

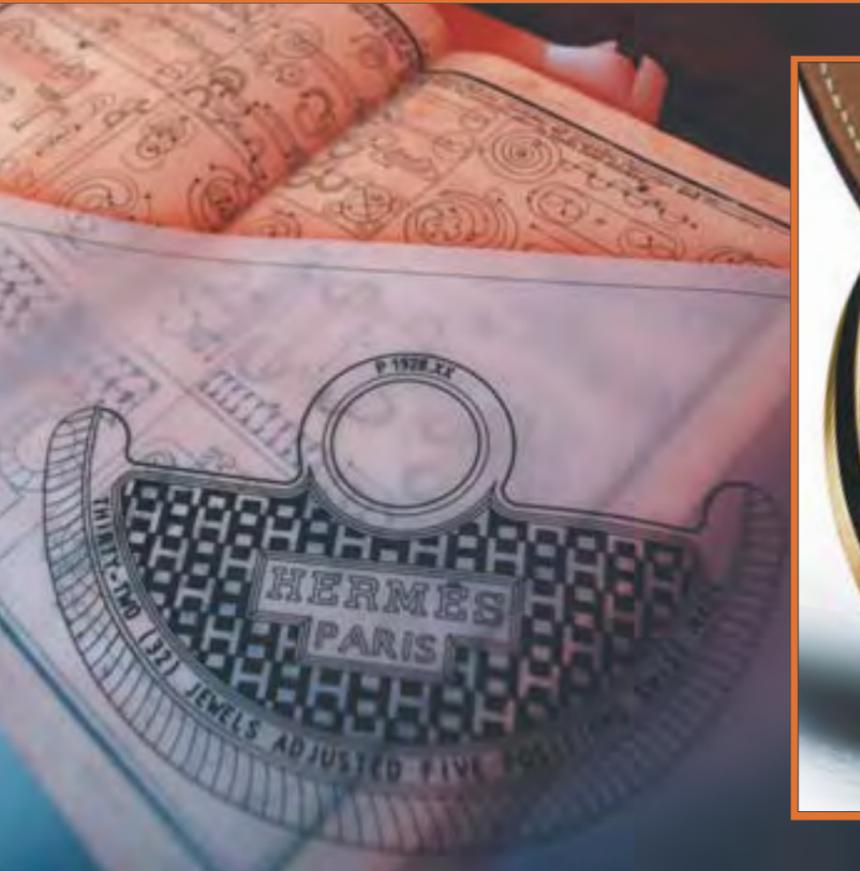


Verve

Hermès venture beyond fashion with the launch of the Dressage

Nicholas Foulkes

 The first and most important call I make every time I find myself in Paris is to Charvet on the Place Vendome, without doubt the most remarkable shirt maker in the world. I can, and do, spend several hours discussing collar shapes, stitching, colours and monograms with the charming proprietor Anne Marie Colban. After that I head to Caron to stock up on sufficient quantities of my favourite eau de toilette, Coup de Fouet, a fragrance created in the 1950s and sold from glass samovars on the shop floor. And then there is Hermès.



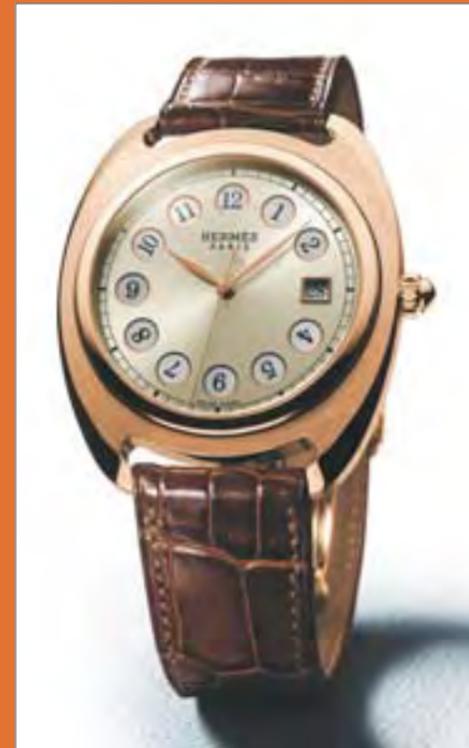
Hermès on the Faubourg Saint-Honoré is not so much a flagship store as a landmark. However many times I visit this place I never tire of strolling around, delighting in the design of, say, a piece of cutlery here or a collapsible backgammon set there. However, I have never quite got the hang of the saddler's collection of wristwatches. Some, like the Harnais and the Kelly (the latter a timepiece in a padlock on leather cord or bracelet), make sense in a fashion-conscious, leather-working sort of way. Others leave me unmoved, but then I am a watch snob who tends to regard watches by non-watch houses with some suspicion. I have, of course, always been suitably impressed by Hermès' beautifully designed stands at Basel and have made the right appreciative noises when being told about their factory in Bienne, but there my interest has stopped.

Which made me all the more curious when I heard that Hermès were about to enter the grown-up watch market with a timepiece called the

Dressage, retailing from £9,000 to a top price of £17,000. Admittedly, the top end watch is a platinum piece limited to a series of 75 and is delivered in a delightful wooden Hermès box that comes with all the accoutrements (hydrometer etc.) to be converted into a humidor... a bargain really. But part of the clue to understanding what struck me as the riddle of Hermès watches lies in the number 75.

Starting out

It is 75 years since Hermès launched their first watch, which in itself is a considerable achievement. It also helps to set La Montre Hermès in the context of the French *art de vivre*. So, on a sunny day in late September, I set out to Paris to find out about the world of Hermès watches. After making my usual stops at Charvet and Caron, I found myself on the top floor of the Hermès building enjoying pre-prandial drinks in a little rooftop garden, watching an Indian summer's sun set over the rooftops and landmarks of Paris. Sipping



The Dressage is the latest timepiece from Hermès' 75-year horological heritage, and is the first to feature a Vaucher movement.

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a flute of champagne by my side was Guillaume de Seynes, who has been the boss of La Montre Hermès since the turn of the century and who is, like many of the top brass at Hermès, a member of the founding family. Part of the enduring excellence of Hermès comes from the fact that the business has remained in family ownership since its foundation in 1837, when Thierry Hermès opened a saddlery business. He died in 1878, and since then the firm has been bequeathed to succeeding generations.

Perhaps the most inspired character was Emile Maurice Hermès, who ran the business from 1919 until the early 1950s. At the end of the First World War he figured that the horse was on the way out and the new-fangled horseless carriage was about to take over. So instead of shutting up

shop, he went into overdrive, cranking out handbags, agendas, bracelets and watches that became instant classics. Among his more revolutionary acts was using zip-fastening – which he had seen in use on a motor car in Canada – on clothing. With typical Gallic bravado, the zipper became known as *la fermeture Hermès*. It was also Emile Maurice who introduced the first Hermès timepiece, a leather-covered, rectangular "purse" or travel watch of the type that is wound by squeezing the ends of the case.

"My great grandfather realised that the automobile would replace the horse as a way of travelling," explains de Seynes. "He had to find other ideas and think of new items to create and develop under the signature of Hermès. He decided to use the skills of his craftsmen to create leather goods, luggage



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and, in the mid-1920s, ready-to-wear sportswear using leather. It was through the leather strap that he started to get interested in the watch; that was in the early days of the wristwatch, back in the '20s. He decided to get in touch with some Swiss manufacturers to make some watches to be sold under the Hermès name."

At the time, different brand values prevailed. "Swiss brands were not as exposed as they are today," says de Seynes of the watch market at the time the first Hermès watches appeared. "Among the many watch-making houses who created timepieces for Hermès were Universal and Jaeger. Tavannes made a successful model for Hermès that was a sterling-silver belt-watch for golf players, and it is quite something." And according to the curator of the Hermès museum,

this timepiece was worn by such fashion-conscious skiers as the King of Italy.

Phase two

After the death of Emile Maurice Hermès, "the watch business continued during the '50s and '60s with less dynamism, focusing more on the women's watches. In the '70s – the time of the quartz revolution – Jean Louis Dumas took over and created his own subsidiary, La Montre Hermès, with a factory in Switzerland."

The clever thing about Hermès is that they do not try to be anything that they are not: "Basically, what we have tended to propose is elegant quartz watches mostly for ladies, although we have quite a large collection devoted to men." But the Hermès heritage in the world of saddlery



and, later, in leather goods, is clearly communicated with such models as the Harnais and the padlock-shaped Kelly, created in homage to the eponymous handbag.

"I think that the purpose of the company is to do what we do now, according to what we have always done. Going back to the roots of elegant and long-lasting products is very important at Hermès. We were not born as evening-dress makers; we were born as harness makers," says de Seynes with conviction. Hence the watches are characterised by an elegant functionality rather than dazzling horological complexity. "We try to have very easily readable dials – generally we avoid diamonds on the dial; after all, a watch has a function: to give the time."

However, there is the sense that de Seynes is being a little disingenuous as, under his stewardship, La Montre Hermès has taken on a slightly more prominent identity with such products as the Double Tour. The Double Tour is a watch strap, designed by Martin Margiella, that is wound twice around the wrist before being

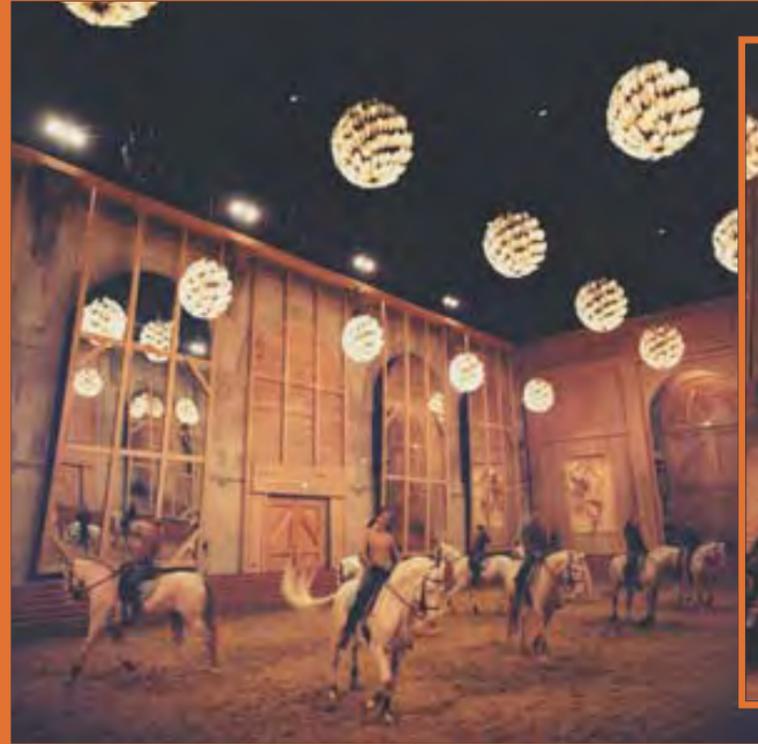
fastened. Attached to a watch called the Cape Cod, it has become something of a cult item among discerning men and women.

Going alternative

With the Dressage, de Seynes intends to rack up the cult status of Hermès watches in general with a watch designed by Henri d'Origny, a suave, snowy-haired, septuagenarian French seigneur of the old school. If Ian Fleming had been French, he would have written his 007 novels with d'Origny in mind as the model for the lady-killing secret agent. Like all the best and grandest Frenchmen, d'Origny is an Anglophile from the tips of highly polished Lobb's shoes (Hermès owns the Paris branch of the renowned boot-maker) to the collar of his exquisitely distressed tweed suit. He is also a horseman, and explains his work as a designer for Hermès by saying that he has to feed his horses somehow.

d'Origny is behind many of the classic equestrian-inspired items that have charmed visitors to Hermès stores since the late 1960s, and his snaffle- and bridle-inspired ties from the 1970s and '80s

Guillaume de Seynes (far left) is careful to ensure that watch collections produced under his aegis are suffused with the character of Hermès. The Glissade is typical of this approach, with its sliding case evocative of the famous Kelly bag padlock. The Harnais and Heure H (above) are equally identifiable as from the Hermès stable.



The launch of the Dressage, held at the dressage school in Versailles, could not have been more Hermès if it tried.

are quite rightly regarded as classics of the genre – although of course M. d’Origny prefers the chic polo neck to anything as formal as a shirt and tie.

Hermès have a corporate confidence and insouciance that enables them to find a benefit in not farming the design of a watch out to a specialist but keeping it in house, in the hands of one of its most trusted experts who has, of course, designed watches – among other things – in a career spanning four decades at Hermès.

Moreover, the watch itself is made by Vaucher, the movement-, component- and case-manufacturing arm of the Sandoz Foundation, who also back Michel Parmigiani in his eponymous brand. The marriage of Hermès and Vaucher (who incidentally also supply Asprey) is a felicitous one; the union is symbiotic in that it allows each company to bask in the glory of the other’s reputation. For Vaucher it is a chance to align their undoubted technical excellence with the



design flair of one of the world’s most prestigious luxury goods brands, while Hermès can be sure that, with their first foray into the world of *haute horlogerie*, they have the backing of a world-class, quality-obsessed movement and component maker.

The launch of the Dressage was pure Hermès. The day after our drinks and dinner on the roof, I accompanied de Seynes out to the dressage school at Versailles, where the horses were put through their paces in the charming indoor arena. After that, a banquet was held Marie Antoinette-style in the same arena, with seating in the form of straw bales (covered in canvas coloured with Hermès’ traditional burnt orange) and food provided by one of Paris’s top caterers. It was as slick and stylish as only the best French luxury goods houses can be, and it underlined that while the Swiss make the best watches; it is the French who have the edge when it comes to *art de vivre*. ◉

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