luxury brands in North America, including Michael Kors, Christian Dior, Salvatore Ferragamo and Chloé. But some companies like to keep their relationship with Rago private, preferring to give the impression that every

marred handbag or shoe gets sent back to the factory in Italy.

"We have representatives from Italy who come several times a year from the manufacturing plants to make sure we are doing our job," says Tom. "They like to walk around and see we are doing things properly."

ROXY MARIN, WHO SPENT seven years at Neiman Marcus before she began working at Rago, opens hundreds of boxes a day filled with damaged handbags and shoes. "When we get 400 shoes or 1,000 shoes in one shipment from a factory," Marin explains, "that outpaces the [walk-in] repairs." A shipment of about 1,000 Fendi signature orange shoe boxes recently crowded the floor

of the dyeing and refinishing room. All the boxes contained pairs of Fendi shoes with the same mass defect, a scratch on the back of each heel.

"This is the room that makes us famous," says Tony, gesturing to the jars of custom-mixed paint and tiny brushes. "Because what we do here, I'm certain no one else can do."

Rago's staff of more than 50 is well-stocked with specialists. A few commute from New York and Pennsylvania. Diego Valencia, known as "the strap guy," has worked at Rago for 10 years. He grew up working in his father's leather shop in Colombia and impressed the Rago brothers at his job interview by creating beautiful new piping and and new handles for handbags.

Feliz Maria learned to tailor and sew complex leather pieces growing up in Santo Domingo. He moved to New Jersey to work at a Coach factory. He heard about Rago 10 years ago and knew it was where he wanted to work. "Things that come in to the shop beyond repair," says Marin admiringly, "Feliz finds a way to make them like new again."

Marin and the other counter employees have mastered multitasking; answering customer calls and handling \$1,000 handbags while typing up mail-in orders. And \$1,000 is often a conservative estimate. Rago frequently refurbishes priceless, one-of-a-kind items, like custom-made, turquoise, python Jordan sneakers by Balenciaga that needed a new row of stitching. Then there are the iconic, red-soled Christian Louboutin heels that line the shelves of the shining-and-resoling room.

Rago excels even at mundane tasks. "People used to take their Uggs to dry cleaners, but we clean them better," says Tom. "We do hundreds of pairs a week. There really isn't anything we can't do."

So what happens when the brothers decide to hang up their aprons for good? Tony has three college-aged children, Anthony, Marissa and Dean, and Tom has 17-year-old twins, Thomas and Eva. Most of the kids help out part-time to earn some cash, but their fathers refrain from pressuring them to carry on the family business. "My son said to me one day, 'I want to be a manager like my dad,'" recalls Tom with a laugh. "I said, 'Thomas, you've never even shined a pair of shoes!'" ■



"Thank God for the Short Hills Mall."

—Tom Rago

GRAB BAG: Luxury handbags hang to dry in the dyeing and refinishing room, above. Nestor Calderone, left, custom matches a leather color to fill a scratch.

