



Carole Thomas believes calfskin is becoming a hard-to-source "precious" type of leather.

ALL CREDITS: MAISON THOMAS



Committed to calf

Paris-based leathergoods brand Maison Thomas is small enough to feel the pain of recent reductions in the availability and increase in price of calfskins and calf leather, but its commitment to the material it has chosen for its high-end bags and purses remains unshaken.

Maison Thomas is one of around 20 start-up luxury leathergoods brands involved in Au-delà du Cuir, an association set up in recent years by France's Conseil National Du Cuir (National Leather Council) and national footwear federation (FFC) to promote the use of leather by young designers. In May 2014, Au-delà du Cuir opened its own showroom in Paris, giving the brands a new place to showcase their products. In the case of the Maison Thomas founder, Carole Thomas, this meant an additional platform for her to display and sell her high-end calfskin bags, along with a stand she has in the Le Bon Marché department store in the centre of Paris, a presence in the Fenwick department store in London's Bond Street, at 10 Corso Como in Seoul, at Lazy Susan in Tokyo and at outlets in New York and Switzerland.

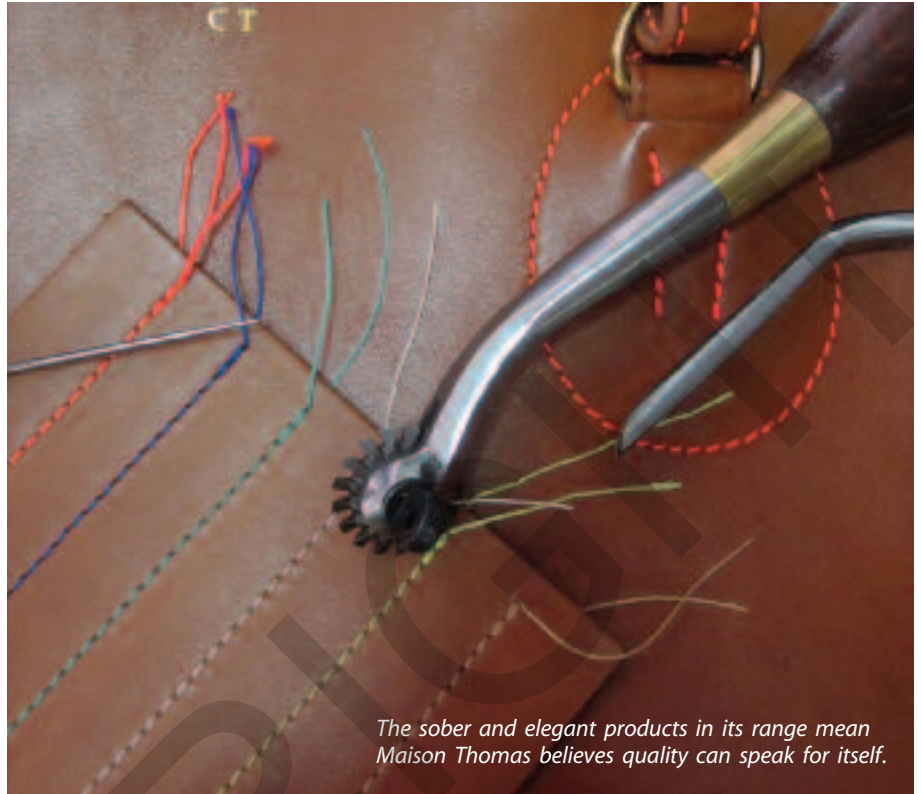
Au-delà du Cuir, which means 'Beyond Leather', sees itself as being a link between traditional French leather artisanship,

creative dynamism and talent and the challenges of the international market. Her Fenwick experience suggests that Carole Thomas, who spent some years as a student in London, is already making an impression on the international market. Fenwick came to her, rather than the other way round. "They found me at a trade fair," she explains, "and my bags have had a good reception there. They're introducing a lot of new brands to their selection and my brand is part of that."

As well as working on her designs, buying leather and liaising with her artisan manufacturing partners, Ms Thomas tries to spend time every afternoon at Le Bon Marché. She says she enjoys meeting customers and seeing what they like. Her typical customer can be any age and any nationality, but people who choose Maison Thomas accessories, which she describes as sober, elegant and solid, marrying "a raw look" with refined details, highlighting the beauty of the craftsmanship, are often people



Maison Thomas founder, Carole Thomas, is one of 20 young designers to have been picked for a programme called Au-delà du Cuir.



The sober and elegant products in its range mean Maison Thomas believes quality can speak for itself.

who have been “over-saturated” with big-name brands. “They don’t like big brand labels covering their things,” she explains, “and there is a market for that. People know the leather, recognise the quality. They don’t need to show off a brand name. The quality speaks for itself.”

Student life

One year of a law degree course in Paris some years ago was enough to convince Carole Thomas that her future lay in the creative professions. She left, and spent the next two years studying fashion under the auspices of the influential École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne. “It was very traditional there,” she recalls, “and I really wanted to develop my own styles. It was at this time that I began to think about going to London to study at Central Saint Martin’s College because, at the time, it was beginning to become well known; everyone was talking about Alexander McQueen, for example, as he had just been taken on (in 1996) by Givenchy.”

She graduated with first-class honours from the London institution three years later, having specialised in textiles; she says she was attracted to the way colour works in textiles, and this was her focus in her first job, at a Tuscan textile company. However, there was no need for her to visit Tuscany’s centres of leather excellence such as Florence or Santa Croce for her to develop an appreciation of leather; she had had a deep love of the material since early childhood. “I have always loved bags,” she explains. “I remember as a very young child playing with my mother’s bags and I really loved the touch of leather. I remember my first real leather bag, I remember the smell of it and I think of it like the madeleine.” This is a reference to Proust’s ‘Remembrance of Things Past’, in which the taste of a tiny cake brings flooding back all the memories of the narrator’s childhood.

After a year in Italy, Ms Thomas returned to Paris and began to work on leather accessories during a stint with a big fashion

house there, cementing her love of the most special material in the industry. She met and married her husband and soon moved to Brussels with him for his work. She looked for a job in the Belgian capital but could find nothing suitable there, although she did find something interesting in Antwerp, at AF Vandevorst, where she started to do what she still does today: design beautiful, high-end leather bags of her own.

Too much to learn

Carole Thomas says she became attracted to the notion of launching her own accessory brand while studying in London, but for some time after the course at Saint Martin’s felt she was still too young and had too much to learn. Upon returning to Paris with her family at the end of 2009, she realised that the time might be right at last, and that launching her own brand could allow her to find a way of continuing to work in the fashion industry while still spending time with her children. “It’s quite an issue,” she says, “to be able to work in the industry and also have a family. But I was really motivated to have both. I don’t have any investors, so in spite of the fact that I would love to have an office and a studio somewhere else, I am working from home at the moment. And I work all the time, even at weekends, but at least I am there and I am able to organise things.”

Bags seemed like the best products to concentrate on and traditional, very high-end French calfskin the best material. She feels that it was at this time that bags were becoming the extremely important fashion items they are today. This doesn’t mean it was easy for a new name to make an impression on the market; it was far from easy, and there were even more immediate difficulties. “It was hard even to find space at the manufacturers,” Ms Thomas says now, “because they were all so busy. It’s okay to do prototypes and then, perhaps, a trade fair, which I did, but I was asked almost immediately to supply a collection to a retailer and I had to say I could not do it yet because I had no access to



Contrasting colours for the thread for stitching and the leather provide a refined detail in products such as the Pépité.

leathergoods manufacturing. I didn't want to start taking orders and then not be able to make the products on time. That would have killed the brand before it had even started. So I decided I was going to take the time to look for the right manufacturing partner and be sure of the quality of production."

A masculine world

She says she has learned a lot from talking to the artisan leathergoods producers she has met, in the various jobs she held before setting up Maison Thomas and since and also to tanners, in her case in France and in Italy. "When you start asking questions, they love explaining what they do. The only thing I found difficult is that it's a very masculine world in the tanning industry and, in the beginning, that was hard."

Her workshop is in her home near the Eiffel Tower and the artisan manufacturing partners she has chosen to work with, whom she prefers not to name, are not too far away in the Loire Valley. As for tanners, she says she keeps going back to the same ones and is able to keep buying from them, in spite of the vertical integration that has been taking place in the luxury industry. LVMH took control of Tanneries Roux in 2012, following a joint-venture with Tannerie Masure in Belgium in 2009 and taking a controlling stake in Singapore-based crocodile leather producer Heng Long in 2011. Hermès has taken over d'Annonay, Kering has acquired France Croco and JM Weston is linked to the new owners of Les Tanneries du Puy. "I've managed to find places where I can still buy what I need," she explains. "I'll never be a big customer for them, so I'll always have to fall in line with that. It's small quantities, but I produce all year long, not just for two seasons, and I use a range of colours, including orange, cognac, navy, gold, grey and sand."

The shapes of the products are classical. One of the refined details is that she has used stitching in a colour that contrasts

with the tone of the leather, fluorescent yellow thread with grey leather, for example, bright orange thread with navy leather or blue thread with cognac, to create a distinctive Maison Thomas touch that consumers like. Products include the Portrait tote, the Princesse and Porte-Moi satchel-style bags and the Pépité, an elegant envelope clutch with space for a passport, cards, a smartphone, driving licence and so on. "It's a little envelope that women like carrying," the designer says. "You can put all your little treasures in it. It's a nice object."

Supply pressures

But it doesn't come cheap. Calf leather is becoming rare as veal consumption and slaughter rates decline. "This is a big problem, a big issue for the luxury leathergoods industry," she says. "It's not exotic, but it is becoming a rare and precious type of leather. If I could, I would buy land and raise cattle, because the key is the cow. But I have taken this line of 100% calfskin and I'm trying to find a way for the brand to become known and, for the moment at least, people appreciate the commitment to calfskin. The bags are unlined because most of the time a lining is there to hide defects. I've got regular customers who are becoming repeat buyers of Maison Thomas bags because they really love this type of leather."

She doesn't want to hide anything. She has concerns about offshore manufacturing in locations with low labour costs. She insists on high levels of environmental care and waste management at the tanneries she buys from and on safe, fair working conditions for the artisans at her leathergoods manufacturing partner. She says: "The thought of someone being exposed to solvents while working on something for me really bothers me. There's always a person behind an object."

She has, therefore, resisted any temptation to do things the easy way or on the cheap. She is remaining faithful to her vision and the dreams she has for Maison Thomas. 🌱