

# THE SCHOOL

REPETTO SCHOOL IS GROWING

**THE REPETTO SCHOOL IS EXPANDING, SPREADING THEIR INFLUENCE AND TRANSFORMING INTO A HUB OF EXCELLENCE IN LEATHER: LUXURY BRANDS HERMÈS, REPETTO, J. M. WESTON AND CDW WILL NOW TRAIN THEIR FUTURE ARTISANS AT A SINGLE TRAINING CENTER SUPPORTED BY THE FRENCH REGIONS OF AQUITAINE, LIMOUSIN AND POITOU-CHARENTES. THIS REGIONAL HUB FOR LEATHER AND LUXURY IS A MAJOR FIRST FOR THE INDUSTRY!**

*"THE ECOLE REPETTO" AT THE THIVIERS PROFESSIONAL HIGH SCHOOL, 15 RUE ALBERT BONNEAU 24800 THIVIERS, FRANCE.*



Appreciated for their exceptional artisanship, "Made in France" craftsmanship and world-class creativity, the juggernauts of French luxury – Hermès, Repetto, J.M. Weston and CDW – owe much of their success to their tireless support of training programs in artisanal and traditional techniques. For Repetto, the idea of perpetuating excellence in leather work by federating brands into a united front in favor of training dates back to 2012. That same year they inaugurated their very first school to teach the "stitch and return" fabrication technique used to make their famous ballerina flats. Originally intended to train a first class of 150 artisans over four years, the school depended on the growth of just a single company for its survival – a precarious scenario for Chairman and CEO Jean-Marc Gaucher, who wanted to ensure the school's continued existence. Given the demand for leather artisans by every luxury brand, why not create a single school to service the entire sector? This was the exact idea that struck Chairman Jean-Marc Gaucher who was shocked to see the unemployment rate in France climb over 10%. Considering the reputation of French luxury around the world, the absence of any school was incomprehensible, especially to the man who transformed Repetto into a global brand since taking over in 1999."

## **EXPANDING THE HUB OF EXCELLENCE IN LEATHER AND LUXURY**

Cutters, machine operators, mounters and welt stitchers: these professions are just as obscure as they are in demand. What's more, we are told they are even "key positions" at places such as J.M. Weston. Experienced cutters work on exotic leathers like crocodile, which are both costly and complex to manipulate. Machine operators on the other hand, stitch shoe uppers without a guide, contrary to the flat stitch technique typically used with leather goods. "The artisan's precise, detailed and minute work is what ensures the quality of a piece", asserts the shoemaker, who also underlined the critical importance of providing training. The average age of cut and stitch technicians is 51. Losing talent to retirement becomes a crucial concern. Even though the company already benefits from a sustained rhythm of training and hiring, the project launched by Repetto should be applauded for its resonance across the industry.

Strategically located 100 km from the big local hub of leather producers and subcontractors in the Aquitaine, Limousin and Poitou Charentes regions, the center provides training in leather techniques for 80 local and national SME and SMI including internationally recognized companies. In September, "the Thiviers

public professional high school, already recognized for its excellent curriculum in craft and woodworking professions, and accustomed to dialogue with companies in the creative sector, will add just one additional path in craftsmanship: the curriculum offered by the hub of excellence in leather and luxury", tells Serge Graneri, principal of the high school and director of the training center, supported by the CTC technical center for leather. Training will first be provided to those who already have professional qualification in leather. Later it will expand to include textile professionals looking to make the jump into the growing leather industry. "Working with leather is unique and complex, because the material was once alive. It's not like working with metals that can be perfected in a foundry. At each step in production, with each action, with each operation, every time you take the leather in hand, it must be inspected. This is not a uniform material. We demand excellence because we want to reach zero defects." Beyond the core curriculum intended for all artisans at the center, additional courses are designed to meet the needs of each fashion house, and to make sure their production secrets stay in-house.

"It takes time to acquire know-how", insists the shoemaker. It certainly takes know-how and drive to optimize the quality of leathers. Too often treated as waste and not a source of value for the French economy, leather quality suffers from the poor living conditions and slaughtering techniques imposed on animals, deplores Jean-Marc Gaucher. The leather industry in France faces several challenges. From having no tanneries and outsourcing to Italy, to locating quality vendors, there can be no doubt of the struggle to utilise the material. "Why is there no school to train the vendors serving luxury brands? This sector would create so many jobs!" Gaucher proclaims.

Though he may be full of ideas, and frustrated by the untapped potential of luxury retail leather, while the French economy stagnates in recession, will the executive's efforts to provide training in luxury professions serve as a stimulus plan for the industry? Does Gauvher harbor ambitions of one day entering politics like so many other entrepreneurs? No, this just isn't Gaucher's intention. He's already too busy running Repetto, which will open five new stores in China in spring 2015. *STÉPHANIE BUI*