

HERMÈS and Craft Fetishism

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INTRODUCTION

When I was in my early twenties, I got a job on Wall Street, which meant brutally long hours of hard work and a substantial financial reward. After a few years on the job, I made enough money to feel that I could allow myself a purchase of a luxury bag. I wanted something beautiful, well made and lasting - an item that would take me from the office to a social event and whose appeal would withstand changing fashions. I knew that I wanted an Hermès bag.

I still remember a clear spring morning when I walked into an Hermès boutique on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris for the first time. Upon hearing my request, a sales associate named Virginie lead me to the back of the store, asked me to get comfortable in a plush armchair and promptly disappeared with a mysterious air. Left to wait in a state of excited anxiety, I tried to remain cool but fretted inside, since I had heard that Hermès bags were notoriously difficult to procure. When Virginie finally appeared, she carried a large orange box and I felt a jolt of excitement mixed with disbelief. Was I really going to become an owner of an Hermès bag? Virginie ceremoniously peeled back the layers of crisp tissue paper, untied a cloth pouch and revealed a Birkin bag in subtle tan leather. The bag was exactly what I wanted and without hesitation I paid for it with an amount of money that I had never previously paid for a single purchase. I used my Birkin every day, carrying it to the office to admirable and sometimes envious glances of my colleagues, and travelled the world with it. Almost twenty years later the bag shows the sign of times we have shared together but I still enjoy it as much as I did when I first got it and I know that one day I will pass it on to my daughters.

What is it about Hermès that possessed a young woman like me and continues to push millions of luxury consumers to desire an Hermès object? The company's name alone prompts sighs of desire among those in the know – an international following ranging from fashionistas to housewives, royalty, social climbers, equestrians, and CEOs. Known as one of the world's most elegant, exclusive and coveted brands, Hermès is a French family-owned and managed producer of luxury goods. Established in 1837, Hermès gained renown as a producer of handmade one-of-a-kind saddlery for European noblemen. From its nineteenth-century foundation in leather goods production, Hermès entered the twenty-first century, having actively diversified the products it offers. The company has moved into the production of handbags, silk scarves, men's neckties, ready-to-wear, perfume, watches, lifestyle accessories, and, more recently, home furnishings.

At the core of any enduring brand is a product backed by a promise. In the case of Hermès, the company's leading principle remains its fierce commitment to the quality of each of its products. Though Hermès is grouped with other luxury brands, it stands apart and transcends the luxury brand category altogether, preferring to be known for its timeless refinement, impeccable craftsmanship, and careful protection of its brand's mystique. The company prides itself on operating in accordance with its family credo *Que l'utile soit beau* (That the useful be beautiful).¹ Putting its credo into practice, Hermès strives to unite beauty and utility by creating rationally designed handcrafted objects whose appeal comes from form dictated by function. Le Corbusier praised the simplicity of Hermès bags, Jean-Michel Frank asked the

¹ "Hermès International S.A. History," *Funding Universe.com*, <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/hermes-international-s-a-history>.

company to upholster his furniture and walls with beige leather, and Ettore Bugatti commissioned a trunk in yellow cowhide to match the first Bugatti Royale, the ultimate luxury automobile.² Each Hermès object claims to be so intelligently designed and well made from superior materials that it appears to surpass fashion. This tradition of embracing artisanship in favor of mass production and mechanization, along with its unwavering commitment to the quality of the product and the promise it delivers, have been the lifeline of Hermès and the ultimate draw for the consumers since the brand's inception.

I would argue that Hermès' initiatives within the company foster a definition of its workforce as artist craftspeople, which feeds into a publicly projected vision of its artisans as folkcraftsmen, whose behind-the-scenes story is revealed through carefully orchestrated PR and marketing campaigns. Both the internal and the external company messages enable Hermès to perpetuate an idealized connection between its artisans and their work, which in turn elevates the status and the perceived value of the Hermès' handcrafted creations in the consumers' minds. The house of Hermès knows that its profitability is dependent on the quality and the myth behind its goods. The internal and the external company communications reassert the value of the handmade over the machine-made, the latter reminding consumers that at Hermès one does not just acquire a pricey object that anyone with money can buy. Along with beautifully handcrafted, stylish goods, one buys a piece of art and French heritage as well as entrée into a rarified world - *Le Monde d'Hermès*.

² Nadine Coleno, *The Hermès Scarf: History & Mystique* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 24.

Following an overview of the company's history, Chapter 1: *Artisans as Artist Craftspeople*, looks at definitions of "craft" using the work of scholars Sôetsu Yanagi and Karl Marx. The chapter draws on the author's interviews with Hermès' artisans and examines a number of internal initiatives such as *Adresse*, *Fête de l'Adresse*, Hermès Museum and the Conservatoire to establish the company's definition of its workforce as *artists craftspeople*. In Chapter 2: *Artisans as Folkcraftsmen*, I argue that Hermès' external initiatives present the artisans as folkcraftsmen and through an orchestrated humanization of the company's ateliers, create an emotional connection with consumers that enhance Hermès' commercial edge. The chapter surveys public relations and marketing campaigns including the film *Hearts and Crafts*, the festival *Festival des Métiers*, the magazine *Le Monde d'Hermès*, and the book *An ABC of Hermès Crafts*. This argument is further developed in Chapter 3: *Koto Bolofo's La Maison*, which reviews the constructed and publically projected image of Hermès depicted in Bolofo's eleven volume set by drawing on the theories of representation by John Tagg and Stuart Hall. The chapter focuses specifically on the volumes dedicated to the company's iconic products: a Kelly bag, saddles, and silk. Hermès' collaborations with artists and designers will be discussed in Chapter 4: *Artistic Collaborations*. In this chapter I study *Hermès La Maison* and *Hermès Editèur* through the prism of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social distinction. I argue that by aligning Hermès with the arbiters of taste, both past and present, the company actively engages in the production and dissemination of cultural capital. The premise of social mobility via acquisition of cultural capital together with Hermès' cultivated association with the heritage and cultural identity of France further enhances the brand's consumer appeal and profitability.

CHAPTER 1: ARTISANS AS ARTIST CRAFTSPEOPLE

The House Of Hermès

The house of Hermès began as a harness and saddle workshop in Paris in 1837. The company's trademark of a *calèche*, a lightweight horse-drawn carriage, recalls the business's origins and was inspired by a nineteenth-century drawing of the eponymous vehicle by Alfred de Dreux, whose equestrian portraits had been much in vogue under French emperor Napoleon III.³ The company's founder, Thierry Hermès (1801-1878), was born in the German town of Krefeld, which at that time was part of Napoleon's empire. After he lost all his family to disease and war, Hermès moved to Paris in 1821. Having proved gifted in leatherwork, Hermès opened a shop in 1837, specializing in the horse harnesses required by society traps, calèches and carriages.

It was a business founded on the strength of a stitch, "saddle stitch" as it is called, that could only be done by hand and required two needles working two waxed linen threads in tense opposition. Done properly, this functional and decorative stitch never comes loose. It is still used in the production of saddles, furniture, and the iconic Hermès handbags. Hermès' hand-stitched perfection could not be rushed and allegedly royal coronations were sometimes delayed until Hermès fittings for the carriage and the guard had arrived.⁴

In the present day, the quest to obtain such a highly coveted hand-stitched item as a Birkin bag, a handbag created in 1984 for the actress Jane Birkin and

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Laura Jacobs, "From Hermès to Eternity," *Vanity Fair*, September 2007, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/09/hermes200709>.

requiring eighteen to twenty five hours to make, can take months if not years and requires a great deal of patience, persistence as well as disposable cash. The perceived scarcity of the Birkin bags has created an international legion of desperate women trying to get their hands on this prized possession. It also enabled an eBay entrepreneur Michael Tonello to become a successful reseller of high-end luxury goods, particularly the Birkin bags, at a tidy profit. Tonello chronicled this modern shopping phenomenon and his modus operandi in a book *Bringing Home the Birkin: My Life in Hot Pursuit of the World's Most Coveted Handbag*, which tells the tale of his adventures around the globe to procure “same day” Birkins for wealthy clients reluctant to wait for the iconic purse.⁵ In April 2016, a never used crocodile Birkin bag in a fire-engine red color and featuring diamond details was resold through a luxury bag dealer Privé Porter for a record \$298,000.⁶

Back in the nineteenth century, with his mighty saddle stitch, Thierry Hermès built up a successful business and catered to the equine whims of the rich Parisian beau monde and European royalty, including the Emperor Napoleon III. Hermès became their indispensable go-to craftsman at a time when horses dominated all aspects of mobility and status.

After the death of Thierry Hermès in 1878, his son Charles-Émile took over the reins of the shop. The family business was moved to 24, Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, which has been the company's flagship location ever since. In that same year, Hermès expanded into saddlery, a custom business that required measurements

⁵ Michael Tonello, *Bringing Home the Birkin: My Life in Hot Pursuit of the World's Most Coveted Handbag* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

⁶ Christina Binkley, “Record Price for Hermès Birkin Bag,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/record-price-for-hermes-birkin-bag-1460588133>.

from both a horse and a rider. Under Charles-Émile's leadership, the brand became even more prestigious, building up an elite, cosmopolitan clientele throughout Europe, North Africa, Russia, America and Asia.

In 1902, Charles-Émile's sons, Adolphe and Émile-Maurice, took over the business under the name Hermès Frères. The company entered the twentieth century peerless in the field of saddlery, adding Czar Nicholas II of Russia along with the other royals and elite riders to its already impressive clientele from around the world. Nevertheless, the beginning of the twentieth century ushered in the ascent of the automobile and corresponding obsolescence of the horse-drawn carriage. Elder brother Adolphe, fearful of this epochal change, thought there was no future for Hermès with the disappearance of the equestrian lifestyle. Émile-Maurice, an inspired visionary, was ready to adapt with the times and to think creatively about new opportunities, effectively steering the company from potential ruin to renewed fame.⁷

During World War I, Émile-Maurice was sent as an officer to America on an official mission to oversee the procurement of materials for military equipment.⁸ There he met Henry Ford and became exposed to considerable advances in transport and mass production. He also discovered a zipper, or *fermeture éclair*, an American invention that opened and closed in a flash and was used for the canvas roofs of the

⁷ Charlotte Aillaud, "The Hermès Museum: Inspiration for the Celebrated Family Firm," *Architectural Digest*, January 1989, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*

cars at the time.⁹ Émile-Maurice had the imagination and foresight to bring the zipper back to France with an exclusive, European two-year patent.¹⁰

Émile-Maurice understood that in the age of the automobile his customers would no doubt require leather accessories. His unique American fastener was a perfect device with which to secure a pair of driving gloves, a bag or a jacket against high speeds. Hermès made the first-ever leather jacket with a zipper for the fashion-forward Duke of Windsor and thus, revolutionized clothing.¹¹ The zipper became so closely associated with Hermès products that the French referred to it as “Hermès fastener”, or *fermeture Hermès*, long after the company’s patent had expired.¹²

By the 1920s Hermès’ product line included saddle-stitched leather bags, gloves, luggage, travel and driving accessories, jewelry, wristwatches and an entire range of sportswear. These products quickly became harmonious companions of the globetrotting international elite and royalty.

Émile-Maurice transitioned the business to his son-in-law Robert Dumas in the 1930s. It was the time of the creation of the company’s two iconic products – a silk scarf and a Kelly bag. In 1937, Robert Dumas directed the design and production of the first Hermes silk scarf, or *carré*, inspired by jockeys’ silks.¹³ Like the production of leather goods, Hermès’ scarf creation was fully dedicated to the utmost pursuit of quality achieved by a combination of top materials and time-consuming

⁹ Margaret Perlis, “4 Steps to Building An Enduring Brand: Lessons From Hermes,” *Forbes*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/margaretperlis/2012/10/11>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Hermès International S.A. History,” *Funding Universe.com*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

craftsmanship. Commanding high retail prices, over the years Hermès' scarves became a French traditional heirloom and an international status symbol.

The great Hermès classic of timeless simplicity, the Kelly bag, was also introduced to the market in the 1930s. Its design was based on a specialty nineteenth-century saddlebag. The bag was officially named the Kelly in the 1950s after the American actress and Princess of Monaco Grace Kelly. She was photographed with this chic accessory to shield the first signs of her pregnancy from the paparazzi and was spotted holding one on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1956.¹⁴ Such an association with a Hollywood celebrity and European royalty quickly popularized the bag and turned it into an expensive status symbol, which it remains to this day.

Over the decades that followed, under the astute leadership of the Hermès family members, the house continued to rule the luxury brand market. The company expanded and revitalized its classic product line, strengthened the brand's youth appeal, extended vertical integration, and established a global network of Hermès stores. It revived its lines of men's and women's ready-to-wear and leather goods, including launching the much sought-after Birkin bag, a ladies' handbag created in 1984 based on a 1892 design.¹⁵

Having debuted a line of giftware and home furnishings in 1954, Hermès strengthened the company's hold on its suppliers in the 1980s. It acquired major stakes in such prestigious French glassware, silverware, and tableware manufacturers

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Betsy Kroll, "In the Bag." *Time.com*, April 17, 2007, <http://www.content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1611284,00.html>.

as St. Louis, Puiforcat, and Perigord.¹⁶ This strategy positioned tableware as one of Hermès' most promising business segments for the 1990s and 2000s.

Presently, under the leadership of a family member, the sixth-generation Axel Dumas, who after several years as a co-Chief Executive, assumed sole control in February 2014, Hermès is outpacing many of its competitors in growth. In 2012, Hermès was valued at \$19.1 billion – that's a sixty-one percent jump from the previous year.¹⁷ In 2013, the Hermès Group reported revenue of € 3.7 billion, a year-on-year rise of 13% at constant exchange rates and posted operating income of € 1.2 billion, an increase of 9%.¹⁸ The company's first-quarter sales for 2014 were up 10.1%.¹⁹ The company employs over eleven thousand people worldwide, of which almost half work in production. In 2013, the Hermès Group created over nine hundred new jobs, over five hundred of which were in France, mostly in sales and in its production facilities.²⁰ The company manufactures products in sixteen different sectors with the collections comprising over fifty thousand items and has three hundred fifteen exclusive stores around the world.²¹ In 2011, the company launched its latest brainchild, *Hermès La Maison*, a line of furniture and home accessories.

¹⁶ "Hermès International S.A. History," *Funding Universe.com*.

¹⁷ Perlis, *Forbes*, October 11, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/margaretperlis/2012/10/11>.

¹⁸ Hermès International S.A, *2013 Annual Report*, 28, <http://finance.hermes.com/en/Reports-and-Presentations/Annual-reports>.

¹⁹ Matthew Schneier. "A Horse on the Bourse? Of Course." *The New York Times*, May 21, 2014, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/05/22/fashion/hermes-celebrates-its-artistry.html>.

²⁰ Hermès International S.A, *2013 Annual Report*, 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Hermès continues to grow while remaining a family firm with a uniquely creative approach that merges precision manufacturing with traditional craftsmanship.

Defining Craft

Should Hermès' ongoing artisanal practices be seen as the persistent last vestiges of grand old traditions or as reinterpretations of those traditions that assert their commercial relevance in the twenty-first century? To answer this question, we should first consider the definitions of craft that Hermès employs internally as well as communicates to its customers.

The traditional overarching definition of craft is the making of usable artifacts in a given material, done individually, by hand, displaying great mastery and effectively a universal expression of human creativity.²² In his 2008 book *The Craftsman*, the sociologist Richard Sennett makes a case for *homo faber*, or man as maker. Evoking the workshops of the medieval guilds and the studio of violin-maker Antonio Stradivari, Sennett argues that a craftsman represents a special human condition of being engaged in the work in and for itself, attaining skill, enjoying freedom to experiment and reaping the emotional rewards of inner satisfaction and pride in one's work.²³ Therefore, it is only through making things – by trying, failing and repeating – that we gain true understanding and achieve a fulfilling life.

The Japanese scholar Sôetsu Yanagi in his treatise *The Way of Craftsmanship*, breaks down the definition of crafts further, arguing that crafts generally fall into two

²² Glenn Adamson, ed., *The Craft Reader*, (New York: Berg, 2010), 323.

²³ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 27.

categories: folkcrafts and artist crafts.²⁴ Folkcrafts are things that are unself-consciously handmade by a community of anonymous craftsmen and whose beauty is in their utility and natural materials. Artist crafts are individualistic things, which are made by a few, for a few, at a high price and approach fine arts in their pursuit of beauty for its own sake, while placing utility second. Artist crafts depend upon the personality of the artist, whose character and ego have a direct influence on the object and whose fine sensibility becomes one of the object's intended merits. According to Yanagi, in a contemporary world of mechanization and mass-production, craftsmen and their work must be saved for the future. He argues that folkcraft is essential for the preservation of craftsmanship. The value of artist-craftsmen in an industrialized society, according to Yanagi, is in their ability to understand and show us how to properly appreciate beauty in handwork, which leads to the stimulation and dissemination of folkcrafts and consequently, to the perpetuation of crafts.²⁵

I would argue that Hermès' initiatives within the company foster a definition of its workforce as artist craftspeople, which feeds into a publicly projected vision of its artisans as quintessentially French folkcraftsmen, whose behind-the-scenes story is revealed through carefully orchestrated PR and marketing campaigns. Both, the internal and the external company messages reassert the value of the handmade over the machine-made. As Hermès strives to maintain its position at the pinnacle of the luxury market through its fierce commitment to quality of its handmade goods, it effectively positions itself as a savior of crafts, or a David of crafts to the Goliath of mass production, and in the process it fetishizes its subject. What Karl Marx in his

²⁴ Sôetsu Yanagi, "The Way of Craftsmanship," in *The Craft Reader*, ed. Glenn Adamson, (New York: Berg, 2010), 168.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

Capital: Critique of Political Economy called “commodity fetishism” – that ineffable aura that gives an object a perceived value greater than its actual material cost²⁶ – is best exemplified by the Hermès’ handcrafted perfection – the saddle stitch on a bag, the finished edge of a silk scarf. Hermès’ craft fetishism not only serves the greater good of society through crafts preservation as the company may claim, but it also conveniently supports Hermès’ financial strength. In a contemporary society with more and cheaper goods continually mass-produced and dumped onto the market, consumers increasingly yearn for quality, not quantity. The problem with modern craft is that it’s expensive. Craft fetishism enables companies like Hermès to mythologize and romanticize the handmade and thus, justify its premium.

Hermès’ Internal Initiatives

In 2011, Hermès presented an annual theme “Contemporary Artisan since 1837,” which was celebrated with numerous company and customer events across its entire network. One of the themed internal initiatives was the *Adresse* project launched within Hermès’ ateliers, with the name bearing particular significance since *adresse* in French has two meanings: the dexterity and skill that each craftsman develops in his trade as well as the location where he works.²⁷ The *Adresse* project hailed the craftsmen’ expertise through internal demonstrations of objects that strongly illustrated contemporary artistry, recognized individual craftsmen,

²⁶ Hazel Clark and David Brody, eds., *Design Studies: A Reader* (New York: Berg, 2009), 195.

²⁷ Hermès International S.A, *2011 Annual Report*, 86, <http://finance.hermes.com/en/Reports-and-Presentations/Annual-reports>.

strengthened the pride of belonging and achievement, and facilitated sharing of knowhow.

As part of the *Adresse*, all of the Hermès employees in France received a *Carnet d'Adresse* (Skills Booklet), an illustrated document intended to explicitly share the principles of craftsmanship across the different métiers.²⁸ The employees were encouraged to actively refer to the booklet as well as familiarize themselves with an accompanying movie, which indicated the addresses and functions of the company's various production sites. Both documents, intended for internal use only, exposed craftsmen to each other as artists possessing distinct individual knowhow.

In the same spirit of revealing and discovering individual skills, the *Parcours d'Adresse* (Skills Workshop) allowed craftsmen to explore a different production sector for a week. Over the course of two years more than two hundred employees received an intense initiation into a different métier, learned more about the manufacturing cycle of a Hermès object and gained a greater understanding of other craftsmen.²⁹

The company's *Fête de l'Adresse* (Skills Celebration) culminated in the award of the *Prix de l'Adresse* (Skills Prize), which ended a seven-month contest among thirty-four teams of craftsmen representing all of Hermès' métiers.³⁰ The goal of the contest was to create exceptional objects that reinterpreted an item from the Hermès archives and employed knowhow that is no longer or seldom used. Over one hundred sixty artisans volunteered hundreds of hours of their time to relearn or reinterpret

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 87.

³⁰ Ibid., 86.

forgotten techniques to create thirty-four unique objects. Without any technical manuals to guide them, the craftsmen relied solely on their eyes and minds to recreate the techniques of the past and envision their application to contemporary design.³¹ The contest defined its participants as artist craftsmen by bringing forth each artisan's individuality, eliciting creative and technical ambition and encouraging personal challenge while achieving emulation and recognition for their one-off creations. The thirty-four objects are expected to be exhibited as true works of art in a museum-like setting of Fondation Jean-Louis Dumas, which is currently under construction.

Individual artistic achievement was additionally spotlighted when, with the company support, three Hermès employees, namely two glass-blowers and one crystal cutter, were awarded the title of *Un des Meilleurs Ouvriers de France* (One of the Best Craftsman in France) in 2011.³² It is a highly coveted lifelong title that is bestowed by the French government on a true master artist craftsman. Every three years the Ministry of Labor awards this title to about two percent of all applicants in recognition of their pursuit of excellence and French craft. The titleholders face off rigorous competition and make up an elite group of about four thousand professionals, dedicated to the survival of traditional knowhow and representing more than two hundred métiers across the country.³³

The pride, individual passion and dedication to their craft as art become most evident in conversations with artisans tirelessly toiling at their worktables. In November 2013, I visited the Hermès production site in Pantin on the outskirts of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 84.

³³ Ann Mah. "In Paris, Five Shops Where Artisanry Becomes Art." *The New York Times*. October 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/travel/in-paris-where-artisanry-becomes-art>.

Paris, which houses about three hundred craftsmen mostly specializing in leather goods. I was taken around the ateliers and introduced to the craftsmen by an artisan, a woman, who has been with Hermès for over thirty-five years. Her longevity at the company is not unusual as most of the craftsmen spend their entire professional lives at Hermès, a telltale sign of their commitment to the business.

As the artisans explained to me the intricacies of putting together a famous Hermès handbag, I was surprised to discover that each craftsman was solely responsible for putting together a bag from start to finish. There was no division of labor, no separation of tasks and no specialization. Each craftsman carefully cut the leather into cutouts to be assembled like a puzzle, then sandpapered the rough edges, rounded them with an iron, worked a needle and a linen thread to make the famous saddle stitch, and finally attached the straps and the handles until he or she was satisfied enough with the bag's perfection for it to be deemed completed. This is a time-consuming process and it may take a week to make one bag. Although the craftsmen do not explicitly sign their creations, the inside of each bag is stamped with the individual artisan's name, location and date of production. This stamp is akin to an artist's signature and allows to authenticate product and trace it back to the original creator should an object be returned to Hermès for repair years later.

This kind of individual attribution comes with tremendous responsibility for the product's quality and also with great personal satisfaction and pride in a job well done. The leather worker told me that it felt "sensational to have the finished piece in your hands."³⁴ All of the artisans I spoke with echoed this sentiment saying that pride was their work's greatest reward. They admiringly told me about one craftsman, who

³⁴ Hermès Artisan, in discussion with the author, November 2013.

would proudly and affectionately kiss each of his completed creations before sending them into the world. How about that for individual commitment? And when I asked the craftsmen whether they saw themselves as artists or workers, who were really good at making luxury products, the unanimous answer was an emphatic “artist,” linking each individual with his or her exceptional creation.³⁵

The pride of the Hermès’ artisans is rooted in the impeccable quality of their work, achieved through hours of scrupulous handwork. It takes an entire year to make fifty items from the Pippa range of folding furniture. A craftsman needs up to twenty-five hours to make a single Birkin bag. When looking around the leather atelier, my eye caught a trunk upholstered in subtle cowhide. The craftsmen explained that only a few people had the technical knowledge to make a trunk and it took two leatherworkers several months to construct one trunk that retailed for around €150,000, a prohibitively high price for most people. The artisans were keen to point out to me that the trunk’s stitches went through both, the leather upholstery and the wooden carcass, which radically differentiated Hermès product from that of its competitors. The latter, to the disdain of the Hermès’ craftsmen, faked the stitches on their trunks by only penetrating the leather and then gluing it to the wooden base. As far as the Hermès artisans were concerned, they would not cut corners when making a truly authentic object, just like a genuine artist would not compromise his creative process.

I doubt that many consumers can tell or care to discern the nuanced production difference between an Hermès trunk versus another luxury trunk. The distinction presupposed that only a true connoisseur could appreciate the fine details of authentic French craftsmanship. It also enables a Hermès artisan to define himself as an artist

³⁵ Ibid.

craftsman, driven by his unwavering commitment to superior quality and tradition as well as unsusceptible to pressures of economic competition. The trunk's "authenticity" evokes the cultural uniqueness of Hermès goods as exemplifiers of specifically French craft that is grounded in superior technical and aesthetic standards, both constituent elements and emblems of French culture.

The anecdote of fake stitches resonates with a study of the Parisian chocolatiers by the anthropologist Susan Terrio recounted in *Crafting Grand Cru Chocolates in Contemporary France*. In her work, Terrio examines how in the face of increasing competition from Belgian franchises selling mass-produced candies in settings that replicated French artisanal boutiques, the French chocolatiers attempted to stimulate demand for their own expensive handcrafted products by promoting and capitalizing on the artisanal qualities of French chocolate and its production.³⁶ The French chocolatiers contrasted their dark, bittersweet candies that were freshly handmade in limited quantities, using traditional methods, to the Belgian mass-market products that they deemed inferior in taste, purity and originality. By exploiting the handcrafted quality of their creations, the French chocolatiers championed their uninterrupted link with the French past and firmly distinguished their chocolates as culturally authentic, superior and justifiably more expensive.

There is a clear parallel between the positioning and the perception of the French chocolates and the Hermès goods. The histories of the French artisanal chocolates and of the Hermès' trunks, among the company's other goods, give them special value in the eyes of their makers and consumers and directly connect us back to Marx's notion of "commodity fetishism." This is what distinguishes them from the

³⁶ Susan Terrio, "Crafting Grand Cru Chocolates in Contemporary France," *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 1 (1996): 68.

“fake” chocolates or a “fake” trunk made from similar materials as well as adds a hefty monetary premium. In the words of an artisan, who spoke with conviction of a true French craftsman, “when the price of Louis Vuitton stops, the price of Hermès begins.”³⁷

Moreover, in their effort to distinguish the local artisanal candies and their buyers, the French chocolatiers and tastemakers collaborated to codify and promote a new set of expert criteria adapted from wine connoisseurs for determining both the quality and the authenticity of chocolates.³⁸ In following these standards of appreciation, the use of a jargon being incidental, consumers of French chocolates, just like consumers of Hermès luxuries, demonstrated their ability to recognize “objects of quality.” They therefore, set themselves apart as a sophisticated select group, who can understand and appreciate the aesthetic and technical subtleties of craft as art.

As Pierre Bourdieu argues, connoisseurship plays an important role in the pursuit of social distinction. Bourdieu differentiates a connoisseur as a “person of quality,” who has a unique capacity to appropriate an “object of quality.”³⁹ This ability cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy and is only achieved through knowledge via a significant investment of time. In other words, a person may purchase an expensive luxury item but only a connoisseur has the tools to value an object beyond its monetary worth. Connoisseurship is an important element in driving

³⁷ Hermès Artisan, in discussion with the author, November 2013.

³⁸ Terrio, “Crafting Grand Cru Chocolates in Contemporary France,” 71.

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 281.

demand for the luxury goods associated with it, be it artisanal chocolates or handmade trunks, by reinforcing their rarity and conferring cultural capital on those who consume them.

The Hermès craftsmen are connoisseurs in their own right, of the art of craft. Their position is unusual in that their company culture leads them to possess the ability to recognize quality craft objects. It also provides them with the outlets in which to celebrate and indulge their passion for craft via the Hermès Museum and the Hermès Conservatoire.

The Hermès Museum was the brainchild of Emile-Maurice, who was not only a gifted entrepreneur but also an aesthete and an intensely passionate and curious collector. He began a private collection of paintings, books and *objets d'art*, housed in his office above the shop on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. This office is now a small museum filled, over several generations, in the manner of a cabinet of curiosities or a vast treasure chest. The museum is not open to the public but it is frequented by the Hermès' designers and craftsmen and is occasionally made available for tours to select notable guests.

In November 2013, I toured the museum in the company of Menehould de Bazelaire, Director of Cultural Heritage and Curator of the Hermès Museum. As I wandered through the oak-paneled rooms with their almond-green velvet drapes, the space felt like a living, vital family home, where very few things are shut away in glass cases or sequestered behind ropes. As my eyes jumped from one object to another, my imagination raced to keep up with their stories. Here, suddenly standing out among hundreds of things, was a great nineteenth-century statesman's traveling case, complete with ivory-handled razors and silver drinking vessels; there, a

beautifully decorated rocking horse, originally made for Napoleon III's son; and there, a Russian coachman's velvet hat, an empress's embroidered saddle, and an extraordinary pheasant-feather hunting umbrella. I was happy to encounter an early leather handbag with a zipper, designed by Emile-Maurice for his wife in the 1920s. The bag was elegant and simple without any decoration and looked completely modern.

De Bazelaire explained to me that Emile-Maurice began his collection at the age of twelve, when he acquired a walking stick that transformed into a lady's parasol. In fact, the unifying theme of the collection is related to the world of travel, movement, equine, hunt and also possessing an element of surprise and quirkiness. The collection is not static and de Bazelaire's team works on new acquisitions, which must relate to the Emile-Maurice's originals. "It represents the spirit and the soul of Hermès", de Bazelaire said of the museum. She explained:

The collection transports Hermès' designers and artisans to a different world, where they can effectively browse through the entire history of movement as some of the objects date back 2000 B.C. The collection functions as a visual representation of a relationship between the man and the horse, where objects combine usefulness and beauty, two qualities that are essential to Hermès.⁴⁰

The Hermès' designers and craftsmen frequently visit the museum to look for ideas to reinvent or to bring up to date. According to de Bazelaire, the Hermès Museum reminds contemporary artisans that they are just steps on the path of the craftsmen of the past and their work is just a drop in the ocean of collective craftsmanship. The company believes that coming in close contact with this heritage evokes the feelings of humility and admiration, which in turn spur creativity and fresh ideas.

⁴⁰ Menehould de Bazelaire, Director of Cultural Heritage and Curator of the Hermès Museum, in discussion with the author, November 2013.

During my visit it became apparent to me that the Hermès Museum formed a natural bridge between the past and the future, appearance and function, and demonstrated the company's credo that only objects imbued with meaning survive the test of time. These characteristics of the museum's collection are signs, which render it deserving of protection and interest akin to a national monument. These signs refer to the past – the past of man, his environment and his craft – and to the otherness of the objects in the collection because they stand out against analogous objects produced in our day. In his discourse on historical patrimony of France entitled *The Archives: From the Trésor des Chartes to the Caran*, Krzysztof Pomian explains that works that are recognized as monuments all possess signs that confer on them an exceptional status, such as rare and precious materials as well as forms, colors and textures resulting from their creators' uncommon effort and ability.⁴¹ These works also refer to the past that they aim to glorify and to the future in which they must arouse admiration for the great deeds accomplished by their creators and patrons. Pomian adds that one often needs a well-trained eye to recognize the objects' "otherness" and to correctly situate them as monuments.

Following Pomian's argument, the reverence of the Hermès staff for the museum's collection showcasing the skills of the past and the vision of its founder, places the Hermès Museum in a category of a French national monument. France is a country whose people are extraordinarily aware of history and their place in it. The Hermès Museum is the company's inner sanctum, whose dynamic link between the

⁴¹ Krzysztof Pomian, "The Archives: From the Trésor des Chartes to the Caran," in *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 30.

past and the future reminds the Hermès staff of their place in the history of craftsmanship and allows them to draw knowledge and inspiration from the achievements of the past. And it is their deep, connoisseur-like understanding of craft as art that allows the Hermès artisans and designers as well as a small circle of insiders to fully appreciate the significance of and engage with what has been assembled in the museum.

If the Hermès Museum is the company's monument to craft at large, then the Conservatoire des Créations Hermès is its monument to the craftsmanship of Hermès. I had the privilege to explore this inner sanctuary, which is a vast warehouse-like facility in Paris, in November 2013. I was guided by Attaché de Conservatoire Charlotte Daniel, who explained to me that the conservatoire housed over thirty thousand items produced by Hermès since the beginning of the twentieth century. There is another facility that houses an additional thirty thousand objects with a total collection exceeding sixty thousand articles. During my tour Daniel emphasized that the collection is extraordinarily large for something that was only started by an Hermès family member fifteen years ago and is a testament to the company's unwavering dedication to the preservation of its heritage.

The conservatoire functions as an enormous archive or an encyclopedia of the company's creations, which scrupulously traces and documents Hermès design and product development via physical representations. Each object in the conservatoire is preserved, photographed, and cataloged. Items are constantly being added to this depository as the conservatoire's staff routinely scouts auction sales and private collections for objects that would fill the gaps in the visual history of Hermès. Designers and craftsmen take full advantage of this in-house resource and come here

for inspiration and ideas rooted in Hermès heritage. In fact, the Conservatoire's staff sends weekly internal memos describing new acquisitions and encouraging designers and artisans to familiarize themselves with the additions.⁴²

On first entering the conservationists' office, I was surprised to see an entire wall covered in diagrams and pictures of ladies' handbags. Daniel explained to me that her team was meticulously tracing the development of a Hermès bag, starting from the 1920s, and documenting evolution of the bag's size, shape, handle and clasp. She then took me to the storage, where I was faced with endless shelves supporting bags of every variety, from brand new Kellys and Birkins to hundred-year-old bags vaguely reminiscent of the Hermès designs we know today.

Daniel pulled out endless drawers containing every imaginable fastening, belt and buckle. She showed me a vast collection of scarves, some of which dated back to the 1930s. I was excited to spot an original club chair and a folding screen in straw marquetry created by Jean-Michel Frank in the 1920s in collaboration with Hermès workshops. Their uncluttered elegance together with Hermès savoir-faire made them appear as modern and exciting as they did ninety years ago. In 2010, these pieces together with several other Jean-Michel Frank designs were reissued for the launch of *Hermès La Maison*.

The Conservatoire des Créations Hermès is a unique learning tool and an endless source of inspiration for the company's designers and craftsmen. It is an in-house memorial to the work and ingenuity of the several generations of Hermès'

⁴² Charlotte Daniel, (Attaché de Conservatoire, Hermès), in discussion with the author, November 2013.

artisans that never ceases to remind that craft and quality of the materials are synonymous with beauty, functionality and tradition - all essential elements of longevity and the company's history. Following Jessica Evans's discourse on museums and national representation in *Representing a Nation: A Reader*, I would argue that in the Conservatoire, the "past is evoked as a period of difference from the present, in order to protect history's glorious culmination in the present from being sabotaged."⁴³ In other words, the Conservatoire's collection of artifacts handcrafted by the Hermès' artisans of the past educates and empowers modern craftsmen to perpetuate their work in the modern world of increasing mass-production. Furthermore, Evans argues, "particular ideas of the nation are created and embedded in the exhibitionary forms of a range of cultural practices and institutions, such as museums and heritage displays. Our sense of nationhood and national identity arises from arrangements of meaning-making, from symbolic practices." Following Evans's argument, the Conservatoire's collection of objects crafted in France using traditional French savoir-faire and its emphasis on tradition and continuity evokes an idea of France celebrated for its artisanal skill. The Conservatoire, therefore not only protects and projects the heritage of Hermès but functions as a sign of quintessential French culture and serves as a tangible and recognizable example of what *Frenchness* is.

Together with the Hermès Museum, the Conservatoire helps refine the artisans' technical prowess and foster their craft connoisseurship. The Hermès craftsmen' ability to appreciate and express beauty in handwork, commended by such

⁴³ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, eds., *Representing the Nation: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

internal initiatives as *Fête de l'Adresse* (Skills Celebration) and the *Prix de l'Adresse* (Skills Prize) defines them as a select group of individuals, each possessing unique artistic originality and prowess. Through a number of aforementioned initiatives, the company encourages an internal perception of its workforce as artist craftspeople, a definition first introduced by Yanagi. This recognition reasserts the supremacy of the handmade and, referencing Yanagi's claim, incentivizes proliferation of folkcrafts and crafts at large.

CHAPTER 2: ARTISANS AS FOLKCRAFTSMEN

Craftsmanship Over Machine Production

Having examined the image of Hermès' artisans within the company, we shall now consider a vision that is being projected to the public via cleverly orchestrated PR and marketing campaigns. In all of my conversations with the brand's customers, when asked to describe Hermès' craftsmen, most clients portrayed a mysterious group of artisans, tucked away in their secretive ateliers and toiling away in ways only known to them.⁴⁴ To dispel this image in the public domain, Hermès reveals a more approachable, friendlier version of its workforce as folkcraftsmen, who perpetuate traditions of the past and create things of great beauty and utility. And in the process, the company reminds consumers of the value of the handmade over the machine-made and delivers a subtle message that "you get what you pay for."

In celebration of the company's theme for 2011, "Contemporary Artisan since 1837," Hermès presented *Hearts and Crafts (Les Mains d'Hermès)*, a documentary film directed by well-known French author and filmmaker Frédéric Laffont and stylist-journalist Isabelle Dupuy-Chavanat. The film has been widely distributed internationally: in cinemas, on television, at festivals, aboard the aircraft of major airlines, in schools and universities, and on the Internet.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Hermès Customers, in discussion with the author, November 2013 and May 2014. The sample group of Hermès customers consisted of six high-net-worth and five professional women, aged between thirty and fifty years old, who reside in Europe and the USA and shop at Hermès at least six times per year. The sample group was selected from friends of the author.

⁴⁵ Hermès International S.A, *2011 Annual Report*, 73.

The 47-minute documentary takes the viewers around France, from the historic Paris workshop above the flagship store on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré to a crystal factory in Saint-Louis-lès-Bitche, a depressed northeastern corner of the country.⁴⁶ The film offers a glimpse behind the scenes of the renowned luxury house, reveals the techniques and expertise used, as well as captures career paths and passions of Hermès' artisans. Set to classical music, the documentary depicts painstaking step-by-step work of the contemporary craftsmen in the Hermès factories, where artisans of all ages, diverse backgrounds and multiple nationalities work side-by-side.⁴⁷ The music is interrupted by the sounds of tools at work and by the artisans' emotional stories. These men and women share a passion for creating beautiful things of impeccable quality and breathe life into objects of leather, crystal, silk and metal.

The artisans in the documentary speak casually and unscripted about their jobs with genuine enthusiasm, pride, and passion. One female metal polisher compares her job to a lover: "You pamper him and give him your all. You take him in your arms and you massage him to make him look good."⁴⁸ Another artisan describes his job and the objects he creates as similar to music, which brings him joy and has lyrics that speak to him. He elaborates: "Leather and the way it can be manipulated is similar to singing. It's as if I compose with my hands."⁴⁹ Another leather worker finds

⁴⁶ *Les Mains d'Hermès*, directed by Isabelle Dupuy-Chavanat and Frédéric Laffont, (Paris: Hermès, 2011), film.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

that the excitement of making a bag from A to Z and being called a craftsman gives him goose bumps.⁵⁰

The movie highlights a strong connection between the artisans and the materials they work with. The craftsmen love and respect nature's gifts, mindful of a skillful approach that is required to transform them into beautiful objects. A saddler finds leather stubborn yet beautiful once tamed into shape by his expert hands: "It's about mastering the material and then making an elegant object that will last a lifetime. That's magic."⁵¹ A leather cutter echoes this sentiment: "It's all about the material. When you understand leather, even if it's sometimes tough, you still love it."⁵² A jewelry maker considers metal "a living thing," something that she can stretch, bend, shape, and polish to yield an exquisite object.⁵³

The artisans' skills are presented as resolutely modern and with a vibrant future rather than survivors of a bygone era. The craftsmen work using only the top ten percent of quality raw materials, aided by traditional and modern tools as well as computers.⁵⁴ They are continuously engaged in training the new generations of artisans, passing on to them their knowledge and tricks of the trade. "There is a real exchange. I like teaching people things – it's a real pleasure," explains a metal worker. A trainee craftsman confesses that his mentor is like a father to him, who

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

shows him his trade and teaches him about life.⁵⁵ It is these bonds between the masters and their apprentices that keep crafts alive, igniting the imagination, savoir-faire and pride of the younger generations.

The pride that the workers take in their creations is a continuous theme of the film's narrative. As he stamps his signature into a bag, a leather-goods craftsman says:

If you work in a car factory, you don't see the finished product, just parts of it. In leather goods, our soul, our stitches, our fingertips go into a bag. The bag goes out into the world but a piece of the craftsman's soul and his proud maker's mark remains with it.⁵⁶

Another leather worker explains that he used to make model boats as a kid. His childhood creations were displayed in his room and now his bags are displayed in shops all over the world.⁵⁷

The pride and the passion captured in the film reveal to the viewers a human dimension of the ateliers. As the artisans bare their souls, their mystique falls away giving way to a community of like-minded folk driven by their love of beauty, technical prowess and nature. The artisans' link with nature is additionally highlighted by the film's numerous shots of scenic landscapes and close-ups of trees, all enjoyed by the craftsmen, whose senses are awoken by "a bird's song or a day's gentle light."⁵⁸ The raw feelings of their testimonies expose the artisans as regular people or folkcraftsmen as Yanagi would describe them, and enable the film's

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

viewers to connect with the craftsmen on an emotional level, understand, appreciate and get inspired by them.

As a viewer of *Hearts and Crafts*, one may have a skeptical attitude toward the genuineness of the film's message and interpret it as Hermès' corporate propaganda. In some ways, the film is like a long company advertisement. At a time when customers have cautiously curtailed their splurges, Hermès and other luxury goods houses are trying to increase the perceived value of their expensive, high-margin products.⁵⁹ That means enhancing the tale behind their goods and publicizing the merits of craftsmanship over machine production. Indeed, *Hearts and Crafts* does play into the hands of Hermès' commercial strategy by encouraging consumers to think of the number of hours and the kind of highly skilled people it took to make each and every one of Hermès' costly products. A leather-goods worker poignantly sums up the message in the documentary: "Grandparents' money disappears, but handcrafts remain."⁶⁰

On the other hand, by lifting the veil over the company's production process, the film gives the bastion of French luxury a human face. Having personally visited Hermès' production center in Pantin, I can attest to the authenticity of the workers' sentiment toward their craft captured in the film. Most of the people I spoke with during my visit and those captured in the documentary, have been with the company for twenty to thirty years – an uncommon loyalty in an era of job hopping and career advancement.

⁵⁹ Christina Passariello, "The Hard-Working Hands Inside Hermès," *WSJ Blogs*, September 14, 2011, <http://blogs.wsj.com/runway/2011/09/14/the-hard-working-hands-inside-hermes>.

⁶⁰ *Les Mains d'Hermès*, 2011.

French Identity And The Craft Tradition

Not many outsiders are able to access Hermès' factories and a film like *Hearts and Crafts* allows customers to connect with the brand on a more personal level beyond a commercial transaction. The film also touches on issues of national pride and France's deep unemployment problems. France has long enjoyed a connection between its national identity and savoir-faire – an awareness of its craft diversity, a promotion of regional métiers and a national recognition of local skills. In the early eighteenth century historian Father Daniel declared France's greatness by linking it to the “endless productions of the several arts, the thousand marvels that France has produced in our time.”⁶¹ With the various social and industrial transformations experienced by French society in recent decades, as historian Richard Kuisel notes, “the disappearance of older industries created a sense of loss and vulnerability; French national identity seemed under threat, and the past became attractive as a ‘warm memory,’ standing for social certainties and economic well-being.”⁶² In this context, craft heritage can be seen as one of the points at which political, economic and social spheres intersect, forming part of the larger heritage movement that has affected contemporary France as a whole.⁶³ From 1978, the Ministry of Culture introduced a state cultural policy that deliberately encouraged the promotion of the past as a means “to follow Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of the past and thus

⁶¹ Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 85.

⁶² Sarah Blowen, Marion Demossier and Jeanine Picard, eds., *Recollections of France: Memories, Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 191.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 142.

avoid anguish and sterility.”⁶⁴ This policy has touched nearly every aspect of French life and industry. *Hearts and Crafts* features workshops, all of which are located in France. The craftsmen in the film practice, preserve and promote traditional French savoir-faire. The film’s context reminds the public and reassures them of Hermès’ true French identity that it can rightfully claim on the basis of its location and artisanal knowhow. This comforting message is also a not-so-subtle jab at the company’s competitors, who haven’t eschewed ever-growing mass production and foreign outsourcing.

As French industry contracted and downsized, unemployment in most urban centers skyrocketed since the 1990s.⁶⁵ In contrast, Hermès is constantly recruiting workers, frequently in some of France’s downtrodden regions. In 2012, the Hermès Group created over nine hundred new jobs, over five hundred of which were in France, most of them in sales and in its production facilities.⁶⁶ The same year the company opened two new leather-goods and saddlery workshops in the French regions of Charente and Isère.⁶⁷ Many of the locations where Hermès has its production sites, such as Lorraine and Ardennes, suffer from persistently high unemployment.⁶⁸ While Hermès alone cannot cure the country’s unemployment problems, in recent years the company has hired and trained hundreds of people from

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁶ Hermès International S.A, *2013 Annual Report*, 29.

⁶⁷ “Hermès International: 2012 Sales,” *Reuters.com*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/12>.

⁶⁸ Passariello, *WSJ Blogs*, September 14, 2011.

regions where manufacturing jobs disappeared.⁶⁹ They are mostly blue-collar workers, who have discovered luxury goods manufacturing after other factory jobs and lengthy desperate job-hunting. The craftsmen in *Hearts and Crafts* happily share the stories of their professional transformation and the joy that comes with it. The film features a fifty-nine-year-old woman, who is in training at the Hermès leather-goods factory. She says that she searched for a job for years after working in a cookie factory. Another woman says that the skills she had previously acquired as an electrician help the precision of her work at Hermès, where she discovered happiness in making personal objects. A young girl says that she burst into tears when Hermès gave her a permanent work contract - a rarity in her region. She feels that now she is able to begin living her life.⁷⁰

It is important to consider the public's response to the craftsmen's heart-felt testimonies captured in the film. In addition to being screened at multiple international venues, *Hearts and Crafts* is permanently located on a dedicated web site www.lesmainsdhermes.com. The site offers mini profiles of the artisans featured in the film, including their portraits and brief biographical stories as well as the film's showing times and locations. What I found particularly revealing is the site's visitors' book. One film viewer wrote on the site on May 8, 2014:

I am Shiang from Taiwan, a leather craft lover. Been making leather craft as hobby for 7-8 years. I learn leather craft by self-taught. We don't have professional leather craft schools. So I read leather craft books, and try to find information on internet. The movie is amazing and awakens the thought deep inside me that "I want to be a real craftsman."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Les Mains d'Hermès*, 2011.

⁷¹ *Les Mains d'Hermès*, <http://www.lesmainsdhermes.com/en/livre-d-or>.

Another comment on the film posted on April 21, 2014 states:

Loved that the employees touched their heart with their hands when talking about the job they performed. Everyone showed passion when sharing their experience. Renewed my passion for my own artwork and crafting.⁷²

The responses to *Hearts and Crafts* captured in the site's visitors' book aptly illustrate the impact the film has had on its viewers. Although the altruistic message of *Hearts and Crafts* is questionable, it is impossible not to connect with the craftsmen as regular folk, appreciate their joys and sorrows, share their pride, and appreciate the passion and the prowess that underpin their work. The film succeeds at presenting the artisans as folkcraftsmen as defined by Yanagi and supports his statement that stimulation and dissemination of folkcrafts leads to a wider perpetuation of crafts. The craftsmen's stories inspired the audience and awakened the public's desire to explore their individual potential as well as engage in the crafts at large.

As part of its effort to pull back the curtain and reveal the work of its craftsmen, in 2011 Hermès launched an ongoing travelling exhibition *Festival des Métiers*. This interactive public presentation brings out Hermès' staff in sixteen different métiers from behind closed doors of their ateliers and places them at open workstations alongside the exhibition's visitors.⁷³ The public has an opportunity to watch the craftsmen at work building a saddle, working leather, painting silk, creating ties, setting diamonds, making watches, painting china by hand, and bringing to life many other iconic objects to the rhythmic sound of tools.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Hermès International S.A, *2011 Annual Report*, 73.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Beyond technical demonstrations, *Festival des Métiers* offers visitors a direct, face-to-face dialogue with the Hermès' artisans to demystify and better understand the painstaking efforts that go into creation of the brand's luxury goods.⁷⁵ The visitors are encouraged to see for themselves, up close, how everything is made, touch the objects and ask artisans questions with the help of translators. A silkscreen specialist may explain that it could take up to two whole years to make a \$400 Hermès' silk scarf from sketch to screen print.⁷⁶ Each scarf requires months of labor as designs are engraved, one color at a time, on printing screens. If a design has thirty colors, the engraving can take up to six hundred hours to complete.⁷⁷ A leather worker would show off the five layers of material that have to be glued and stitched by hand to make a handle of one of Hermès' iconic handbags at a roughly \$8,500 base price.⁷⁸ The Kelly bag, for example, is made with thirty-six pieces of leather and requires around six hundred eighty stitches.⁷⁹

Festival des Métiers started in Seattle in 2011 and has since circulated through key Hermès markets around the world - from San Francisco to Singapore, Dubai, Zurich, New York, Houston, Shenyang, Beijing and Japan, before touching down at the Saatchi Gallery in London in May 2013. It is interesting to note the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Guy Trebay, "Hermès and Craftsmanship," *On the Runway Blog - The New York Times*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.runway.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/herms-and-craftsmanship>.

⁷⁷ Robert Murphy, "Hermès Heritage," *Harpers Bazaar*, January 9, 2013, <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/g2456/hermes-pierre-alexis-dumas-profile-0213>.

⁷⁸ Trebay, *On the Runway Blog - The New York Times*, September 6, 2012.

⁷⁹ Murphy, *Harpers Bazaar*, January 9, 2013.

demonstration's setting in an art gallery, which alludes to the Hermès' internal definition of its artisans as artist craftsmen and makes a connection with Yanagi's claim that the primary value of artist craftsmen is in their ability to show us how to properly appreciate beauty in handwork.

The format of the exhibition, however, was democratic and presented the artisans as approachable folkcraftsmen. On the day I visited the Saatchi Gallery, crowds eager to experience firsthand the Hermès artisans' savoir-faire swarmed the workstations. There were no velvet ropes separating the viewers from the craftsmen and no security guards hovering around the stations in this traveling workshop. Instead, the atmosphere was surprisingly open and welcoming, with people freely mingling and chatting with the artisans. There was no pressure of a fashionable sales event with branded goods flogged at consumers. The focus was entirely on the hard-earned skills and relentless work of the craftspeople as well as the time that went into each creation.

According to Hermès, more than forty thousand people passed through the London exhibition in just one week, evidence to support the fact that consumers are increasingly interested in seeing behind the end product, especially the one commanding a high retail price.⁸⁰ This has not always been the case. During the not-so-distant bull market days of logomania, consumers eagerly flung cash at anything with a label, including mass-manufactured luxury goods.⁸¹ In the current post-

⁸⁰ Imran Amed, "Right Brain, Left Brain; The Welcoming Appeal of Hermès' Festival des Métiers," *The Business of Fashion*, May 29, 2013, <http://www.businessoffashion.com/2013/05/right-brain-left-brain-the-welcoming-appeal-of-hermes-festival-des-metiers>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

financial crisis environment of consumer temperance, *Festival des Métiers* has been a discreet and clever marketing tool for Hermès.

The theatrical-like setting of the exhibition with the tools, leathers and silks out on display like stage props to assist the craftsmen in their performance, is a subtle yet carefully orchestrated way to distance the image of Hermès' artisans in the minds of consumers from the industrial process. It brings a human element back into consumer consciousness and subtly underscores the difference between Hermès and some of its competitors, who do not shy away from mass manufacturing. The message of the exhibition is that with Hermès, you are not just buying into a brand – you are acquiring an object of beauty, quality, and heritage created by folkcraftsmen and not a conveyor belt. It imbues the products with emotion and attempts to reassure consumers that there is real value in handmade goods with authenticity that is worth paying for.

Although the commercial angle of *Festival des Métiers* is evident, the exhibition's educational impact cannot be underestimated. In addition to consumers and lovers of craft, groups of students visited *Festival des Métiers*. The interactive and instructive aspects of the exhibition impressed teachers and students alike.⁸² The mastery and passion of Hermès' artisans exposed at the exhibition are a sure way to ignite the younger generations' interest in crafts and open their eyes to rich career possibilities within a workshop. There is real value to *Festival des Métiers* in the educational and inspirational impact of craft exposure on young generations, which as Yanagi reminds us, is key to perpetuation of crafts.

⁸² Hermès International S.A, *2011 Annual Report*, 73.

The inner workings of Hermès' ateliers are additionally revealed to the public in the company's magazine *Le Monde d'Hermès*. The hard-copy publication and its recently launched digital version are a consumer-oriented quarterly magazine available in French and in English. *Le Monde d'Hermès* is distributed in Hermès' stores, mailed to the company's loyal clients and collected by the brand's devotees. Although the magazine mixes art, photography, poetry, recipes, and quirky essays, it is a slick marketing tool with an objective to sell expensive merchandise. Each issue includes an amusing vignette on an artisan and his craft, which reinforces an emotional connection between the brand and its consumers and reminds the latter of the value in the handcraft that is worth paying for.

The Spring/Summer 2013 issue includes a story on a terry-cloth printer, responsible for making colorful beach towels. The printer is presented as an anonymous folkcraftsman, whose identity is concealed, but whose passion, dedication, and twenty-seven-year tenure with the company are revealed to the magazine's readers.⁸³ The article attempts to dispel the craftsmen's perceived magic and focuses on the five laborious stages of coloring a towel, including printing, and highlights the artisans' commitment to their task along each step. The color-mixer, for example, not only prepares his cans forty-eight hours before printing so that they can settle, but also prefers to hand-weigh pigments rather than use a calibrated machine.⁸⁴ The artisans' visceral commitment to craft described in the magazine, enables the readers to connect with the craftsmen on a personal level and view them as regular folk, who really care about what they do.

⁸³ Sophie Chérier, "Terry-Cloth Printer," *Hermès: Le Monde D'Hermès Printemps-Été 2013*, no. 62 (2013), 56.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Although the magazine details the artisans' craft, it is the end product – a colorful beach towel - that is the focal point of the story. As befits a sales catalog, the beach towel tempts a consumer from the pages of *Le Monde d'Hermès*, evoking thoughts of leisurely days on the beach and the gentle lap of the sea. However, the beach towel comes with a \$600 price tag, which would jolt many out of their vacation daydreams. Yet the emotional connection established by the behind-the-scenes story of the long hours, the personal dedication, and the centuries-old skills that go into a towel's creation encourages a consumer to take comfort in the lasting value of the handmade and take a plunge on a pricey piece of Hermès' terry cloth. The stories in *Le Monde d'Hermès* humanize the craftsmen and in the process assert the brand's commercial advantage and selling power.

To further publicly reaffirm its special relationship with the craftsmen, in 2012 Hermès published a book entitled *An ABC of Hermès Crafts*. In the book, Hermès offers readers a glimpse into the mysterious universe of its workshops from a linguistic perspective. Written by Olivier Saillard, director of Palais Galliera Museum of Fashion in Paris, the book includes one hundred trade-specific terms used by the tailors, leather workers and designers that make up the production teams across all the métiers.⁸⁵ With terms for everything from *abat-carrer* (attenuating an edge of a piece of leather to give it a rounded finish) to *décreuser* (degumming), *retourner* (turning inside out), and *sabrer* (burring), *An ABC of Hermès Crafts* reveals the seemingly impossible number of precise gestures, actions, and skills that each craftsman must master.

⁸⁵ Olivier Saillard, *An ABC of Hermès Crafts* (Paris: Actes Sud/Hermès, 2012).

The premise of the book is that the extraordinarily detailed movements and skills of the Hermès' craftsmen are so exclusive that they create their own language, a *chanson de gestes*, which is understood only within the closed world of the workshops.⁸⁶ Its existence makes Hermès a repository of an original linguistic heritage.⁸⁷ *An ABC of Hermès Crafts*, therefore, is a “book of *words of the tribe*” or a de facto dictionary of the complex insider vocabulary that enables the public to penetrate the universe of Hermès' artisans.⁸⁸

At the start of the book Saillard sets out a romanticized vision of the Hermès' workshops as a mysteriously busy hive that warrants a status of a secret country – a “land of the hand,” where “an incessant ballet of nimble fingers” deftly works materials from start to finish.⁸⁹ It is a land that bewilders the uninitiated, its range and variety of activity often unsuspected. Saillard attempts to demystify this land by breaking down the artisans' expertise into a series of specific operations, precise movements and meticulous techniques. Each of these actions has a word that names or explains it, which Saillard proceeds to decipher. Mixing definitions, personal observations, and anecdotes, Saillard navigates his way through the artisans' insider language and succeeds in evoking from the non-illustrated words, the imagined representations of the craftsmen and of a complex web of actions that go into creation of the Hermes' products.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 7.

An ABC of Hermès Crafts succeeds at conjuring up a portrait of folkcraftsmen, whose mastery is evident at every stage of production and in the almost negligible details. However, it is not clear who the book's target audience is. Billed as a guide to the artisans' insider vocabulary shaped by the history of Hermes' craftsmanship, the book is likely to appeal to a limited circle of linguists, historians, and devoted craft connoisseurs. Having questioned the artisans about the book, I did not sense a strong internal response to it and found them puzzled by some of the terminology and by the book's overall premise. One saddler confessed: "We all have the book – the company offered it to us. I went through some pages but I never really read the book. No one here read it."⁹⁰ When I asked about a specific term, another saddler admitted: "I never heard of that word."⁹¹ He went on to explain: "The book says that the technical words it describes are only for Hermès' gestures but it's not a secret language; it applies to all leather craftsmen in general. Here we use slang and sometimes dirty words!"⁹² Not being an internal hit, the book is also unlikely to appeal to the public. I doubt that an average Hermès consumer, presumed to be the book's target audience, would care to master the workshops' terminology. Perhaps, the company felt that the book's sheer presence on a boutique's shelf is enough to play on consumers' emotions and remind them that at Hermès they are not merely buying an expensive object but investing in heritage and tradition.

Hermès' public initiatives may claim to reveal the inner workings of the company's ateliers inhabited by folkcraftsmen, however there is a clear commercial purpose behind this carefully constructed image of the brand. The film *Hearts and*

⁹⁰ Hermès Artisan, in discussion with the author, November 2013.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Crafts exposes the inner world of the Hermès' craftsmen and casts them as regular folk that the audience can relate to and be inspired by. The exhibition *Festival des Métiers* demystifies the efforts that go into making of Hermès' goods and gives the production process a human face. The magazine *Le Monde d'Hermès* unmask the artisans and the inner workings of Hermès' workshops. The book *An ABC of Hermès Crafts* provides additional insight into the world of Hermès' artisans. These initiatives encourage the public to perceive Hermès' artisans as folkcraftsmen and to connect with them emotionally through understanding and appreciation of their work and passion. The inspirational and educational impact of these initiatives builds the public's awareness of and interest in the crafts and supports Yanagi's claim that folkcrafts lead to preservation and dissemination of crafts at large. At the same time, the orchestrated humanization of Hermès' ateliers in the current age of industrial mass production imbues Hermès' handmade products with emotion and increases their perceived value in the customers' minds. The sentiment that one is buying an object of beauty that carries with it the passion, heritage, and savoir-faire of France is powerful enough to make one pay a premium for a desired thing. In keeping with Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, Hermès' PR and marketing initiatives directly feed the notion of craft fetishism and give the company its commercial edge.

CHAPTER 3: KOTO BOLOFO'S *LA MAISON*

The idea of pulling back the curtain and revealing to the public the inner workings of the Hermès' workshops was the inspiration behind an unprecedented collection of photographs, shot by Koto Bolofo and published in 2010 by Steidl as a book set entitled *La Maison*. The publication's insider view into the ateliers captures the old-world feeling of Hermès' craft and is a result of Bolofo's unique unlimited access to the workshops of a notoriously private luxury house.

Koto Bolofo is a seasoned South African photographer known for fashion spreads and product features for international publications like *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Tatler* as well as for global brands such as Hermès, Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Burberry.⁹³ Bolofo had spent fifteen years completing assignments for the magazine *Le Monde de L'Hermès*, when he felt that his work of photographing the end product for the publication was not progressing.⁹⁴ He was interested in the production process and wanted to know who made a bag or a saddle and how they did it.⁹⁵ In a bold move, Bolofo asked to meet with Jean-Louis Dumas, the late President of Hermès, and expressed his dissatisfaction with the magazine's strategy.⁹⁶ In a surprising response to Bolofo's criticism, Dumas gave the photographer unprecedented access to

⁹³ Creative Exchange Agency, <http://www.creativeexchangeagency.com/artists/photography/koto-bolofo>.

⁹⁴ Appia Michael, "Hermès Book: La Maison by Koto Bolofo," *Wallpaper.com* March 14, 2011, <http://www.wallpaper.com/fashion/herms-book-la-maison-by-koto-bolofo>.

⁹⁵ "Hermès La Maison: Photographer Koto Bolofo is Given Access All Areas to the Luxury Brand," *Nowness.com*, December 11, 2010, <http://www.nowness.com/story/hermes-la-maison>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

the workshops at Hermès, but not before first inquiring about Bolofo's origins. The photographer explained that he came from the Bosutu tribe in Lesotho, a tiny place in the middle of South Africa. In a twist of a remarkable coincidence that decided Bolofo's fate, Dumas explained that his great grandfather was a missionary in Lesotho and used to be protected by Bolofo's tribe from the Zulu attacks.⁹⁷ Dumas proclaimed Bolofo his cousin based on this family connection and gave him carte blanche to photograph anything he wanted at any time in the Hermès' ateliers – a dream Bolofo has long cherished.⁹⁸

Bolofo spent seven years, from 2004 until 2010, documenting every facet of Hermès' craftsmanship. It is interesting to note that while working on *La Maison*, Bolofo positioned himself as one of the folkcraftsmen, matching an artisan's hand-stitching maneuver with his own simple manual knack for capturing action. Like a craftsman shunning mass-production, Bolofo deliberately eschewed high-tech equipment and digital photography to bring pictures to life with a simple click of the shutter - something very different from the manipulated and soulless digital images that he feels have become commonplace. Shedding the usual fashion photography accouterments, such as assistants, agents and bulky equipment, Bolofo used just a film camera, tripod, cable release, whatever natural light was available as well as his talent to be like a fly on the wall and to win the confidence of the otherwise reluctant-to-be-photographed craftsmen.⁹⁹ The mission was to challenge the public's understanding of craft and to demonstrate the 'raw luxury', as Bolofo puts it, in

⁹⁷ Koto Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 1, *Chevaux/Horses* (Goettingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010), 4.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Michael, "Hermès Book: La Maison by Koto Bolofo," March 14, 2011.

Hermès – to analyze and expose the production details and to show what it is really like to fabricate a saddle or to stitch a Kelly bag.¹⁰⁰

The resulting body of work is a tome of eleven volumes, boxed as a set with an outer casing in the traditional Hermès orange. Each volume details a particular aspect of the Hermès' product offering and is named after the atelier it represents – *Horses, Saddles, Kelly Bag, Clothes, Perfume, Bugatti, Gardens, Special Orders, Silk, John Loeb, and Collection Émile Hermès*. The publication transcends a specific category within the medium and combines aspects of photojournalism, documentary, fashion, and art. Only one page in each volume describes the history and process behind the creation of the objects in focus. The publication is mostly about the photographs, which are a striking mix of black and white, sepia-toned and full color images. Some of the pictures are shot from afar and offer a wide view of the work stations, while others zoom right in on the details: needles pulling thread, shears cutting into leather, hammer smoothing the edges. In effect, *La Maison* serves as a pictorial chronicle of the inner workings of the luxury house's ateliers.

What do Bolof's photographs do for Hermès and its consumers? What uses do they have? To answer these questions, we should first consider the meaning of the images in *La Maison*. The historian John Tagg in his work *The Burden of Representation* rejects the idea of photography as a record of reality. Tagg argues "every photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic."¹⁰¹ Tagg expands his argument by stating that chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 2.

variations produce a new and specific reality – a photograph, which takes on many meanings and has real effects.¹⁰² Tagg’s argument is echoed by Stuart Hall, who claims in *Representation: Second Edition* that representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced with the premise that things – objects, people, events in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning.¹⁰³ Hall states that producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, which is sustained by us actively putting things into a code and by the person at the other end interpreting or decoding the meaning.¹⁰⁴ Hall expands his concept of representation by referencing Ferdinand de Saussure and focusing on the constructionist theory of producing meaning, in which the key point is the link provided by the codes between the elements of the image, the *signifiers*, and the mental concepts associated with them, the *signifieds*.¹⁰⁵ The connection between these two systems of representation produces *signs*, which, in turn, produce meanings, and could be used to reference objects, people, and events in the real world.¹⁰⁶ The study of signs in culture to analyze how visual representations convey meaning is generally known as semiotics.

To illustrate a semiotic approach, Hall cites the work of the French critic Roland Barthes *Image-Music-Text* and his example of a Panzani advertisement: packets of pasta, some tomatoes, peppers, and mushrooms, all emerging from a half-

¹⁰² Ibid., 3.

¹⁰³ Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, eds., *Representation: Second Edition* (Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University, 2013), 45.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

open string bag.¹⁰⁷ Through a semiotic approach to decoding of the advertisement's message, a number of signs emerge: the freshness of the produce and the domestic food preparation with the half-open bag as their signifier, as well as the idea of *Italianicity*, its signifier being the bringing together of the vegetables and pasta.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, in his *Mythologies*, Barthes explains that when a sign with a simple denoted message is linked to a broad, ideological theme, it yields a second, more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning.¹⁰⁹ Barthes calls this second level of signification the level of myth. Returning to the Panzani advertisement, we can read the image as a myth by first linking its elements with the cultural concept of Italianness. Then, at the level of myth, the Panzani ad becomes a message about the essential meaning of Italianness as a national culture.¹¹⁰

In *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, edited by Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan, the authors use Italian design to put forth a question of national identity and design in an era of globalization, when the very concept of the *nation* is often criticized as a 'modern myth' or an imaginary construction.¹¹¹ The editors then advance a proposition that national, regional, and local contexts are crucial for design practice and understanding.¹¹² In the words of John Walker: "In

¹⁰⁷ Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 33-5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹⁰ Hall, Evans and Nixon, eds., *Representation*, 26.

¹¹¹ Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan, *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

spite of the mythical nature of the concept of nation, it does have material consequences.”¹¹³ Lees-Maffei and Fallan emphasize an interesting phenomenon: while Italy’s production of goods is modest when viewed on a global scale, its design heritage and innovation are celebrated throughout the world, thus affirming that goods ‘made in Italy’ carry added value.¹¹⁴ The editors argue that ‘made in Italy’ functions as “an unofficial brand to communicate on one level that Italian goods are well designed and well made, and on a metalevel that they conform to a broader *notion* of being well designed and well made, as the mediation of Italian manufacturers, designers and brands has led us to expect.”¹¹⁵ Following Barthes’ thinking, ‘made in Italy’ therefore, becomes a message about the essential meaning of superior Italian design and manufacture as a national characteristic.

The question of design and national identity in the post-colonial, globalized world of the twenty-first century is additionally explored with respect to Britishness in *British Design: Tradition and Modernity After 1948* edited by Christopher Breward, Fiona Fisher and Ghislaine Wood. Many dramatic political, economic, social, and cultural changes occurred in Britain following the Second World War. Within this context of evolving national identity, Britishness and design grew to incorporate traditional values with the ideas of modernism and postmodernism, while maintaining characteristic playfulness and humor. The editors of *British Design* argue that Britain’s creative identity and role in the world can be described through “often-opposing qualities that range from the eccentric and transgressive through the

¹¹³ John Walker, *Design History and the History of Design* (London: Pluto, 1989), 120.

¹¹⁴ Lees-Maffei and Fallan, *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

romantic and sentimental to the pragmatic and ingenious” – characteristics that have been consciously developed in the nation’s material landscape.¹¹⁶

Le Sac Kelly

What do Bolofó’s photographs in *La Maison* tell us about Hermès’ products and craft as well as their place within France’s national context set against a background of globalization? With the help of the semiotic approach I will now endeavor to answer this question. Volume three of the book set, *Le Sac Kelly*, shows almost one hundred photographs of the process involved in producing one of the world’s most coveted handbags. The volume’s cover features an image of a padlock that adorns every Kelly bag. In the first level of signification, this element of a bag is a sign of safety. Then, at the level of myth and connotation, it evokes an idea of a private world, safeguarded by a closure similar to the one on a personal diary. By lifting the volume’s cover, the reader is invited to discover this insiders’ realm. The body of the volume consists of a mix of vibrant color photographs and subtle black and white images that capture one by one the various steps involved in the making of an iconic Kelly bag - in this instance, a shiny red crocodile one, and focus on the link between material and technique.

Bolofó builds his visual narrative of the bag’s production by letting the camera closely follow a leather craftsman in his most routine tasks – all done by hand in an atelier located in a Parisian suburb of Pantin. Bolofó’s images alternate between the still lifes of the materials, tools, and parts of the bag, all frequently captured in the

¹¹⁶ Christopher Breward, Fiona Fisher and Ghislaine Wood, eds., *British Design: Tradition and Modernity After 1948* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 6.

artisan's hands, as well as the shots of the craftsman in action. The production starts with the cutting of the skins, which demands great precision and is carried out with the aid of cutting plates.¹¹⁷ Bolofo captures this stage of creation in stills of the crocodile skin cut outs and cutting plates. He also includes action shots of the craftsman, who carefully places the cutting plates on the leather and deftly slices the skin. These essential elements and steps in the making of a Hermès bag signify quality and handcraft. Then, in a broader context, they become a message of French artisanal heritage and set the overall tone for Bolofo's story of the bag's construction.

Once the leather sections required to make the bag have been cut out, they are carefully collected and trimmed by the craftsman. After the gluing, the craftsman assembles the bag by successively stitching its lining, reinforcing the base, and adding linings to the straps and gussets – a time- and skill-intensive process, closely captured in Bolofo's action shots. In these images, the craftsman is always hunched over his worktable with his body fully engaged in whatever technical maneuver is required by the production. His muscles visibly tense as he strikes precise blows with a hammer, his fingers firmly press on the leather and hands tightly grip a tool. Bolofo alternates between full shots of the craftsman's body and close ups of the artisan's hands, frequently zooming in right on the fingertips as if to indicate the precision and detail that go into the artisan's work. It is important to note that the face of the craftsman often appears out of focus, obscured and cropped. Bolofo chooses to maintain the artisan's anonymity and gives center stage to the artisan's skillful hands. It is as if the craftsman's persona is secondary to his hands and effectively, extraneous to the process of making a bag. These photographs speak of French handcraft and superior

¹¹⁷ Koto Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 3, *Le Sac Kelly/Kelly Bag* (Goettingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010), 94.

skill. Then, at the second level of myth, they take on a meaning of folkcraftsmanship and French traditional savoir-faire.

Bolofo's inquisitive eye pays close attention to the final sewing together of the bag's parts using multiple saddle stitches done with a beeswax-coated thread. Bolofo breaks down this process into its essential elements with close-ups of the needles, spools of thread, a single thread pressing tightly against the artisan's thumb, a needle running through a clump of wax, and the craftsman's outstretched arm firmly pulling the thread through the leather. In these images Bolofo appears to pay special respect to the signature saddle stitch – the foundation of Hermès' initial success and the company's enduring hallmark. Initially, these pictures signify manual production and then, at the second broader level, become a message of the lasting traditions of French handcraft.

Next comes an important operation of making the stiff handle that will crown the top of the Kelly bag. A series of action shots document the multiple steps of the handle's production and reveal it as a process that requires great dexterity and delicate sculpting. The craftsman's hands are captured carefully bending the leather to determine the handle's curvature, deftly stitching and trimming the handle's outer layers in crocodile skin with the help of a rounded wooden block, and confidently shaping the handle's final form against the craftsman's thigh to follow the limb's natural curve. Consistent with Bolofo's other action shots inside the atelier, the images of the artisan unselfconsciously sculpting the handle denote handwork and dexterity. Then, looking beyond the initial meaning, the photographs begin to speak of folkcraftsmanship and French artisanal heritage.

Bolofo captures the gentle yet stiff arch of the finished handle in several still lifes. Intended for practical purposes, the handle takes on an aestheticized quality in

Bolofo's photographs. The arched handle is shown proudly sitting atop a Kelly bag with the light reflecting off the smooth surface of its simple geometric shape, perfected over the decades. The pure form of the handle appears as a minimalist sculpture or an architectural detail. At first, the stills of the unadorned gracefully curved handle suggest practicality and quality. Then, at the level of myth, they arouse an idea of beauty in simplicity and evoke the Hermès' family credo "Que l'utile soit beau" ("That the useful be beautiful").

As Bolofo chronicles the bag's metamorphosis, he pays special attention to its material. He takes close-ups of the red crocodile skin, whose jewel tone fills the volume's pages in an alluring way. The photographs magnify every detail of the exotic skin's unique pattern and highlight its tactile quality. They entice the viewer to imagine what it would feel like to actually run one's fingertips over the skin's surface. As the light bounces off the highly glossed leather, the material appears to glow even in the occasional black and white photographs. The precious red crocodile skin acts as a sign of quality, rarity, and beauty of the material. Then, at the broader contextual level, it becomes a message of luxury and desire that provokes the viewer from the volume's pages. It is also perhaps, a message of the craftsmen's control of the animal world itself, taming and domesticating it.

In the last stages of production the bag is polished and adorned with metallic elements before it assumes its final form. Bolofo's visual narrative of the step-by-step process behind a single bag culminates with a revealing portrait of the craftsman holding the finished red crocodile Kelly. It is the only photograph in which the craftsman looks directly into the camera as if his persona is finally allowed to come through once his labor is done. The artisan appears fatigued yet content, with a confident look in his eyes and a gentle smile on his lips. The bag is placed on his lap

and he tenderly holds it with both hands wearing protective white gloves, which are commonly associated with high-end service - a reference to the bag's exclusivity. At the end of the time-consuming painstaking process the craftsman is proud to show his beautiful creation. The bag appears perfect with its sturdy well-proportioned shape, glossy leather, firmly arched handle and gleaming hardware.

The portrait brings into focus the connection between skill and material, as “only the raw substance that is slow to yield, defying human hand and resisting the artisan's tool will spur the craftsman on to accomplish a feat of consummate skill.”¹¹⁸ Then, in a broader context, the portrait becomes a message of French craft heritage and professional pride. The portrait may also be read as a love story between the craftsman and the red crocodile Kelly – he courted, challenged, persuaded, and caressed the leather before it surrendered to him in its final shape. Perhaps, as the artisan prepares to let the bag go into the world, the image is a solicitation of desire in a potential suitor.

Le Sac Kelly ends with a color image of the Kelly bag and a black and white shot of the atelier. Bolofo places the red crocodile bag in the center of the photograph as if taking a portrait of an attractive woman. The bag's stiff geometric shape stands firmly on a worktop. To craft a beautifully lit portrait, Bolofo employs a classic lighting pattern and turns the bag's front off-center with the right corner facing the viewer. The natural light coming from the right illuminates the bag's side, while the front remains in the shadow. In classic portraiture, this technique is known as short lighting.¹¹⁹ Because the shadow side is more prominent to the camera with short

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ William Sawalich, “Classic Portrait Light,” *Digital Photo Magazine*, December 17, 2014, <http://www.dpmag.com/how-to/shooting/classic-portrait-light?showall=1>.

lighting, it adds mystery and drama to the subject. The play of light and shadow enhances the Kelly bag's features – its structure, rich color, smooth texture, and sheen of the skin, much as it would with a woman's face. The portrait is an affirmation of the bag's beauty and exclusivity as well as a temptation posing a question – who would have the fortune to possess it?

The bag's portrait is juxtaposed with a black and white image of the atelier, shot from afar with a wide lens. It is impossible to discern any tools, materials or people and only the simple long worktables are visible. Without any identifying marks, the atelier appears ordinary and unassuming and has a certain timeless quality. It prompts a question of when the photograph may have been taken – was it months or decades ago? The photograph seems to make a point that it is in this humble place a group of folkcraftsmen produces objects of beauty and guards the heritage of their craft.

Selles/Saddles

In contrast to the vibrant images of *Le Sac Kelly*, the second volume *Selles/Saddles* is more subdued and primarily consists of black and white photographs of the saddle-making workshop. Perched atop Hermès' flagship boutique on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, saddle-making is the oldest workshop in the company. Perhaps, Bolofo's choice of its black and white representation aims to evoke the company's origins and history of when in 1837 Thierry Hermès founded the initial harness and saddle atelier.

Selles begins with the images of keys and an entrance to the workshop – a

rickety wooden door with bits of masking tape stuck to its front and reinforcing its handle. The reader is virtually “handed” the keys and encouraged to enter the saddle-makers’ universe, which is a humble abode without pomp and pretense. It is surprising to discover that behind such an unassuming façade is the place solely responsible for the entire production of the famous Hermès’ saddles.

In *Selles* the saddles appear as objects that are physically difficult to create. Bolofo chronicles their production process as a wrestling match between the craftsmen and the material. In a multitude of shots, Bolofo captures the craftsmen in motion as they stretch, trim, shape, cut, and stitch the resistant leather. Bolofo catches an artisan leaning in on the saddle, with one hand tightly squeezing its side and the other hand forcefully piercing the material. Another craftsman grips a trimming tool so tightly that his knuckles turn white. As an artisan bends a saddle into its final shape, he firmly holds it in both hands with his muscles visibly flexed. Bolofo photographs fingers tightly pressing on the leather, hammers flying, muscles tightening and bodies leaning in with all their might to shape the saddles. Bolofo’s images of the craftsmen in the midst of strenuous labor convey the sheer physical effort that goes into the saddles’ production and speak of the job’s challenge as well as the craftsmen’s dexterity.

Unlike in *Le Sac Kelly*, in *Selles* Bolofo does not present a chronological progression of the saddles’ production. Instead, he focuses on the multiplicity of the craftsmen’s actions, the “authenticity and beauty of their endlessly repeated gestures, the skillful use of tools, working the material in ever finer detail as if in an endless quest to push back the bounds of quality, comfort, performance, and artistic

perfection.”¹²⁰ In his images of the saddle-makers at work, Bolofo appears to capture the craftsmen’s sentiment that could be identified with Saint-Exupéry’s poignant description in *Flight to Arras*: “It came to this, that I was working at my trade. All that I felt was the physical pleasure of going through gestures that meant something and were sufficient unto themselves.”¹²¹

The faces of the saddle-makers are visible in many of the action shots. They do not look into the camera and appear completely oblivious to it. The photographs show the artisans’ heads bent over the material, their gaze firmly following the smallest movement of the hand, foreheads creased, brows furrowed and lips tightly pursed in intense concentration as the craftsmen meticulously perform every task. The saddle-makers appear fully immersed in the job at hand, which takes center stage in Bolofo’s images. The artisans seem to be engaged in an invisible dialogue with the objects that they are bringing to life. Bolofo’s photographs of the craftsmen unselfconsciously engaged in their routine tasks inside a humble saddle-making workshop signify skill, concentration, industry, and dedication to handcraft. In a broader context, these images become a message of folkcraftsmanship and French artisanal heritage.

Bolofo mixes the artisans’ action shots with the stills of production elements that act as signs of the long-standing traditions of Hermès’ craft. In several photographs Bolofo’s camera zooms in on a thread coated in beeswax and a needle piercing the leather to pull the thread through. These images act as a reminder that

¹²⁰ Koto Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 2, *Selles/Saddles* (Goettingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010), 70.

¹²¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Oeuvres Complètes: tome II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 131.

saddle-making contributed the original saddle stitch – a distinctive and enduring mark of superior quality in a variety of Hermès' products. The saddle-makers are seen as the guardians of the Hermès' heritage and their expertise forms a bridge between the company's current diverse activities and the trade initiated by Thierry Hermès in 1837.¹²²

Bolofo closely photographs the craftsmen's rudimentary tools, worn down by the meticulously repeated gestures. Many of these tools belonged to the artisans who retired and passed them along to the next generation as a family treasure.¹²³ Bolofo's camera zooms in on the workshop's leather-bound registers that range in date from 1914 to 1996. The worn out covers give away the registers' age and frequent use. Updated constantly since the beginning of the twentieth century, the registers record every saddle made by the workshop, each bearing its individual identification number.¹²⁴ The registers function as an ongoing chronicle of the work of almost five generations of saddle-makers, which apart from subtle improvements that have taken place over the years, remains largely the same.¹²⁵

The images of the registers, tools and a saddle stitch as well as the artisans' action shots speak of a particular sustainability of Hermès craft and the French artisanal heritage at large. Hermès' artisans proudly work in ateliers based in France using the same tools, techniques and maneuvers as they have done for generations to create highly desirable objects that have remained virtually unchanged in their design

¹²² Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 2, 70.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Hermès Saddle-maker, in discussion with the author, November 2013.

and execution. Within this context, Bolofo's images refer to the lasting power of the reputation enjoyed by Hermès and by the French handcraft in general, historically known for its superiority. Let us recall now Lees-Maffei's and Fallan's *Made in Italy* and their examination of the eponymous notion and national identity. The editors argue that 'made in Italy' refers to a reputation of Italian goods and appears as "shorthand for indicating the quality and specialness of Italian design" – a matter of national pride and identity.¹²⁶ In a similar manner, Bolofo's aforementioned photographs present Hermès as symbolic of the long-standing excellence of French handcraft, a distinct national characteristic. The photographs' message becomes especially poignant thanks to Bolofo's choice of a black and white color scheme. The images evoke old-fashioned representations and appear difficult to date – were they taken months, decades or a hundred years ago? Since the materials, tools and gestures have remained largely unchanged, Bolofo's black and white images convincingly support the idea of enduring superior handcraft as a national attribute of France.

Bolofo concludes the volume with the close-ups of the finished saddles, carefully stacked atop each other. Their functionality and elegantly restrained form have been perfected in response to the most demanding taskmaster of all, the horse. The saddles' excellence launched the business of Hermès and has maintained its reputation into the twenty-first century. The images of the saddles crafted from buttery leather, their graceful shape virtually unchanged over the years, point to quality and performance. And in a broader context, they once again become a message of French handcraft and its endurance.

¹²⁶ Lees-Maffei and Fallan, *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design*, 27.

La Soie/Silk

Determined to delve into the origin of things, in the ninth volume *La Soie/Silk*, Bolofo travels to Lyon to chronicle the creation of a Hermès printed silk scarf in over seventy photographs. To underscore the length and complexity of the scarf's birth, Bolofo goes back to its beginnings and opens the volume with the close-ups of the cocoons, silkworms and their preferred food – a mulberry leaf. By some magical process, the silkworm's tiny mouth transforms the huge mulberry leaf into a fine lacy structure and gives birth to silk.¹²⁷ Bolofo appears to pay his respect to this small miracle of nature in a serene close-up of a single silk thread.

The transformation of the raw silk thread into rolls of silk twill ready for printing requires several important steps, which take place over the course of three months.¹²⁸ The first is the reeling, after which comes the weaving done by powerful machines. Bolofo highlights the human element of this production phase in a portrait of a warper, cutting a delicate figure next to the machine as she intensely focuses on her task of watching over the functioning of the warp beam. The watchful eyes and the skillful hands of a *visiteuse*, as the female inspector is known, perform quality control of the silk twill.¹²⁹ Bolofo's lens zooms in on the hands of the *visiteuse*, who uses her stylus with the skill and exactness of a surgeon wielding a scalpel to remove tiny flaws in the silk twill.¹³⁰ Bolofo's close-ups focus on a tiny loose thread – a

¹²⁷ Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 9, 78.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

potential danger, and magnify the vigilance and exactness required of the artisan.

The theme of precision carries through to the next step of production - engraving. The engraver works with a life-size colored drawing that has to be closely analyzed and broken down into as many films as there are colors.¹³¹ Bolofo photographs the engravers bent over brightly lit tables, using a quill with Indian ink in one hand and a brush with gouache in another, as they patiently transfer each color, one by one, onto a transparent film placed on top of the mock-up design, using one film per color. The artisans' intelligent faces exhibit deep thought and concentration as they perform their extraordinarily painstaking job. They seem constantly aware that the perfection of the print depends on the perfection of the engraving. The images of the engravers denote analytical intelligence, rigor, and dexterity. Then, at the broader contextual level, they speak of handcraft's exacting standards and French artisanal heritage.

From the engravers, Bolofo's camera moves on to the colorists, whose task is to propose colors in addition to the original design, so that each scarf can appear in about ten different combinations.¹³² The colorists have an exclusive kaleidoscopic color chart with about 75,000 hues and have to rely on their eye, hand, and aesthetic sense to put together an attractive color combination.¹³³ Bolofo captures the artisans with color swatches fanned out like brilliantly colored peacocks' tails. The craftsmen confidently look into the camera, undaunted by the array of hues in their hands and ready to deploy them in pursuit of beauty. Color mixing is still largely produced in a

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Thomas Lenthal, "Behind the Scenes: Hermès," *System*, no. 5, Spring/Summer 2015, 230.

traditional way using hand and eye and eschewing machinery. Bolofo highlights this point in images of a color mixer stirring the pigment with her rubber-gloved hands to achieve the correctness of the color in the same way a French chef would prepare a sauce in the kitchen. The photographs of the colorists and color mixers speak of precision, skill, and handcraft and point to a broader theme of quality and French artisanal heritage.

The message of handcraft and its traditions continues into the final stage of production – the actual printing of the silk scarves. The printing process entails a roll of silk twill laid out on a table one hundred meters long with multiple frames placed on the silk in precise order to let one color through at a time.¹³⁴ The craftsmen carry out multiple control operations throughout this process. Bolofo captures the craftsmen bent over the long printing table or deftly maneuvering the silk twill with their gaze firmly fixed on the material.

The volume ends with a portrait of the craftsmen surrounded by the finished products. As in the case of the leather worker, the personae of the silk craftsmen come through upon the completion of their job, when Bolofo's lens points directly at their faces. The artisans proudly smile at the camera as their heads poke out of a multi-colored stack of silk scarves. The craftsmen radiate joy and satisfaction having performed a complex series of actions that started with the raw silk thread and lead to the creation of the fine silk scarves, as complex in their design and color scheme as the painstaking process of their production – a testament to the union of beauty and French craft heritage.

Bolofo's photographs in *La Maison*, all taken in the ateliers located in France

¹³⁴ Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 9, 78.

and ranging from the living beings through to objects – a tool or a piece of leather, focus on the link between material and technique and are loaded with meaning. The still shots of the leather, a needle pulling a thread coated in beeswax, a saddle stitch, and artisans' tools are all elements of production and in the first level of signification become a sign of quality and manual work. Then, at the second level of signification, that of myth and connotation, the sign becomes the signifier and the message of Bolofo's still lifes becomes that of French craft heritage.

The idea of French traditional craftsmanship dominates Bolofo's photographs of the artisans going about their day-to-day tasks. In *Le Sac Kelly* the craftsman is captured tirelessly cutting, trimming, and stitching the crocodile skin as well as shaping the bag's handle with great skill and precision. These action shots, in which the artisan's face is absent but the hands are magnified, denote handcraft and dexterity and on the level of myth, speak of folkcraft and French craft heritage. In *Selles* the craftsmen are depicted vigorously stretching the leather, stitching the materials together with the signature stitch, and forcefully shaping the saddle, while maintaining an extraordinary degree of concentration on their task. The images of the saddle-makers - the guardians of Hermès' original technique, denote expert skill and handcraft. Then, at the second level of connotation, these portraits signify folkcraft and perpetuation of French traditional craft. The photographs in *La Soie* focus on the craftsmen's precision - as in the case of a *visiteuse*, their astonishing patience and dexterity, best exemplified by the engravers, and the unwavering reliance on the skill of their hands, summed up by the color mixers. As in the previously discussed volumes, the photographs in *La Soie* denote handcraft and expertise and on the contextual level, become a message of folkcraftsmanship and French artisanal heritage.

The photographs of the finished products – a Kelly bag, saddles, and printed silk scarves - are revealing in their own right. All objects of utility, the products exhibit a certain attractiveness that comes from their simple yet elegant form, rich colors and superb materials. Their images speak of beauty, both in material and design, handcraft, and exceptional quality. At the second level of connotation, they take on the meaning of French craft heritage, luxury, and desirability, most explicitly conveyed in the dramatic photographs of the red crocodile Kelly bag with its sumptuous skin and pure form. The portraits of the craftsmen with their finished products – a Kelly bag and printed multi-colored silk scarves, show smiling faces of people, who feel satisfaction after hundreds of hours of painstaking work. The images signify the artisans' selfless dedication to and pride in pursuit of their creations' perfection. On the level of myth, the portraits denote French craft heritage and folkcraft. The visualization of the latter through Bolofo's photographs fits in with Yanagi's original definition of folkcraft as unselfconscious handmaking by anonymous craftsmen, who achieve beauty in objects through utility and natural materials.

Going back to the initial question of what does Bolofo's *La Maison* do for Hermès and its customers, I would argue that the answer lies in the sum of the publication's mythological signs. We already established through John Tagg's work that photographs, by definition, cannot be a record of reality and have many meanings beyond their literal content. Following Tagg's and Stuart Hall's theories of representation, we can establish that *La Maison* presents a constructed depiction of Hermès via Bolofo's visual story telling. Through Hall and Barthes' semiotic approach to Bolofo's photographs, we identified the publication's dominant messages of folkcraft, French craft heritage, luxury, and desirability. Therefore, what emerges

from *La Maison* is a revealing, intimate portrait of Hermès as a luxury house that perpetuates traditions of French craft and engages folkcraftsmen in a single-minded pursuit of quality and beauty. Bolofo builds his narrative by gradually revealing the craftsmen's personae along their work's progress. He begins with the images of fingertips and hands dexterously working the material and concludes with the full portraits of craftsmen with the fruits of their labor. Through his photographs of the process, Bolofo slowly reveals the craftsmen emerging as real people and merges them with an idea of home and its members – individual parts making up a greater whole. Even the title *La Maison* denotes a family home with its casual atmosphere of support and selfless industry. In the words of Pierre-Alexis Dumas, Artistic Director of Hermès, the title “elicits neither the image of a fortified castle nor a closed temple. Rather it brings to mind a beehive or an industrious, family-owned farm with its outbuildings and its attic, stables, storehouses and orchards.”¹³⁵

In *La Maison*, Bolofo succeeds in his mission to expose the everyday business of Hermès in order to challenge the public's understanding of craft and in effect, of the company itself. This idea is supported in the foreword to the publication by Pierre-Alexis Dumas: “*La Maison* provides a glimpse of an intimate, living Hermès, revealing the dreams that inspire it and the desire that courses through the hands and minds of our craftsmen. Just like Gepetto, carving the pine log with paternal love, they are all driven by the mad urge to provide material objects with a soul.”¹³⁶

This image of Hermès, constructed through *La Maison*'s photographs, enables the company to build a strong emotional connection with its customers. In the world

¹³⁵ Bolofo, *La Maison*, vol. 1, 4.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

of increasingly demanding and discerning consumers, it reinforces the value of the handmade over the mass-produced and justifies the price premium of the former in line with Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. In an era of globalization, when the question of national identity is particularly acute – as in the examples of Britishness and Italianness, *La Maison*'s representation of Hermès as being distinctly French enables the company to play a nationalist card to its commercial, political, and social advantage. Finally, the attractive visuals of Hermès' luxurious products appear to prey on consumers' emotions with intent to arouse desire of ownership. Therefore, I would argue that for the purposes of Hermès, its constructed representation in *La Maison* could be interpreted as a blatant company advertisement with an aim to solicit business.

The publication is in effect a substantially more comprehensive and hence, more powerful version of the magazine *Le Monde d'Hermès* – a sales catalog with vignettes on the ateliers and product snapshots designed to increase consumer brand loyalty. I find it ironic that Bolofo wanted to distance himself from his work at *Le Monde d'Hermès* by embarking on the creation of *La Maison*. It begs a question of whether Bolofo was aware of *La Maison*'s potential commercial impact and his own indirect contribution to the company's bottom line. Perhaps, Jean-Louis Dumas knew it all along.

CHAPTER 4: ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS

Hermès La Maison

In a move to further expand its commercial activity and product offering, Hermès launched a home collection *Hermès La Maison* in 2011. Presented as a contemporary vision of the Hermès' lifestyle for the home, the range includes new lines of furniture, re-editions of Jean-Michel Frank's designs in collaboration with Hermès from the 1920s and 1930s, wallpapers, furnishing fabrics, and carpets in addition to the existing collections of decorative objects, tableware, and textiles. True to the company ethos, the new home collection promises to combine noble materials, expert craftsmanship, and elegantly restrained design in order to, in the words of Pierre-Alexis Dumas, "demonstrate a contemporary expression of Hermès, faithful to its craftsman spirit and imbued with values of functionality and comfort."¹³⁷

For the launch of *Hermès La Maison* at the International Furniture Fair in Milan, the company brought in a powerful architectural duo of Shigeru Ban and Jean de Gastines, who also designed Centre Pompidou-Metz to design Hermès Pavilion.¹³⁸ The result of their collaboration was an ephemeral paper house made out of cardboard tubes woven with paper – a structure, described by the company in the words of Jean Cocteau, as "the invisibility of true elegance."¹³⁹ The interior configuration consisted

¹³⁷ *La Maison*, (Paris: Hermès, 2011), 3.

¹³⁸ Penny Craswell, "Pavilion Hermès at Milan Design Week 2011," *Architectureau.com*, September 26, 2011, <http://www.architectureau.com/articles/pavilion-hermes>.

¹³⁹ *La Maison*, 21.

of rooms of varying sizes and ceiling heights to simulate private as well as more shared spaces and make the visitors feel at one with the Hermès lifestyle.¹⁴⁰ The pavilion's rooms provided settings for the new contemporary furniture done in collaboration with a number of celebrated artists and furniture designers - Enzo Mari, Antonio Citterio and the RDAI studio (Rena Dumas Architecture Intérieure). The furniture does not appear at the cutting edge of contemporary design, but instead exudes classic luxury of high quality materials and timelessness in its functionality and simplicity – all so central to Hermès. The contemporary furniture collections continue along the lines of Jean-Michel Frank's aesthetic, at once geometric, meditative and extremely simple, with Citterio drawing direct inspiration from Frank's designs and the furniture he created in the 1920s and 1930s, some in collaboration with Hermès workshops.¹⁴¹ The re-editions of Frank's designs appear in the pavilion alongside the new creations.

Are the Frank re-editions and the new furniture collections inspired by Frank's work merely a part of business diversification and expansion by Hermès? Or do they have a broader function? Based on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, this chapter argues that the Frank re-editions and Frank-inspired collections not only add luster to the Hermès' growing home department, but also establish the company as a producer and purveyor of cultural capital. Furthermore, they allow Hermès to successfully position itself as an arbiter of taste and a guardian of national heritage.

¹⁴⁰ Stefania Vourazeri, "Hermès: La Maison, Milan 2011," April 17, 2011, www.yatzer.com/Hermes-La-Maison-Milan-2011.

¹⁴¹ *La Maison*, 4.

Frank, known for his style of uncluttered elegance, is one of the most influential and sought-after designers and decorators of the twentieth century. “He was in fact, one of the best designers of the time,” explained artist Alberto Giacometti.¹⁴² Nothing superfluous bothered the eye in Frank’s extremely simple spaces, which had a distinct sense of peace and tranquility to them. His captivating, pure forms were characterized by the concepts of asceticism, emptiness, and “poor luxury.”¹⁴³ The latter term was coined in his honor by novelist and future Nobel Laureate, François Mauriac, who further described Frank’s style as an “aesthetic of renouncement,” a reference to the designer’s penchant for working with materials that were, at the time, considered too humble for consideration.¹⁴⁴ Frank worked with materials like plaster, terracotta, straw, shearling, parchment, jute, and goatskin, which gave them new appreciation. He juxtaposed these humble materials with the more precious and classically sophisticated ones, such as ivory, gold or mahogany, playing on their contrasts to great acclaim. The materials as unusual to see as they were to touch, the bare stripped forms, and the emptiness of spaces lent Frank’s work its uniqueness and unity. Collaborations with artists such as Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dali, and Christian Bérard amplified Frank’s appeal.¹⁴⁵ Wealthy elite, avant-

¹⁴² Pierre-Emmanuel Martin-Vivier, *Jean-Michel Frank: The Strange and Subtle Luxury of the Parisian Haute-Monde in the Art Deco Period* (New York: Rizzoli, 2008), 9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁴⁴ Sara White Wilson, “Archival Revival,” *Bespoke Magazine*, December/January 2011, <http://www.bespoke-magazine.com/96/Article/Archival-Revival>.

¹⁴⁵ François Baudot, *J.M. Frank: Universe of Style* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1999), 13.

garde intellectuals and artists – all eagerly embraced Frank’s aesthetic of elemental sobriety. The designer’s patrons included Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, Nelson Rockefeller, Cole Porter, Louis Aragon, Elsa Schiaparelli and Guerlain – figures that populated artistic and intellectual life in Paris between the wars.¹⁴⁶

During Jean-Michel Frank’s lifetime to be familiar with him was a clear indication that one was a connoisseur. With the decision to include in the launch of *Hermès La Maison* a collection of re-edited furniture by one of France’s most influential designers in collaboration with Hermès, the company positions itself to bring Frank’s work to a new wider audience. The collection reproduces originals crafted between 1925 and 1935, upholding as close as possible to the quality of the materials and techniques that were used at the time and includes a number of Frank’s emblematic designs, many of which serve as the inspiration for furniture still made today.¹⁴⁷ There are a low sturdy sofa and a cubist chair from the *Comfortable* series, inverted U-shaped low tables, a dining table and a set of nesting tables on X-shaped supports, which display Frank’s signature use of rectilinear lines.¹⁴⁸ There are also exceptional pieces in straw marquetry - a coffee table and a folding screen, as well as a dressing table that transforms into a desk and is finished in parchment.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Martin-Vivier, *Jean-Michel Frank*, 12.

¹⁴⁷ White Wilson, “Archival Revival,” December/January 2011.

¹⁴⁸ “Maison,” *Le Monde D’Hermès*, Spring-Summer 2011, 76-83.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

The idea to re-edit Frank's furniture was "a way to come back to the source of our knowhow in furniture, a great experience for our workshop," explains *Hermès La Maison* General Director Hélène Dubrule.¹⁵⁰ She elaborates:

It was a testament in terms of style because we really think there is a perfect fit between the style of Jean-Michel Frank and facets of Hermès' style because of the pureness of the lines, the timelessness, the simplicity. You know, simplicity is the most difficult thing to achieve when you are looking for excellence and quality. It actually magnifies the quality of the materials and the perfection of the finishing and savoir-faire.¹⁵¹

The Frank re-editions are signed "J.M. Frank par Hermès" and are accompanied by a certificate of authenticity. Dubrule explains why the certificate is so important:

The furniture issued after Frank's death was not authorized by his family. It was difficult for us to find some pieces. We had some in our archives but for others, we had to consult collectors and study the pieces in order to be faithful to the originals. We asked the Frank family, the Jean-Michel Frank Committee and experts who really know his work, as there are so many fakes, especially in the U.S. And throughout the process we showed them our prototypes in order to validate their accuracy because we promised the family we would be faithful to the originals, their level of quality and the technique used to produce them.¹⁵²

With their understatement and strict geometric forms, the Frank re-editions appear as fresh and contemporary as did the originals over eighty years ago. Perhaps, this is what makes a design a classic.

Let us examine now the cultural and social significance of the Frank re-editions based on Bourdieu's discourse on cultural capital. In his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu defines the concept of cultural capital as

¹⁵⁰ White Wilson, "Archival Revival," December/January 2011.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

high cultural knowledge that ultimately leads to the owner's financial and social advantage.¹⁵³ Bourdieu elaborates that a cultural product

an avant-garde picture, a political manifesto, a newspaper – is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience, implicit or even unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by a process of objectification which, in present circumstances, is almost always the work of professionals. It is consequently charged with the legitimizing, reinforcing capacity which objectification always possesses, especially when, as in the case now, the logic of structural homologies assigns it to a prestigious group so that it functions as an authority which authorizes and reinforces dispositions by giving them a collectively recognizable expression.¹⁵⁴

Cultural products that make up cultural capital are defined through the multiple lenses and factors that people use in society and as individuals to determine what are of value at that time and place in society. Furthermore, cultural capital yields a profit in social distinction and functions as an instrument of social domination. Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction establishes the transfer of cultural capital through both informal and formal education. However, the latter way tends to be prohibitively inconvenient and expensive way to acquire cultural capital. In reality, people normally acquire cultural capital informally when they grow to maturity in advantaged socioeconomic households or the "dominant classes" as Bourdieu would call them.

Frank's designs are exemplars of cultural products that make up cultural capital as termed by Bourdieu, and, in turn, this furniture transfers value to its purchasers. These exclusive furniture pieces support Bourdieu's claim that luxury goods make the most overt association of a product with a social group and classify

¹⁵³ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

their owners by establishing a link between “the value of emblems and the value of the group which owns them.”¹⁵⁵ Designed and crafted in France for the intellectual and financial elite of the time (the dominant classes according to Bourdieu), Frank’s furniture pieces have been a mark of wealth, taste, and social standing and have maintained their aesthetic relevance and place in French design history.

We have established that there are many determining factors for taste and the basis of cultural heritage. These factors include time, people, class, cultural history, and individual and community values. I would argue that this is the reason why something that was relevant in the past can still be important in the present and not just for its historical purposes. This is the basis for rationalizing why Hermès would want to re-issue Jean-Michel Frank’s furniture and sell it from a business as well as a cultural standpoint. Given that value and aesthetics are carried down through generations, taking something from the past that was once on the cutting edge of fashion among the intellectual and financial elite of the time and re-issuing it in the present may still maintain its aesthetic and cultural relevance. Like the originals, the Frank re-editions may be viewed as cultural products. In fact, by taking a former marker of class distinction and cultural capital such as Frank’s designs in collaboration with Hermès and launching them as re-editions in the present, Hermès is literally selling objects that are rich in cultural capital (Marx would say rich in commodification) twice over.

Along with the re-editions, the new furniture collections of *Hermès La Maison* are cultural products containing either direct or indirect influence from Frank’s design aesthetic. In his *Métiers* collection Enzo Mari, a renowned Italian modernist artist and

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 577.

furniture designer, focuses on the objects' core functionality and seems to devote all his attention to the materials and their finish. Mari reduced a desk to its basic form – a table in three pieces lightly surrounding the body and covered in smooth calf leather selected for its soft finish.¹⁵⁶ The chair devoid of any superfluous detail is executed in highly polished Canaletto walnut, the noblest wood according to Mari, and hand-stitched leather.¹⁵⁷ The silkiness of the wood complements the skin's granularity and offers a tactile, sensual interaction. The collection also includes a small oval storage coffer, shaped "like a pebble one finds on a beach," whose most conspicuous quality is its top in geometric marquetry that was favored by Frank.¹⁵⁸ There are also two simple tables with legs covered in bull calf leather stitched like the handle of a Hermès bag.

The *Matières* collection by Antonio Citterio, an Italian architect and furniture designer, merges the traditional and the contemporary in unexpected ways. The collection references a variety of ancient chair types and evokes the nomadic origins of Egyptian or Greek folding stools.¹⁵⁹ In addition, it evokes the *Pippa* collection of folding furniture designed by Rena Dumas (founder of RDAI and mother of Pierre-Alexis Dumas) and Peter Coles in 1987 that is also included in *Hermès La Maison*.¹⁶⁰ In the *Matières*, Citterio focused on the beauty and feel of the materials through juxtaposition of leather and fabric, wood and metal. Everything, according to Citterio,

¹⁵⁶ *La Maison*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶⁰ RenaDumas.com, <http://www.renadumas.com/main>.

lies in the emotions that they trigger: “First we want to sit, then to touch and to make the subject live.”¹⁶¹ During his design process, Citterio was apparently fascinated by the tradition of French decorators embodied by Jean-Michel Frank. Citterio saw Frank’s original work, among other examples, during his visit to the Conservatoire des Créations Hermès and regarded it as a testament to *savoir-faire* and the quality of the materials being synonymous with tradition and functionality.¹⁶²

The signature piece of the new furniture collection is the *Sellier Chair* created by the designer Éric Benqué and Denis Montel, artistic director of RDAI. The chair follows a simple and elegant design that makes its function versatile – it can be a seat for the office, bedroom or dining room. The chair is available completely covered in leather, or in leather and *toile H* – a robust fabric used in the creation of suitcases.¹⁶³ The hand-stitched removable leather and/or fabric covers with zips of the *Sellier Chair* present the same craftsmanship and detailing as any of the objects created by the Hermès’ saddlers or handbag-makers.

Leather was at the heart of the decade-long collaboration between Hermès and Frank, who worked closely with Jean-René Guerrand, the son-in-law of Emile-Maurice Hermès at the helm of the business in those days.¹⁶⁴ Frank asked Hermès to cover several of his furniture pieces with the company’s famous buttery leather - a material not considered luxurious at the time. For this, the Hermès’ leather craftsmen selected the leathers, adapted the “*piqué-sellier*” stitch to furniture and devised an

¹⁶¹ *La Maison*, 9.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ White Wilson, “Archival Revival,” December/January 2011.

unbroken ribbon of piping.¹⁶⁵ Guerrand and Hermès' mastery of the material and technique combined with Frank's design vision resulted in radical and sophisticated objects that often created a sensation. For example, Frank asked Hermès to produce wall panels and screens in pale beige leather, that the craftsmen had to cut and stitch to look like set stones.¹⁶⁶

Continuing in the tradition of its past collaborations with Frank, in 2012 Hermès presented Shigeru Ban's *Module H* - a modular system of architectural elements for walls and partitions. Renowned for his love of lightness, Ban created an openwork aluminum structure, where the cutouts form a series of H shapes and give the grid itself an aesthetic quality.¹⁶⁷ The metal structure can be left bare or covered with 90 cm square modules – a signature Hermès' dimension. The upholstery of the modules comes in a range of leathers, exotic skins or fabrics and is executed in strict accordance with Hermès' traditional techniques.¹⁶⁸ Light and easy to install and with its infinite combination of colors, materials and geometric forms, *Module H* offers a flexible and adaptable approach to interior design. It brings Hermès' aesthetic and craftsmanship to the personalization of spaces and echoes the interior surfacing for apartments conceived in the 1920s and 1930s in collaboration with Frank.¹⁶⁹

Imbued with Frank's design sensibility and conceived by prominent contemporary architects and designers, the *Métiers* and *Matières* collections along with the *Sellier Chair* and *Module H* can be categorized as forms of cultural products

¹⁶⁵ *La Maison*, 4.

¹⁶⁶ Coleno, *The Hermès Scarf: History & Mystique*, 24.

¹⁶⁷ *Module H*, (Paris: Hermès, 2012), 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

discussed by Bourdieu. By introducing Frank re-editions and Frank-inspired furniture pieces - all established as cultural products, Hermès positions itself as a heavyweight producer and provider of cultural capital to its customers. The company not only contributes to its bottom line by increasing and diversifying its product offering, but also convincingly positions itself as culturally important - an arbiter of taste and a purveyor of cultural heritage, albeit at a steep price. Given that the objects in this case are all crafted in France using traditional French techniques and inspired by a legendary French designer, I would also add Hermès' positioning of itself as a carrier of the French national heritage and identity. According to Jean-Paul Sartre,

to know how to appreciate a piece of Louis Seize furniture, the delicacy of a saying by Chamfort, a landscape of the Ile de France, a painting by Claude Lorraine, is to affirm and to feel that one belongs to French society; it is to renew a tacit social contract with all members of that society.¹⁷⁰

I would argue that the knowledge and appreciation of Jean-Michel Frank's furniture as an expression of one's Frenchness promoted by Hermès, may be easily added to the above list.

It is important to note the marketing terminology used by Hermès with regard to Frank's furniture. It is not referred to as replicas or re-makes, which may be interpreted as cheap or inauthentic as well as threatening the distinctive properties of the originals with popularization. Instead, the furniture is re-editions, presupposing a faithful adherence to the exclusive original design and craftsmanship and certified as such. The original Frank pieces in collaboration with Hermès are rare and hard to authenticate but re-editions allow an immediate ownership of Frank designs made by the same company with the same impeccable quality. Effectively, a customer may

¹⁷⁰ Boswell and Evans, eds. *Representing the Nation: A Reader*, 148.

walk into a Hermès boutique and, if he/she is willing and financially able, buy a piece of French history and high culture as well as potentially increase their social standing – all in a form of a \$14,600 chair or a \$46,700 dressing table.

Bourdieu's work on social mobility through ownership of cultural capital requires more than simple acquisition. Bourdieu argues that owning cultural goods is not only a question of money; one must also appropriate the objects that one has the material means of acquiring. To appropriate a cultural product, one must affirm oneself as "the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object."¹⁷¹ Essentially, one must possess a 'code' to decipher a cultural product – a set of "dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally" and are typically acquired when one grows up in the dominant class.¹⁷² Marx would say that to possess an object one must take ownership of all its qualities. Once fully materially and symbolically appropriated, cultural products generate an advantage in social distinction, "proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them."¹⁷³ Therefore, the cultural products with the greatest distinctive power

...are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person.¹⁷⁴

We can therefore, surmise that without an ability to decode or appropriate cultural capital, one would not necessarily increase their cultural and social standing. I would

¹⁷¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 280.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

argue that Hermès does not automatically make this distinction to its customers. It is the company's job to sell luxury goods as emblems of class and a dream that owning these goods makes one a certain type of person. Essentially, owning a Frank re-edition or one of the new Frank-inspired furniture pieces means owning a cultural product but only its full appropriation may favorably affect its owner's social standing. This appropriation presupposes recognition and appreciation of all the furniture's qualities, such as its style, aesthetic, beauty of material, and craftsmanship as well as possession of design culture, which requires a long investment of time. Contrary to what the luxury brands would like their customers to believe, Bourdieu's theory of the appropriation of cultural capital supports an old saying that "money alone does not buy one class." Perhaps, Hermès' external communications such as *Le Monde d'Hermès* and *La Maison* offer the brand's customers a way to fast track their appropriation of cultural capital.

Home department is not the only domain in which Hermès has established itself as a producer and purveyor of cultural capital. In celebration of its 2013 sports theme, Hermès co-published with Actes Sud a book entitled *A Sporting Life*.¹⁷⁵ The book showcases a stylish collection of sport-themed images by the renowned French photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue and adds to the inventory of Hermès' cultural products. Rather than focus on the grueling side of training and competition, the book presents Lartigue's characteristically elegant photographs that encapsulate the *joie de vivre* of active pursuits. The subjects of his photographs range between famous sporting heroes and amateurs – mostly friends and family - at leisure, swimming,

¹⁷⁵ Jacques Henri Lartigue, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: A Sporting Life*, (Paris: Actes Sud/Hermès, 2013).

skiing, playing tennis, and doing gymnastics. The book also presents sports as a spectacle with pictures of fashionable ladies attending the races in Paris in their finest dresses. The book illustrates how sport transformed social relations, changed the aesthetics of the body, and introduced new opportunities for expression.

With commentary from historian Thierry Terret and novelist Anne-Marie Garat, the coffee-table tome reflects more than just a history of sport. It represents the ties that Hermès has forged and has continued to cultivate with the arts. As a co-publisher of the book, Hermès exposes Lartigue's artistic heritage and offers a new dimension to the work of the photographer, who is most famous for his images of glamorous Parisian fashion models, planes and automobile races. I would argue that by disseminating Lartigue's work, Hermès appropriates it as its cultural capital. Lartigue's photographs also serve as a historical catalogue of the paraphernalia and fashionable clothing associated with various sports. Presumably, seeing the book's images of the exuberant sporting pursuits in stylish outfits captured by a celebrated French photographer helps create a cultural recognition and an emotional connection between the Hermès' customers and the company's activewear. In 2013, the same year it published the book, Hermès introduced a sophisticated capsule collection that drew inspiration from its original 1930's ski line. The release of the book timed to coincide with the launch of the Hermès' skiwear seems like a clever marketing move on behalf of the company that aligns its new collection with the French artistic and historical past. After all, if someone were willing to pay the price, why would they not want to look like a French style icon, ready to step out in front of the great photographer's camera?

Hermès Editeur

The link between Hermès and the arts is most evident in *Hermès Editeur* – the company’s collaboration with artists to create limited-edition silk scarves launched by Pierre-Alexis Dumas in 2008. In the words of Dumas, the Hermès scarf “had to become a meeting point between forms, a place where art could express itself freely and fully.”¹⁷⁶ Participants in *Hermès Editeur* have included a Bauhaus artist Josef Albers with *Hommage au Carré*, conceptualist Daniel Buren with *Photos-Souvenirs Au Carré*, photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto with *Couleurs de l’Ombre*, and a kinetic and optic artist Julio Le Parc with *Variations autour de la Longue Marche*. The works of these artists were translated into their untraditional form and put on silk scarves to be worn, hung, and experienced. Each scarf is individually signed, numbered by the artist and offered with an accompanying book and documentary DVD.¹⁷⁷ The company offers the limited-edition scarves for sale and also exhibits them as contemporary artworks in galleries and museums worldwide.

The premise of *Hermès Editeur* is to translate artistic work onto silk scarves and therefore, to forge a connection between contemporary art and the traditional craftsmanship of Hermès. The company believes that these collaborations challenge and stimulate the artisanal spirit as the craftsmen push the boundaries of their savoir-faire and tie it with modern technology.¹⁷⁸ I would add that by turning one of its ubiquitous products into a piece of conceptual art through collaborations with

¹⁷⁶ Hermès Editeur, <http://www.editeur-en.hermes.com/hermes-editeur.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Veronique Hyland, “Launching Tomorrow: Daniel Buren’s Hermès Scarves,” *HarpersBazaar.com*, October 20, 2010, <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/trends/a6008/daniel-buren-hermes/editeur>.

¹⁷⁸ Hermès Editeur, <http://www.editeur-en.hermes.com/hermes-editeur.html>.

prominent contemporary artists, Hermès solidifies its cultural gravitas and authority on taste vis-à-vis its consumers. Effectively, *Hermès Editeur* allows the company to bring contemporary art to the masses, albeit to those who can afford it at EUR 5000 or EUR 7000 apiece and have the knowledge to appropriate it.

For the first edition, Hermès launched *Hommage au Carré* (Homage to the Square) based on a series of paintings by Joseph Albers. As a renowned painter and one of the great color theorists, Albers was a teacher at the Bauhaus in Germany and eventually became chairman of the Department of Design at Yale University.¹⁷⁹ After twenty-five years of artistic experimentation, Albers was able to reach in his work a stage of extreme formal rigor, combined with intense chromatic sensation.¹⁸⁰ Albers' *Hommage au Carré* is based on a simple principle: to create a series of infinite chromatic variations within an unchanging form, the square, composed in a certain way.¹⁸¹ His overlapping squares in different colors are homages to radical simplicity and purity.

Reproducing these images in scarf form using a 'frame' printing technique was a new challenge for the Hermès' craftsmen, which took the artisans to the limits of their savoir-faire.¹⁸² The artisans had to perfect an 'edge to edge' printing technique in which large areas of color are printed on silk so that they meet but do not overlap, avoiding the faint lines that usually separate two juxtaposed zones of

¹⁷⁹ Coleno, *The Hermès Scarf: History & Mystique*, 52.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Hermès Editeur, <http://www.editeur-en.hermes.com/hermes-editeur.html>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

color.¹⁸³ The colors are printed evenly and without modulation, seeming to have gradations of lightness and darkness. The resulting effect is a distinctly flat surface that appears to simultaneously move backwards and forwards in space. The series of six scarves based on Albers' work - *Joy*, *Greek Island*, *Formal Garden*, *Allegro*, *Silver Dawn*, and *Nocturne*, is a demonstration of Hermès' exceptional capability to match the colors Albers chose with great care as well as to impeccably align and register pure hues on silk.¹⁸⁴ As true works of art, Albers' *Hommage au Carré* creations were exhibited in the Museum der Kulturen in Basel.¹⁸⁵

The second edition *Photos-souvenirs au carré* was done in collaboration with Daniel Buren, a French conceptual artist known best for using contrasting colored stripes to integrate visual surfaces and architectural spaces. The series consists of 365 scarves based on photo-souvenirs - photographs taken by Buren during his travels around the world.¹⁸⁶ The scarves incorporate twenty-two of Buren's photographs, which the artist has cropped and framed in different ways, so that each scarf is unique. The photographs are framed with Buren's signature white and colored vertical stripes – an omnipresent visual that unites all 365 images and also disrupts the figurative narrative to reveal the abstract. With their poetic sensibility and rigorous colored

¹⁸³ Coleno, *The Hermès Scarf*, 52.

¹⁸⁴ Hermès Editeur, <http://www.editeur-en.hermes.com/editions/h1-josef-albers/hommage-au-carre-2.html>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Malaika Byng, "Hermès scarves by Daniel Buren," *Wallpaper.com*, October 19, 2010, <http://www.wallpaper.com/fashion/herms-scarvs-by-daniel-buren>.

framing, the scarves' images express the certain fundamentals of Buren's work, such as space, time and color.¹⁸⁷

To edit the scarves, the Hermès' craftsmen had to master ink-jet printing on silk, an entirely new procedure for the métier of textile printing.¹⁸⁸ Unlike traditional screen-printing, this technique allows an infinite number of colors to be produced. The result of this technical challenge is 365 bold, graphic examples of printed photography with intense nuances of color, enhanced by the suppleness of the silk. Besides being a testament to the craftsmen's technical virtuosity, the scarves appear as examples of wearable art, which as Buren insists, are designed to be tied about the neck, draped or even crushed: "They are unique objects like paintings but, rather than fixed on a wall, are made to be worn."¹⁸⁹

In 2012, a third series of artist's silk scarves were created in partnership with the acclaimed Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. His powerful poetic images, informed by the principles of conceptualism and minimalism, examine the nature of reality and such abstract qualities as time, light, and space.¹⁹⁰ Sugimoto's *Couleurs de l'ombre* edition for Hermès consists of 140 unique scarves in twenty subtle color variations. Giving importance to abstraction and color, the edition is inspired by the artist's work on the diffraction of light and capturing complementary color harmonies

¹⁸⁷ Hermès Editeur, www.editeur-en.hermes.com/editions/h2-daniel-buren/photos-souvenirs-au-carre-2.html.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Byng, "Hermès scarves by Daniel Buren," October 19, 2010.

¹⁹⁰ Hermès Editeur, www.editeur-en.hermes.com/editions/h3-hiroshi-sugimoto/couleurs-de-l-ombre-1.html.

with a Polaroid camera.¹⁹¹ It is interesting to note that similarly to Koto Bolofo and his *La Maison*, Sugimoto deliberately eschews digital technology in his work. He prefers “old, traditional, out-of-date technology” and refers to his work as “craft of photography,” in which he wants to preserve the tradition.¹⁹²

To represent Sugimoto’s original small Polaroids on 140-centimeter square scarves, the Hermès’ craftsmen deployed a new ink-jet printing technique using a machine specifically manufactured for the project.¹⁹³ It took the craftsmen three weeks of non-stop inking to finish a single scarf and faithfully recreate the subtle gradations of intense color on silk.¹⁹⁴ The scarves’ full visual impact appears in whole, not in pieces around someone’s neck. In fact, at EUR 7000 apiece, the question becomes whether these scarves should be worn or mounted and hung on the wall. For Sugimoto the scarves are “serious art” and “if it’s serious art, for me, it’s also very reasonably priced.”¹⁹⁵

Hermès seems to support Sugimoto’s notion of scarves as art and presented them at some of the world’s major museums and international art fairs, including Art

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Katy Donoghue, “Hiroshi Sugimoto: Couleurs de l’Ombre Comes to Miami,” *Whitewallmag.com*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.whitewallmag.com/art/hiroshi-sugimoto-couleurs-de-lombre-comes-to-miami>.

¹⁹³ Nate Freeman, “Artist Hiroshi Sugimoto Captures Moving Colors for a New Line of Hermès Scarves, Timed to Debut During Art Basel,” *Blouinartinfo.com*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/806432/artist-hiroshi-sugimoto-captures-moving-colors-for-a-new-line>.

¹⁹⁴ Freeman, “Artist Hiroshi Sugimoto Captures Moving Colors,” June 13, 2012.

¹⁹⁵ Alix Browne, “He’s a Rainbow: Hiroshi Sugimoto For Hermès,” *T Magazine* June 8, 2012, <http://www.tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/hes-a-rainbow-hiroshi-sugimoto-for-hermes>.

Basel in Switzerland and Miami Beach. In 2012, I visited the Hermès' pavilion at Art Basel Miami and came face to face with Sugimoto's creations. In a bare minimalist space typical of a contemporary gallery, the scarves hung as art to dramatic effect. The huge squares of silk, their vivid colors cascading from red to orange and from blue to green, pulsed against the pavilion's white walls and enthralled me. I found each piece beautiful, elegant, simple and worthy of contemplation. It struck me that the scarves had the aesthetic and intensity of the works by Mark Rothko and at that moment I became a believer in the Hermès' idea of scarves as contemporary art.

The latest edition entitled *Variations autour de La Longue Marche* was done in collaboration with Julio Le Parc, a Paris-based Argentinian artist-experimenter, who has been a major champion of kinetic and optic arts since the 1960s.¹⁹⁶ Le Parc's work explores the concepts of movement, light, and color – particularly the fourteen colors of the chromatic prism. Coupled with Le Parc's fascination with geometry and optical illusion, the artist's work results in art that generates a visual as well physical relationship with its viewer. For *Hermès Editeur*, Le Parc transposed a variation of his *La Longue Marche* (1974-1975) artworks onto sixty unique scarves divided into two categories: those that go through the fourteen colors of the prism and those that are elaborated from the three non-colors.¹⁹⁷

To produce the edition, the Hermès' craftsmen had once again to rise to the challenge of frame printing, using edge-to-edge technique.¹⁹⁸ The resulting silk scarves are a kaleidoscopic vision of curvilinear patterns, such as circles, braided lines

¹⁹⁶ Hermès Editeur, www.editeur-en.hermes.com/editions/h4-julio-le-parc/variations/autour-de-la-longue-marche.html.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

and loopy rainbow squiggles reminiscent of the 1970s – all juxtaposed against monochrome backgrounds in red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. There is also a group of the more subtle black and white creations. As the previous edition, *Le Parc*'s creations were unveiled in 2015 at Art Basel – a high-profile contemporary art fair in Switzerland that draws in affluent individuals from around the world. Presenting the scarves in an art fair setting - a fertile ground for luxury consumers, is a way for Hermès to connect with potential clients and reaffirm its cultural links.

Hermès Editèur functions as a perfect blend of fine art and craftsmanship. It responds to a profound need of the luxury house steeped in tradition – to remain relevant with the times in terms of its skillset and product offering. On the technical side, the collaborations push the Hermès' craftsmen to discover and invent. The projects confront the artisans with real technical challenges that extend the limits of the company's savoir-faire. Dumas describes *Hermès Editèur* as “an absolutely essential approach to ensure that Hermès does not become a museum of knowledge and techniques, but remains a living enterprise that takes risks, reaches beyond its own limits and strives to reinvent itself with each new generation.”¹⁹⁹

On the creative side, the editions function as works of art, whether wearable or for display only, and align the company with the tastemakers of our times. In effect, the silk scarves are limited-edition prints by renowned contemporary artists executed in an untraditional tactile medium. They may be mounted and hung on the wall and, given their scarcity and artistic provenance, may over time potentially increase in value. *Hermès Editèur* is the most obvious way in which the company produces and

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

flogs cultural capital, loaded with an ability to increase one's cultural and therefore, social standing. After all, Bourdieu states that

purchase of works of art, objectified evidence of 'personal taste', is the one which is closest to the most irreproachable and inimitable form of accumulation, that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural 'distinction', personal 'authority' or 'culture'.²⁰⁰

Of course, Bourdieu adds here that in order to raise the distinctive power of ownership, one must appropriate a work of art by asserting oneself as the "exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object."²⁰¹

In the competitive environment in which more and less expensive artifacts are made continually available through the improvement of mass production, Hermès not only promotes premium quality and unique production of its high-priced goods but also looks for creative ways to tell their story. *Hermès La Maison* presents re-editions of designs by the legendary Jean-Michel Frank as well as the new collections inspired by Frank's work – all unveiled in an ephemeral structure marked by simplicity and elegance inherent to the brand. The publication of *A Sporting Life* provides an association between the company's skiwear collection and the French artistic and historical past. *Hermès Editèur* offers limited-edition silk scarves as pieces of contemporary art, displayed in museums and at international art fairs. These initiatives bolster Hermès' production and dissemination of cultural capital. *Hermès Editèur* makes a direct connection between the company's goods and fine art. Meanwhile, *Hermès La Maison* and *A Sporting Life* not only connect the brand's

²⁰⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 282.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

products with high culture, but also establish a link with the heritage and cultural identity of France.

Hermès' capitalization on contemporary artistic trends and French heritage are part of the company's conscious positioning itself as a distinct, culturally important and quintessentially French luxury brand – an effort that serves an apparent business purpose. By aligning itself with the arbiters of taste, living and historical, Hermès educates consumers about the company's products and at the same time pays homage to the brand's heritage and values. Consequently, Hermès is able to establish an emotional connection between consumers and its cultural products, regarded as emblems of class that may influence their owners' social standing. This premise leads to a growth in the products' value perceived in the minds of consumers and can be translated into increased company sales.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this thesis I asked these questions: What is it about Hermès that possessed a young woman like me to splurge a significant amount of money on a Birkin bag back in my twenties and what continues to maintain the company as the most desirable luxury brand in the world? The answers lie in the myth and craft fetishism behind Hermès' products that have turned a simple handbag into an international status symbol. An object of timeless functional elegance, the bag discreetly yet assertively communicates to those in the know, its owner's social and financial distinction as a member of an elite, who can afford and appreciate such a product. The prestige and desirability of the Hermès' goods such as a Birkin bag rest on the company's fierce commitment to quality of each of its handmade products that unites beauty with thought-out functionality and a deep sense of humanness derived

from the products' connection to place and person. It is a connection that the company carefully cultivates, mythologizes, fetishizes, and ultimately, capitalizes on. Hermès' craft fetishism enables the company to create an emotional connection with consumers by upholding the value of the handmade over the machine-made and asserting itself as a socially, culturally, and nationally important brand. In turn, it justifies to its customers the premium of the company's products and maintains their draw for consumers.

In a contemporary society with more and cheaper goods continually available through mass production, consumers increasingly yearn for quality, not quantity. Hermès knows that its profitability and position at the pinnacle of the luxury goods market are dependent on the superior quality and the myth behind its products. "Every Hermès object has to be perfectly done and in the best possible material and in the best way, that's a matter-of-fact for us, a basic standard," explains Pierre Hardy, creative director of the brand's footwear and fine jewelry divisions.²⁰² Along with the near-fanatical dedication to craftsmanship, the orchestrated humanization of Hermès' ateliers and the company's concerted positioning of itself as a purveyor of cultural capital and French heritage imbues Hermès' products with emotion and increases their perceived value in the customers' minds. The sentiment that at Hermès one buys an object of handcrafted beauty that carries with it the passion, heritage, and savoir-faire of France, as well as the cultural gravitas that may, if fully appropriated, propel one up the social ladder, is a powerful incentive to make one pay a substantial premium for a desired product. Therefore, Hermès' PR and marketing strategies discussed throughout this paper directly feed the notion of craft fetishism and provide

²⁰² Suleman Anaya, "The Humanity of Hermès," *Business of Fashion*, April 29, 2014, <http://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/humanity-hermes>.

the company with a commercial edge.

Hermès' numerous initiatives aimed at the public, such as the film *Hearts and Crafts*, the exhibition *Festival des Métiers*, the magazine *Le Monde d'Hermès*, the books *An ABC of Hermès Crafts* and especially Bolofo's *La Maison* expose the inner workings of the company's ateliers and tell a story of the artisans as folkcraftsmen, who passionately and selflessly create things of great beauty and utility as well as perpetuate traditions of the French past. This corporate storytelling constructs a depiction of the company as a friendly home, emotionally connects the public with the Hermès' craftsmen, and consequently, fosters consumer brand loyalty. Pierre-Alexis Dumas affirms what makes his family business thrive

This is a family house that goes back six generations. We did not invent our craft, we are the recipient of an age-old tradition, mixed with something which is perhaps proper to my family – a desire for excellence – and maybe something a little bit obsessive and mad about detail.²⁰³

But the zealous quest for perfection aside, the goal of the company is, at the end of the day, to produce things that people want to buy. “I want people to come into Hermès store and smile and think ‘I want that, I need to have that, because I like it,’” acknowledges Dumas.²⁰⁴

This ethos is reflected in the ways Hermès relates with the public, from its events – charmingly old-fashioned affairs devoid of efforts to appear sexy or cool – to the printed material that presents the company as a family home seeped in French tradition. Dumas explains the brand's PR and marketing initiatives: “Everything we do [at Hermès], we do it because we believe in it – it has to be meaningful and relate

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

to what we are trying to express.”²⁰⁵ Instead of the prevalent celebrity-centered PR and marketing initiatives of our times, Hermès earns the enormous goodwill of its customers by publicly exposing its inner workings, heritage, and values with a premise that honesty will win over the customers’ hearts and wallets. Christophe Lemaire, former Hermès’ artistic director of women’s ready-to-wear, elaborates on the company’s marketing strategy

When you try hard to please and seduce, and you anticipate what people expect from you, it doesn’t work. It’s better to know who we are, be ourselves and believe in our own values, and they can be universal, if they are true. At Hermès, we are very confident in what we stand for and in the excellence of our work. And basically the client understands that, which is the main point at the end of the day.²⁰⁶

Hermès’ interaction with consumers appears to revolve around storytelling, in which the more the company can communicate using an image, video or a presentation, the greater the consumer awareness of luxury and aspiration, which create intent to own the product.

This strategy, together with its dedication to craft and quality is paying off for Hermès. At the height of the financial crisis, when most major brands took a beating due to a drop in sales in the luxury sector, and several well-known companies went bankrupt, Hermès grew substantially: sales were up 8.6 percent in 2008 and 8.5 percent in 2009; operating income was up 3.1 percent for 2009.²⁰⁷ In 2013, the group’s consolidated revenue totaled EUR 3.75 billion (about \$5.2 billion), a 13

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Dana Thomas, “The Battle for Hermès,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903596904576517151602728260.html>.

percent increase over 2012, at constant exchange rates, with an operating margin of 32.4 percent, the highest ever recorded in the company's history.²⁰⁸

It is no wonder the luxury-goods conglomerate LVMH has shown an interest in Hermès, quietly accumulating 17.1 percent of the company's stock between 2002 and 2010.²⁰⁹ Hermès sees the move by LVMH as a full-frontal attack on the family-run house. "Hermès and LVMH are at the two extremes of the culture and industry of luxury," according to Patrick Thomas, the CEO of Hermès until 2014.²¹⁰ Thomas elaborates

We are artisans and creative. We try to produce the most beautiful products in this industry. The artisans put their heart and soul in the bag and when the client buys it, they buy a bit of the ethic of Hermès. Our combat with LVMH is not an economic fight, it is a cultural fight. We try to do poetry and we get excellent economic results.²¹¹

The stock accumulation by LVMH led to a fractious and drawn out legal dispute between Hermès and the conglomerate. LVMH now retains a 23 percent stake in Hermès, but was fined EUR 8 million (about \$11 million) in 2015 for violating public disclosure requirements.²¹² A separate criminal investigation is under way.

In the meantime, the Hermès' artisans seem to go about their work in a quiet and focused manner and embody the notion of contemporary craftsmanship, which I witnessed during my visit to the ateliers in Pantin in 2013. According to Dumas, in response to a question about the role of a craftsman in a fast-changing modern world,

²⁰⁸ Anaya, "The Humanity of Hermès," April 29, 2014.

²⁰⁹ Thomas, "The Battle for Hermès," August 25, 2011.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Anaya, "The Humanity of Hermès," April 29, 2014.

his father created truly modern manufactories, where “a craftsman would be treated with respect in order to continue to be able to do the best work with his hands.”²¹³ The company’s guiding ethos with regard to its employees has been to provide a workplace where craftsmen are given the space and respect to work under conditions that are as close to ideal as possible, thus enabling them to identify with their profession and produce at an according level of quality and efficiency as well as feel that what they do is meaningful. This spirit is clearly evident in the company’s internal initiatives such as *Fête de l’Adresse* (Skills Celebration) and the *Prix de l’Adresse* (Skills Prize), which define the Hermès’ artisans as artist craftspeople. In addition to stimulating creativity and job satisfaction, the brand’s internal initiatives together with its public messages, enable Hermès to promote and ultimately, capitalize on a glorified connection between the craftsmen and their handwork.

While craftsmanship has remained the company’s constant, intensely upheld value, its reinvention and change have played an important role in maintaining the brand’s relevance and financial position. The company is acutely aware that artisanal excellence in and of itself means little if it is not applied in a timely and business-savvy way. In the words Dumas, “The game is to stay true to our roots and at the same time to evolve.”²¹⁴ He explains the company vision

Craft can only survive if it finds a natural application and if it finds a market. What a craft produces has to be relevant to the world we live in today. If craft does not reinvent itself, it dies. If we were still making harnesses, Hermès would not exist anymore. That is why we constantly re-design [things] and try to find new applications and new ideas all the time – because that’s what

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ “Hermès Heritage,” *Harpers Bazaar.com*, www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/g2456/hermes-pierre-alexis-dumas-profile-0213/?slide=3.

keeps craft alive. It's production. It's the ability to make objects that will sell.²¹⁵

The new product range of *Hermès La Maison* and the silk scarves of *Hermès Editèur* are prime examples of how the company challenges and extends the limits of its savoir-faire. They also imbue the brand's products with cultural capital and French national heritage to further broaden consumer appeal. In addition, the internal initiatives such as *Fête de l'Adresse* (Skills Celebration) and the *Prix de l'Adresse* (Skills Prize) as well as the Hermès Museum and the Conservatoire help refine and promote the craftsmen's technical prowess and artistic originality.

Along with its unwavering commitment to craftsmanship and quality, Hermès endures and prospers by successfully capitalizing on a role it plays in people's lives. Hermès is a unique business model – “it is a human experience.”²¹⁶ In the words of Dumas

Hermès objects are desirable because they reconnect people to their humanity. Our customer feels the presence of the person who crafted the object, while at the same time the object brings him back to his own sensitivity, because it gives him pleasure through his senses.²¹⁷

In the world of increasingly demanding and discerning consumers, Hermès reinforces the value of the handmade over the mass-produced via craft fetishism that not only serves the greater good of society through crafts preservation as the company may claim, but also conveniently supports the company's financial strength. And in an era of pop culture and globalization, Hermès positions itself as a carrier and provider of high culture and as distinctly French. Indeed, Hermès is very French. It is France as

²¹⁵ Anaya, “The Humanity of Hermès,” April 29, 2014.

²¹⁶ Thomas, “The Battle for Hermès,” August 25, 2011.

²¹⁷ Anaya, “The Humanity of Hermès,” April 29, 2014.

we imagine it: alluring, sensual, traditional, intellectually and culturally astute as well as utterly self-confident.

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