

VNY *La Voce di New York*

— *america Oggi* 1988 —

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The First Italian English Digital Daily in the US

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Travel

June 11, 2026

Made in Signa: How Tuscan Straw Hats Became a Global Fashion Icon

A museum near Florence explores the artisans, innovations, and legacy behind Italy's pioneering luxury export

Italian Hours
Lucy Gordan



The museum shop. Photo: Lucy Gordan

While simple straw-braided headwear for sun protection dates back to the Middle Ages in Tuscany, it wasn't until the mid-16th century, when their workmanship had reached a high-level art form, that Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-74) offered these meticulously woven hand-made hats as gifts to European royal visitors.



A boater, always the most popular straw hat for men Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

However, the defining moment for the industry came in 1714 when Domenico Sebastiano Michelacci (1669-1739), a visionary merchant originally from Galeata near Forlì, arrived in Signa, a town 10 miles north of Florence, and revolutionized the craft. He began cultivating a specific variety of spring wheat (*grano marzuolo*) to achieve high-quality non-edible straw. Because the long stalks were thin, flexible, and exceptionally shiny, they could produce a premium braid unlike anything else in Europe.

Throughout the 1700 and 1800s Michelacci's agricultural innovation turned the Florentine plains into a massive millinery fashion hub. Entire towns, especially Signa and Campi Bisenzio, dedicated themselves to this wheat's cultivation and its weaving process. Because the hats were then shipped from the bustling port of Livorno—being most popular in England—they earned the nickname “Leghorn hats”. Later, the completion of the Florence-Pisa-Livorno railway in 1844 further accelerated their distribution to high-fashion markets across Europe and the Americas, where they, the earliest globally esteemed Made-in-Italy fashion product, remained a status symbol until the mid-20th century when the Panama hat and Chinese market of synthetics nearly eclipsed them.

To learn more history and see the “machinery” used to produce these hats, take a local train from Florence three stops to Signa to visit the Municipal Straw Museum. Located at a ten-minute walk from Signa's station, it opened in 1997 at Viale Giuseppe Mazzini 5; its hours are 9 AM to 1 PM Tuesday-Saturday as well as 3-6 PM Tuesday and Thursday. Closed Sunday and Monday. Entrance fee: 3 to 5 euro.

Just inside the entrance under a roof of straw hats hanging from the ceiling is Bruno Catarzi's large terracotta statue of a



Bruno Cartarzi's statue of a trecciaiola Photo credit: Courtesy of the Municipal Straw Museum in Signa

woman braiding wheat. Known as *trecciaiole*, at first, they worked at home, moving to factories in the 19th century. To her left, past the museum shop with a selection of hats still produced by Signa artisans for sale, a video in multiple languages explains that, after harvesting by hand in the early morning the straw was left flat to dry outside for three days. The rotation of the sun and the night's dew made it ready to be cut the same size by the *macchina agguagliatrice* into compact bundles called *manate* which were then delivered to the *trecciaiole*.

Examples of various braid styles, often personal inventions, as well as of wooden machinery: the *agguagliatrice*, a *schiacciatrecce* to flatten the braids, and an *annaspo* which rolled the braids into skeins to be measured before sale to other factories or sewn immediately into hats by the best in-house



An agguagliatrice multiple. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

trecciaiole, are on display in the first of the first floor's four exhibition rooms. Also here are paintings of *trecciaiole* at work, some braiding, others sewing spirally from the *tondo* downwards to first form the hat's crown and then its brim.

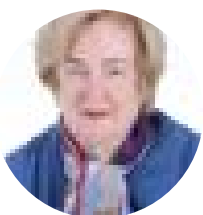
In the second room are a metal *agguagliatrice multiple*, so several hinged together maneuvered simultaneously by a wheel and used in factories, a shelf of irons used to stabilize the hat's form, and a wall of photographs showing all the phases of factory straw-hat production in the 1920s, plus a factory's work bench with a wooden mold and sewing machine. Instead, on display in the third room are finished products: mostly various models of straw hats, the most popular being the boater for men and the "Pamela" for women, as well as straw toys, cradles, baskets and chair seats. Displayed in the fourth room are post-World War Two products: straw mixed with synthetics, which include shoes, slippers, belts, jewelry, handbags, eyeglass frames and more. Demand has declined, but Signa handmade straw hats remain especially popular today with the movie industry.

Straw-hat artisans with shops in Signa include "Tesi Hats" since 1850, "Cintelli & Galluzzo" since 1991, "Filippo Catarzi" since 1910 and "Grevi" since 1875, which also has a shop at Via dei Fossi 7R in Florence.

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Italian Hours

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