

DECEMBER/JANUARY 2023/2024 • ISSUE 169 • SOFT POWER SPECIAL

MONOCLE

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You'll never guess who's top...



I'm just here for the sweet treats!



We love countries that are quick on the draw

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Iced and spiced global seasonal confections.

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2 **FASHION:** Manufacturing

Tools of the trade

Normandy

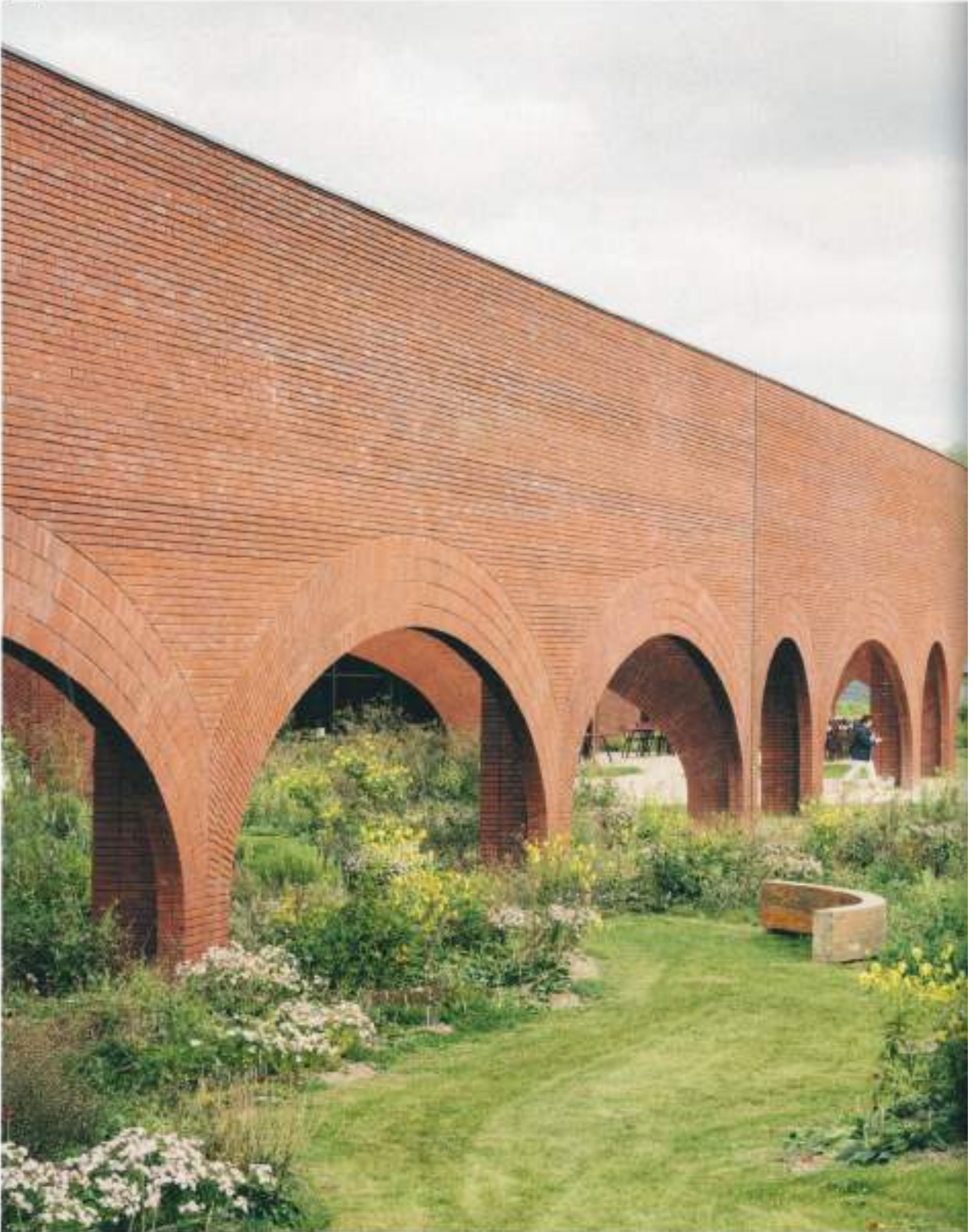
Hermès is at the forefront of a movement to uphold France's leather-working traditions. We visit its new factory to meet its expert artisans.

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Since its founding in 1837, French luxury house Hermès has become one of the world's greatest makers of leather goods. Whether you are buying a saddle, a pair of sandals or a handbag, there's a heightened sense of confidence that comes with Hermès's orange branding – you can trust the provenance of its products and rest assured that their value will continue to increase over time. There are many reasons for the label's success but a continued commitment to artisanal manufacturing remains key. "We are constantly investing in our leather production as the demand for bags and small

2 FASHION: Manufacturing



2 FASHION: Manufacturing

their careers by learning about leather at the brand's training centre next door, the Louviers École Hermès des Savoir-Faire, which offers apprenticeships that last up to 18 months. Many retrain from other professions, with staff including former bakers, nurses and hairdressers. "It's always good news when Hermès decides to invest," says De Seynes, noting the company's tight-knit relationship with the mayor of the nearby commune of Le Vaudreuil, Bernard Leroy.

When it reaches full capacity, the Louviers site will employ 260 leather workers and saddlers, in addition to staff in management and logistics. Of the company's 12,400 employees in France, more than half are artisans – a worthwhile investment in helping Hermès to retain its status as a luxury-market leader. "The only way that we can increase our output is to grow the number of artisans,"

1. Work in progress
2. Airy factory interior
3. Hand-sewn leather
4. Artisan's tools
5. Muted rainbow of bobbins



1



2



3



“Daylight streams in through the arched side windows, illuminating the artisans’ workstations below”



adds De Seynes. “This is still extremely manual work. It’s not only a matter of investing in equipment but also about hiring more people, training them and identifying the most talented ones – the ones who will become masters of their craft.”

Walking through the building, there is a sense of airiness thanks to its broad corridors, generous apertures and high ceilings. Daylight streams in through the arched side windows, illuminating the artisans’ workstations below. “It’s important for the rooms to have northern light because it is clear and pure,” says De Seynes. A leather worker in the bridle-making team echoes his thoughts. “There is so much natural light here,” he says. “It helps us ‘read’ the leathers and work precisely.”

The building is also unexpectedly quiet, aside from the soft thuds of hammers echoing in the distance – a reminder that every item is put together by hand and that there are no machines to speed up the process. In one workshop, a woman sews straps onto a Kelly bag made from Epsom leather, while her neighbour assembles the same bag in glossy-black Box-calf leather, the oldest version of the material used by Hermès, which is known for acquiring a patina over time. “This is my favourite type of leather to work with,” she says, with a smile. “It requires extra care.”

A bright space filled with smiling employees was part of Ghotmeh’s initial vision for the new Louviers facility. “Architecture has an immediate effect on wellbeing and behaviour,” she says. “I want this building to bring joy and warmth to the artisans, and for them to work in comfortable, naturally lit ateliers.”

Training the next generation of craftspeople and providing them with the right working conditions is quickly becoming a prerequisite for fashion houses. Hermès is setting an industry benchmark by investing in craft and sustainability. The Louviers workshop is powered by geothermal energy and more than 2,300 sq m of solar panels. It’s also surrounded by three hectares of gardens designed by Belgian landscape architect Erik Dhont, who ensured that most of the site’s original trees were retained.

Strolling around these idyllic gardens, where employees often gather during their afternoon breaks, offers a peek into what the future of manufacturing could be – one that isn’t purely machine-led but instead centred around human skills and artisan communities, working together in well-designed spaces. “We have been cultivating this know-how for centuries and still believe in it,” says De Seynes. “This means investing in good facilities, hiring staff and passing on our savoir-faire to the next generation.” — ©