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The meaning of things

Hermès' objects of desire

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"A horse does not want to be ridiculous."

Out of context, it's an odd phrase, the kind of thing Eric Cantona might have whispered before leaving a press conference. But when heard within the hushed confines of the Émile Hermès Collection – known informally as the "museum" – at Hermès' headquarters at 24 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris's 8th arrondissement, it makes complete sense.

Meneshould de Bazelaire du Chatelle is exactly as one might imagine the artistic director of the cultural patrimony of Hermès to be. "Chic" doesn't really cover it. Drifting through the creaky wood-panelled rooms and corridors, a light jumper tied neatly over her shoulders, she is exceptionally elegant, softly spoken and polite. You get the sense that Meneshould knows every inch of these rooms by heart. Were you to nudge something out of place or spin a picture on its hook by a few degrees, she would notice. To that end, visitors should be careful – there is a lot of stuff to bump into.

Everywhere you turn, there are horses. Paintings of horses, sculptures of horses, saddles, carriages, spurs, whips, harnesses and memorabilia. There are hundreds of other items, too. Pieces of furniture, cigarette cases, penknives, clocks, children's toys, glassware, crockery, clothing, jewellery, weapons and books. Thousands of books. And hardly any of it made by Hermès. But the overriding theme is decidedly equine. The horse, Meneshould explains, is central to everything Hermès has ever done and will ever do.

The brand was founded by Thierry Hermès in 1837. He left Krefeld in the west of Germany in 1828 and, so the story goes, walked the 281 miles to Paris, before opening a harness workshop on Rue Basse-du-Rempart in the very heart of the city. Hermès quickly garnered a renown for elegantly understated and well-made tack. Eventually, his son Charles Émile took control of the company, moving the headquarters to Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and starting a bespoke harness and saddle service for the city's finest coach builders. Then came his son Adolphe Hermès, who was joined at the helm by his brother Émile-Maurice in 1902. The company operated as Hermès Freres until the Twenties, when Adolphe left and Émile-Maurice took sole control of the brand.

It was Émile-Maurice who amassed the equestrian collection, and Émile-Maurice who led Hermès from a harness and saddle company to the Hermès we know today, the Hermès that makes perhaps the finest clothing, accessories, fragrances, homeware, furniture and watches one can buy. The Hermès that is a byword for luxury. It was also Émile-Maurice who cemented the icon of the horse into the house credo.

"He was born in the family, born to dress horses," says Meneshould. "And he wanted to remember that Hermès' first customer was the horse. The horse is not concerned by the logos, the brand, the price. The horse is demanding comfort and elegance. A horse does not want to be ridiculous. So his idea was to keep the horse as a model. And it sounds like a paradox, but the horse is still a scout for Hermès today. When we don't know if 'this' or 'this' is the thing to do for Hermès, just ask the horse and he will know because he is at the source of Hermès, not just at the back but as a leader. The message of this collection is to remember the horse, never forget the horse and try to be worthy of the horse."

Clearly, Émile-Maurice Hermès had a thing for things, too. He began collecting at the age of 12 when, against his parents' advice, he spent the proceeds of his first tip (two Francs) on a "*cane galant*", a thin walking stick that had a delicate parasol hidden within. It was to be offered to a lady if the sun became too much while out for a stroll. A strange thing for a child to want, especially as it was more than 80 years old when he bought it, but it typified the kind of thing he was into, or at least the kind of thing he would grow to love.

"His golden rule was beauty through usefulness," explains Meneshould. "His contemporaries collected French 18th-century [objects and art] because it was considered a thing of taste. But this didn't concern Émile-Maurice. He collected to enrich his vision for the company."

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Walking around the museum, the idea of "beauty through usefulness" is visible everywhere. There is another cane that features a little velvet pouch, in case you decide to gather mushrooms on your walk in the woods, and another, for insomniacs, features a tiny hidden candle at →

the top. Then there's an architect's portfolio that folds out into a table, and then a Napoleonic trunk, which might be one of the coolest, most mind-bogglingly natty things I've ever seen.

Most days, Émile-Maurice would sneak out of a secret door in the bookshelf of his office to view lots and place bids at the Parisian auction houses (such as Hôtel Drouot in the 9th arrondissement, where much of his collection was bought). On one such trip, he found a trunk once owned by Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès, a statesman in Napoleon Bonaparte's government, and one of the authors of the *Code civil des Français* (Napoleonic Code). Within the sturdy looking wooden and metal case, designed with a slanted base to be fitted on to a coach, was a perfectly arranged collage of goods, all slotted snugly into perfect position like puzzle pieces. There would have been everything the statesman needed on his travels, from shaving equipment to tableware. Menehould explains that it was of great interest to Émile-Maurice but it was too expensive. The week after, he had changed his mind and went back, only to find that the dealer had sold all the contents – the razors, the bowls, the mirrors etc – separately. All that was left were the keys. But Émile-Maurice bought it anyway.

The lock on the trunk is hidden, you need an oddly shaped key that pops a spring-loaded door open to get at it. Inside, further keys are needed to open other compartments. It is “the secret”, explains Menehould, and Émile-Maurice and his friend, the car maker Ettore Bugatti, loved “the secret” (when we are shown “the secret”, there is an audible intake of breath among the group). It led to Hermès creating a series of bespoke suitcases for one of Bugatti's cars.

A few paces from the trunk is a 1928 Hermès picnic set. Designed by Émile-Maurice to go in the car, it is wrapped in pig leather (better for humidity) and its contents – sandwich boxes, cutlery, crockery and an insulated flask for your caviar, among other things – is perfectly positioned to allow for easy access and closing of the case. Although a simpler version, the parallels with the Napoleonic trunk are clear.

“[It is] his vision of luxury,” says Menehould, “very solid, very simple, adapted to function, and that lasts. You don't have decoration everywhere. His obsession was that the detail must be perfect, very fine. It looks simple, but it accompanies your movement very well. For Émile-Maurice, the motorcar was like the horse: deserving of the best.”

The museum, which is not open to the public, is maintained as what Émile-Maurice intended it to be: a source of inspiration for the creative minds at Hermès. A place where the designers can come to marvel at the things he himself marvelled at, and see how they can inspire new collections and new objects. “We have a phrase: ‘Les vase communicant’,” explains Menehould, describing the principle in fluid mechanics where a liquid will fill three connected vessels to an equal level. “One vase is the past, one vase is the creation and one is the future. The more we need to create, the more we need to discover into the past. All civilisation is creative – stories of innovation, craftsmanship – and we want just to be a part of this story, and never cut the chain.”



In “The Psychology of Stuff and Things”, an essay for the British Psychological Society, Dr Christian Jarrett explains that an inherent attachment to certain objects is almost unavoidable. “Our relationship with stuff starts early. The idea that we can own something, possess it

as if a part of ourselves, is one that children grasp by the age of two. And by six, they exhibit the ‘endowment effect’, placing extra value on an object simply by virtue of it being, or having been, theirs.”

Jarrett goes on to explain that as we grow into adulthood, we see our possessions as extensions of ourselves, and that they act as “signals” of what we are to other people. This is what “conspicuous consumption” is, and it is perhaps most evident in heavily branded goods. That accounts for the vast majority of clothing in the modern fashion industry, but doesn't account for most collections, which are often kept relatively hidden away, acting as private sources of satisfaction.

You may think people collect things because they like them enough to want more, and that may well be the case. Research by Professor Itamar Simonson, an expert in consumer decision-making, based in the Stanford Graduate School of Business in California, recently suggested that it may actually be more a question of guilt or embarrassment. Owning two of something is unjustifiable, so instead we rationalise the decision to keep both things by buying more and starting a collection. Simonson refers to the purchase of the third thing as the “tipping point”. (So if you've just taken receipt of a hat-trick-completing leather jacket, warn your loved ones there will be more to come.)

Though the museum is full of horse-related things, Émile-Maurice didn't collect just one specific object or artist or epoch (the youngest piece in the collection is a zoetrope moving-picture device from 2003, and the oldest is a Neolithic statue of a horse from the Mehrgarh civilisation, thought to be many millennia old). For something to merit a spot here, it needed to be intelligent, irreverent and beautifully made. “It was extremely stimulating for Émile-Maurice to work with all these objects of the past, challenging him to go further on the road of creativity and to project him into the future,” affirms Menehould.



A part of that future resides in Pantin, a district in the north west of the city, beyond the *périphérique* that demarcates the shimmering, history-steeped centre of Paris from the industrial outlands. On a corner there is a gate, tall and fading after years of neglect. The gate offers access to a building as unremarkable as any building in any suburbs of a European city, and a million miles from the chicness of 24 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. But inside you'll find the Sur-Mesure, Hermès' bespoke department, a place where customers' dreams are made manifest.

“If you asked me what an achievement is at a house like Hermès,” explains Axel de Beaufort, Hermès' director of design and engineering for special projects, “it's really when you manage to bring emotion into an object. When you bring emotion into something, then yes, maybe we can call it luxury. And then luxury is affordable for everybody.”

Did you know that you can buy an Hermès skateboard? Or an Hermès bicycle? There are Hermès boxing gloves, in case you like your pugilism luxurious, and there is even an Hermès anvil, complete with handmade leather anvil cover. Nothing piquing your interest? Well fear not. If you've got the time, money and inclination, you can get de Beaufort and his team to make you just about anything. One client commissioned a rickshaw. Would you like an Hermès rickshaw?

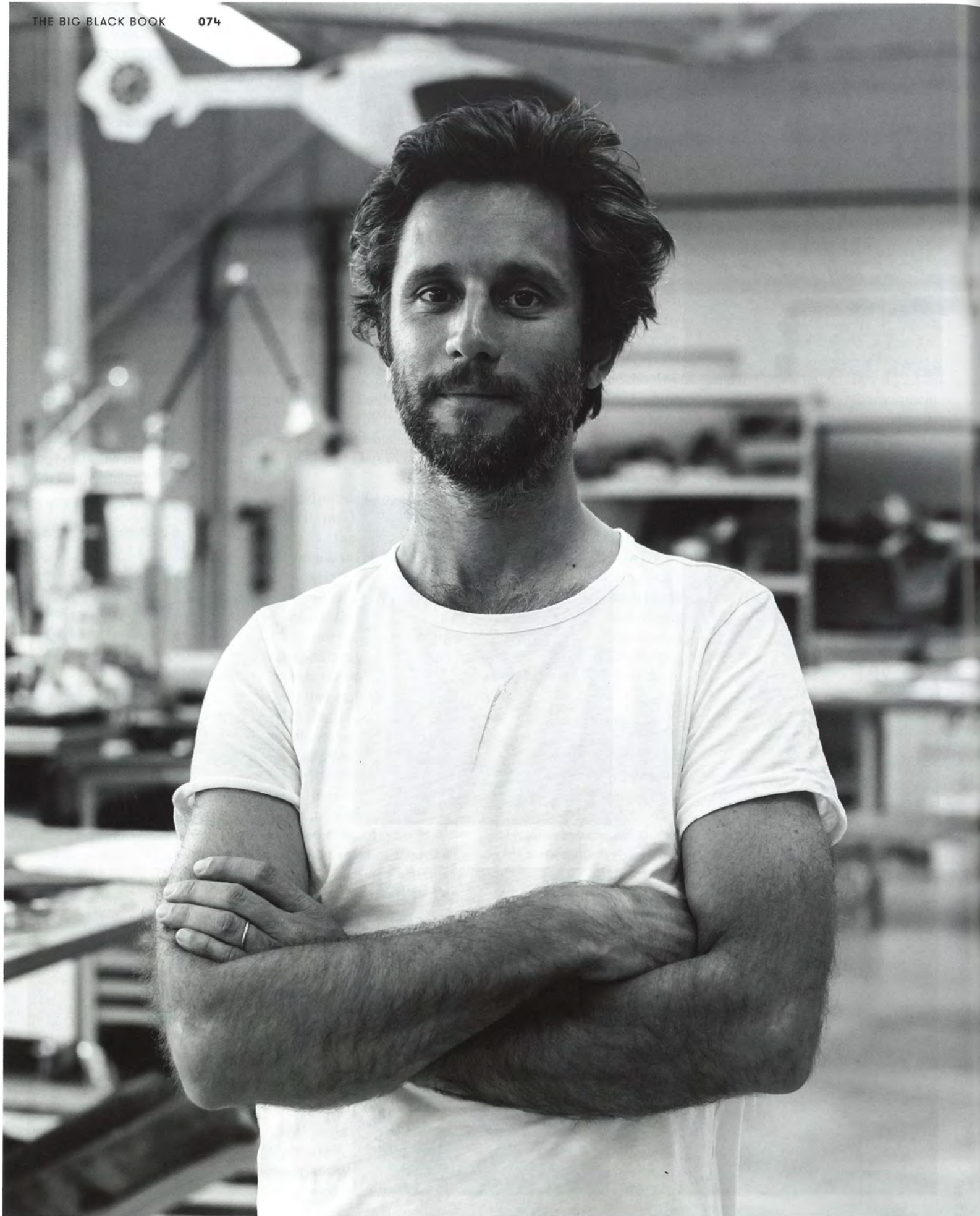
In line with Émile-Maurice Hermès' penchant for wonder and levity, the brand has been making curious, whimsical, artisanal versions of everyday things for many years. At the museum, Menehould



AMONG THE CURIOSITIES AMASSED IN THE ÉMILE HERMÈS COLLECTION ARE A NAPOLEON-ERA TRUNK FILLED WITH TRAVELLING ESSENTIALS (TOP RIGHT); A 1928 PIG-LEATHER PICNIC BASKET (BELOW LEFT); THE FIRST HERMÈS BAG WITH A ZIPPER (BOTTOM LEFT); AND A CANE WITH A POUCH TO FACILITATE THE COLLECTING OF MUSHROOMS (BOTTOM RIGHT)

PREVIOUS PAGE: DECORATIVE VINTAGE HORSE-RIDING EQUIPMENT ON DISPLAY IN THE “MUSEUM”





(LEFT) AXEL DE BEAUFORT, HERMÈS DIRECTOR OF DESIGN AND ENGINEERING FOR SPECIAL PROJECTS
ABOVE: A SKATEBOARD IS ONE OF THE CONTEMPORARY BESPOKE DESIGNS ON DISPLAY IN THE SUR-MESURE SHOWROOM



HERMÈS' THE SUR-MESURE DESIGN STUDIO IN THE PARIS SUBURBS IS A HUB OF WORKSTATIONS, TOOLS AND MATERIALS (ABOVE), WITH WHICH CRAFTSPEOPLE APPLY LUXURY STYLINGS TO ALL MANNER OF COMMISSIONS, INCLUDING STEERING WHEELS (RIGHT)

explains that in the Twenties there was an Hermès yo-yo, and once, on a visit to a Parisian flea market, she found an Hermès bag in the shape of a little dog. But it was only in 2015 that de Beaufort and his team started the “My Hermès Dream” project, which invited each of the brand’s stores around the world to suggest something – anything – to create, providing it wasn’t a bag. (Le Sur-Mesure department already makes lots of bags.) It threw up a few odd suggestions, which have proven to be hits, such as the skateboard (hundreds have been sold), a kite and a picnic basket. Then there was also a foosball table (priced at £55,600). They ended up making 26 of those. And this autumn, Hermès will unveil a fly fishing set, originally requested by one of the stores in Japan but now available to all.

In the showroom there are boxing gloves and the skateboard and a prototype for a yacht’s wheel among other things on shelves. White, 3D printed-looking models are arranged against one wall. Then in the middle of the room is a Voisin C28, a car from the Thirties that looks as if someone wrapped the art deco movement in riveted aluminium and put it on wheels. The car’s interior has been re-set by Hermès in flawless tan leather. It’s so beautiful, you can’t imagine anyone would be mad enough to actually drive it. Outshined somewhat by the car is a Yamaha motorcycle, which has also had many of its vital organs cocooned in leather. From a shelf, de Beaufort plucks the frame of a bicycle. “We did a big functional analysis about cycling,” he says, “and we didn’t try to buy from a brand and put some leather on it and say, ‘This is a new Hermès bike.’ We did real design work, made by hand in France – it’s one of the lightest in the world, less than one kilogram. As a brand we don’t talk so much about these technical things. But what I try to do with this kind of technical project is bring ‘something’. And for me, cycling is not about being a hipster, it’s about cycling.”

By trade, de Beaufort is a yacht designer. His relationship with Hermès began when he consulted on a project 10 years ago, and then

he became involved more and more until in 2013 the brand asked him to take over the design department, which he says has “always existed but never been organised”. De Beaufort is a proper designer, and keen to stress that the Sur-Mesure is a proper design studio, not just a place where rich people place orders for expensive luggage, but where questions are asked, research is done and problems are solved.

“Sometimes people say they want to see a big ‘H’ and when we talk with them we say they have come to the wrong house. We are not here for advertising, we are here to bring what you will never get anywhere else,” he says.



If the museum is, as Menehould described, like “Ali Baba’s cave”, then the Sur-Mesure design studio is a mad scientist’s mountain-top lair. Through a narrow corridor (past the pictures of an Aston Martin DB4 that de Beaufort and his team refitted with Hermès leather; he points out that they weren’t required to do the boot, but they installed a hidden umbrella and wrapped the fire extinguisher in leather, because how could they not?) the space opens up, all light and air and serenity. To the right, there are tables and workstations manned by craftspeople quietly beaver away, one is stitching the seam of a briefcase, while another is sanding down a car steering wheel. Straight ahead is a clutch of sewing machines, backed by a wall loaded with spools of thread and to the left there are small glass-walled offices, home to people with desks covered in swatches and boxes and general design studio detritus.

In the far corner, a huddle of people chat and laugh quietly as they work and, next to them, hidden behind boxes and some leather-clad cabinets, is another Voisin car, two-tone inky blue and yellow. Its interior has been removed, waiting to be replaced. There are shelves all around loaded with parts of skateboard and delicate crockery and →





ITEMS IN THE SUR-MESURE SHOWROOM INCLUDE (FROM LEFT) A LEATHER-TRIMMED YAMAHA MOTORCYCLE, A PROTOTYPE YACHT STEERING WHEEL AND BOXING GLOVES

strange shapes of metal and prototype bags and wicker baskets and bits of leather. (There is leather everywhere, and almost all of it is impossibly soft and squidgy to touch.) This is what Victor Frankenstein's lab might have looked like had he been a Parisian aesthete.

In addition to the pieces requested by clients and the stores, the Sur-Mesure department makes objects of its own design. Last autumn, there was a giant Mikado set made from sycamore wood, and before that was a gardening set, complete with a cotton apron, flower basket and leather-clad secateurs. In spring 2018, Hermès made a set of tools (hammer and two screwdrivers) and this autumn there is an Hermès surfboard (designed to be fun for all abilities, rather than decorative), which de Beaufort has himself tested in Brittany and the Caribbean.

When you commission de Beaufort's department to make something, they will try to have it ready in a year or less, although a big project, the fit-out of a private jet, for example, might take longer. With leather goods, the designers will speak to you about what the item is for and how you will use it. Then you'll get initial sketches – hand sketches – to approve, before prototypes are made up and the production begins in earnest. Bigger, more unusual projects might require visits to the studio. Just make sure you know what you want. "These guys here will enhance what you've been imagining," says de Beaufort, "but you need to write the first line. If you have nothing to say there is no point."

The collective passions here are material and craftsmanship. That is to say, only the finest possible materials are used or developed for each project, and in general, each craftsperson works on the same project from start to finish, being allowed the time they need to make sure everything is perfect. In one corner there is a storey-high shelf stuffed with rolls of leather. One, de Beaufort points out, has been developed to be fire-retardant so it can be used in an aircraft, and another, for use on the deck of boats, is resistant to the effects of salt

water and sun. The rolls are kept, not to be used for other jobs, but for guarantee on the projects they were originally created for. If you commission something, it is actually made from scratch.

When asked if there were any projects he most enjoyed working on, de Beaufort is diplomatic. "The most challenging ones are the most unexpected ones, and that's good, I like that. For instance, the rickshaw. You start by studying. The act of creation is about study, then getting inspired, then making research. And then we draw lines and sketch. Me, what I like, is not big or small, it's to get surprise. The guys here, and I can speak for everybody, we like surprise. If somebody comes with an idea we would have never had, then we're like, 'Wow, let's do it.'"

And are they ever stumped? Yes, but it's just a case of doing research and finding a way in. And then of course, there's the museum. "You have to know what has been done in the past to move on. So it's a big source of inspiration," says de Beaufort. "It's amazing because one guy of the family set it up. I called Menehould today and she said, 'Yeah, you know we have this...' and you realise all these things have been so smart before, and of course it's amazing. I'm not going every day, but sometimes when we need inspiration then I take the team and we go around."

And so the loop closes. Émile-Maurice Hermès had a passion for the novel, the witty and the impeccably well made, and over a century later, the craftspeople at Hermès use that passion in their endeavour to create goods that are novel, witty and impeccably well made.

Back at the museum, when asked, "Is this everything?", Menehould smiled politely and shook her head. "No, we have storage," she replied. "This is really just part of the iceberg." It conjured images of warehouse after warehouse full of crates piled to the high ceilings, all stuffed with intriguing and beguiling things that fit into your pocket or perch on your head or shoot out of your sleeve. Were it not for Hermès' eternal love of "things", that might be completely out of the question. **ENDS**