

Heavenly creatures

*From designing accessories for the world's biggest fashion houses to crafting bespoke toy animals, **Hugues Bermond** is a virtuoso with leather*

Interview by Janine Leah Bartels

During the course of a distinguished career designing accessories, Hugues Bermond created the Diamond bag for Céline, the Pop-Up bag for Maison Margiela, and the View and the Cross bags for Jil Sander, for whom he is now Head Accessory Designer. But the French designer is perhaps best known for Bestioles by Hugues Bermond, his whimsical collection of luxury leather toys.

Bermond came up with the idea for the collection early on in his career, while working at Louis Vuitton. His first 'Bestiole' (it means 'little beast' in French) was a leather rabbit he made for a pregnant colleague. Praise from Marc Jacobs gave Bermond the confidence to further develop his delicate collectables. Five years on, he has created an entire zoo of luxury critters from leftover python, kangaroo, lizard and other exotic fine leathers, as well as fur, from manufacturers. Each one is unique and handmade by Bermond himself.

Whether it is repurposing luxury leathers in the form of an owl or designing next season's accessory collection for Jil Sander, everything that Bermond creates is carefully thought through.

Take this season's View bag, for example. Dissatisfied by the way the leather buckled outwards when weighed down by the clutter inside, his solution was to cut out part of the leather, creating a 'V' on

the flap. Now, when the handbag is picked up, the leather slides along the chain, closing the gap. For Bermond, it's all about function and form.

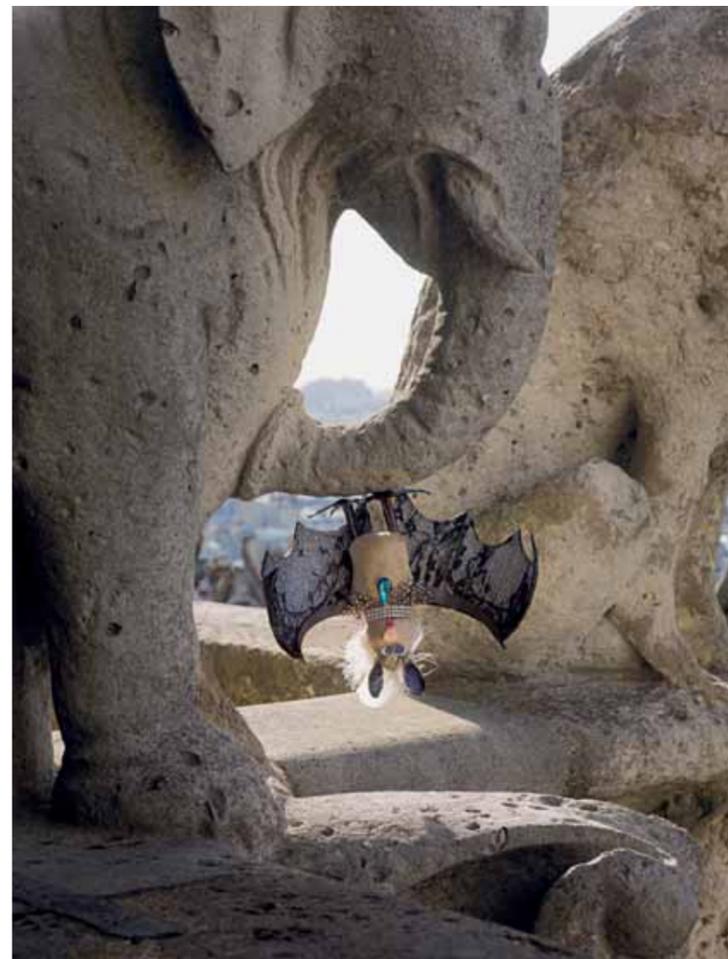
So, how did you end up in the world of accessories?
I studied in the South of France at a high-level ski school - a lot of my friends now compete in the Olympics - and when I was 18, I entered a fashion competition with a friend and we won second prize. I was planning to be an architect at the time, but after this contest, my parents, who are architects themselves, suggested I do something else. So I went to art school in Aix-en-Provence, and then I studied at L'Institut Supérieur des Arts Appliqués in Paris. After I presented my graduate collection, Louis Vuitton offered me a job in accessories.

Talk us through your career...
I stayed at Louis Vuitton for five years. I was in the team that worked with Marc Jacobs on the fashion shows. Then I decided to do my own collection for one year. After that, I was headhunted by Céline. I am still in love with Céline - it's super-close to my DNA. As I was the only designer working on bags alongside Johnny Coca, I went to the meetings with Phoebe Philo. I learned a lot from her. Now, the team is huge and she's not so accessible any more. I was at Margiela for more than

Photo: Michael Baumgarten



"Each Bestiole must match the character of the customer"



Why do you think people are moving away from monogrammed bags and towards minimalism?
When I was at Louis Vuitton with Marc [Jacobs], it was always a game to see how we could make the monogram different. But now the market no longer answers to the super-logo bag. Real luxury should be something that no one recognises. Gucci and Louis Vuitton have become a bit mass-market. I think many clients are disturbed when they see people in the street carrying fakes.

In your opinion, do accessories play a key role in the marketing of a brand?

Yes, I think everything is changing. There is too much communication, and too many collaborations around the products. It has become more about everything around the product, rather than about the product itself. A lot of care goes into inviting a famous photographer to take a picture to make the product look better, instead of making the product better. I'm here to think of a good product with a new idea, not find a new Hollywood star to carry it.

What was the idea behind your luxury toy brand, Bestioles by Hugues Bermond?

Back when I was at Louis Vuitton, my parents bought a house in the mountains. We found a lot of things in the house, including some fabrics. The pieces were so small, we didn't even know what to do with them. I decided to make a fabric chicken, and my mother's friends went crazy about it. That was the start. Then, a girl at Louis Vuitton was pregnant, so I made her a leather rabbit and I brought it to the office. I left it on my desk, which was right in front of Marc's office. He saw it and said, "What is that? I really like it." That's why I did a website and created a collection. And, of course, I made one for Marc, too.

What did he get?

I made him a rabbit with tattoos, wearing earrings with stones - a bit like Marc himself. He put it on a shelf in his office, beside a Murakami sculpture. I was really happy he put it next to a piece of art!

Do you make all the Bestioles yourself?

Yes. I send questions to the customers, and from their answers I create the Bestioles. I couldn't ask someone else to make them. I create them myself - each one must match the character of the customer.

That's a very personal approach. Which animal is your favourite?

The ones you see on the website are the ones that I really like. I do a lot of chickens and rabbits!

What are they made of?

They are all in leather. The way I work is quite green, because I buy small pieces from makers to create the Bestioles. That makes the pieces unique, and that's what I'm really happy about. It's not possible to reproduce them, because I won't ever have the same leather or colour again.

What are your future plans for the Bestioles?

I don't want to make a business with this collectors' item. I just want it to be an artistic project.

Top row: a selection of Bestioles, all created by Bermond. From left to right: Valentin, Hector, Vladi'tza. Bottom row: the View bag, designed for Jil Sander



two years. At first, it was amazing - I learned to be conceptual and translate it into fashion. In the last pre-collection for Maison Margiela by Galliano, the Pop-Up bags are mine. I was happy they kept them. When I arrived at Jil Sander, it was for the first pre-collection with Rodolfo [Pagliarunga]. We decided to recreate new DNA for accessories. I like the idea of starting over. I like to think about everything, even the pictures for the lookbook.

How would you define your aesthetic?

I have been with these brands - Céline, Margiela, Jil Sander - for a reason: they suit my taste perfectly! I like details that have a technical function. I always start my research with art, pictures and drawings. I never work with vintage bags. In fashion, there are many people who buy vintage, change it a bit and it's done. I hate that way of working. I do trials, folding paper or stitching a piece of leather. I'm more based on an idea, a concept, than on an existing product.

Do you look to art for inspiration?

I go to the library at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, where they have a lot of books by new artists. What inspires me is how the artists create their pieces. When you see a blue painting with red dots, it could be inspiring for a print, but I'm more interested in why the artist decided to put the red dots on a blue screen.

"Real luxury should be something that no one recognises"

Photos: Michael Baumgarten