

# Le Monde d'Hermès

SPRING-SUMMER 2020

N°76

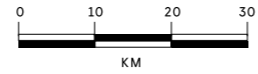
PART. 1



# PARIS

SADDLE UP!

BY PATRICK BOUCHERON\*

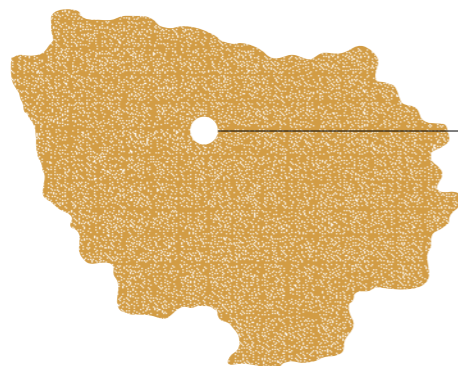


48°51'12.2" N 2°20'55.7" E

In 1837, Thierry Hermès opened his first workshop, originally making harnesses and later saddles, on the rue Basse-du-Rempart, not far from the church of La Madeleine in Paris. At that same moment, the painter Louis Daguerre, improving on an invention by the engineer Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, found a way to record the image from a camera obscura on a silver-coated plate. Using hot water saturated with sea salts to fix the imprint of light, Daguerre succeeded in briefly arresting time: the daguerreotype was born. Two years later, the astronomer and politician François Arago solemnly invited the House of Deputies to offer this French innovation to the world, revolutionizing the representation of all things.

Let's examine, for example, this daguerreotype taken that same year, 1839, from the

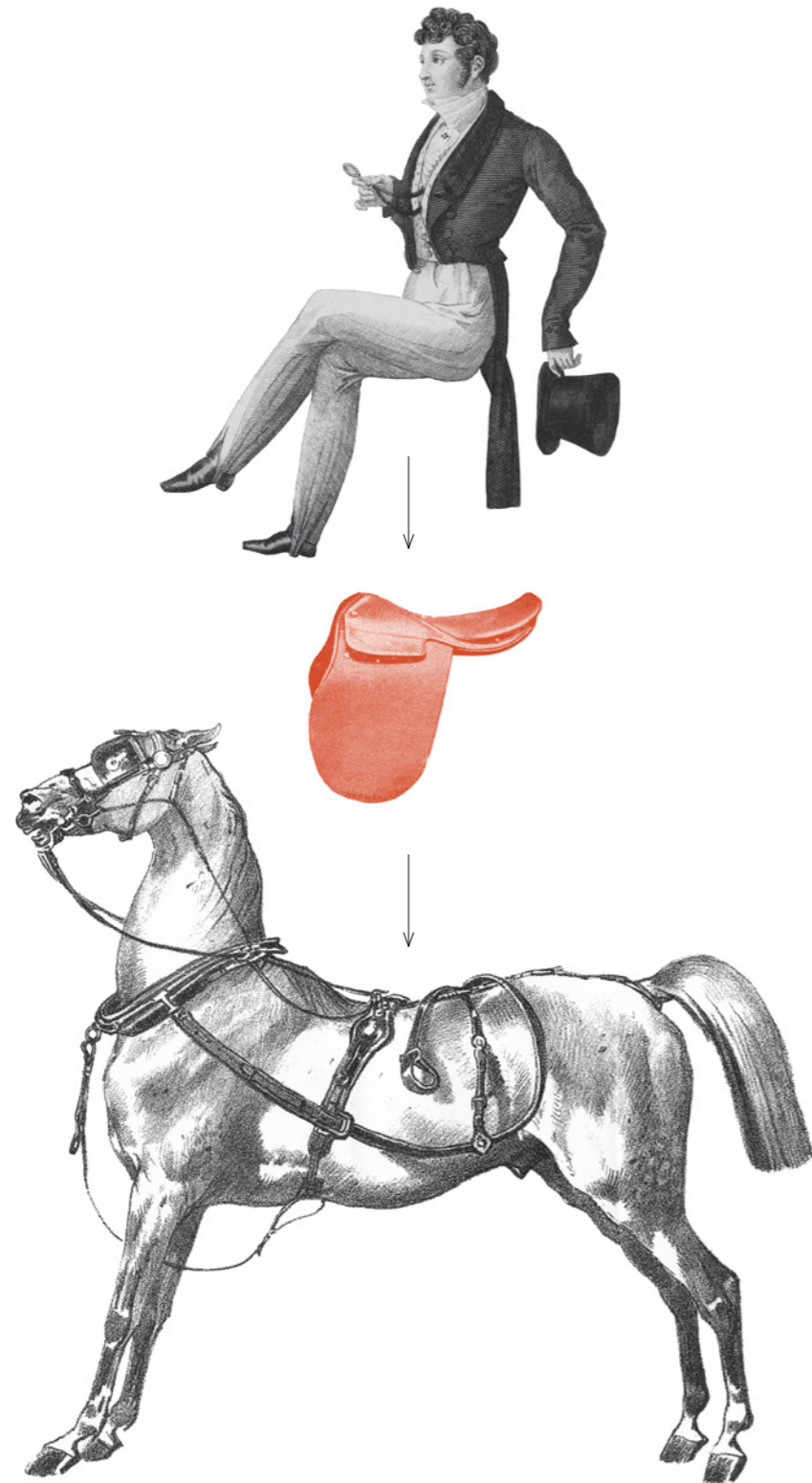
window of Daguerre's workshop on the rue des Marais. Daguerre has photographed the bend at the start of the boulevard du Temple. The city appears deserted, because the shutter's pause time was so long that "objects moving are not impressed", as an expert on speed, the inventor of the telegraph Samuel F. B. Morse, wrote in



PARIS

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"It is not enough for the saddle to sit true on the horse, it must also suit the rider." Jacques de Solleysel, 1664

Gift of the M. A. Ghering-van Ierland Collection

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the *New-York Observer*.<sup>1</sup> Only the buildings remain visible, stubbornly occupying their space, indifferent to the human commotion. The carts, horses and foot traffic travelling the still-gleaming pavement on that Paris morning were moving through too quickly to *pause* on the photographic plate. But taking a closer look, we can see one man. He is standing in silhouette towards the bottom of the photograph, leaning forward, a dark, frail figure under a hat. One of his legs is raised. He appears to be having his shoes shined, which is why he stopped on the street, and why we can still see him today. He is thought to be the first person ever photographed.

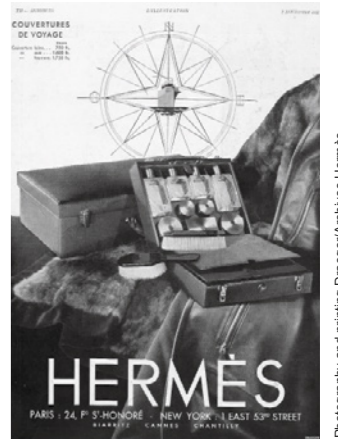
Bustling with activity, the city of the 1830s was "a boiling bubble inside a pot", and photographic technique had not yet learned to capture it. Here is Robert Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*: "Cities, like people, can be recognized by their walk ... [They are] made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests."<sup>2</sup> At the time Musil was writing, one hundred years on, the hurly-burly of Paris was starting to turn into mechanical congestion. But the city still kept its animal nature: Paris had two horses for every one hundred inhabitants, and the history of leatherwork and saddlery was continuing its course – at a trot, at a gallop. Horses had *impressed* themselves on the modern city.

Photography has its inventors, even if they quarrel among themselves for priority. But who invented the saddle? A "Dictionary of Inventions", also published in 1837, wanders off into a maze of conjectures: "The origin of the saddle is uncertain. Its invention is attributed to the Salians, an ancient Frankish people, from whose name the Latin word for saddle, *sella*, may be derived. The ancient Romans are known with certainty to have had neither saddles nor stirrups."<sup>3</sup> Maybe not the ancient Romans, but on the far side of the world, in Japan, the art of horsemanship was evolving, and

by the fifth century the Japanese were using lacquered wooden saddles and bronze stirrups. The earliest harness is likely to have appeared in Central Asia, with a leather or cloth seat structured by a saddle tree and conforming to the curve of a horse's back. There, in the heart of an area crisscrossed by what are called, though erroneously, the "Silk Roads", anthropologists tell us that, raising horses and developing an equestrian culture, a people became masters of distance, connecting far-flung worlds scattered like archipelagos.

If the bestiaries of the Middle Ages make no mention of horses, it's because they were not quite considered animals. They were man's privileged partner in the great adventure of opening up new worlds. From the trade routes to the pilgrim roads, from the clashing of armies to the sweet talk of commerce, from the excitement of voyages to the routine of daily walks, wherever and whenever movement and innovation were called for, humanity turned to equestrian culture. The encounter was so intimate that it gave rise to an imagined hybrid, that joyous and powerful chimera, the centaur. Man and horse, their forces joined. That's why the saddle is perhaps the first connected object, one that binds together and launches forth, enlarging the world and setting it in motion.

What if we set off towards them? What if we explored this atlas of connected objects, striding out or taking measured steps, just as you choose? But let's be clear about connected objects. These are not meant in the digital sense, which leads, by the excitement of the immaterial, to a world where we no longer connect to anything but our own solitude. By connected objects, we mean the very opposite: a certain quality of slowness, of distance and of desire, by which we do something fresh, something our own, creating communities of objects that enlarge the beauty of the world. It has to be as soft as silk, as supple as leather, as strong as a horse. How can we not see that the saddle is the connected object



Advertisement for travel items, 1931

Photography and printing: Draeger/Archives Hermès

1. "Samuel F. B. Morse visits with Daguerre, March 9, 1839", *New-York Observer*, April 20, 1839.

2. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, translated from the German by Sophie Wilkins, edited by Burton Pike, New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

3. Noël, François, L. J. M. Carpentier and Louis Puissant, *Dictionnaire des inventions, des origines et des découvertes, dans les arts, les sciences, la géographie, l'histoire, l'agriculture, le commerce, etc.*, 4th edition, Brussels: Méline, Cans et Compagnie, 1837.



*Le Boulevard [sic] du Temple et le Boulevard de la Madeleine.* Fold-out plates from the album *Les Boulevards de Paris* published by Lemercier in Paris, circa 1850. Lithograph heightened with watercolour, after drawings by Paul Lancel.

*par excellence?* Jacques de Solleysel said as much in 1664 in his “The Perfect Marshal, with Instruction on the Beauty, Goodness and Faults of Horses”.<sup>4</sup> He wrote that the saddle must be well fitted so as to “carry everywhere” without causing injury, and that “It is not enough for the saddle to sit true on the horse, it must also suit the rider.”

Hand stitching. Or rather, “saddle stitching”, with a needle at either end of a single thread, by way of trademark. Not an invention, but the stubborn, relentless and patient carrying forward of a continuous innovation. It is this history of adjustments that we are being invited to explore. The atlas of connected objects doesn’t join the great cavalcade of these hard-faced times,

goaded by a blindly technical understanding of innovation. Easy in the saddle, staying balanced while in motion – having what riders call “seat”.

Two pictures suggest themselves: the image of the world before the great social innovation of technical thinking known as Taylorism; and the image of the world afterwards, but putting its faith in those who mould it with their own hands, and who express it with their own words. In that world, if the past has a future, it’s not because it fetishizes tradition, but on the contrary because it knows how to stay in motion. Pauses become more pleasant, supple, lively. And look – in photographs, people are reappearing.

4. Jacques de Solleysel, *Le Parfait Maréchal qui enseigne à connaître la beauté, la bonté et les défauts des chevaux* (Paris: 1664).



Henri d'Origny in the Hermès store at 24, rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré, 2008

