

a&e



THE CHANGEMAKERS

THREE WOMEN WHO ARE HELPING SHAPE THE
FUTURE OF CINEMA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

ISSN 2078-1644
9 772078 164007

HONOURING TRADITION

HOSPITALITY

HONOURING TRADITION

VALERIANO ANTONIOLI, CEO OF LUNGARNO COLLECTION DISCUSSES THE GROUP'S EXQUISITE HOTEL PORTFOLIO

BY LINDSAY JUDGE

As the CEO of Lungarno Collection, Valeriano Antonioli leads one of Italy's most refined luxury hospitality groups, renowned for its seamless blend of heritage, elegance, and contemporary flair. Founded by the Ferragamo family, the group is deeply rooted in the legacy of Italian craftsmanship and style, extending the iconic fashion house's values into the world of bespoke hospitality. From the art-filled halls of Hotel Lungarno in Florence to the chic sophistication of Portrait Roma and Portrait Milano, Antonioli has played a pivotal role in shaping the group's vision—where every stay feels like a chapter from a well-lived Italian story. In this interview, he shares his insights on the evolution of luxury travel, Lungarno's unique identity, and the enduring influence of the Ferragamo family ethos.

Tell us about your role at Lungarno Collection and what it entails.

I entered the hospitality industry at a young age, driven by a passion for growth and excellence. I set clear goals for myself, and, through hard work and determination, I was fortunate to achieve them. After gaining international experience across various regions, I settled in Florence, where I now serve as the CEO of Lungarno Collection. In 2012, after two years with the Ferragamo family-owned Lungarno Collection, I identified some missed opportunities and set out to create something truly distinct. This led to the creation of the Portrait brand, a collection of award-winning hotels in Rome, Florence, and Milan. With Portrait, we've been able to transform traditional luxury into a more spontaneous, personalised experience, filling a significant gap in the luxury hotel industry.

What is your vision for the company today?

The vision of Lungarno Collection is to infuse each of our hotels and restaurants with the values and hospitality culture of the Ferragamo family. We are constantly exploring new cities and countries where we can authentically express our philosophy of Italian elegance and the Art of Italian Living. For us, expansion is not simply about opening new properties—it's about discovering destinations that reflect our commitment to authenticity, craftsmanship, and a meaningful connection to local culture. As we evaluate new opportunities, we focus on places with rich heritage, vibrant cultural scenes, and a refined sense of luxury that aligns with the expectations of our guests.

Tell us about the evolution of Lungarno.

Lungarno Collection began its journey in Florence, the heart of Italian art and culture, where it owns and operates four distinctive properties: Hotel Lungarno (including Lungarno Apartments), Gallery Hotel Art, Portrait Firenze, and Hotel Continentale. All are

located just steps from the iconic Ponte Vecchio and offer stunning views over the Arno River, each with its own unique character and charm.

The group has since expanded into two of Italy's most iconic cities. In Rome, Portrait Roma offers a refined boutique experience with just 14 suites, nestled near the Spanish Steps. In Milan, the recently opened Portrait Milano marks a bold step forward, set within a restored former archbishop's seminary, it provides an immersive hospitality experience in the heart of the city's fashion district.

Beyond its hotels, Lungarno Collection is also celebrated for its culinary excellence. It manages three renowned restaurants: the Michelin-starred Borgo San Jacopo, Caffè dell'Orto, and The Fusion Bar & Restaurant. These are complemented by three signature bars in Florence—La Terrazza at Hotel Continentale, 701 Rooftop Bar at Gallery Hotel Art, and Piccolo Bistro & Bar at Hotel Lungarno—as well as the elegant 10_11 Bar-Garden-Restaurant in Milan.

At the core of this evolution lies the Portrait brand, representing the pinnacle of Lungarno's personalised approach to luxury. With Portrait Roma, Portrait Firenze, and Portrait Milano, the brand redefines the guest experience, eschewing traditional standards in favour of bespoke hospitality that fosters a deep, authentic connection with each city.

You opened the first fashion hotel in 1997, but today many brands are following in your footsteps—what do you think is the secret to success today in this category?

While Lungarno Collection benefits from the heritage of the Ferragamo family, we are not an extension of the Ferragamo fashion brand. This distinction has been key to our success. From the very beginning, our aim was not to simply translate a fashion label into hospitality, but to build a luxury hotel brand rooted in the values of timeless elegance, craftsmanship, and personalised service.

Today, many fashion houses are entering the hospitality space, seeing it as an opportunity to extend their brand identity into physical, experiential realms. There's no doubt that aligning with a recognisable name offers advantages, but fashion, by nature, is seasonal and ever-evolving, while hospitality demands permanence and consistency. A successful hotel brand must stay relevant and desirable year after year, not just for a season.

Our approach has always been to draw from the Ferragamo family's cultural sensibility and tradition of innovation, rather than relying on the fashion name itself. This has allowed us to develop a distinctive identity—one that is deeply personal, intentionally niche, and centred on creating immersive, beautifully crafted experiences in iconic locations.



The Portrait brand, for example, was built from the ground up, not on instant recognition, but on substance—through exquisite design, intimate service, and a philosophy of tailored luxury. In the long run, we believe this foundation will lead to enduring global recognition, attracting guests who value authenticity, discretion, and a truly personal connection.

How do Lungarno's hotels remain modern but also honour the legacy of the Ferragamo family?

Balancing contemporary elegance with the heritage of the Ferragamo family is at the heart of Lungarno Collection's philosophy. We believe that true luxury comes from authenticity, where the richness of history and the sophistication of modern living coexist in harmony. As with all our hotels, this vision is brought to life through the creative direction of renowned Italian architect Michele Bönan, who has designed all Lungarno properties. His work blends classical Italian elements with contemporary refinement, creating spaces that reflect the timeless elegance associated with the Ferragamo legacy while appealing to today's global traveller.

But honouring legacy goes beyond design. In Florence, Rome, and Milan, we embrace the cultural fabric of each city, working closely with local artisans, designers, and creatives who represent the best of Italian craftsmanship. These collaborations allow us to preserve and reinterpret tradition in a way that feels both relevant and refined.

Staying modern also means being forward-thinking. We continuously observe and anticipate global trends—not only in design but also in service, lifestyle, and guest expectations. This allows us to evolve our offerings with intention, ensuring each guest experience feels fresh, meaningful, and tailored.





The result is a distinctly Italian hospitality experience—rooted in heritage, elevated by innovation, and deeply personal. Our guests don't just stay with us; they connect with a story, a style, and a legacy that continues to evolve.

Tell us about the design of the hotels and what makes them unique?

Design is at the very core of the Lungarno Collection's identity, shaped by a 50-year collaboration between our President, Leonardo Ferragamo, and Michele Bönan. Together, they have cultivated a distinctive aesthetic that blends timeless elegance with modern sophistication, emphasising craftsmanship, bespoke details, and the use of precious materials.

Each property within the collection tells a unique story through its design:

- Hotel Lungarno, our flagship in Florence, evokes the feeling of a luxurious riverboat, nestled along the Arno. Guests are surrounded by an extraordinary private 20th-century art collection of over 400 works, including pieces by Picasso and Cocteau. The experience is enriched by our renowned concierge service, which opens the door to Florence's hidden treasures, and a Michelin-starred culinary journey at Borgo San Jacopo.

- Gallery Hotel Art was Florence's first design hotel. Conceived as a contemporary art gallery, it hosts rotating exhibitions and photographic vernissages. Its modern, creative energy is complemented by the Fusion Bar & Restaurant, offering global tapas and innovative cocktails.
- Continentale channels the glamorous energy of the 1950s with a playful yet romantic spirit. Its vibrant interiors are matched by its iconic La Terrazza Rooftop Bar, offering one of the most breathtaking views over Florence.
- The Portrait hotels embody tailored luxury. Each location is intimately connected to its city's cultural heart: in Rome, overlooking Piazza di Spagna on Via Condotti; in Florence, beside the Ponte Vecchio with views of the Arno; and in Milan, housed in a historic seminary on Corso Venezia, in the heart of the city's fashion district. The Portrait brand offers a deeply personalized experience, where every detail feels curated just for you.

What are your thoughts on the industry in the Middle East?

I have been travelling to Dubai since 2006 and during these years I have seen the city evolving into a great innovative hub: during my last stay, I admired the architecture, the beaches, the wonderful restaurants, the gardens, and the people.

Are there any plans for expansion into this region?

If the right opportunity were to arise, I would be happy to consider opening a Portrait hotel in Dubai. We are committed to seeing the Portrait brand grow, and in constant search of a future location, and in part determined nevertheless by the same iconic position accessible to locals and where we are able to transport our Italian DNA.

Tell us about more about portrait collection.

The word Portrait speaks to individuality. It's about capturing the unique essence of every guest, just as a portrait captures the soul of its subject. From the beginning, the vision behind the Portrait Collection has been to redefine luxury hospitality through deeply personalised experiences that go beyond aesthetics and comfort, and instead engage, inspire, and connect on a human level.

At the heart of this vision is our international Lifestyle Team—a group of hospitality professionals with an innate sense of care and an intuitive ability to anticipate guest needs. More than a team, they are the soul of the Portrait experience. Their talent lies in making each guest feel truly seen, understood, and welcomed—not with scripted service, but through genuine, thoughtful gestures and meaningful connections. This human touch is what transforms a stay into something unforgettable.





Portrait Milano represents a new chapter in this journey. It is more than a hotel—it is a destination. Housed in a former archiepiscopal seminary, it offers a unique urban retreat in the heart of Milan's fashion district. With its grand central square, curated cultural events, restaurants, boutiques, and lush gardens, it is designed to be open and inclusive—a place where locals, visitors, and guests come together in an atmosphere of elegant informality and discovery.

The evolution of the Portrait brand is guided by a commitment to authenticity, emotional resonance, and the art of Italian living. As we continue to grow, our focus remains on delivering moments of beauty, belonging, and personal connection—crafted not just by design, but by the people who bring each space to life.

What is the biggest challenge in your position today?

Perhaps the greatest challenge today is the unpredictability and influence of geopolitics, which directly impacts travel patterns and demand. Events like the Covid-19 pandemic have also highlighted the responsibility I hold—not only toward our guests, but also toward our entire team—their well-being and professional stability during one of the most severe crises our industry has faced.

What would you still like to achieve with the Group?

My goal is to contribute to the Group becoming one of the most respected and recognisable Italian luxury hotel brands, known not only for excellence in service, but for offering an experience that is distinctly Italian, deeply authentic, and globally admired. I

want us to be synonymous with refined hospitality that reflects our heritage, our culture, and our passion, while setting new standards in innovation, guest connection, and local immersion. Achieving this means building a brand that inspires pride within our teams and loyalty from our guests around the world.

What do you believe is the secret to unrivalled service in the hospitality industry today?

The secret to unrivalled service today lies in creating genuinely human, culturally connected experiences that go beyond traditional hospitality standards. Guests no longer seek just comfort or efficiency—they're looking for a sense of place, belonging, and connection. To deliver this, we must break from stereotypes and instead offer a style of hospitality that mirrors how we ourselves experience the city: personal, immersive, and emotionally engaging. This begins with deep listening—truly understanding what matters to each guest and being agile enough to respond with thoughtful, individualized touches. It's powered by a team of people who don't just have skills, but the innate desire to serve, to share, and to make others feel welcome. When staff are genuinely passionate, knowledgeable about their surroundings, and proud to represent the local culture, they naturally create a service style that feels effortless and unforgettable.

In short, unrivalled service is not about perfection—it's about authentic connection, local insight, and a heartfelt commitment to hospitality as a way of life. ☺