

Hermès Launches Headphones as Its Bespoke Division Expands Into Sound

Hermès launches headphones featuring handstitched leather and handbag hardware as its Ateliers Horizons bespoke unit expands into sound.



At Hermès, there are personalized products — and then there is Ateliers Horizons.

Nestled behind a steel gate on a nondescript side street in the Paris suburb of Pantin, this discreet workshop houses unexpected treasures. A canoe? A foosball table? A jukebox? Horizons can customize all these, and more, not to mention the handbags that make up the bulk of its special orders.

Don't even think of trying to bypass the French luxury house's notoriously long waiting lists by tapping the workshop for a classic Birkin or Kelly. Instead, imagine bags shaped like a birdcage or a pineapple.

"We are trying to be a bit crazy every day," says Axel de Beaufort, creative director of Ateliers Horizons since 2012.

With a degree in naval design and architecture from the University of Southampton in England, de Beaufort has the chops to handle the atelier's large-scale projects like boats, private jet interiors and cars.

He likes to stop by the Horizons showroom to admire the C28 Aérosport, made in 1935 by French manufacturer Avions Voisin, that takes pride of place on the ground floor. Working with a professional restorer, Hermès made the leather interiors of the silver Art Deco-style model, of which only a handful were produced.

"Before I met the owner of this car, I didn't know about Voisin," admits de Beaufort. "This is what we like at Horizons: to find ourselves in this kind of story."

He's just as enthusiastic about more offbeat projects. A fishing rod, boxing gloves and a disco ball are among the commissions the studio has received. "I'm as interested and happy about these little special orders as the seat of a plane," de Beaufort says.





In the last decade the bespoke studio has also started to create its own capsule collections, available in selected Hermès boutiques. Initially it asked store managers for creative briefs, making items like a picnic hamper, a hammock and a kite. Now the unit generates its own ideas, adding surfboards, skateboards and speakers to the mix.

De Beaufort is part of a team of around 50 people at Horizons, including designers, engineers and artisans. Aside from a handful of bag specialists based at the Hermès headquarters on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, they're all housed under the same roof.

The sound of hammering reverberates around the airy workshop. Two men are conferring around a brown leather airplane seat. In a corner, a young woman with headphones is handstitching a leather handle cover for a foosball table.

Creatives and makers work hand-in-hand to develop products that meld technical excellence with traditional craftsmanship — a balance de Beaufort perfected back when he worked on big yachting projects.

"Victor Hugo said: 'The sea is a place of rigor and freedom.' I like this because it's really where we are. When you design a boat, you have to understand every part of the technicity of things and at the same time, it must be a nice object to go wherever you want," he says.

"We need to be super creative and at the same time, as we are here to explore, we need to understand the engineering of things. It doesn't mean that we do the engineering, but we need to understand and we need to be able to push boundaries," he adds.

A case in point: the first Hermès headphones, which will hit stores this summer, 10 years after the luxury house created a sensation by partnering with Apple on its connected watch.

Ateliers Horizons has dabbled in sound before, developing a first jukebox in 2019, as well as a boombox housing a vertical turntable. Its latest collection also includes a cubic connected speaker, a lacquered mahogany DJ table and a new jukebox featuring the Cheval Néon design by Greek illustrator Elias Kafouros.

Creating the \$15,000 headset was especially complex as the brand pursued an original "Hermès sound." Adding leather and a logo to an existing product is never an option for Ateliers Horizons, which works with specialized manufacturers when it doesn't have the expertise in-house.

"Being able to bring some proper Hermès work on industrial design is very interesting," de Beaufort says. "The edge between industrial design and craftsmanship is so thin."

The minimalist design of the headphones, designed for both Bluetooth and wired use, features signature touches like handstitched cowhide leather and metallic finishes inspired by the Kelly bag. Colors include "naturel," black, chocolate, "rouge H" and Prussian blue.

Like any Hermès product, the luxury is whispered.

"People don't really need to know that what's happening behind it is as authentic as stitching a Birkin in the workshop. There are people, there are hands, there is time. There are no shortcuts," de Beaufort says.

"The idea is not to be able to replicate that 10,000 times as a big headset supplier would do. The idea is to have the few that we will do made perfectly, and that has been a very long learning process," he adds.





It's just as well the Paris-born designer is a connect-the-dots kind of guy, with a passion for problem-solving. "Finding solutions is always something amazing," he says.

He has no set routine for tackling a blank page, instead drawing inspiration from conversations, surfing or playing with his kids. "I'm very curious, I like to ask questions wherever I am," he says. "My brain is always on."

De Beaufort lauds Pierre-Alexis Dumas, artistic director of Hermès, for giving his teams space to exercise their imagination.

"He's never telling you what to do. He's more listening to you and giving you what the DNA of Hermès is," he says. "It's really a blessing because it's pretty rare to be in this kind of situation."

Bespoke objects are baked into that DNA. After all, Hermès was founded in 1837 as a harness workshop. Its most famous creation, the Birkin, was famously designed for actress Jane Birkin after she met Hermès executive Jean-Louis Dumas on a plane and lamented the lack of large handbags.

"It has never been marketing-driven. It's always been something appealing to craftsmanship, appealing to stories, with values that we're attached to, where we can recognize ourselves," de Beaufort says.

Accordingly, he's loath to turn down any request, no matter how outlandish. In fact, he frequently pushes clients to think even more outside the box.

"We are here to bring oxygen. We are here to bring the unexpected fun or nice situation in a super high quality. That's what we try to do," he says. "People are very happy about that because when they come to Hermès, they come for the entire Hermès [experience]."

