

A Hermès Watch for Any Gender

By Robin Swithinbank

March 20, 2019

What makes a watch a man's watch? Or a woman's?

Consider La Galop d'Hermès, a stirrup-shaped timepiece introduced at the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie in January. It's a feminine watch, according to Ini Archibong, the California-born designer who collaborated with the Parisian house on the piece, but it doesn't have "a gender per se."

"In the beginning of the research, there was a lot about looking at fashionable, powerful women who were moving fast in a determined way, going somewhere," said Mr. Archibong, 35. "But then we thought, 'What if there's a watch that has feminine energy but invites the man to embrace that?'"

Mr. Archibong, who is now based in Switzerland, was approached three years ago by Hermès to create "a new women's icon." "It was a lot of pressure," he said. "How do you even do that? You know what the iconic watches are, but you don't know what makes them that."

"It came down to an iconic silhouette," said Mr. Archibong, who consulted regularly during Le Galop's development with Philippe Delhotal, the design and development director of the house's watch division.

Mr. Archibong said he examined the Panerai Luminor, the Patek Philippe Nautilus, the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak, the TAG Heuer Monaco and the Rolex Oyster Perpetual — "traced them and made a black silhouette, removing the straps so it was just the case. Then I sat with Philippe and he just named them off, one by one. If you have an iconic case shape, then you'll be able to identify exactly what it is from far away."

He said that Hermès hadn't steered him toward its equine roots; he settled on the stirrup-shaped case himself after spending time at the house archives.

"Hermès was started upon the idea of creating a better harness for attaching the horse to the carriage," he said. "If you look at the logo, there's this negative space in the harness connecting to the horse. I started with that and realized that the brand's story was about hardware and about aerodynamics, speed, efficiency and travel."

He described spending six hours with the company historian on one occasion, learning how early Hermès designs were approached. "I saw all the stirrups that Emile Hermès collected, and that's when the stew started cooking," he said. "That's how I design — in my head. I just fill it up with stuff until something comes out, and when it comes out it's the whole thing, it's a whole idea."

Swithinbank, Robin. "A Hermès Watch for Any Gender," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

Mr. Archibong's parents, academics from Nigeria, had expected that he would follow in their footsteps, and he did study business before deciding to pursue a career in design. He is a graduate of the prestigious L'École Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne in Switzerland and spent several years working in Singapore, and his portfolio includes lighting fixtures and furniture for brands such as Sé, Formentera and Lapidica.



La Galop d'Hermès, designed by Mr. Archibong, is a stirrup-shaped timepiece that he said doesn't have "a gender per se."
Daniel Auf der Mauer for The New York Times

Designing a watch, however, came with a new set of challenges. "Moving down in scale means changing how drastic a movement is," Mr. Archibong said. "When you get down to a watch, you're drawing with your knuckles. If you're making a gesture that's bigger than what you can do with your knuckles, you've already done way too much."

Le Galop was made at 26 millimeters (an inch) in diameter and 40.8 millimeters tall — small for a man's watch but large for a woman's. The crown was tucked away at 6 o'clock, reducing the perception of size even further.

When it came to designing the two-layered dial, which Mr. Archibong described as the most challenging element, he said he was inspired by his obsession with cathedrals and their windows. The outer part of the dial was bead-blasted, a finish suggested by Mr. Delhotal that gives the watch's appearance much of its depth, and that Mr. Archibong admitted he had not known was possible when the process began. Mr. Archibong said he enjoyed that mentoring.

Swithinbank, Robin. "A Hermès Watch for Any Gender," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

“A lot of times, I got the feeling that Philippe was sending me on missions to make me keep trying, even though he knew what the thing to do was,” he said. “He was teaching me how to design a watch through the process of designing this watch.”

Much of La Galop’s personality is communicated through its Arabic numerals, which taper in size with the case. They were designed by Vincent Sauvaire, a young typographer who also graduated from the Lausanne school and previously worked with Vacheron Constantin.



Mr. Archibong said he wore the La Galop watch as an accessory, nestled between bracelets on his wrist.
Daniel Auf der Mauer for The New York Times

“The perspective of the numbers getting smaller is to keep that zoom feeling going and have everything flowing in a direction,” Mr. Archibong said.

At its introduction, La Galop was presented in either steel or rose gold, with a diamond-set option and a time-only battery-powered quartz movement. Prices start at \$3,650.

“The essence of the watch is in its simplicity and in that sense, it needs to tell the time,” Mr. Archibong said when asked if he would like the range to be extended. “What it offers to the wearer isn’t really about the mechanical part of it. It’s about purity and being a window into the house of Hermès.”

Swithinbank, Robin. “A Hermès Watch for Any Gender,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

Mr. Archibong, who was wearing a Slim d’Hermès watch during the interview, said he wore the Galop as one of a number of accessories on his wrist. “The size is perfect for being on the verge of large for a woman’s wrist so it’s a powerful statement, and then also large enough to be the size of a vintage watch on a man’s wrist,” he said.

“People describe a lot of my work as feminine,” he said. “What they actually see is a certain amount of delicacy in it, but there’s also strength. The interplay of delicacy and strength is what makes things have feminine energy.”

A version of this article appears in print on March 20, 2019 in The International New York Times

Swithinbank, Robin. “A Hermès Watch for Any Gender,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760