



# SADDLE UP

The leading luxury leather house looks to the future

**Y**ou see them everywhere—strolling Park Avenue in New York, shopping Knightsbridge in London, dangling off tanned, toned arms in Cannes and Monaco, and stuffed under first-class seats of planes all over the world. But the Hermès Birkin looks particularly at home in Paris, reflected in the storefronts of the Rue Faubourg, where in the glass vitrines of number 24 contain more exotic and sought after versions of the iconic handbag than anywhere else in the world. This is, in a sense, the ancestral home of the Birkin bag, an enduring symbol of the luxury, good taste and humor of one of the world's most legendary luxury houses.

To witness the birth of one of these bags, however, you must head out of the glamorous city centre and into the suburbs to one of their ten

production sites, all located in France. We enter the Harmonie workshop, a nondescript commercial building just down the street from Hermès headquarters in Pantin, on the outskirts of Paris. The waiting area, on this warm summer Friday, is unattended as only a French office on a summer Friday can be, and we peek into a vast fabric warehouse ogling piles of silks and cottons until Kerry Hollinger, head of the small leather goods collections, beckons us onward. She explains that what we've been looking at is one of the shirting workshops; Hermès ID is also in this building, where the wildest Hermès customer dreams come





true—helicopters, boats, motorcycles, anything that can benefit from the touch of Hermès leather is customised here. But what I've really come to see, she says, is upstairs.

The company, founded in 1837, stayed put in their offices above the 24 rue Faubourg store until 1992, when they were finally forced to expand; they've already outgrown what they still call "the new offices" and are continuing to buy as many neighboring buildings as they can. The official number of 10 sites is not exactly correct—there are 10 for bags, plus small leather goods and luggage, plus a special studio for alligator bags, but not the wallets, which are made elsewhere, and not the saddles, which are still made above the store, as they have been for the past 172 years. The degree of specialisation amongst the 250 craftspeople employed here and elsewhere is staggering; it's not just corporate speak



when they say that these are workshops, not factories. Indeed, as is immediately evident when we step out of the elevator, it is the physical and philosophical opposite of a vast room full of people as interchangeable as the parts they're making—everything, everyone, is specialised.

In the Harmonie workshop, one is witnessing not just the creation of the legendary bags, but the creation of something the company considers just as important as its products—a new generation of artisans, trained since their youth to be the best of the best. France has a leather school from which Hermès takes the top eight students and apprentices them

for their own special training. "What they learn isn't as intricate as what we do, the quality is higher," says Hollinger, and the students spend about 15 months training in this and other workshops, by the end of which time they will have made one Birkin and one Kelly bag, which between them include all the proprietary details for finishing, inside and out. "They work under someone more experienced and we really emphasise quality to them over and over."

The apprentices in the workshop we visited were mainly focused, on this sunny Friday afternoon, on mastering sewing and finishing, but each step of the process is as labor-intensive as the next—there are no throwaway tasks. The time it takes to train an apprentice fully is an investment on which the company refuses to cut corners: "After about five years they're paying for themselves; it takes about ten years to master the whole range," she says, "and at the end of making a bag, the headmaster does the quality control—if they're not perfect but can be fixed, he will send them back to the craftsman, if they're just not up to scratch, they're destroyed."

The quality control for an Hermès bag begins at the very earliest stage of the process. The leather buyers choose their own skins from the tanners, making selections at each stage of the tanning and finishing processes—they'll cull from the initial batch, then again after the first tan, then again after the second, and then the buyers make their final picks. The other skins will go to other leather-goods houses, but none of them could be said to be using Hermès leather—it's that eye for the best that makes their bags what they are. This, of course refers just to calfskin; Hermès produces many exotic skin bags as well, and recently made headlines with the news that they were breeding their own crocodiles in order to fill the demand for their bags—a practice that makes sense if you consider the disposition of crocodiles and the difficulty of finding one in the







wild with the unscarred, undamaged skin necessary for a bag. Regardless of the type, the skins go next to the cutters, who select from the skins for particular work orders and cut them to specifications, and the neatly wrapped packages of cut leather forms arrive in flat plastic bags at the workshops, packaged with shiny shrink-wrapped hardware and the details of each work order—everything the assigned craftsman will need to make the bag from start

to finish. “We know who did each of the bags,” says Hollinger, “it’s important for our pride and for our quality.” Each craftsman has their own tools, and each station reflects the various heights, hands, and quirks of its owner—the apprentices learn over time to arrange their things just as they will need them.

We move from table to table, observing some of the dozens of steps that go into creating one of these bags. Each edge, for instance, has a line that’s hand-embossed along the threadline—“they have to get the pressure and oil just right,” she says—a detail which many companies machine onto their leather bags to simulate that same effect. Little bits of bags and leather, like bright flowers, pepper the workshop—here, the handle of a tool is wrapped in red pebbled leather; there, the rough edge of a metal hanging rack is padded with a strip of hot pink kidskin. All the leathers are coloured on site by hand; the first craftswoman we pass is putting together the second of a pair of bag handles, all leather inside and out—a leather core wrapped in a finished leather strip. Many are busily chatting and edging at the same time. The edge finishing is a slow, methodical process; Hermès edges are always dyed brown or black, in keeping with their roots as a saddlery, and just one of the almost imperceptible details that gives their bags that classic look. Coat after coat of dye is applied, let to dry, and then the edges are sanded into a perfectly smooth, rounded half-moon edge. In the hour we were there, there were several women who did nothing but this, sanding away at edges so perfectly beveled it was impossible for the casual observer to believe they were shaped by hand, let alone had any irregularities—but then again, these are not casual observers, and, says Hollinger, “Its sanded and dyed as many times as it takes to get it right—there are layers and layers on it by the end.”

Two tables in the back have larger bags gripped in cork-lined vises; a 40cm camel leather Birkin and a larger Kelly bag in a dreamy gray-blue color, one of the newest introductions to the range. Both craftspeople are absorbed in saddle stitching the thick layers of the tops of the bags, the signature stitch that makes wealthy women all over the world confident that they can stuff their handbags full of the detritus of a life well-lived, throw it into the backseat or drop it on the floor, and it will still look every penny’s worth as beautiful as the day it came out of its orange box. Done with two needles, the saddle stitch is a very strong and secure stitch, a legacy, as the name suggests, from Hermès’ roots as a saddlery. A single piece of sturdy linen thread is covered in beeswax then stitched from both ends, a matter of practical importance that guarantees if one stitch breaks, the rest of the thread won’t fall apart, and it can go without being restitched indefinitely—perhaps not a priority for a modern handbag, but a definite asset on a horse’s saddle mid-ride or mid-show. The craftsman uses an awl to make a hole, then deftly switches the awl for the needle and pulls both ends of the thread through



to make a very tight knot. Hollinger interjects, “When they start stitching, they finish; they don’t take breaks, they don’t go out—because maybe after lunch, they won’t have the same energy, the same stitch.” And truly, even as I peer over their shoulders, those in the middle of their stitching remain in their Zen-like calm—chatting with their neighbours, music playing, but clearly absorbed in the rhythm of their work.

The bags are actually made inside out, the basis for Hermès’ claim that every inch of their bags are equally perfect—an almost unfathomable thing to imagine, except that then a woman beckons us over to the corner, where a black bag that would look at home on the shelf of any boutique sits on her work table. “Black lizard,” whispers Hollinger, “she’s been here a while. You wouldn’t want to start on one of those!” and indeed, as she picks up the bag, flips the handles to point towards the floor and begins to firmly, literally, snake them down the sides of the bag, working the squeaking leather centimeter by centimeter, I would indeed not want that. I’m not even touching the bag and I’m breaking out in a nervous sweat, watching approximately \$15,000 of material, history, and human labour take such punishment. She smiles, in on the joke, as she pushes out the first corner of the bag’s bottom panel with an audible “pop!” and then suddenly, three “pops!” later, there it is, not entirely finished but fully recognisable in its black, glossy glory, a 30cm Birkin bag. With nary a break in the action, she reaches for a dull wooden knife and begins working in the folds on the side of the bag, the end of her labor nearing.

Her neighbour, a very dashing young blonde Frenchman, is finishing work on the hardware, one of the last steps in the process, and requiring skills beyond that of a leatherworker into that of a silversmith—each piece of hardware is nailed through the leather, and then the end of the nail is cut off and hammered down carefully until its formed into a nailhead, making it nearly impossible for the hardware to fall off. “Every little bit is hand finished,” notes Hollinger almost unnecessarily, as I am nearly dizzy with the amount of considered detail in every step of the process, from the interior finishing to the cabinet of linen threads, in every color they produce plus



*Robert Chavez*



white, which is not even a white, just the natural color of the high-quality linen thread. Different amounts of time are allotted per bag varying according to size and material—a basic Birkin is about 15 hours; 23-24 hours for crocodile, and it only goes up from there. “All the detailing makes the bags costly, not expensive—it adds up to so many hours by so many people,” Hollinger says, which of course raises the inevitable question when discussing Hermès handbags—how is it possible that a bag sold at a price which is more than many people make in a year has waiting lists that are years old? And in a larger sense, how has this company, which sells only the highest end leather, silk, china and other luxury goods, managed to not only survive but thrive and grow in the midst of an economic crisis?

**T**he answer, according to Robert Chavez, CEO of Hermès USA, is their deep understanding of their customer and their commitment to their product. Hermès has never been about ubiquity or flash, and that understated image is both more attractive to their key customers and easier to maintain. “We want a very limited distribution for our products, and I think that’s key to weathering the storm—and we’ve been really all right so far. Remember last fall’s 70 percent off sales? I remember walking into Saks Fifth Avenue, seeing designer merchandise thrown all over the place, being sold for nothing. I was horrified. We didn’t do it; people came in and said “Don’t you have anything on sale? Everything else is on sale.” We just said no, sorry, and it helped us—our customers fell off a bit, but it’s helped us in the long run to maintain.” He also guided them past several other potential pitfalls that befell many of their competitors, rather than falling in to the lure of ever-larger stores and ever-easier money. “I draw a bit from them, but it’s more about what not to do. We have great creative people here figuring out where we can go, so they come up with their ideas, and its up to me to see what we have to avoid. Every time I see some gigantic mega-flagship, I think my god, I’m glad that’s not us, and I think right now a lot of them are regretting things like that.”

Hermès’ devotion to their core customers, a systematic program of communication between sales associates and regulars that was implemented at the beginning of Chavez’s tenure, has seen dividends. “A lot of the once a year shoppers, who come in to buy that one tie, that one bracelet, they dropped off significantly this year, but our regulars stayed with us. There was some pulling back, which the staff saw, but for the most part they’re still here.” And, he says, their commitment is not just to moving product, but to truly understanding and making their customers happy when they enter a store. “There’s always been a feeling of wanting to surprise our clients, that’s a word we use a lot around here. There’s always been an effort to do new things.” However, that surprise never comes at the cost of the key elements that are the signature of the





brand. “I think people know us for three things. They know us for leather—bags, sure, but also belts, small leather goods, other things, and then of course for silk as well. The third thing is really our colour.” Colour, he explains, is an icon at Hermès—“people notice it and appreciate it. I saw the color kitchen in Lyon, where we’ve made something like 70,000 colours, and it’s just incredible, something people respond to. And of course different colours will sell in different places, maybe bright pinks and greens in Palm Beach and darker colours in Boston—but that’s what is again great about the buyers [who hand-select what they want to stock from each collection for their particular stores and customers]. It also creates a funny phenomenon—if you see something in a store that you love, you better buy it, because you might not see it again. It even happens to me, I remember being somewhere and seeing a tie I loved and then thinking, oh, well, okay, I’ll just get it when I get back to New York, and when I got here they’d sold out of them entirely. And once they’re gone, there’s no more.” It may seem counter-intuitive, but the company has posted increasing profits in the two toughest quarters since

the beginning of the recession, and their competitors are scrambling to get back to a similarly stable position.

Back in the Harmonie workshop, we inhale the smell of cauterising leather, growing smooth under what looks like the stroke of an electric fountain pen, our guide remarks that it was only 16 years ago that they heated the smoothing tools on Bunsen burners sitting on their tables, requiring yet another layer of ability to gauge just how hot your tool was. Electricity, frankly, seems like a better idea in a room full of dangling bits of cloth and thread and leather, and the craftswoman smiles wryly when the Bunsen burners are mentioned. Progress has not left the workshop untouched, but certain aspects of this traditional labor





necessarily retain an old-fashioned feel. For instance, men usually work on larger bags—not out of any ingrained preference, she explains, but it takes a lot of strength to stitch through that much leather. “In the trunk workshop, they’re making a hole and then stitching through layers of wood and leather together. In the small leather goods workshops, the staff is almost entirely female, where we need smaller fingers to finesse the stitching and turning.” There is no preference given to anything other than the absolute top level of skill, and that makes hiring difficult enough. “You really need someone who wants to work with their hands, wants to work in a group, but there are places here to grow. They do advance, but they have to be very gifted to begin with.” Of the few people who have left, Hollinger says, “a lot of those came back—it’s just not possible to do this level of work anywhere else.” The nature of Hermès as a family company and a French company means that constant hiring and firing is not a habit or even a possibility were more labor were available, so instead, we have this—the best people, using the best materials, to make the best product they can, every time. ■

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