



Entrepreneurial spirit



So far, specialist French leathersgoods start-up incubator Au Delà du Cuir (ADC) has been responsible for helping more than 60 new brands become active in the market. The programme, whose name means 'beyond leather', launched in 2009 under the auspices of research and testing organisation CTC. In 2012 it became more independent and set up its own studio in Paris.

Sophie Viot Coster, who took up the role of running ADC at the start of 2018, has been able to bring her own knowledge and background to the role, including her experience of launching, running and selling a start-up. She has been on the receiving end of the help that she now puts in place for the leather start-ups of the 2020s. After starting her professional life in consulting, she launched a company called Cireurs, the French word for shoe-polishers, in 2012. Recent comments about this on the On(Ward) Fashion podcast make it clear that the ADC director regards the Cireurs adventure as her "first steps in the leather universe". She was committed to helping people keep their leather products in good shape for longer and she also placed great value on the business's capacity for providing jobs for people in the communities in which Cireurs operates, jobs that, by the nature of the work, could not be outsourced to places with lower labour costs.

Help is at hand for leather-sector start-ups in France in the shape of incubator body Au Delà du Cuir (ADC). More than 60 small companies have received a boost from it already. As the industry seeks to rebuild after covid-19, thoughtful, knowledgeable input from a network of experts may be of greater value than ever.

Three years later, she sold the business and began to work as a consultant again. The team running ADC asked her to return and work with them, leading to her taking charge three years ago. And Cireurs, too, has gone from strength to strength. It began as a service to provide a high-quality polishing service for shoes; it now also offers a repair service for footwear and bags and has even begun to sell its own range of products.



Most of the start-ups that have come under ADC's incubator umbrella until now have been footwear and accessory brands.

All credits: ADC

Select group

Most of the start-ups that have come under ADC's incubator umbrella in the course of nearly a decade now have been footwear and accessory brands, but among the current cohort of 18 start-ups, one is a tanner. The company in question is Ictyos, a Lyon-based operation that produces fish leather. Ms Viot Coster also points to Adapta, which finds buyers for excess leather stocks that have built up at tanneries and big leathergoods companies, as another exception.

It selects a new cohort each year in the autumn and takes the successful applicants under its wing for up to three years. Criteria for inclusion are that the companies have to be recent start-ups, and to have a turnover of more than €50,000 (to be part of the Emergence programme) or €250,000 (for the Growth programme). ADC says that they should make products that are "unusual, desirable and creative", preferably manufactured in France or another part of Europe. It also expects the people running each company to be able to show that they are ambitious and have the capacity to run a business and also be part of a team.

Outspoken chairman

Last year, for the first time, Paris-based designer Jérôme Dreyfuss was the chair of the selection panel for choosing the companies for ADC to work with. It is almost 20 years since Mr Dreyfuss launched his own brand. Comments he made in 2020, though, show that he still recognises how difficult it is to achieve success in the wider world of fashion. He also understands that, these days, there may be extra challenges for young designers who feel the appeal of leather and understand how well the material matches the mood that is driving a move to a circular economy. He issued a press release last autumn to counter negative messages about leather and to highlight the pitfalls that accessories brands often face in choosing substitute materials.

Mr Dreyfuss said he had decided to speak up because he was "tired of hearing about the supposed damage leather does to the planet". His brand, La Maison Jérôme Dreyfuss, which has four boutiques in different parts of Paris and supplies its products to another 300 boutiques, has long argued that one of the best things consumers can



Fish leather from Lyon-based Ictyos.



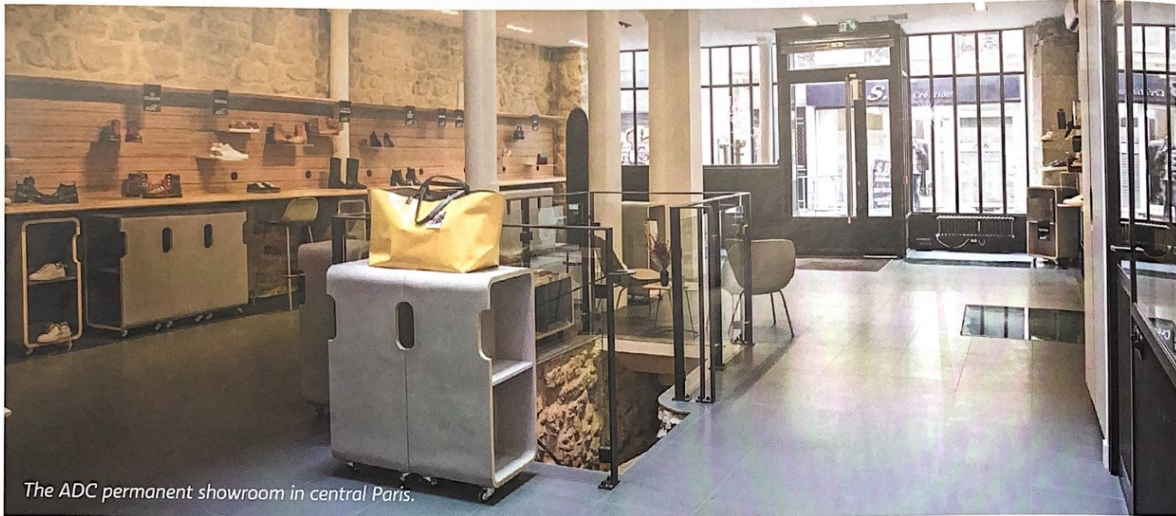
Adapta, also adopted by ADC, finds buyers for excess leather stocks.

do to lower the fashion sector's carbon footprint is buy fewer products. They should, however, choose things of quality and use them for a long time. Its position is that products made from responsibly produced leather lend themselves perfectly to this.

In the press release, Jérôme Dreyfuss said that synthetic substitutes that contain some bio-based materials may appear attractive, but that in reality most of them rely on plastic to give them "any sort of resistance". He added that, without plastic, "you could not use any of these materials to produce a tote bag or a pair of sneakers".

Covid response

The ADC director says she is very happy with the way the selection panel has worked, even in covid times. Mr Dreyfuss was joined on it by finance people, people representing industry bodies, others who know the exhibition sector and others who have a deep knowledge of finished products. "We met in July 2020," Sophie Viot Coster recalls, "and we realised that we could not ask small companies to apply to be part of our programme without first asking ourselves about the changes the pandemic is making. The health situation was hitting everyone very hard at that



The ADC permanent showroom in central Paris.

point; we were still emerging from the first lockdown.”

Companies of all dimensions and in all industries have suffered serious set-backs since the start of the covid-19 pandemic, but recent start-ups probably have less capacity to cope than most. This year, in addition to its work directly with the companies in its own programme, ADC has joined forces with similar incubator bodies in other parts of the fashion industry to share a series of talks and seminars with any company that wanted to listen. “We wanted them to learn as much as they possibly could under the circumstances about projects they are launching,” Ms Viot Coster explains, “to hear about good practice and to be able to benchmark themselves against what others have learned. So we opened up the seminars to everyone, charging just a small fee to let them take part.”

Skills preservation

Candidate companies for the 2022 ADC programme had until mid-July to apply. Sophie Viot Coster highlights the link between companies that make their products in France and the preservation of the artisan leather skills that France still has. Through ADC, new companies can avail themselves of the knowledge patrimony that exists. If they are able to grow and to be successful, they will keep producing in France and make a contribution of their own to keeping that heritage alive.

Following up on the comment about ADC preferring the companies on its programme to make products that are “unusual, desirable and creative”, the director adds that attractive, well made products are part of what she looks out for, but also ones that “make sense in terms of value for money”. This, she explains, is an indication that these brands are built on an economic model that will hold up. She continues: “To get your margins right is one of the big challenges when you are just starting out. You have to work this out so that you can make a living right away rather than at some point in the future when you are well known.”

She also thinks digital skills are going to become more and more necessary. “We have no way of knowing how long

the present crisis will last,” she says, “but it seems to us at ADC that entrepreneurs are going to have to be comfortable using digital technology. There won’t be the same level of sales to tourists or in airport shops or in department stores the world over. It will be difficult to display products physically. I would say this will drive a desire to use digital technology better.”



ADC director, Sophie Viot Coster, brings her own start-up experience to the role.