

START FROM CRAFTS

WHEN ENTREPRENEURS TAKE A STEP
BACK TO RE-CREATE SMALL-SCALE
COMPANIES

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Abstract

Old fashion system lays on a network made of family businesses, from prestigious tailors and bootmakers to modest clothing retouchers. In the global capital of fashion, Paris, they have been almost wiped out by the delocalisation along the 20th century. However, since its damages have been measured, there is a trend through young fashion entrepreneurs aiming the renewal of French fashion savoir-faire. Since 2019, I am studying some of these initiatives in the field of leatherwork (maroquinerie), and focusing from 2021 on one particular Paris brand : Laperruque. Working there both as an anthropologist and as a craftswoman, I have questioned the stakes of developing a small-scale company, limiting its growth, and identified the limits of such entrepreneurial initiative. Starting from scratch, with barely no investment fund, the two founders of Laperruque refer to traditional business model and not to start-ups, laying on financial speculation. However, the company is not just an unchanged reproduction of ancient familial businesses, since they also try to fix some of the contemporary working failings and the main fashion industry's issues. The following paper highlights the ideals constructed through the young craftsman-entrepreneurs' discourses and the negotiations necessary for their project to last.

Keywords: *Workshop, Leather, Entrepreneurship, Small-scale production, Fashion accessories*

INTRODUCTION

The international conference « Fashion Prosperity », which took place in February 2025, aimed at challenging the future of fashion through a new vision of prosperity. According to scholars' analysis and the testimony brought by professionals of its industry, fashion is hard-hit by several crises (social, ecological and financial). The awareness of its failures is strongly perceptible in the discourse of the sector players. Some of them attempt to escape its prevailing *modus operandi* by creating companies, renewing not only fashion items but also the philosophy of working and the corporate life. Such entrepreneurs raise an interesting paradox, by being a part of the fashion system while trying to find alternatives to its up-to-date

functioning. Among young brands' founders, I have had a long-standing interest in craftsmen applying ancient technics to manufacture fashion items in order to create long lasting pieces of accessories. As an anthropologist, I have investigated this trend alongside craftsmen-entrepreneurs in the leathersgoods' field. As a leather-craftswoman, I have experienced working in an independent brand's workshop, producing belts, handbags and functional accessories, which is at the core of my ethnographic survey and my PhD thesis (Barancourt, 2024). In that respect, this article is based on the anthropologists' traditional method – observing participation – and extended to autoethnographic materials. The methodology in question will be specified after introducing the

fieldwork-company.

Laperruque, based in Paris, offers an unusual layout for a French fashion brand founded in 2016: the designing, the manufacturing and the selling of the items take place in a single location, in the center of the French capital. It reminds some traditional types of trades characterised by the adjacency of the workshop and the shop - and even the dwelling (Sennett, 2010, 77) - such shops have almost disappeared from Paris streets. The causes of this depletion are most likely the combination of global factors such as the massive importation of fashion items from southern countries (Kurkdjian, 2021) which has disturbed short supply chains and local stakes, for instance the raise of lease payments in the city center. Not only reproducing an old fashion type of shop with its workshop in the basement, Laperruque also embodies the contemporary craftsmanship's evolution. Its two cofounders – Robin Hureau et Robin Nozay¹ - have met online in the 2010's, as they used to hold blogs about fashion crafts and menswear, which they finally overhauled in a single one (<https://redingote.fr/>). Hureau remembers : «We were interested in clothes, we said that we would write about it, almost by chance. It was the age of first blogs, back then, they were no blogs in France». With no formal training in the fashion field or the craftsmanship, they first enriched their cultures of these topics thanks to online resources. At a later date, they both decided to make a career out of their hobby, the first one by returning to school studying luxury management and the second one by getting a technical degree in leathercrafts. Then they decided to start their small-scale business together, in addition to their freelance jobs in sales of high-end fashion.

As their own company did not initially cover their basic necessities (covered by their freelancer missions), Hureau and Nozay have constructed an ideal of fashion business, partially departed from economic sustainability. It would be more accurate to say that they have established a projection behind the immediate need of returns. The following paper aims to question the viability of their ideal after celebrating the eighth birthday of their company, as their duo has now been joined by two trained craftswomen (including myself), an apprentice in the workshop and a sales manager in the shop.

¹ The two business partners have the same surname. Later, I will speak about each one only using its family name.

My ethnographic survey has allowed me to document several steps of the business growth. To collect the inquiry materials, I have been holding an ethnographic diary while working as a salary in the company since 2021. Moreover than constituting an autoethnographic testimony of the daily life in the company, this methodology is inspired by previous researchers questioning work in France. In that specific field of studies, the engagement of the observer is particularly noteworthy in the approach of french philosophers hired into factories in order to understand the working class from the inside (Weil, 2002 ; Linhart, 2003). In the 1990's in France - later than in anglosaxon countries – companies start to welcome academics, sometimes both as researchers and as employees (Sélim, 1993). Eventhough it has been strongly influenced by this tradition, my own study differs from the one of Monique Jeudy-Ballini, which has been asked to investigate in Louis Vuitton's factories (1991). As she has been trained for basic tasks on the lines and in the shops especially for her researcher's work, I had started to learn technical skills before my arrival in the company. During my time as an employee at Laperruque, I have written my ethnographic diary after working hours, and organised interviews with my colleagues. This article lays mainly on a tape-recorder discussion between Hureau, Nozay and me, dating from november 2022, on several excerpts from interviews with customers and on informal talks reported in my daily notes.

This survey is at the intersection between the fashion industry and the craftsmanship. It led the two business partners creating their brand to borrow from role models which are sometimes diametrically opposite. Their ambition for the quality of their products is to be as close as possible to items traditionally made by prestigious French ateliers - Hermès or Moynat for example - by using the same types of high-quality leathers. In the meantime, they turn down the strategy of seeming unreachable by maintaining a close relationship with their customers and by keeping prices as low as possible. Trying to conciliate such opposite purposes is only possible at some costs. First, the idealistic vision – which i called a « modern day crafty tale » - of Laperruque's founders will be exposed as it appears in the story-telling of the brand. Then, I will examine some compromises needed for the company to face an unfavourable economic context. At last, I will try to consider

the assets of short supply chains to overcome difficulties, in order to temper two fantasy images: the idealistic vision of a virtuous fashion and the pessimistic idea of its absolute impossibility.

MODERN DAY CRAFTY TALE TELLING THE LAUNCHING'S STORY

As I arrived in Laperruque's workshop in 2021, the data I had access to in order to document the prior hours of the company was the story told by my two employers, Hureau and Nozay. I heard the narrative of the company's launching many times, not only when I conducted research interviews with them but also when they told it to their customers. As I was also involved in running the shop, I sometimes had to rehearse it myself. Then, as I have analysed it through my anthropological research, I have noticed that it echoes other brands' founders involved in the renewal of made-in-France fashion items, such as resistant pantyhoses or reparable shoes. The strongest marketing argument is the willingness to undertow the global fashion system that creates trends making goods obsolete before they are worn-out (Erner, 2004). Its main dynamic is summarised by Roland Barthe's equation, when the rhythm of buying objects exceeds its wearing (1983, 299-300). Doing her ethnographic survey in a very similar context as mine, anthropologist Aurelia Gualdo testifies that the idea of putting an anticonsumerist ideal at the core of a brands' strategy is perceived by some fashion activists as a non-sense (2023, 141). However, according some fashion professionals from both her fieldwork and mine, it is the best (or the least worst) way for them to conciliate their ethic and their taste for fashion. I will first focus on the specificity of Hureau and Nozay's shared vision of how fashion goods should be consumed to improve the customers' satisfaction, also offering to the brand's team some significant fulfilment and a meaningful job.

Hureau and Nozay are on hand to pitch their own business. As they both have worked as salespersons and created some blogs about fashion in the 2010's, they have sharpened their expertise and their culture of fashion, especially the menswear and the workwear. Nozay says : « I spend a lot of time on the Net to find out about it, I had witnessed the birth of blogs, especially on menswear ». For example, he refers to the American website (<https://www.acontinuouslean.com/>) which offers many articles about footwear, clothes or accessories made in the USA according

to old-fashion savoir-faire. Later, for his own brand, old-established labels also serve as models, such as the British company Drake making ties and pocket squares. The story-telling of Laperruque rests on two mens launching their business from scratch, starting thanks to a crowdfunding campaign. In order to do so, they reused their professional skills into their personal project : creating long-lasting fashion items. Not counting their time and effort to accomplish something they strongly believed in, Hureau remembers : «We sold 300 pieces [...] Thanks to the crowdfunding, [we were able to] buy some tools, like the cutting tools, because before, everything was cut by hand. And... Later, the cutting press». In like manner, he hand-stitched every leather piece until affording an industrial sewing machine.

RECIPE FOR NEVER-OUTDATED ACCESSORIES

The motivation to create their own workshop came from Hureau and Nozay's personal affection for the pieces of cloth and accessories they wear, use and cherish. Mostly buying second-hand items, they are sensitive to the ageing of cloth and accessories. When they acquire some piece, they care for it to make it last and do not want to see it outdated by new ones. Laperruque's leather items are surviving short-time trends and aging nicely by two means. The first tool is a very pure design without superficial details and the second one is the application of traditional technics, ensuring its maintaining and reparation. According to the two business partners, every-day life objects, even the ones that are not necessarily meant to be seen, such as wallets and card-holders spending most of their lifetime in their owner's pockets, should be high-quality and long-lasting. As Hureau summarises: «we wanted to create objects for the everydaylife, but a nice everyday life». In addition to that hedonistic philosophy, they also attempt to make it affordable, by calculating low margins when they price their goods. Their vision has a political dimension that reminds the ideas of the British multitask artist, architect and writer William Morris. Along the 19th century, he expressed through his political career the importance of making high-quality artefacts for every social classes (Morris, 2010) and fought against the disasters of the industrial production in the merging consumerist society. He inspired some of the German Bauhaus founders (Midal, 2009). The founders of Laperruque do not mention Morris as a reference, but its founders

cite the Bauhaus school as a source of inspiration, both formal and intellectual. In more recent time, they are the inheritors of some communities sharing knowledge and technics through digital technologies, such as the makers in FabLabs. In the running of their workshop, they tend to combine their culture of the traditional crafts and some tools inherited from both the manufacturing industry and new technologies such as computational design and 3D printing. For example, they turn down the traditional hand-cutting of leather pieces and design custom-made tools (based on vectorial drawings) to dye-cut the objects of their catalog. Working mostly in series is a mean of keeping the items prices relatively low: it permits the compensation of the cutting-tools' cost. The pricing is calculated depending on the estimated duration of the work required, lowering when series are made instead of single pieces². That is why they do not develop novelties each season just like most of fashion brands do (creating at least two collections per year) and they re-edit constantly the same catalog. The running of the company leads us to its main paradox, which shows simultaneously the co-founders' success as craftsmen and their issues as the owners of an accessory brand in progress.

Designing an item at Laperruque includes the feed-back of the customers which allows the team to refine its process constantly. Nozay underlines how rare it is for a fashion brand to have such a long time to fine-tune its production: «we have almost seven years of feedbacks, we took almost all of them in consideration». Through the shop, located above the workshop where the items are made, the staff can directly measure the satisfaction of customers and identify their special needs. In addition to online sales, Laperruque's shop is a perfect monitoring center to evaluate the customers' contentment, and also a pedagogic tool to explain their unusual approach, re-engaging with the pre-capitalistic trade's form of the local shop. They seem to have achieved the goal of creating a place which is not only about selling accessories but sharing the story of their project: their shop in Paris became a place where customers show their trust in the brand, sometimes stopping by to chat and to show their personal belongings' patina. As craftsmen, it can be seen as a full success. In the

² Excerpt from the fieldwork diary, dated from 2021/12/13: «[Nozay] shows me an Excel table where is referenced for each product raw material costs, working time, etc. 'It is an ingeneer's thing', he says. I ask about the items I have just been trained to manufacture, in order to know how many must be ideally produced in a day of work».

meantime, this strategy is challenging in order to maintain the company's place on the scene of made-in-France fashion items.

BACK TO REALITY

CRAFTING THE COMPANY GROWTH DESPITE AN UNFAVOURABLE CONTEXT

Laperruque's custom-base extends slowly : purchasing durable accessories is not the key to trigger sales. As a matter of fact, the brand's customers rarely buy new leather goods to replace the ones they already get from the shop. With a limited set of accessories in its catalog, it hardly gains shares on a more widely defined market. If customers do not renew their own items from the brand, they often gift some to their relative. Step by step, the circle of retail customers increases. However, to count on this growth mechanism is not enough to provide the increased needs of the company. To reach its current size and efficiency, the co-founders staffed the workshop, then the shop. Their challenge soon became to maintain financial balance by becoming regularly incomes. To do so, they identified the need of going a step further in Laperruque's growth. Using their knowledge of the fashion market and the city of Paris, they tended to a new goal.

The current location of Laperruque's shop is at the border of the Marais, a historic top place for fashion in the French capital. This Paris neighborhood is well-known for its art galleries and fashion shops, also appealing for tourists. If it used to be a place involved in the production of fashion goods, which is still perceptible through the fact that some suppliers' shops remained in the area, most of the manufacturing workshops have been replaced by fancy retail outlets. Laperruque store's street is full of trendy second-hand shops, coffee shops that are popular on Instagram and exhibition spaces for artists and designers organizing pop-ups. Some of the neighbouring store send customers to Laperruque's shop, such as a specialized book-store for architecture or the nearby hotel sending its guests. However, the street is not as busy³ as the ones located in the center of the Marais and the small size of Laperruque's shop is bounding for the renewal of the merchandizing set. In order to be more attractive and to enlarge their custom-base, Laperruque's co-founders tried to reach their dream-set. They wanted to move in a larger shop,

³ The amount of visitors in the shop increases in December, as I noted on 2021/12/6: «Many visitors in the workshop this week, I imagine that the rythm of visits steps up with Christmas approaching».

allowing them to install the workshop part on the ground-floor⁴. By exhibiting their specificity - which is the maintaining of a local manufacturing - through their window shop (Rodriguez, 2001), they hoped to advance from a stage where the brand is the matter of a restrained circle of connoisseurs to a wider visibility through public space.

UNESCAPABLE COMPROMISES

After some trials to afford this type of local, for which the liquidity of the company was insufficient, the two co-founders decided to compromise. In order to extend their production volume and to report this step of growing, in 2023, they moved the workshop from the Paris-basement to a bigger space, located at the border of the capital in the city of Pantin. From now on, the production and the selling of the items is about 5 kilometers apart. This distance is most often travelled by bike or by subway by the team members channeling leather goods from the workshop to the shop. After one year in this new configuration, they face new difficulties related to an unfavourable context leading to sales arrears. The company had to adjust its managing and marketing strategies, finding that customers are reluctant to shop unless there is some sales promotions and discounts. According to Nozay, the fashion market is evolving in the direction of the cars' or the furnitures' market, on which only one on four product is sold at his full price. He talks about «deadweight effect» and he notices the customers «need an opportunity before purchasing goods». What kind of tools Laperruque can use to adapt in such context?

BALANCING SMALL-SCALE WORKSHOP'S ASSETS AND WEAKNESSES

THE DOWNSIDE OF LASTING LONG

Laperruque's company is facing a paradox. Its own added value comes from the characteristics of its products, long-lasting and well-made. This working process, in addition to the calculation of low margins, is hard to combine with a broad marketing strategy. Reducing the price of the items equates to running two risks : to produce at loss and to damage the brand image. However, in 2023 the company compromised for the first time and organized an exceptional archive sale. Flawed objects have been sold at a cut-price. Until then,

only seasonal colours of leather were discounted twice a year, according to the classical calendar of most brands (Barancourt, 2025).

From now on, the challenge for the company is to find a way of strengthened its desirability in order to maintain the shop-and-workshop-ensemble functional. Spending time and efforts on perfecting its catalog's existing models almost avoided its team to develop some novelties for over three years. The two business founders have decided to take benefits from the skills they develop in the workshop to diversify their brand's offer and develop a simpler version of their accessories to reach new customers with lower budget. Named the « unlined » line, it is an offshoot of the existing catalog with rougher finishing. The pieces are made of a single piece of vegetable tanned leather – instead of calf leather on the outside and goat leather lining the inside – and their edges are bee waxed – instead of painted layer upon layer. The declination of the catalog shows a refined knowledge of the traditional crafts, because it is inspired from saddlery's processes.

CRAFTING HANDILY

By easing the manufacturing, Hureau, the craftsman-founder of the brand, tries to break open time for designing some novelties. The latest is an open-source collection, described on the brands' website (<http://laperruque.co>)⁵ as a mean to create a stronger connection between the customers and their items and to reinforce the relationship between the firsts and themselves: « we therefore wanted to offer the curious, amateurs and do-it-yourselfers the chance to create an even more durable personal version of our objects. In an act of radical transparency that contributes to the fight against emotional obsolescence, we are sharing the patterns and instructions for making these objects.» New seamless pieces, such as air pods pouches, are now sold in the shop. As shown by the quotation of the webpage, the items' patterns are also available for free on laperruque.co, giving the opportunity to crafty customers to make their own. This kind of offer has two functions. First, it participates of renewing the catalog, inviting regular customers to enlarge their set of Laperruque's accessories with new pieces. Second, the open-source collection has been inspired by designers with a strong ethical and political commitment, for instance Viktor Papanek.

⁴ In 2023, the team visited such a shop, but the landlords never followed up.

⁵ <https://laperruque.co/produit/etui-pour-airpods-open-source-en-veau-a-double-tannage-noir/?v=11aedd0e4327>

His work is a criticise of the industrial context of production, and he was involved in sharing his knowledge about construction of housing and furniture, offering people alternatives to the consumption society (Hennessey and Papanek, 1973). Referring to the «roots [of] the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s in the [U]nited [S]tates⁶». Mentionning not only American designers but also Enzo Mari and Gerrit Rietveld, the two business partners strengthened their creative identity. It is an obvious reminder of their initial utopical vision of the company. However, there is an unavoidable paradox in the fact they are referring to anticonsumerist projects in an off-peak period for the company.

To Hureau et Nozay, the common ground of self-making thanks to open resources and purchasing long-lasting objects is the attachment to artefacts, sending them back to the starting point of their project. Caring for their own items, the two founders of the brand have created through their shop a place to share and nurture this vision of consuming artefacts. Nozay sums ups their process with this tagline: «it is an iterative design process integrating our costumers' feedbacks». According to Johnathan Chapman a way for design to increase its durability is to create a stronger meaning: it is emotionally durable design (2015). This way of thinking artefacts suits very well to leather items used every day, each one getting a single patina. Even though this rhetoric is quite efficient, in Laperruque, some tools have been borrowed from a more conventional marketing (sale promotions and launching novelties) enterprise-wide to maintain its position.

TO CONCLUDE

Laperruque is an interesting observation unit to measure the ambiguity of creating a company in the field of fashion that aims at counteracting the logic of renewal in its industry. The crafting of an independant unit, taking in charge both the manufacturing and the selling of leathersgoods, has increased the financial needs of the company. To fulfill these obligations, the skilled craftsmanship meet its limits and the company has to operate some levers that it did not intend to in the first place. Depsite the intention of offering an alternative to the traditional fashion market modus operandi, by sending long-lasting accesso-

ries, its fonctionning absolutely needs to create and maintain the intention to purchase in their custom-base. In that way, Laperruque is faithful to the traditional business company, looking for its own growth. However, the growth curve keeps a gentle slope because it is limited by the own workshop's producing capacity, on a slow course. In the words of the two co-founders, this dynamic will stop and the running of the company will be stabilised when it will reach a stade they call its «cruising speed ». It remains to be seen if such a gait is achievable alongside competing brands with fewer production constraints and more financial resources to invest.

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