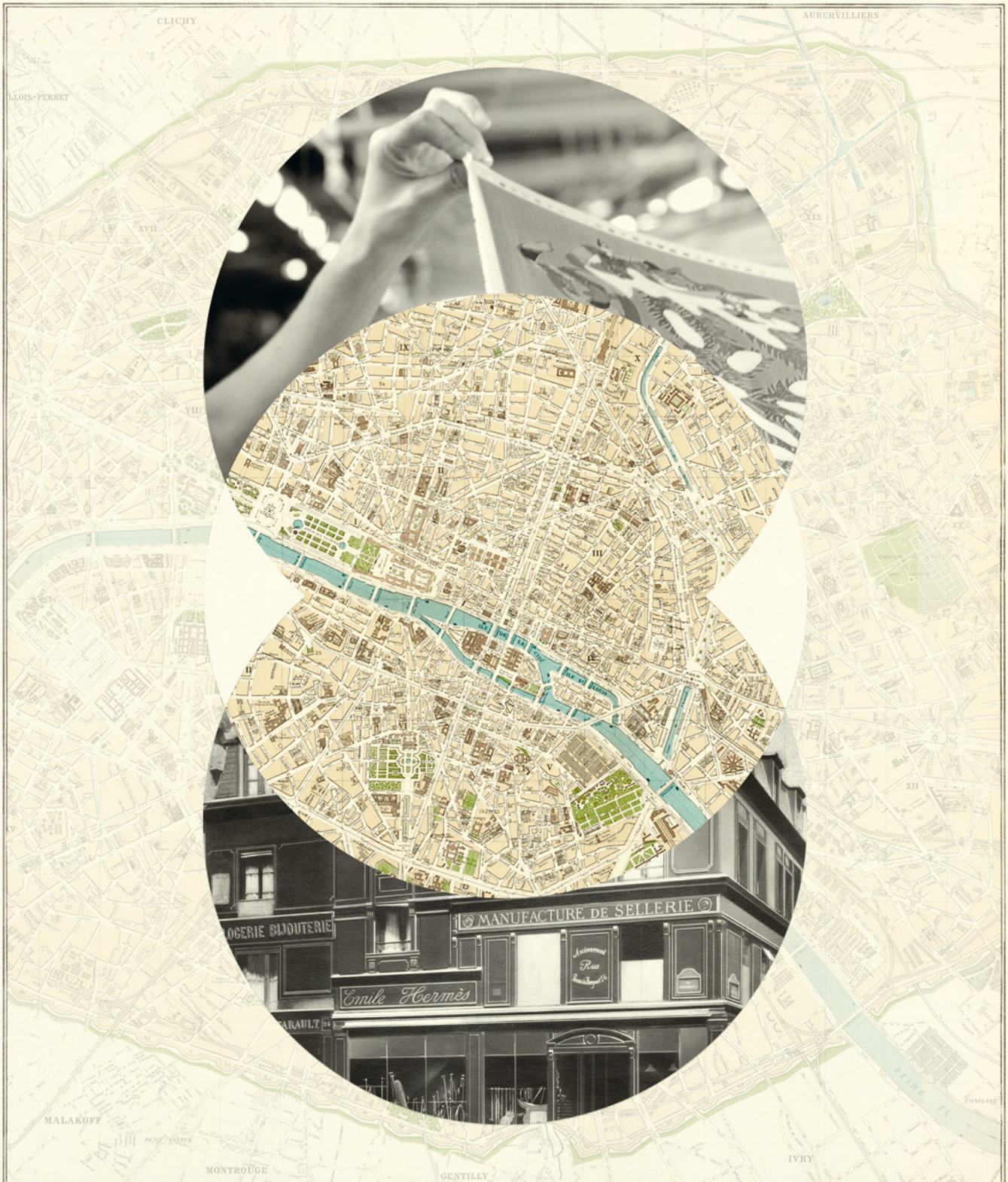


Le Monde d'Hermès

SPRING-SUMMER 2020

N°76

PART. 5



FOURTH PLANET IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM

MARS

DIARY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST IN THE FUTURE

BY PATRICK BOUCHERON

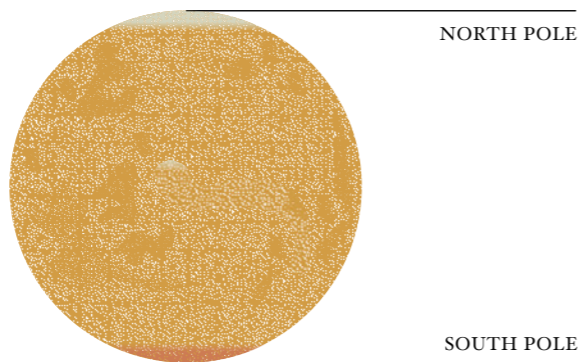


I've never believed the stories told about our earlier life. About the time when we lived so crowded together, in such great numbers, on the solar system's third planet. That hot ball, surrounded by unbreathable gases and racked for millennia past by violent storms – it's hard to believe that so inhospitable a place was ever called Earth. They say it was the cradle of humanity, but what do we really know about life there before the Major Transshipment, now some 40,000 years ago?

Like everyone, I've read the great epics of ancient times, from Gilgamesh to those of the last Earth humans. I've learned to shudder and obey, memorizing the lamentations from the Great Flood that followed on the heels of the Major Warming. It's a lesson we were taught thoroughly, and I know every part of it: how profligate we were, how egotistical, ignorant and unjust. We thought we were chomping on the fruit of prosperity and knowledge,

when in fact we were biting the milk-filled breast of our Mother. She chased us from paradise, even as it turned into a living hell. From this misadventure, we learned to live slowly, naked and in poverty. Now we listen to our doomsayers.

I know all that, but it isn't enough. Something about that story doesn't ring true, and a lot of us on Mars have not been satisfied with the scant shreds of our past brought here when, in the wake of



The shoe was made with such commanding artistry that we came to believe that human society must have harboured this knowledge for several centuries.

catastrophe, we were forced to leave Earth behind, along with most of our memories. Because we know what happened to the billions of files that had been uploaded to the Cloud and that were supposed to preserve mankind's memory intact. The cosmic storm triggered by Venus's explosion destroyed them almost completely, except for a ragged flotsam of texts and images that are for the most part indecipherable. Our scientists still pore over Earth's surface, but the scattered remains of human activity are now incomprehensible to us.

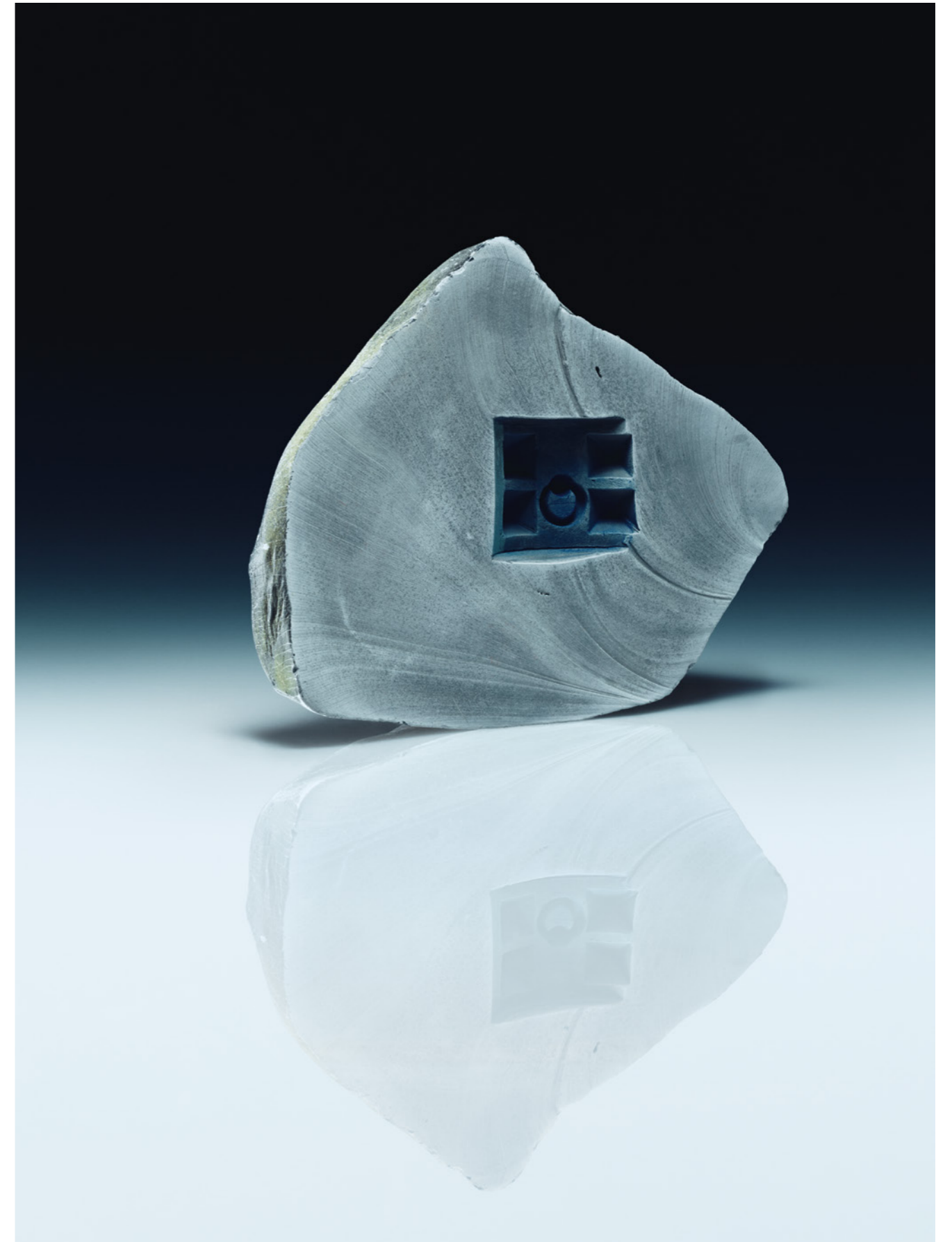
For instance, what was the purpose of those giant structures, either circular or oblong, in which many thousands of humans – some say up to 100,000, but that seems excessive – would gather to shout and sing (as we know from fragmentary sound recordings) in front of a few individuals who would gesticulate in their midst, apparently in a state of trance? Since a large number of these buildings are found scattered across Earth, all of them practically identical, they are generally thought to be the main temples of a global religion. But what were its beliefs, its observances, its founding texts? No one knows. An inscription has been found on one of them: *stadium*. The word seems to be derived from a very ancient language and to mean simply “to stand”. Not much information there.

So when the first space expeditions were formed to revisit Earth and harvest some of the smaller artefacts, I was intrigued and decided to participate. The plan was a simple one. We would take our cue from the methods that the Earth humans had used to explore their own ancient past. These were known to us because, among the various fragments of text that had survived the disintegration of the Cloud, one – it happened to be the longest, at fifteen pages – was entitled *Report on the Further Archaeological Excavations of the Upper Terrace of the Teotihuacan Pyramid by the Team Led by Professor* [the text breaks off here]. What they called “archaeology”

seems to have meant interpreting time's imprint on matter. It basically consisted of gathering the objects that some exceptional circumstance had saved from destruction (because they were caught in a mudslide, for example, or wedged in a sand pit in the dunes, or swallowed by deep waters and thus protected from the insane temperatures that eventually blanketed Earth) and figuring out not only how they had come into our hands but what they might say about ancient times.

The trip was long and uncomfortable. That's always the way with space travel. They promise you luxury, peace and pleasure, but after a few months of flight the constant proximity to others becomes unbearable, and also you get bored. I'd forgotten why I'd ever signed on for such torture, and my cabin mates felt the same. We were never convinced by the stories they told us. Sure, man's time on Earth was a time of unbelievable excess, and humanity paid a steep price for it. But history can't always be lecturing us, especially when it rests on such a slender basis of fact. You had to go there and see. Get closer, even to have a chance of understanding. Had there never been on Earth some glimmers of intelligence, courage, beauty? Would it not be possible to find some trace there of a few happy days, a few moments of contented respite suggesting peaceful life?

This is what had brought us all this distance, to such hostile terrain: the desire to see what men were capable of. But time is short, and I can feel your impatience. I'll spare you the details of our further hardships, our safety protocols, and the technical difficulties we faced. Eventually, we got down to work. We'd chosen one of the few areas in the Northern Hemisphere that hadn't been submerged, thanks to a large-scale seismic upthrust, accompanied by lava flows that fossilized many of its buildings. The one uncovered by our archaeological dig was a kind of giant stadium, but without any bleacher seats, and located not far from



What was this object for? Are we to believe that in those days the great shamans faced off according to colour, the blues against the reds?



In this object made of leather and stainless steel we discovered tiny shards of computer information that had been miraculously preserved.



The form of the object evokes the writing of the ancient alphabet still in use in certain regions of the globe two millennia ago.

several large vehicles with metal wings. There were people back on Mars who said that, right at the end of the old civilization, men had mastered the art of manned flight, but these are just fanciful hypotheses. In any case, the epigraphy didn't help much. There was an inscription: "Vancouver Airport, Concourse B, Duty Free", but it taught us little. On the other hand, all our chronological dating techniques were in agreement: the building under excavation had been built not long before the Major Transshipment, at the very beginning of the third millennium of the Age of Earth.

A votive chamber? A tomb? A throne room? There was no way to know the exact

function of this room where our archaeologists were working in the big palace we called the "pseudo-stadium". Once again, the inscriptions offered little insight: Hermès Store. Was it the name of a god? A tutelary hero? There was no way to decide, since the language remained completely impenetrable to us. In any case, the room was chock-full of objects, which we found hard to free from the mineral crust encasing them. The first of them bowled us over. It was footwear, deep red in colour, made of an astonishing material. It was supple, vibrant and, I'm almost tempted to say, alive. It seems a little crazy, but when you touched it you had the sensation of being in

contact with a very ancient power, almost archaic, yet extremely delicate – like those big animals painted by humans in their caves, at some time prior to the period that interested us. Our impressions were confirmed by the spectrographic analyses we performed in situ, and which we checked over and over because of the unexpected result. The “shoe” (to give this pedal sheath its correct archaeological designation) was made from animal hide, we’ll call it *leather*, but with such commanding artistry that we came to believe that a human society capable of such extraordinary delicacy must have harboured this knowledge for several centuries at least. Was Earth less crude than we had been led to believe? Had the men who lived there 40,000 years ago progressed beyond pillaging their resources in a succession of industrial disasters whose sorry litany we’d learned in school on Mars? If true, these humans would have had an unsuspected capacity for patience, solidarity, and hard work. A world was opening up before our eyes, but its social logic eluded us. This item of clothing was clearly intended for a queen, but why was it found next to this blue aluminium bracelet, which could easily be imagined belonging to a slave? We debated the question. Some noted that its little ornamental ring could never be used to shackle anyone; others interpreted its four miniature pyramids in relation to the *Report on the Further Archaeological Excavations of the Upper Terrace of the Teotihuacan Pyramid*, which I’ll remind you was our only guide. Did this kind of object perform a military or a religious function? Are we to believe that the great shamans that people flocked to admire in the *stadiums* faced off according to colour, the blues against the reds? Hypotheses were plentiful, but in truth we knew nothing.

We had found two objects, separate but connected. Many things separated them: one was made of leather, the other of aluminium, one was sewn and the other cast

apparently all at once. The first was animal in nature, while the second was abstract; one harked back to telluric forces from a very ancient past, while the other seemed almost to come towards us, as though it would be natural to wear it, even today, on one’s wrist. Yet they were connected by a shared archaeological context. We had to imagine a civilization where these two objects existed contemporaneously. How was that possible? We’d been taught to classify the ages of humanity according to their material technologies. There had been a time of stone, then one of bronze, and finally of iron. But right before the Major Transshipment, had it been the age of leather or of aluminium?

We were arguing over this question when, on the last day, we discovered the ultimate object. It was made of leather and stainless steel. It also seemed meant to be worn on the wrist, but analysis showed that it contained infinitesimal traces of digital information. Most of the data was garbled, but our engineers managed to extract a few morsels, from which we learned that on Thursday, January 16, 2020, at 2pm, a human, at or near Earth’s surface, had a rendezvous with Susan, that he was listening to *Kind of Blue*¹ by Miles Davis, that he had walked fast, that the sun was shining feebly, and that his heart was pulsing at a rate of eighty-three beats per minute.

It was time to return home. What had I learned beyond the things my mother told me at bedtime, the horrifying stories of the former world, this Earth that humans had inhabited so poorly, contemptuous of its beauties? Almost nothing, really. I’d learned that it hadn’t come down, everywhere and for all, to a frantic race towards catastrophe, but that there had been, in many parts of the world, careful and deliberate people who read, worked, loved and spoke to each other, and that they did all this with objects that connected them and gave them peace. Almost nothing, as I say. A tear in the fabric of time. A minute on Earth.

1. Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*, Columbia Records, 1959.



It is clear that women in those days adorned themselves with incredibly complex forms that seem to have come from times even more remote.

