

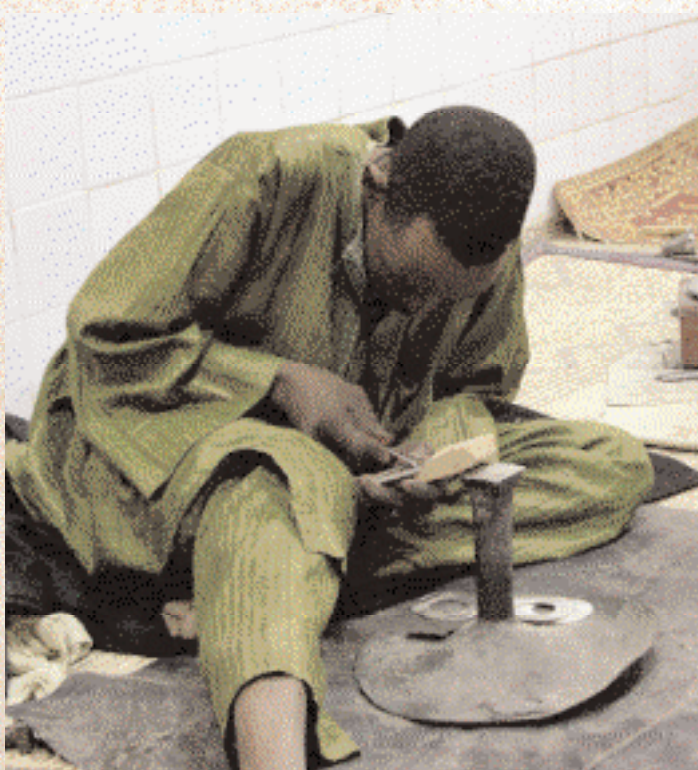


A journey to Niger, where traditional Tuareg blacksmiths and luxe French company Hermès forged a common purpose.

by Todd Pitock

As the Wind Moves, So Does Memory

> In 1992, Jean-Yves Brizot, not yet 30, went to Niger to create a guild of blacksmiths. He had spent most of his 20s guiding young adventurers in rugged environments all over the planet, but the place that captured his imagination was the Sahara. There, he'd encountered Tuareg blacksmiths creating exquisite silver jewelry using a trembling hand technique. The work was not merely beautiful: It also was an archive of Tuareg values, beliefs and culture. No piece could be replicated.



For the Tuaregs, numbering 1.2 million in Niger and Mali and thousands more in Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso, modernization was creeping like desert sands into cities on the fringe of the Sahara, and these ferociously self-reliant people known for their shimmering indigo veils and long swords in leather scabbards were in transition. After a series of devastating droughts in the '60s, '70s and '80s, and growing influence from outside, including aid groups, missionaries and even tourists, they now faced the reality—hum-drum yet difficult—of making a living. The blacksmiths, among the custodians of Tuareg culture, had difficulty getting their wares to market. Exploitative merchants were paying terrible prices for them to knock out cheap pieces for quick sales to tourists.

Brizot, the grandson of blacksmiths on both sides, wanted to help and got a sympathetic hearing at Hermès, the French company that began in 1837 as a harness and saddle workshop in Paris's Grand Boulevard quarter and has remained committed to preserving handcraft know-how.

The arrangement was an autonomous partnership. Hermès helped get things started; the guild then supplied silver pieces called "The Tuareg Collection."

Fourteen years hence, the collaboration between a global company and traditional smiths continues, moving between 6,000 and 8,000 pieces most years, with a high of 13,000—a good living for those associated with the guild, economically insignificant for Hermès. The endeavor has had its challenges, especially after September 11, when orders slowed to a wheeze, leading Brizot to increase his guiding to earn money. That's what he was doing when I met him last year in Libya, where he told me about the guild.

"If you want to see something true and authentic," he said, "come to Agadez."

So it is that on a balmy January evening, accompanied by Jean Jonot, a 71-year-old retired alpine guide from Brizot's hometown of Grenoble, I spend an eternal day hopscotching across continents aboard charter planes, and arrive ahead of my luggage.

"It will come on the next plane," an airline representative says.

"When is that?"

"Next week."

Brizot greets me with a man-hug. "It's only clothing," he says. "We'll get you what you need. Every challenge is also an opportunity."

Ah, Niger, land of opportunity. In any case, the country, a land



Clockwise from top left: The Grand Mosque's 89-foot-high pyramidal minaret has stood since 1844; Jean-Yves Brizot, the founder of A' L'Atelier, while most foreigners travel in SUVs, Tuaregs prefer motorcycles; a blacksmith engraves a piece of jewelry

mass almost twice the size of Texas, is a fascinating prospect. Landlocked south of Algeria, north of Nigeria, it last made international news for its bread (lack of, see also famine) and cake (so-called, of uranium; see Iraq War; also, Plame Affair).

Getting oriented doesn't take long.

Agadez is an ancient city along the Trans-Sahara Trade Route, an area where merchants and wayfarers have carried salt and slaves since the advent of camel caravans. Its mud architecture gives the entire city a reddish hue that, when the sun slants, gives off a radiant orange glow against the intense blue sky. The Grand Mosque, marked by its 89-foot-high pyramidal minaret, has stood since 1844; the previous mud minaret had been there since 1515. There is some electricity; but at night, unlit chambers fade into a dark oblivion. Two Internet cafés, a fast one and a slow one, opened last year. In one, I look over the shoulder of a Tuareg in a violet *tagelmoust* reading a story on Yahoo: "10 Best Places to Live!" Taxis are low-octane motorbikes; you get on and hold on, and all rides, whatever the distance, cost about 40 cents.

The population is a mix of Tuaregs, Hausas, Tubus and mixed-race "Agadezians." A small population of mostly French expats—Niger was a French colony until its 1960 independence—greet one another with stiff courtesies at places such as Le Pilier, the town's best European restaurant, whose Tuareg chef was trained well by its Italian owner. Rich Saudis come to Agadez to hunt.

Brizot's place is a two-story affair near the Grand Mosque containing warriors' spears, mats, tablets covered in Arabic script, a giant bowl, drums and books stacked on a black table with elephantine legs. His bedroom opens onto the roof, where he prefers to sleep in the open air.

At 42, Brizot's classic Roman features bring to mind busts of Caesar, which is not a bad comparison: adventurer, intellectual, romantic, merchant. He has a facility for intimate conversation and relationships, and also for disputes and rivalries. His healthy ego is additionally nourished by rafts of children, who hail him leaving or entering his house, "Brizot! Brizot! Brizot!"

"You're like a rock star around here," I say.

"Yes," he says, "I am."

What he's most proud of is the guild. The name in French, *A l'Atelier*, means "to the studio"; in Arabic, *A'Allah te leir* means "to get linked to God." The space includes a garden with citrus, quinine and neem trees; an office; and the artisans' workspace, where 18 or so blacksmiths each sit on the ground on a clearly defined rectangle, beating, cutting, scratching and polishing silver that was smelted just across the compound.

Over the following days, the blacksmiths greet me warmly, though communication is no simple matter, requiring English to French, then French to Tamashek translation. On the traditional ladder of their society, they're above domestics and slaves, below the nobles and teachers at the top. They are born and marry into smith families—marriage to a non-smith is regarded as intermarriage—and go through years-long apprenticeships. They take on many roles: creators,

salesmen, entertainers, magicians, intercessors with jinn—a type of spirit in Islam. In the modern world, the hierarchy has often been turned on its head: Idle nobles whose livestock were killed by the famines are poor, while the smiths, who have learned to earn, are better off.

Tuareg Islam incorporates animist beliefs and mysticism. The universe is inhabited by jinn, and the blacksmiths' dealings pollute the smiths even as they imbue them with mystery. The blacksmiths themselves encourage the mystique. One man, I'm told, lifts molten objects with his bare hands but is never burned.

"They are alchemists," says Brizot. "What you have to understand, though, is that the object is only the physical, visible aspect of alchemy. For the blacksmiths, the object represents a process of personal, spiritual transformation."

Pieces include 21 designs of Tuareg crosses—cruciform pieces, though not crucifixes, that can identify the wearer's place of origin. *Tcherots*, or amulets, are a traditional form; they contain verses of the Koran inscribed by clerics, not unlike Jewish mezuzahs. The imagery is geometric, compositions of lines arranged at angles to give the pieces movement. In recent years, the smiths have started working with gold, a mineral that was traditionally believed to have negative powers—the price and quality of silver became volatile, gold was stable, and there was a predictable market for gold jewelry.

Hermès's "Tuareg Collection," which is all silver, includes bangles, necklaces, buckles and locks that incorporate tradition with other motifs. The objects' shape and weight and the quality

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of silver meet certain parameters Hermès set. Their engravings, though, are drawn from the Tuareg lexicon.

"They have Hermès shapes, but they have Tuareg meanings," says Atoheul N'Gatan, the guild's production manager. "For the blacksmith, the underlying purpose is still aesthetic," he adds.

"You need to think about what a piece is meant to represent and it should be expressing something. When you give a piece of jewelry to someone, it should represent an emotion."

My own emotional state gets knocked somewhat off-bal-



ance the next day, the holiday of Tabaske, which commemorates Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael, as the Koran tells the story. After gathering in the cemetery, the community whets knives and appetites for a mass slaughter of lambs, who bleat, bleed and expire all over town, which clouds with cooking fires and smells of barbecue.

The sultan, an important political figure in the city, invites us to visit. Brizot has attained a noble's status, and as his visitors, we share that lofty perch. Thanks to a friend, donated clothes arrived in a World Food Program duffel bag. I might have worn a tie instead of this vow-of-poverty look, but Brizot assures me the Sultan won't be offended.

The palace compound is a large house in a big square of dirt enclosed by mud walls with covered bays for the Sultan's various vehicles. His bodyguard is turned out in a brilliant red *tagelmoust* and a luminous red, green and white robe.

"Is there anything I need to know before we go in?" I ask Brizot. "Call him 'Excellency' and don't look into his eyes."

We're shown into a side entrance to an anteroom, where we sit on chairs backed against a wall—Brizot, Jean Jonot, myself and another fellow who is dressed like a goatherd and who is, I have no doubt, using the opportunity of the holiday to solicit charity. Beggary is not unknown in Agadez, and on a holy day like Tabaske, one is expected to give, so an industrious mendicant can really clean up. After we sit for a few minutes, we're invited back out the door we entered. The bodyguard shakes our hands and gives a hale *salaam aleikum* as a send-off.

"What about the Sultan?" I ask. Had I inadvertently done something wrong that canceled our meeting? "Aren't we going to meet him?"

"You just did."

"The goatherd? The goatherd was the sultan?"

Brizot is troubled. Apparently I missed the point. "Normally the Sultan would greet someone very formally," he says. "It was a sign of great deference and even affection that he greeted us humbly, in a small room. He was saying, 'We are equals.' You should feel honored!"

Jean Jonot shrugs. "I also thought he was a goatherd," he says.

There is still, Brizot figures, a big gap in our understanding. "If you want to really get some understanding of everything here," he says, "we have to go into the bush."

The next day, we pile into his modified 1988 Toyota Land Cruiser. Brizot puts on a pair of beaten-up '70s-style shades he bought from the Sultan, and we set off on a 600-mile loop through the Air Massif, a mountain range that slopes into the Ténéré, the expanse of dunes that rolling into Niger's northeastern flank.

The landscape starts to change about 30 miles out of Agadez as we rumble on a rutted road. Like the jewelry, the scenery is all about shapes, textures, reflections and angles of light, with alternations of color—pale yellow brush, burnished orange sand, rows of pale green foliage on desert trees. Brown mountains fade to black, all of it framed by a deep blue sky that loses its intensity as it dissolves into a pale haze. After this fertile area the vista opens up onto fields of black rock, with boulders and craters and for-



An exhibition, *The Art of Being Tuareg*, opens at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History and runs from October through February. It will appear subsequently at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

mations of rock. Deep shadows and haze form over the massif.

There are signs of life. Wells, trees, donkeys and arrangements of rocks that indicate burial sites or mosques. Most Tuaregs we see are on motorcycles, up to three on a ride; deeper into the dunes and soft sands of the Ténéré, camels are, I'm told, still preferred. People materialize in the most unlikely places, as if suddenly formed out of dust and sand.

Now and again we arrive in a village or a farm where Tuareg men have learned the art of flirting with non-Tuareg women, and who, moreover, pull their *tagelmousts* below their chins to talk about the challenges of getting their sweet, pink onions to markets in Europe.

We drop our pads and sleeping bags on the sand near an ancient rock painting by a Muslim holy place. The wind in the trees incongruously sounds like the ocean.

The next day we go to Tîmia, an oasis with a hilltop auberge of mud cottages above the sandy valley floor, a green orchard of date palms and a village with a *boulangerie* that sells fresh rolls. Women and girls turn big wheels to draw water from the wells.

From there, we cross the remnants of prehistoric forest, now acres of petrified wood, and follow the seam stitching the massif to the dunes of the Ténéré. Scalloped waves of sand extend just short of forever. It's an extraordinary place that delights the soul with awe and elation—feelings we get to indulge longer than planned after a mechanical breakdown.

A couple of days later we roll at the speed of donkeys into a village called Iferouâne. The blacksmiths descend to peddle their wares. Their single-mindedness brings to mind the word "pushy." "Tell them I'm not buying!" I say.

A blacksmith named Tonka appears in a billowing black robe and *tagelmoust* laden in silver bangles, talismans, hoops and loops. He clangs and jingles when he walks, and has made his stylized presence heard even in France and Germany.

"In those clothes?" I ask.

"Of course!" he says. "They love it." He sings. He dances. He sells. *Vini, vidi, vinci*.

"Do you prefer the French or the Germans?"

"The French are nicer but the Germans buy more. They like the big pieces."

I want to know about the meanings in his work, but conversation with him is like making small talk in a bordello. He hints at deeper mysteries he can't reveal then mumbles something in French.

"He says you ask too many questions," Brizot says. "I think there's another reason he doesn't want to talk."

"What's that?"

"He may not know."

Tonka's magic, though, is his salesmanship; somehow we're in a negotiation, and before he goes I have acquired another Tuareg cross.

Back in Agadez, I return to the guild, where Abda Ahmoudou, the quality control manager, takes out some of his

own pieces and shows the lines that draw an analogy between wind and memory. "One symbolizes a natural force, the other an emotion. They're related to each other. As wind moves, so does memory." Against that a thicker line symbolizes a home, a physical defense against natural force but the place of love. Yet it's not merely a random expression of feeling, as in abstract art, but a discipline that holds to established motifs, a language of the hands. As Abda explains his work, images come into focus and ideas enter the atmosphere. "Everything is linked to the emotion you experience at the moment of creating."

I ask if he feels intruded upon by my questions.

"Oh, no!" he says. "I'm very, very happy. There are no secrets. You're the first person who has asked since a German 15 years ago! I say, *merci, merci, merci.*"

Two days later, just before I leave, he presents me with a heavy swatch of shimmering silver. Its detailed imagery recalls the earlier conversation about wind and metaphor. Mountains and wells refer to our desert journey. A ladder runs up the left side, symbolizing the sadness of my impending departure. It is signed in Tifinar, the Tuareg alphabet. The piece is a poem about friendship.

It has one notable weakness. The necklace, a leather cord that's used to loop a camel's nostril, is not worthy of it. Brizot suggests replacing it later.

"Will it hold?" I ask him.

"It should."

I'm delighted. Abda and I stand in the courtyard saying long good-byes. After you shake hands, you put your fingers to your chest as a way of saying you've received the person into your heart. I do, and my fingers land on the talisman. Then Brizot takes us to the airport, where the plane, alas, is delayed, so we go back to town for lamb couscous and Cokes.

"It's an amazing piece he made," Brizot said. "It's museum quality."

"I've never had a piece of jewelry that I cared about," I say. "This really has meaning to me."

I put my hand to my chest to take it out. Only...it's gone. We look everywhere. I'm bereft, worse than when I learned that I had no clothes. Brizot lights a cigarette and philosophizes Frenchly on the meaning of what's happened.

"A blacksmith might say the spirits wanted you to learn something," he says. "Maybe it's something that'll be in your story."

"I'd rather just have the *tcherot.*" I'd like the moment back to tuck the talisman into my pocket. I never had an object for such a short time and felt its loss so keenly. ●



Clockwise from top right: the Sultan's bodyguard; the Auberge—mud cottages built on a hilltop overlooking the Tîmia oasis; some Tuareg still travel by camel; detail of an ancient rock painting in the desert

