



Jean Paul Gaultier has been one of the stellar names of haute couture for more than 35 years. Between 2003 and 2010, he was design director of women's ready-to-wear for luxury brand Hermès, with Hermès eventually owning a 45% stake in the Gaultier brand. The relationship ended when Hermès sold that part of its business, but as this article reveals, seven years at Hermès left the designer with a deep love of leather, which still influences his work today.

Leather brings Gaultier designs to life



A bowling bag in perforated leather from the brand's accessories collection.

PHOTOS: JEAN PAUL GAULTIER

*F*ashion designers, almost of necessity, are free spirits who value their independence and space in which to turn their visions into clothes, shoes and accessories. Most hope that the rich and famous will fall in love with them and that people further down the fashion food chain will imitate. But, like the rest of

us, they too have bills to pay and many have found that working on a collection or two for retailers and fashion brands with deep pockets can reap rich rewards.

Jean Paul Gaultier, high profile on the world fashion stage since the 1970s, has been involved in a wide variety of partnerships of this kind in recent years,

ranging from a lingerie collection for Italian brand La Perla and a clothing line for US discount retail group Target, to work on a furniture collection with high-end French company Roche Bobois. In March 2012, he announced that he had agreed to be the creative director for this year for Diet Coke. The playful extravagance for which



The Jean Paul Gaultier flagship store in Paris.

the designer had become famous was evident in most of this work (for example, a sofa design for Roche Bobois incorporated his trademark blue-and-white hooped Breton fisherman's jersey style, with red pom-poms as a finishing touch).

Love of leather rubs off

However, an agreement he reached in 2003 to become the design director of women's ready-to-wear for iconic luxury leathersgoods brand Hermès always had a more serious tone about it. Hermès doesn't do red pom-poms. The Paris-based brand had long been an admirer of Jean Paul Gaultier and already owned a 35% stake in his company when it brought him on board. In 2008, it increased its share to 45%, only selling (to Spanish perfume company Puig in May 2011) after the designer had stopped working for Hermès in 2010.

Seven years is a long-time in the fashion world, long enough for the Hermès devotion to exquisite leather to rub off on Mr Gaultier. This, at least, is what his

product manager for accessories, Anne Charlotte Dedieu, says today.

Her role as product manager is, she explains, to "develop Gaultier products to perfection". It is she who must take sketches from the company's design department and translate the vision of the design team into a real product in three dimensions that has the form and shape that the designers envisaged. In the case of Gaultier, the products she has responsibility for are shoes, bags, belts and other small leathersgoods, for men and women. Ms Dedieu's first experience of this work was with apparel at sportswear brand Quiksilver and fashion brand Cacharel. She moved from there to Louis Vuitton and started learning about accessories. Her move to Jean Paul Gaultier was in 2009.

"I would say that leather

and textiles are completely different as raw materials," she explains. "Leather is like life. No two skins are the same, and this makes things complicated for us, but this is also what is interesting. Textiles are more regular, but leather gives life to a bag. And if you try to make the same bag with different leather, you can't; the touch and the visual aspect are different."



Classic Gaultier design ideas in a suede corset.



The Canasta sandal in vegetable-tanned leather from the spring-summer 2012 Jean Paul Gaultier collection.

Haute stuff

For each season, Jean Paul Gaultier releases pre-collection products, then the mainstream collection, plus the haute couture collection. First-line products contain the best of the leather the company sources, like deerskin, but there are also bags that are aimed at younger people and have a correspondingly lower price tag. Every one of these products is of great interest: calfskin, as well as lambskin, goat, deerskin or exotic leathers, with a wide variety of techniques used for embossing, printing and folding, all have a part to play.

Details of the autumn-winter 2012-2013 are scant at the time of writing, but it's easy to see that leather plays a prominent role in the Gaultier ready-to-wear collection as well as in accessories. The designer put models onto the catwalk in combinations that included leather dresses, trousers and jackets. Accessories included gloves, clutch bags in metallic blue, shoes with huge platforms and belts so broad they looked like cummerbunds. Accessories for the current collection, spring-summer 2012,

include limited numbers of bags, small leathersgoods, belts and shoes.

One from the top of the range is a small, evening bag called the Tattoo in "dipped lambskin" with a tattoo print. It costs €1,490. Three belts in the collection are made from split calfskin and range in price

The Tattoo bag in natural and aniline lambskin with a printed design.



from €190 to €295. In footwear, a nude-coloured sandal with an 11-centimetre heel and a one-centimetre platform, the Canasta, catches the eye. The upper is 100% full-grain calfskin and the heel is 100% wood. They cost €780 per pair.

In keeping with the vision

Anne Charlotte Dedieu does the legwork to source these materials, visiting the leather tradeshow, meeting tanners, looking at the articles they have on display and if she sees something "interesting", which for her means something that's in keeping with the vision of Jean Paul Gaultier, she finds out as much extra detail as she can, opens a dialogue with the tannery and sets about making some samples. "We're just the same as everyone else," she explains. "We want the best quality, but also the best price."

She clearly has a good understanding of the kind of material Mr Gaultier will like and regard as suitable for bringing his designs to life. She says that, for example, at the February 2012 edition of Le Cuir À Paris, at which tanners from around the world were exhibiting samples of the leathers they believe will meet the requirements of the fashion world in spring-summer 2013, it was impossible for her to have a fully formed idea of what the designer will want for the season in question—especially as his

company was working flat out during those days to finish its catwalk presentations for autumn-winter 2012-2013, which went on display at the Paris Fashion Week in March. "He will give me more detail nearer the time, but he is a designer and his collections take time. All I can tell you is it will be on trend."

Leather quality is what matters

So, at this distance, it's not tanners' ideas of colours for spring-summer 2013 that make the biggest impression on Anne Charlotte Dedieu. It's more about the kind of leather on display, meaning the type of skin or hide, the techniques used to finish them. "The quality of the leather is what matters to him," she says of her boss, "and for him to feel it. The origin of the leather is not so important to him. We source leather from France or Portugal, but most of time our choice is Italy."

In the course of her two-and-a-half years in the role, Ms Dedieu has worked with a variety of tanners. She knows the quality Jean Paul Gaultier is looking for and, yes,

she knows which tanneries she can go to and be sure of receiving leather of that standard and with the most appropriate price for what is usually a small order. Gaultier is still a low-volume business compared to many of the tanners' other clients. "Around 50 square-metres is great for us," she says.

Production runs are increasing in quantity: the minimum is usually of 50 pieces and can reach 1,000 pieces for some of the bags in the range. All the finished products are made by small European independent leathersgoods manufacturers: between 40% and 50% in Italy's main centre of leathersgoods excellence, Tuscany, some in Belgium and Portugal and the rest in Paris. It's becoming less easy to find the right manufacturing partners in France, the product manager says. The expertise and the tradition are there, but labour costs are high and many buyers now look elsewhere, which has made it difficult for many of these small

producers to continue. "In France, for young people especially, there is a bit of a prejudice against working with your hands," she continues. "People want to study for a long time and then have long and lucrative careers as doctors and so on." In the world of haute couture, in contrast, artisanal work in which people use their hands to make real things is highly valued.

Shops and showrooms

On the retail side, the business has five shops of its own, including a flagship store on the Avenue George V in Paris and one in London. There are around 20 franchise stores in China, Dubai, Indonesia, Kuwait, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Russia and Japan, and also a wide network of multibrand retailers around the world who stock Jean Paul Gaultier products. Customer tastes are far from uniform, Ms Dedieu explains. For example, the preference among French consumers for bags made from vegetable-tanned leather does not translate to Asia in her experience. But some of the factors driving growth for the Gaultier brand are universal. She continues: "When you buy a Jean Paul Gaultier bag, it says something about your liking for luxury accessories but also about your creative status. You like fashion, but you also like creativity and the special Gaultier style."

She sums up what is special about this particular style by saying Jean Paul Gaultier likes to "re-interpret" products, to use things, but perhaps not as they were originally meant to be used. He is, apparently, working on a few bags at the moment inspired by clothes. "So you will find a bag that looks like a coat," the product manager says. "It's going to be big in size and it's going to consume a lot of leather. Jean Paul Gaultier loves leather. He learned a lot during the years at Hermès because there he was working with the highest quality imaginable. He has always had a feel for leather, but it definitely increased during his time with Hermès and this is what he is bringing to his collections today." ●

Shoes in the printed tattoo skins that represent the spirit of the Jean Paul Gaultier fashion show in March 2012.

