

ON RECREATION

by pascale mussard

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photo Carole Bellaïche

A UNIQUE LABORATORY FOR INNOVATION, PETIT H IS THE CREATIVE ENGINE THAT DRIVES HERMÈS FORWARD, WHERE CASTOFFS AND DISCARDS OF THE FINEST MATERIALS COMBINE TO CREATE THE RAREST OF ITEMS. SINCE ITS INCEPTION, THE FASHION HOUSE HAS PURSUED THE SAME GOAL: TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE TRADITIONAL KNOW-HOW AND RARE MATERIALS. A SIXTH GENERATION MEMBER OF THE SADDLERY FAMILY AND THE HOUSE'S CURRENT CREATIVE DIRECTOR, PASCALE MUSSARD CONCEIVED THE PETIT H LAB IN ORDER TO PERPETUATE THE HERMÈS DREAM THROUGH A MIXTURE OF "GOOD SENSE" AND "SWEET MADNESS."

Tell us about the idea behind the Petit h collections. You like to talk about "reconstruction"...

I'm constantly talking about how our different métiers at Hermès are like brothers and sisters, but they rarely get together. I want them to meet, celebrate together, interact, and help each other out. Our family numbers 15 métiers and it's extraordinary. After more than 35 years with the house, my dream was to bring all these métiers under the same roof. I've always felt that there's strength in unity and that we can all draw inspiration from each other. Obviously I'm delighted to see that my intuition was right, as proven by the work of these extraordinary alchemists who transmute their materials thanks to this type of dialogue. Our initiative builds on the vision of craftsmanship that Hermès has developed over the years: a form of craftsmanship rooted in research, with one foot in tradition and one foot marching into the future. In our pursuit of excellent craftsmanship we never rest and we never stop striving for more. We have a tendency to think of craftsmen as only a pair of hands and not visionaries. But they have plenty of vision, too.

Petit h strives to achieve a striking, irreverent attitude. Developed through a process of collaboration between craftsmen and designers, the creations are rather bold for a typically classic fashion house, like the camel with pink socks, for instance.

I like the unexpected. So far it's been a great move for Petit h to play the irreverent card. When I decided to create this new business, the idea was to bring a playful and whimsical spirit to the kind of design we do at Hermès. This type of creativity was already a huge part of our boutique windows and our playful and innovative web communications. It's always upset me to know that people think of Hermès as a serious and classic house, while we have done so much to move our image forward.

What motivated you to create Petit h?

I wanted to get back to something incredibly simple, based on good sense: a laboratory that pushes us to transmit a profession, a sense of craftsmanship, a desire to work with one's hands, and a will to dream. Innovation is crucial. It's the most important thing for me: what would the future be like without leather?

Knowing how to manage production resources is a critical concern.

It's true, and we're already seeing the effects: animals are fed different diets and that impacts the quality of their leather. We use the finest materials, so it's impossible to plan for our future without tackling this issue. It was actually a lack of leather that pushed us to diversify our activities all throughout the history of Hermès. We have always innovated in order to manage external constraints by using the resources available to us at any given time. So our goal at Petit h is to plan for the future, especially in terms of brainstorming ways to keep designing new items with limited resources. We've already lost so many materials. And now there are larger issues like water quality and availability. Our tannery and silk activities use a massive amount of water. What will we do if we ever have to limit or cut our water use? In our eyes, every material is fit for use. It's interesting to think about how to use materials that have been around forever like papyrus, giant cane which I've used in the past, or terrazzo which I'm working on now. Petit h is all about working on materials, exploring the relationship between a creator and a designer, and offering techniques and material blends that Hermès has never used before.

Can you tell us about the project you're working on now, called "Terrazzo - Petit h"?

Terrazzo is a traditional material made from an aggregate of fragments, castoffs, and discards from marble, gemstones, and pearl. Decorators and designers Nicolas Dual and Julien Demanche developed a new type of terrazzo using our materials. For the terrazzi in Veneto, Italy, the designers gathered all of our metal and crystal discards, buttons, bits of leather, and even rope. Then they created a new material to form colored tiles in Hermès red, natural stone, and green. We presented the Terrazzo research at the latest Designer's Days in Paris: it was the perfect chance to share our vision and place Petit h within a long tradition of experimenting with materials. At the end of the year we're presenting a collection of items made from the our terrazzo tile.

The approach taken by Petit h is also in line with the growing interest in "sustainable development" - a concept I don't think you've mentioned.

It's been compromised, like most "-ing" words. For me, it's a question of good sense. I don't know if I'm too politically correct when it comes to "sustainable development." I'm not a hardcore environmentalist, though I think I was raised that way. Simple living



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1. SAILBOAT IN WOOD, LEATHER, AND SILK
Created by Godefroy de Virieu for petit h
photo: Philippe Garcia

2. LIGHTS IN CRYSTAL AND LEATHER
Created by Florence Bourel for Petit h
photo: Philippe Garcia



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is a good value. The way I see it, Hermès owes its growth more to simplicity than to market studies. And when I say that, I'm thinking primarily about our past generations, who had a deep appreciation for hand craftsmanship, materials, and their customers. They designed goods with others in mind, not themselves. In fact, they didn't keep anything for themselves. They used and sold everything. The Conservatoire des Créations Hermès didn't start until much later.

How important is it for Petit h to work with young craftsmen?

In addition to training some of our more experienced craftsmen to take on the new challenge of design, I wanted to work with and train a few young craftsmen fresh out of school. I wanted Petit h to integrate the type of sponsorship that's now offered at so many different workshops. Young craftsmen ask questions that push us to explore our potential. It's this kind of dialogue that leads to new techniques. I think young craftsmen have a lot to offer, especially when they receive training both in craftsmanship and design, just as designers with craftsmanship experience have a unique vision, like Gilles Jonemann. It's hugely important for a house like ours to take risks. Though it's a calculated risk because I'm confident our craftsmen will make quality items. At first I felt we needed to get off to a strong start to make sure our project would survive. Every one of our items is the result of a completely new technical process that has helped drive innovation all throughout our fashion house.

Petit h also intends to inspire craftsmen working at other Hermès workshops.

Yes, the spirit of innovation is contagious. It's great to see this process in action. Young craftsmen come to Petit h, then they join other workshops where they introduce a whole new energy. Now a lot of people are contacting me to do other projects. For example, whenever I'm at a sale and I see an object or material that we used to use until it went out of style, I try to bring it back. I try to be the fly in the ointment. It was all instinct at first, just like my logo: a circle without a carriage, because Petit h grew out of Hermès and has to acknowledge that fact. We're a legitimate child of Hermès. We invent new materials, bring in new designers, and offer a new perspective. Some Petit h designers have already started working with the house. Competition like this is healthy for a fashion house like ours. It pushes us forward.

You're always on the lookout for rare know-how in your innovation process.

That's true: I've always had a strong interest in traditional know-how. I think what I like most about craftsmanship is the whole question of researching and transmitting crafts and handiwork. Nothing is more fragile than a craft that isn't in use. In less than a generation a craft can be lost. It's disappointing because a technique once used to make travel trunks might help us make a piece of contemporary furniture. But if we don't actively decide to perpetuate the technique by using it to produce something new, then we risk losing it. All of these concerns make Petit h a laboratory for transmission and innovation. In my opinion, supreme luxury is all about the workshop. It's about the chance to work on the world's finest materials with the most experienced craftsmen. They are like alchemists.

What made you decide to start this project in 2010?

It's something I always wanted to do. But I needed time to fully develop my project. It all clicked when I realized I needed to transmit these crafts. During one of our seminars, we started to imagine the future of our fashion house in a world without our materials. That was the day I made my decision. The following year, Gilles Jonemann and I worked in secret to make about 100 objects that we planned to formally present to the family. The project was approved and that's how the Petit h adventure began.

After receiving the 2014 Golden Talent Award from the Centre du Luxe et de la Création, how do you see the future of Petit h?

I see us lasting well into the future! After spending more than 35 years at Hermès, I was starting to how we might transmit all of our traditional know-how. What could I do to help? Research and write theses? Because there comes a time when you have to think about transmission and passing on the baton. I was lucky enough to know the fourth, fifth, and sixth generations of our family. Hermès has evolved and changed in profound ways throughout our history, but the main concern has always remained the same: our unique way of looking at things, our way of surprising even ourselves. Petit h builds on a concept of creation that our fashion house has always cultivated.

What do you enjoy most about Petit h?

So many things, like meeting new designers and seeing their perspective in the workshop. I have a great story about meeting a customer at the latest Saut Hermès event: I saw a woman wearing a basket that we'd had a bit of trouble making. She looked wonderful wearing it. I like when our creations do more than just sit on a shelf. I like when Petit h is accepted for what it is!



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3. BILBOQUET GAME IN GIANT CANE
Création Antoine Boudin pour Petit h
photo: Pauline Faugère

4. PIROGUE BENCH IN LEATHER
Created by Christian Astugueville by Petit h
photo: Philippe Garcia

5. TERRAZZO
Created by Nicolas Daul and Julien Demanche for Petit h
photo: Hermès@studio rouchon

6. ORIGAMI RABBIT IN LEATHER
Created by Charles Kaison for Petit h
photo: Philippe Garcia

7. PLEATED SILK SCARF NECKLACES
Created by Godefroy de Virieu for Petit h
photo: Philippe Garcia