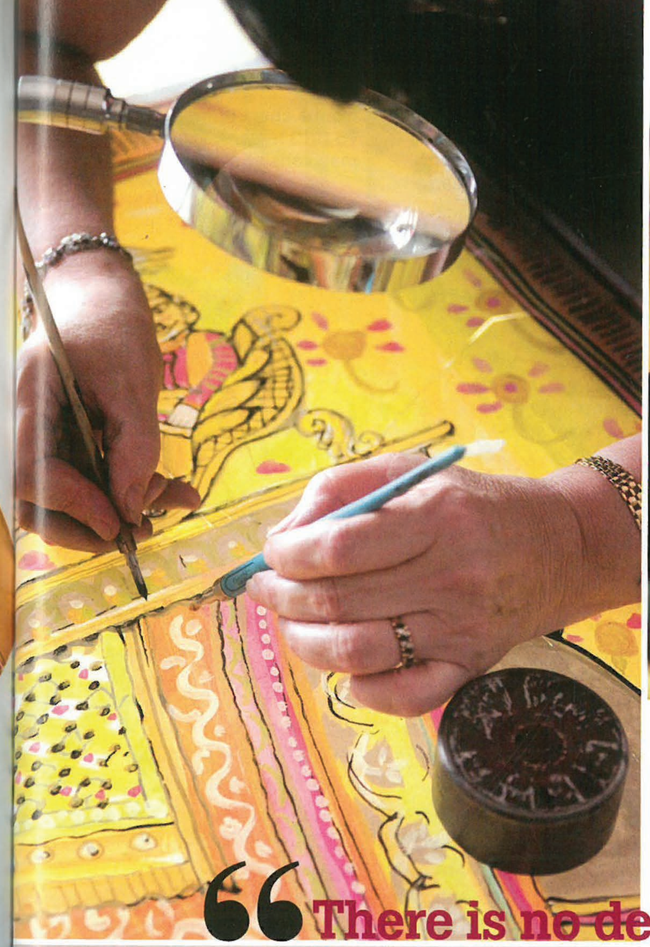
A model displays an Hermés scarf; inset: la Danse du Cheval Marwari – a scarf inspired by the Indian wedding *ghodi*

For the devoted and passionate lover of luxury, a Hermés scarf is an absolute must-have. *Marie Claire* takes you through the making of the famed silk square and why it is one of the most coveted objects in the world. **By Shefalee Vasudev**

# The story of the HERMÉS SCARF

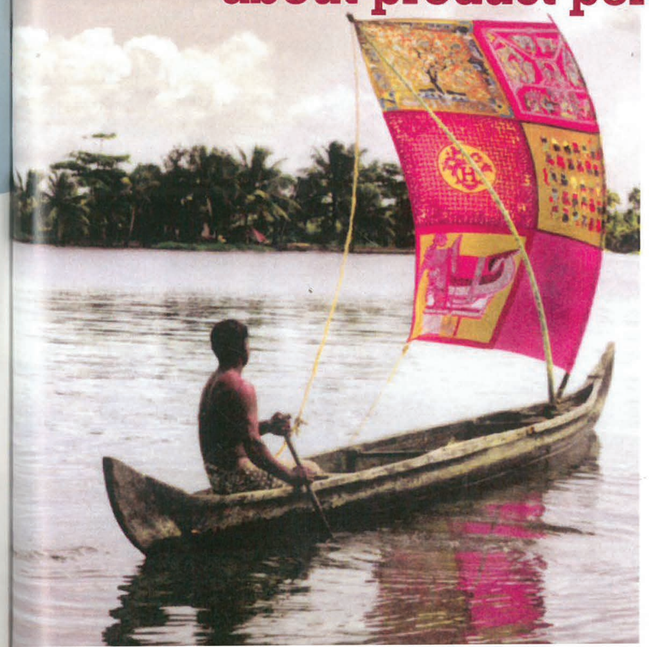
If telling a tale is the incidental by-product of luxury, the famed Hermés scarf is a master storyteller. India being a constant character in this silken *sutradhar* that mirrors the world's cultures, it was an *Alice in Wonderland* experience exploring the birthplace of the wildly colourful la Danse du Cheval Marwari. A scarf inspired from the Indian wedding *ghodi*.

Let's start with a story. Or few. The distance from Paris to Lyon, the silk region of France, is 450 km. That is exactly the length of silk thread taken from 300 silk cocoons, needed to make one scarf. Made from Brazilian silk, some are now mixed with vintage twill, crepe, muslin, chiffon or cashmere. The first scarf commissioned by Robert Dumas,



L-R: Nadine, a senior engraver, working at Hermés' Lyon Silk Division; colour trials being done from a 75,000-colour palette

**"There is no deadline. The making is not about time, it's about product perfection**



the grandfather of Pierre-Alexis Dumas (now the artistic director of Hermés' silk division) in 1937 mixed humour with colours. "A good player never gets angry," it read.

Zen and the art of making an Hermés scarf? Well, why not. The 2,000-odd designs since the first scarf have combined history and modernity with inspirations from fashion, arts, scientific advances and parables. Some are abstract, others exotic. A powerful sketch of the Tree of Life hangs on a wall in the engraving division of Hermés at Lyon. "An engraver needs arresting silence to work with full concentration," says Kamel Hamadou, head of communications at Lyon. A process that requires 700 people with different skills, linking 800 chains which can take over two years to create, surely needs total calm. Watching the work of Nadine, an engraver with 31 years of experience, is a lesson in yogic concentration. After an artist's design is okayed, the engraver re-imagines the story. She divides the design onto different slides with the finest combinations of hues, textures and prints closest to the artist's rendition. It takes anything from 600 to 2,000 hours to make one composition.

The colours are tried from a palette of 75,000 colours to get the harmony right. Each design is interpreted in eight combinations of a 40-colour scheme. The trials go through vigorous inspections and are often sent back for retrials. When it is time to print, a roll of silk is stretched over a 300-ft long printing table and one colour is applied at a time. The printing table is scraped and cleaned after each application. The scarf is inspected for imperfections between applications. There is no deadline. The idea is ▸

## 10 TRUISMS OF THE SCARF

■ Since the first scarf in 1937, Hermés has created 2,000 scarf designs with 30 new ones each year.

■ 90 x 90 is the house's original square scarf size.

■ Each scarf uses 450 km of silk thread.

■ The process consists of 800 links, which can take as long as two years and include as many as 40 artisans.

■ 79 gm is the weight of a 90 x 90 cm silk twill scarf.

■ Each scarf has a name, often forming an integral part of the original design.

■ The choice of the colours of the scarves is made from a chart of more than 75,000 hues. A single scarf may consist of 40 colours.

■ The first scarf design was reproduced in 1987 for the 150th anniversary of Hermés and remixed in 2007 as 70 x 70 cm vintage twill on the occasion of the scarf's 70th birthday.

■ Each season, the house selects 10 memorable designs from its archives that are recoloured and reissued.

■ Artists, graphic designers illustrators and craftsmen from every horizon and culture have dreamt and drawn different versions of the scarf for the past 70 years in collaboration with Hermés.

graphic scarves, whose beating caused the vibration of silk!

Scarves inspired by India offer a lovely perspective to our own culture. Last year when Hermés' theme was India, these were unfurled in stores across the globe. In 1985, when Rakesh Sharma became India's first astronaut to go to the moon, Jean Louis Dumas added an astronaut to a scarf design as a tribute to the country he loved. Embellished elephants, elaborate petal decorations, and the most memorable – a collection of scarves that was turned into a sail for a backwaters boat – make India a pulsating artery at Hermés.

Freudian dreams in silk – the scarf (Rs 20,000 at the Hermés India store in New Delhi) is a timeless accessory. Grace Kelly, who became the Princess of Monaco, wore it as a sling for her broken arm in 1956. As the decades wore on, legendary ladies from Queen Elizabeth, Jacqueline Kennedy, Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe self-styled it. A favourite now with Madonna and Sarah Jessica Parker, the scarf invites devotion from those who pray at the temple of luxury.

You can't help laughing when Maria Schaefer, head of the women's silk collections, gives advice on the scarf. "Don't respect it," she says, "dare to crease it, to treat it a little roughly." It can be worn as a shawl, a collar, draped belt, sexy bustier, a bolero, a wrap skirt, little handbag, necklace or bracelet, worn on a belt, tied to a bag or in the hair – its versatility makes it a blank slate for a fertile imagination.

In fashion's competitive universe, blinded by big brands coming out with the next big thing, the Hermés scarf is a contradiction. It's like a handicraft but has a clean shape and modern values. It is conspicuously old-fashioned yet stands for the future of a tradition. Timeless, truly. ■

**“From the beginning, the Hermés scarf was imagined as an object not an accessory**

▸to not accept anything mediocre. It's not about time, it's about product perfection. Even at the final stage, mistakes lead to the consignment being destroyed. Scarves go through grooming, de-gumming and rinsing to ensure colour luminosity and texture. And are inspected yet again! "The way to spot a fake scarf," says Hamadou, "is to look at the hemming. A genuine one will have the hem rolled inwards and finely hand-stitched."

An army of skilled talents work on these scarves with the tenacity of soldiers, who know why errors must be weeded out. Each colourist is a student of fine art. "From the beginning, the Hermés scarf was imagined as an object, not an accessory," maintains Dumas. Each square looks like a pictorial coffee table book, with a point of view. When ready, the scarves create magical stories in Hermés store windows around the world, besides becoming subjects of art exhibitions. In the window of Hermes' Hong Kong airport store, a little red heart was once installed between two very

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