

Leather artisans apply modern flair and perfection

PARIS

Traditional craftsmanship is used to create custom, sensuous luxury goods

BY NAZANIN LANKARANI

For their distinctive appearance and luxurious feel, leather and exotic skins have an enduring appeal.

A new generation of designers is working with these traditional materials — and applying traditional skills — to create contemporary masterpieces. Some of the results can be seen in December in the Parisian concept store Colette, on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Hippolyte.

"My idea was to handpick a group of young and independent talents with exceptional know-how, to show that luxury is about singularity not standardization," said Thomas Erber, a veteran luxury expert and trend consultant, who conceived the "Cabinet de Curiosités" show, a modern version of an old concept.

Known for their fresh approach to leather craftsmanship, the French duo of Benjamin Caron and Isabelle Guédon, partners in a company called Deuce, are among the 36 artists featured in Mr. Erber's show.

Deuce specializes in handmade chess, checkers, domino and backgammon boards fashioned from the thick leather used for shoe soles, often paired with ebony wood, and updated with features like touch-sensitive screens and magnetic dice.

The craftsmanship remains traditional, the feel sensuous, but the products are contemporary in their sleek, minimalist appearance.

"We are a mix between an 18th-century leather maker and Bang & Olufsen," Mr. Caron said. "Those who buy our products are aesthetes who play games in a nobler manner."

Mr. Caron, 40, started his career as a boot maker, having first learned the trade as a hobby.

Formally trained at the Ateliers de la Mode in Paris, Mr. Caron spent the 1990s making prototypes for some of the high-end luxury shoemakers in Paris. But he had no desire to remain in shoe manufacturing.

"My first game was a leather backgammon I made for myself, black with red checkers, with the same finishing done in boot making," Mr. Caron said. "I showed the piece in a trade show along with my boots. It was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York."

With a range of prototypes available in their Paris showroom, Deuce caters mostly to private clients looking for custom-made boards.



"The starting point is usually a wooden structure covered with leather," said Ms. Guédon, 35, a graduate of the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, who came to Deuce from a fashion background. "People who see our product for the first time cannot understand how leather could be worked with such precision by hand."

Although Deuce pieces seem effortless in their clean, linear design, their simplicity is unforgiving when it comes to finishing.

"Our pieces must be perfect, otherwise you only see the defects," Mr. Caron said. "Our prices are justified by that



Top, Benjamin Caron and Isabelle Guédon in their workshop. Some of their products, like the chess set, in stained and lacquered rose-wood, leather and chondrian-silver, left, will be shown in December in the Parisian concept store Colette. Above, an alligator bag with insect brooch, by Peter Nitz.

perfection and the tremendously nerve-racking effort to achieve it."

All pieces are made-to-measure and priced from \$5,000 to \$50,000, or about \$6,800 to about \$68,000.

Peter Nitz is another designer featured in the Cabinet de Curiosités who uses traditional technique to make contemporary objects. His handmade matte crocodile briefcase in the show is an example of how he applies the principles of traditional saddle making to handbags in exotic skins.

"The traditional term for what I do is 'saddles' because the techniques I use are those of saddle making," Mr. Nitz said in a telephone interview.

The case is designed to carry a laptop computer or an iPad and is priced at €14,275.

"Everything is made by me, by hand," Mr. Nitz said. "There is no machine stitching, just traditional workmanship."

Mr. Nitz, 35, who was born in Greenville, South Carolina, now lives and works in Zurich. He first channeled his creativity into making jewelry, clothing, ceramics and furniture inspired by handcrafted pieces he found in flea markets and antiques fairs.

A chance meeting three years ago with a retired craftsman trained in the ateliers of the luxury house Hermès, itself originally a harness maker, ignited a passion for leather and exotic skins.

"My teacher had spent a lifetime making Kelly and Birkin handbags for Hermès," Mr. Nitz said. "I wanted to learn the craft seriously, not as a hobby. This was a chance to learn from the best."

Through one-on-one private lessons, Mr. Nitz learned the secrets of the craft and started his own label of made-to-order handbags last year, many of which are embellished with a vintage jewel.

"I look for vintage pieces by Fabergé, Van Cleef or Cartier in auctions," he said. "In small antique shops, I find unmarked jewelry with very intricate workmanship."

A taste for vintage was imprinted in Mr. Nitz's mind by his parents, who were antiques dealers. He likes to combine the old with the new, giving a second life to an old object.

"I use a lot of vintage 'insect' Victorian brooches from the 1840s," he said. "They are extremely well made and the craftsmanship is visible in the detail, something you don't see much in contemporary jewelry."

Mr. Nitz says his exotic-skin evening bags start at \$2,400, while those adorned with jewels range from \$9,000 to \$30,000. Because he makes each piece himself, creating a collection is, for now, a distant dream.

"I have designed entire collections in my mind," he said.