

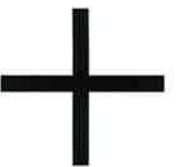
# WISH

MAY/JUNE 2020



## BATTLING THE VIRUS


How luxury is stepping up  
to help fight COVID-19



**FOUR PILLARS GIN**  
**STUDIO KO**  
**INDIA GLAMPING**

THE AUSTRALIAN





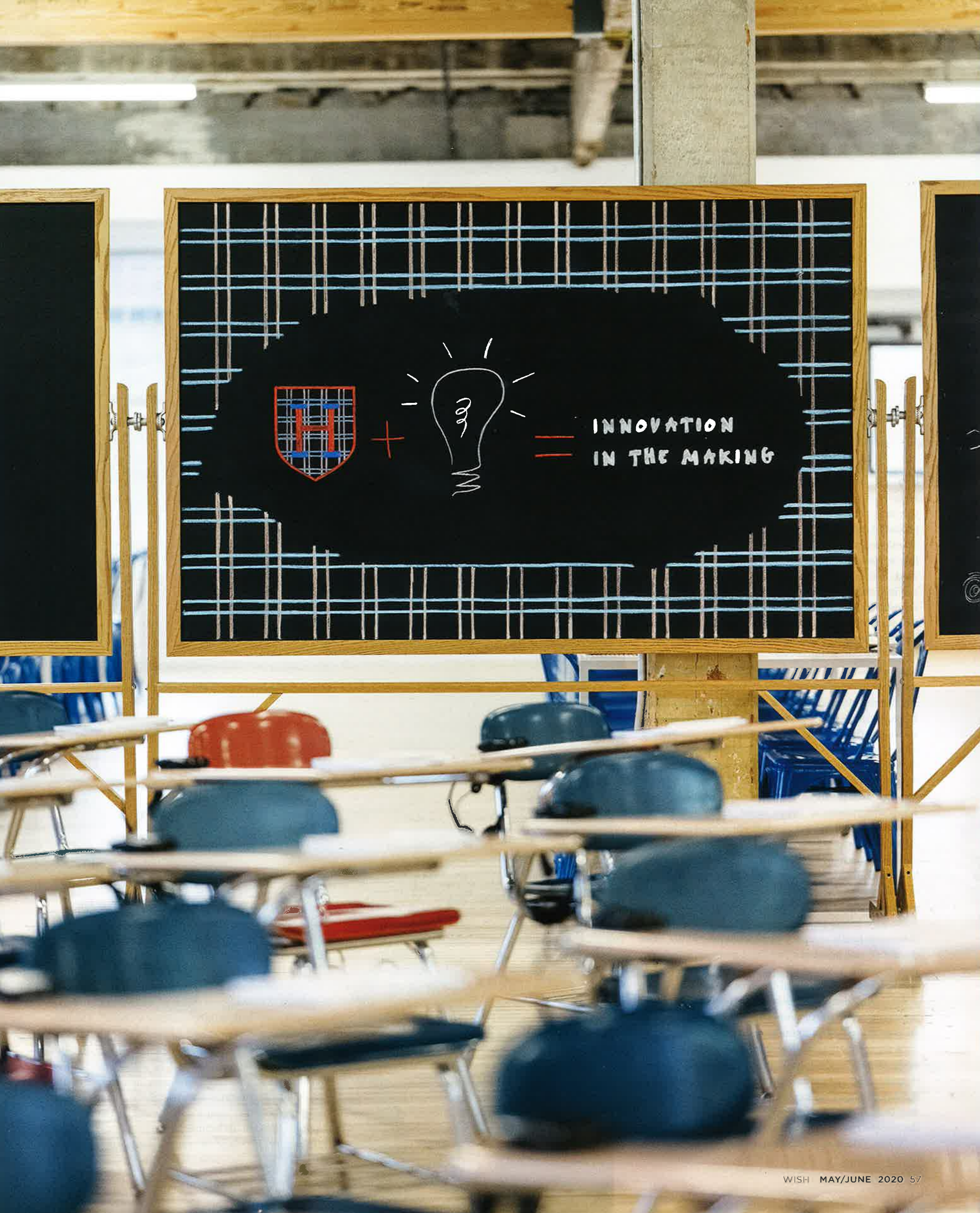
When Hermès brought together some of the world's best minds to explore the concept of innovation, the timing could not have been more prescient

# THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

STORY DAVID MEAGHER

OLIVER HADLEE PEARCE; CAROL SACHS









Each year since 1987, the French luxury goods company Hermès has declared an annual theme for the brand that runs through all of its *métiers* (the producers of its products), as well as its advertising and communications. The theme is decided by the company's creative director, Pierre-Alexis Dumas, and presented to the designers more than two years in advance to give them the time to find their inspiration. Whether it's perfume, silk, accessories, homewares, watches, ready-to-wear or, as of this year, beauty and makeup, the idea is to have all the company's creatives singing from the same song sheet.

Each of the entities at Hermès has its own design and commercial teams, know-how, suppliers and unique crafts, and according to Dumas, he doesn't expect the designers who form his team to illustrate the theme in a literal way. He says it's more of a guiding principle and that he just wants people to think about it. "They can integrate it or not, but I know that it allows them to go back to the drawing table and to think about Hermès and what they are going to produce from that particular angle," he says.

Some years the theme is quite explicit, such as in 1997, which was the year of Africa, or in 1996, which was all about music. And in other years the theme is a little more *recherché*: in 2016 it was "Nature at Full Gallop" and this year it's "Innovation in the Making". Even Dumas admits that a topic such as innovation is a wide-ranging one and can be understood in many different ways. Which, he says, is precisely the point.

So why, in the 183-year history of Hermès, a sixth-generation family company considered one of the most innovative and successful in the luxury industry, did Dumas choose 2020, of all years, to finally celebrate the spirit of human ingenuity?

"It's a new decade and I thought it was time for a new paradigm, and maybe it is time for us to rethink what we do, even if it is just to do the same," he says.

"I think it is time to give the example of what good design should be. And this is a time for us to think about that, all of us – not only at Hermès. So, with a new decade, it dawned on me that it's the time to wake up and not just take things for granted. Every day the news teaches us that we can't take anything for granted."

When WISH met with Dumas in early February in



New York City, the Coronavirus outbreak was still largely confined to Asia. Despite the disease spreading outside of China, the state of the world today with lockdowns in every country still seemed the stuff of Hollywood movies. With the benefit of hindsight, Dumas's comments about not taking anything for granted seem especially prescient.

At the beginning of each year, to launch its theme, Hermès invites a select group of press, employees, and creative collaborators such as filmmakers, artists and photographers to a day-long event to set the scene. This year it took place on New York's Governors Island. A 69ha outpost off the southern tip of Manhattan, nestled between Lower Manhattan and the Brooklyn waterfront, it's a former US Army base that has been turned into a public park, arts centre and high school.

The day's itinerary was kept secret until after attendees were collected from their hotel in a traditional yellow school bus – a clue – followed by a short ride by public ferry to the island (along with a group of schoolchildren who attend the high school there). As we disembarked, we were greeted by a marching band playing outside an institutional-looking building that had been renamed "Hermès University" for the day. In fact, the building is a part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Art

Center – an incubator for creative exploration. And just as at university, there was a timetable of lectures written on chalkboards.

The day's events included a meditation on coincidence from the French philosopher François Jullien, one of the most translated contemporary thinkers in the world and the author of *The Silent Transformations: This Strange Idea of Beautiful* and *The Philosophy of Living*, among others. Dumas has regularly invited a *philosophe* to deliver a discourse on the meaning of the annual theme when he unveils it to his creative directors – despite being a global brand Hermès is still a very French company in spirit.

Jullien spoke in French for 40 minutes, and when he turned to the subject *du jour* he said that "nothing is more suspicious than this great theme of innovation", and that "nowadays, we look at innovation as a rescue". He then delved into the importance of grounding innovation in tradition, something his hosts know a lot about. But his primary focus was on what he called coincidence/de-coincidence and adaptation/ex-adaptation, and the boredom of perfection, with just the right amount of "do you follow me?" and a cursory look at the audience peppered through his lecture.

Then for a change of pace, it was over to Peggy





The event took place on New York's Governors Island, where a marching band (opposite) greeted attendees outside 'Hermès University'



Whitson – a genuine high flyer. Whitson grew up on a farm in Iowa, became a biochemistry researcher and eventually rose to the position of chief astronaut at NASA. She was the first woman to command the International Space Station (in 2008 and 2013), has spent a total of 665 days in space and holds the record for the most spacewalks completed by a female – more than 60 hours. Whitson's engaging presentation made it seem like walking in space is no big deal, until she talked about the complexity that goes into something seemingly as simple as a glove, and how it is made so astronauts can move their hands with dexterity while on a spacewalk. The intricacy of the design of a glove was contrasted with the prosaic nature of some of the work she completed while in the Space Station, such as cleaning up a toilet spill.

"The important thing about innovation is to look at things from different perspectives," Whitson said, before she told the story of how she and her team once had to repair the Space Station's vast, lightweight, accordion-folded solar panel, which ripped while being removed from its case. No one could figure out how to repair it, she said. Eventually an engineer on the ground at NASA decided the panels could be re-attached to their frame with cufflinks – which meant Whitson and her team had to figure out how to fashion cufflinks from the materials they had on hand. The former farm girl recalled her father's maxim: "You can fix almost anything with Number 9 wire and a pair of pliers." Not rocket science, but crisis averted.

Other presenters on the day included Ian Tattersall, a British-American paleoanthropologist and curator emeritus at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. He gave a brief history of the evolution of the primate hand from being at first long, slender and excellent at gripping (about 3 million years ago), to a broader hand with greater dexterity. Combined with the brain developing advanced cognitive skills, this made hominids capable of making and using tools, he said. Tattersall called them the first craftsmen, deftly making the link with Hermès, although what they produced was all about pragmatism rather than creating objects of beauty for the sake of it.





After lunch, the Igbo-Nigerian American choreographer, performer, artist and writer Okwui Okpokwasili greeted “students” as they filed back into the lecture hall with a performance that appeared to have already been in progress: with Okpokwasili moving slowly and purposefully in her chair on the stage and ultimately morphing into powerful singing. She then settled in for a conversation with Lili Chopra, executive director of artistic programs at the LMCC. Okpokwasili spoke about slowing down – literally. She organises what she calls “slow walks” with other performers, whereby they start as a group at one end of a room and walk as slowly as possibly to the other side. “There’s a tension between what it is to be yourself, but also to walk as slowly as the slowest person in the room,” she said. Okpokwasili said that her slow walks are about slowing down time. “Slowing down is a way for me to innovate,” she said.

But perhaps the most famous innovator of the day – one of the pre-eminent innovators of the 20th century, in fact – was saved for last. Jony Ive, the former chief design officer at Apple and the designer of the iPhone, iMac, iPad and Apple Watch, to name just a handful of the world-changing products he has been responsible for at Apple – has been friends with Pierre-Alexis Dumas for about 15 years. Ive joined Apple in 1992 and stepped down from his position last year to establish his own design agency, LoveFrom, with the Australian-born industrial designer Marc Newson (however Ive will continue to work with Apple on product design).

Dumas and Ive collaborated on a special Hermès iteration of the Apple Watch in 2015, and a design problem between what Hermès proposed for the watch and what Apple could actually make work was one of the issues they talked about in their joint presentation.

Dumas said that when they first started working on the Hermès straps for the special edition of the Apple Watch, he wanted to be able to include a version of the brand’s famous “double tour” strap design, which wraps twice around the wrist. The problem Apple’s engineers had was that the second turn of the leather had a tendency to slide under the watch case, thereby rendering its sensors, which need direct contact with the wearer’s skin, ineffective. Dumas was disappointed, but persevered.

One of Hermès’ craftspeople eventually came up with the idea of adapting a technique normally used to reinforce the handle of a handbag to keep its shape. It worked; the tension in the strap prevented it from sliding under the sensors. “We sent it to California and received a message that the engineers could not understand why it worked,” Dumas recalled.



*Innovation isn't just about doing something new or different, it's about solving a real problem and making something better*

“I like that story because it creates a new space where technology and craft can somehow create a dialogue.”

For him, Ive said, innovation isn’t just about doing something new or different, it’s about solving a real problem and making something better.

Dumas opened his discussion with Ive by asking him why he called his new company LoveFrom. To explain it, Ive recalled a conversation he once had with the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs. According to Ive, Jobs told him that even though they won’t necessarily meet the people they make products for and learn their life stories, if they make things with love and care then it’s a way to “express our appreciation for the species, and I thought that was just glorious”.

Ive also discussed the value of failure in the design process. “I am much more interested in trying stuff and failing than being right,” he said. “I really don’t care when it goes the wrong way. In fact, I find a perverse sort of delight in it . . . By definition, if you’re innovating, there are going to be unforeseen consequences, some good, some poor. Either way, you must own responsibility for them.”

Pierre-Alexis Dumas is a sixth-generation Hermès scion who became the artistic director after his father, Jean-Louis, who ran both the creative and business sides of the company for 28 years, announced his retirement in 2005. Pierre-Alexis’s cousin, Axel, is now the CEO. The company is publicly held but still majority controlled by the Hermès family. Jean-Louis is the person most often associated with transforming Hermès from a predominantly French company into a global international luxury juggernaut with the introduction of new product lines and the opening of stores all over the world. Next month the brand is due to







The ferry to Governors Island, below. Hermès creative director Pierre-Alexis Dumas says the success of the event is not about a return on investment in the traditional sense

open its largest store in Australia, in Sydney's historic Trust Building. The store has been years in the planning and, when open, will be three times the size of the current Sydney flagship.

Earlier in the day, Pierre-Alexis told a story about the brand's long links to New York, which also served to illustrate the importance of owning your mistakes. Hermès decided to launch its theme for 2020 in New York, he said, because of its celebrated "spirit of innovation". But also because it is the site of a key lesson in the brand's history. "My grandfather [Robert Dumas] had the brilliant idea to open a store here in 1929. *Voilà*. We closed it in 1930." The anecdote elicited laughs from the crowd, as if to suggest no major brand would be that foolish today, or that nothing like the stock market crash of 1929 could ever happen again. It was another moment in the day that, in time, would prove to be eerily prophetic.

Hermès, which makes products that, while expensive, are built to last, appears to be weathering the current economic conditions better than expected. In April the company announced its first-quarter earnings, revealing that the Group's consolidated revenue amounted to €1,506 million in the three months to March 31, down by 6.5 per cent at current exchange rates. Before the announcement, however, some analysts estimated that the fall could be as much as 12 per cent. According to Bain & Co, Hermès has offered a picture of resilience amid the coronavirus pandemic, outperforming larger luxury rivals that have reported first quarter declines closer to 15 per cent. Axel Dumas said the second quarter would be hit hard by the global health emergency, given that 75 per cent of the group's stores were still shut at the time.

In its financial statement on April 24, Hermès said that it was its unique business model that would see it weather this unprecedented economic crisis and that it would continue to pursue its long-term development strategy.

"With pride in its artisanal model, in 2020 Hermès pays tribute to the extraordinary tool that is the human hand, as well as to the ingenuity that drives every one of the house's craftsmen and women," the statement said. "For it is this combination that characterises the innovative spirit of Hermès..."

What exactly was the point of bringing together in New York this diverse mix of speakers for a day to ruminate on the topic of innovation – with no clear return on investment (an oddity in today's globalised luxury industry)? The success of an event like this, says Dumas, is not about a return on investment in the traditional sense.

"As I was listening to [the speakers] this morning, I really got goosebumps, because I thought, wow this is working; there is something happening, which is exactly what I anticipated," says Dumas. "There was no way we could anticipate what the interaction of all these people would be. So when we invited an astronaut, when you invite a philosopher, or a choreographer, you are going to make the connection, and intelligence is going to emerge from the natural opening of the mind through the confrontation of ideas – and that is what I was hoping to create. So if you felt some of that, then it's been successful." (W)

