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Parasols and umbrellas – from everyday object to work of art

Michel Heurtault's museum pieces from 1750 to 1970 and his latest creations

24 October 2015 – 3 April 2016

The whole world is overwhelmed with cheap umbrellas from Asia with only a small artisan business being undertaken in Paris. With specific materials and a unique know-how the small shop offers parasols and umbrellas for all weathers and every occasion. They can be designed for protection against the rain or sun, for a wedding, a historic movie, a haute couture show or for a very particular special exhibition. This is the world of Michel Heurtault. He is Parisian by adoption and has gained an incredible knowledge on umbrellas – as well as acquiring the art of restoring historic umbrellas. Today his skills are deemed to be unique and have led to a worldwide reputation and to various awards, among them the *Maître d'Art*.

The exhibition will display more than 400 museum pieces from bygone days as well as his latest creations. On display will be the various components of a parasol or an umbrella from the handle being in ornate shapes such as that of a dog or cat, old lace by the yard or historical embroidery and the framework made of various materials such as whalebone or metal. Parasols and umbrellas can enable us to look back to an evolving history of more than 4000 years. The oldest piece in the collection was manufactured by Jean Marius. At the beginning of the 18th century, Sun King Louis XIV granted Marius, the inventor of the three-way collapsible umbrella, a five-year royal monopoly on the manufacture of folding umbrellas.

Umbrellas and parasols: origin and significance

The oldest and simplest function of the umbrella was certainly that of a portable protective canopy. The verbal descriptions of, and names given to, this object are indicative of its functions: to shield against sun (French: *parasol*) and rain (German: *Regenschirm*) and provide shade (Italian: *ombrella*). In Middle High German, the word *Schirm* denotes a warrior's shield, thus including the general meaning of a protective function.

Besides providing protection against sun and inclement weather, the umbrella was intended, much like a portable baldachin, to elevate symbolically the personage being protected. In this dual protective and symbolic function, the umbrella also evolved into a symbol of sovereignty. In its simplest form, an umbrella or parasol consists of a central shaft of varying length, to which multiple ribs are attached, with a canopy of cloth, paper, leaves, feathers, leather or similar material stretched above it. The shape of the canopy may vary: flat, semi-circular, tapered or bell-shaped – anything goes. Fringe, bobbles or little bells may be attached to the edges.

The earliest evidence of the parasol dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. Parasol-like objects from this epoch, ritual fans called *flabella*, were discovered in Egypt. In terms of their symbolic function, *flabella* are related to the later parasol, which was usually round. They were used to fan and provide shade for the person being protected.

Numerous images from the Assyrian culture depict parasols of the type common today. The magnificent, ornate appearance of the parasol and its frequent use in connection with the ruler cult are evidence that the parasols of the Assyrians, Persians and Greeks served as symbols of rule in addition to their protective function. Since the 1st millennium BC, the parasol is also noted as a symbol of power and sovereignty in Asia and Africa.

There is evidence of parasols in China from the 11th century BC. Here, too, they served as emblems of sovereignty in addition to their function as a shield against the sun. In China, as in India, the number of levels in a parasol indicated the dignitary's station in society. The shape and colour of the parasol varied depending on the user's rank. In Japan, the multi-level parasol also denoted the rank of the person using it. The broad red parasol was part of the emperor's regalia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Japanese ladies used the parasol as a luxury item. The lower classes also used it as protection against the weather.

Umbrellas and parasols in European civilization

In Greek and Roman civilization, the parasol primarily retained its original significance as protection against the sun and was mainly an object closely associated with women. Written sources, however, reveal that the Romans were already familiar with a type of umbrella.

It was not until the Middle Ages that the parasol was imbued with greater importance and became a significant element of papal ceremony. The earliest evidence dates from the late 12th and early 13th centuries. For example, a 13th century papal inventory lists umbrella holders. Down to the present day, the papal umbrella is a visible sign of his authority and dignity and is especially carried in processions. The crossed keys of St. Peter and the umbrella are depicted in 18th century papal coats of arms and on 19th century coins.

In Venice, the practice of holding a parasol above the head of the Doge survived until the 18th century. This was done to make the honourable official visible from afar, since he was unable to travel through the city's narrow confines on horseback or in a coach.

In Western Europe, there is no evidence for mundane use of umbrellas and parasols until the late 16th century. Their use as protection against sun and rain was reserved for dignitaries. They were not used in normal everyday life until the late 16th century. Documents of the period show that ladies carried parasols as protection against the sun. There is no evidence of umbrellas being used at this time.

Parasols caught on in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in France, Italy, Germany and England. At first they were found principally at court in cities of royal residence. A 1673 inventory of the wardrobe of Louis XIV reveals that he had eleven parasols made of multicoloured taffeta and three umbrellas made of oilcloth lined with silk with gold and silk embroidery.

The use of umbrellas is documented from the late 17th century. Men began using them in the middle of the 18th century. The long disinterest in umbrellas and parasols for everyday use is attributable to the social conditions of the era. The upper class travelled at first in sedan chairs and later in coaches, making protection against the weather unnecessary. The poorer population did not need any protection because their clothing was made of rugged, plain material. Weight was an additional factor. Early parasols and umbrellas could easily weigh several pounds, making them too unwieldy to become fashion accessories.

The oldest surviving specimens are from the 18th century. During this period, umbrellas and

parasols caught on at all levels of society. It was especially the women who made them socially acceptable. Ladies carried parasols to protect their fashionably pale complexions and avoid being dazzled by the sun. Thus, the parasol became an indispensable accessory of feminine attire. Over time, use of parasols and umbrellas increasingly spread to the bourgeoisie as well. Here, umbrellas were used more frequently than parasols, because the upper echelons of society travelled primarily by coach.

The umbrella as a fashion accessory

The history of umbrella fashion began when the mere utility and functionality of the umbrella became less significant and vital importance was attached to craftsmanship, aesthetics and decoration. The umbrellas were sometimes long, sometimes short; the canopy large, flat or arched; the shaft embellished, ornate or plain; and the handle a work of art in itself.

Over the course of the 19th century, the umbrella became an article of daily use at all levels of society. The late 19th and 20th centuries evidenced a diversity of umbrellas that changed with each new fashion trend. As a fashion accessory, the umbrella picked up on the respective trends, complemented and completing current lines and added finishing touches. Until well into the 1960s, it was still possible to go anywhere in Paris or London and order a custom-made umbrella. For both ladies and gentlemen, the perfect outfit was incomplete without a good one. Then the first cheap umbrellas from China appeared, and with them began the downfall of the once so beautiful and practical fashion accessory.

Today, not a single factory making umbrella frames remains in Europe. The best mechanisms of the 1950s and 1960s were made by the German company Knirps.

Perhaps this exhibition will make a small contribution towards changing perceptions of, and attitudes towards, this everyday object, so that the umbrella can once again be viewed as more than just a disposable product.

The parasol and its millennia-old history

The parasol has a tough time of it these days. It is much older than the umbrella and appears in ancient Egyptian, Persian and Chinese depictions. The early forms were generally large baldachins held by servants. In Japan, Indonesia or Burma (modern-day Myanmar), paper was stretched over the spokes. In other regions, people wove parasols of straw to shield themselves against the sun. Over the course of the 17th century, this evolved into a small parasol that could be carried in one hand. Around the middle of the 18th century, in the time of the Marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764), it was crucial for this new accessory, the parasol, to focus attention on the appearance of the woman using it and to show her to her best advantage. The middle classes' delight in outdoor walks, the discovery of scenic attractions, country outings and strolls along the promenade created numerous opportunities to be seen with one's parasol. It was impossible for it to be too fashionable, extravagant, playful and coquettish. If it was also handy and collapsible or could be suspended from the wrist, all the better.

In around 1750, a folding parasol with hinges, the so-called *Knickerschirm* or marchioness parasol, became all the rage first in France and then in Germany. There were models with a second hinge in the shaft that made it possible to tilt the canopy sideways by approximately 90 degrees. This parasol could be used like a fan. These special models failed to catch on, probably because of the

complicated mechanism. The plain marchioness parasol, by contrast, remained extremely popular with the ladies and new versions of it were produced again and again until well into the 1870s. The walking stick parasol, which was welcomed by the ladies because of their high heels, came on the scene in the late 18th century. The only unpleasant drawback of this parasol was the necessity to take hold of the dusty end in order to open it.

Until around 1915–20, the parasol was an indispensable outdoor accessory for women. The size and colour of the parasol, the length of the shaft, and the number of panels changed as fashions changed.

Since its origins, the parasol was considered an essential accessory for light-skinned people to avoid exposure to the sun's searing rays. In the years after the First World War, changed societal conditions caused the demands made on fashion – and thus the parasol – to develop in the opposite direction. The suntanned complexion that was once a feature distinguishing people who had to work outdoors from those who could afford to stay at home became socially respectable. Because of this shift in aesthetics in favour of deep suntans, parasols are hardly ever used today. The emerging leisure society and tanning are now considered the social earmarks of a privileged lifestyle: a tan says "I can afford to take a Mediterranean holiday".

The history of the parasol comes full circle in China, the land of its birth. There, now as ever, it is cherished as both an everyday object and an ancient cultural heritage. In parks in Shanghai, one encounters Chinese women who carry the accessory with the same charm as generations before them. The traditional concept of beauty, which rejects darkly tanned, leathery skin, has also remained unchanged over millennia. One sees colourful parasols with nylon fabrics next to traditional oiled-paper parasols with bamboo shafts and ribs that are made in parasol makers' workshops.

The umbrella

The first written mention of an umbrella in Europe dates back to the year 600. At that time, the Abbot of Tours sent one to the Bishop of Salzburg with the words: *I am sending you a canopy to keep the rain from falling on your venerable head.*

Evidence that umbrellas were used as protection against rain does not turn up until the late 17th century. The sole feature distinguishing it from a parasol was the waterproof version of the canopy. In China, umbrellas were once made of bamboo frames and oiled paper. Modern umbrellas are made of waterproof cotton, plastic or nylon with telescoping steel frames.

Attempts to design a collapsible umbrella that would take up a minimum of space when not in use began already in the late 17th century. In January 1710, during the reign of Louis XIV, Jean Marius was granted a royal privilege for his invention of the three-way collapsible pocket umbrella: For five years, all pocket umbrellas of this type bore his mark. In 1786, umbrella maker John Beale applied for a patent on a self-opening pocket umbrella. In the 19th century, there was apparently also a need for foldable umbrellas. There were various models using different technologies.

The most successful variant of the collapsible umbrella is undoubtedly the world-renowned *Knirps*. This pocket umbrella was invented in Germany in 1928. It was devised by retired mining engineer.

This pocket umbrella was invented in Germany in 1928. It was devised by retired mining engineer Hans Haupt of Breslau. He had the model patented in 1930 and named it *Knirps*. There is a demand for this small, handy and extremely practical umbrella even today. It survived every fashion trend to become the most popular travel umbrella ever: whether in a car, in a train, on a

plane or in a backpack - the Knirps is there.

Until well into the 1960s, it was still possible to order a custom-made umbrella anywhere in Paris.

Umbrella shaft and handle

The walking stick industry supplied the umbrella shafts and handles. Most walking stick industry factories were founded between 1850 and 1880. The most popular European woods were oak, chestnut, beech, birch, pear wood, plum wood and hazel wood.

In the 19th century, elaborate handles were in high demand. Handles were made from every conceivable material and in an extremely wide range of shapes. Wood, ivory, horn, precious metals or plastic were decorated with animal heads, coats of arms, figures, portraits, blossoms, fruit and much more. Fantasy knew no limits. Handles with small containers for cigarettes, powder, perfume and other toiletries were a special feature.

Umbrella makers, Parapluiemacher and umbrella manufacturers

In circa 1800, a master craftsman usually worked alone or with a very few journeymen and apprentices, without machines and with little division of labour. He bought his own raw materials. He also owned the necessary tools and usually sold his products directly to consumers at local markets or sometimes to dealers.

In Germany, umbrella makers' workshops mostly evolved from woodturners' workshops in which umbrellas were produced in one-off production. Until the 1840s, German umbrella makers called themselves *Parapluiemacher* or *Parasolmacher* – an indication of the French dominance of fashion during this era.

The 19th century witnessed the advent of industrialization and consequently mass production. There was probably no other industry that depended on as many completely different semi-finished products to produce one finished product as the umbrella industry did. Above all, the factories also sought to reduce the considerable weight of up to 5 kg (circa 1806). In France alone, there were some 60 patents during the period 1791–1843 that aimed to achieve this goal. In the middle of the 19th century, the heavy whalebone or tubular frames were replaced by substantially lighter steel designs. We owe this invention to the Englishman Samuel Fox. This development heralded the advent of modern umbrella production.

The old oilcloth canopies were also replaced by new fabrics such as silk, cotton, wool or blended fabrics, which were waterproofed with a paraffin mixture. Decorative, playful materials were used for parasols. Lace and embroidery were in especially high demand.

Today, not a single factory that makes umbrella frames remains in Europe. The best mechanisms of the 1950s and 1960s were made by the German company Knirps.

The umbrella: a cultural object

The umbrella has an almost mystical significance – as a portable canopy that protected the images of the gods and served as a symbol of temporal authority down through the ages of the oldest advanced civilizations. Today, the baldachin is still a sign of honour and authority. So it comes as no surprise that umbrellas and parasols turn up again and again in many 19th and 20th century depictions, including murals, silk paintings and vase paintings.

Parasols are also frequently seen in paintings by famous artists - especially depictions of pale city

dwellers at a time when the middle classes avoided any hint of a suntan. The fear was that darker skin would give them a complexion similar to that of the hardworking peasant families in the fields or itinerant workers who lived in the open air. Noble paleness and an ivory complexion were visible attributes of social status and considered a mark of high social position.

The parasol was an important, fashionable attribute and part of the wardrobe of wealthy urban women. For the artist, it was a means of expressing the light, dainty, playful and intimate nature of the woman who carried it. It was indispensable on a stroll outside the town. In Claude Monet's work *Promenade à Argenteuil* (1875), the women promenade with open black *Ombrelles* made of a silk-cotton blend. In another Monet painting, *Les coquelicots à Argentueil* (1874), a woman out for a stroll holds her open parasol pointed sharply downward behind her back. Holding the parasol upright over your head was very uncomfortable while promenading through the red poppy fields and enjoying the panoramic view of the landscape. Another Claude Monet painting from the year 1875 shows his wife Camille and son Jean. Madame Monet holds her parasol high in the air, seems very exhilarated, and uses it as a flirtatious prop. The parasol is also a theme in other works such as *Woman with Parasol* and *The Beach at Trouville* (1870).

In stark contrast to these paintings is Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884), in which women depicted with parasols seem very static.

Generations of painters used a parasol with the largest possible diameter for a very special purpose: as a *painter's parasol*, which was intended to keep the sun away from canvas and sketchbook. The Swiss painter Frank Buchser offers a splendid illustration of this use in one of his works from the year 1862. The Munich master Carl Spitzweg also depicts a painter taking a siesta under a painter's parasol in the woods (1850). Carl Spitzweg's 1839 painting *The Poor Poet* is world famous. The poet is reclining in bed in his room, and on the ceiling above him hangs an open black umbrella. Umbrellas appear time and again in Spitzweg's works, for example in *A Sunday Stroll* (1841), *The Painter in the Garden* (circa 1870) and *The Squire*.

It is also astounding that the umbrella, the heyday of which began very late, was depicted so frequently in works of art. In 1879, the French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir entitled one of his paintings *The Umbrellas*.

The umbrella often served the painter as an aid to composition, a patch of colour or a light filter. In his painting *Lise* (1867), which is considered a standard work of early Impressionism, the woman's face is in shadow, with just a patch of sunlight under her chin. The list of famous painters who depicted umbrellas and parasols in their paintings goes on and on: Vincent van Gogh's *The Langlois Bridge at Arles*, Francesco José de Goya's *The Love Letter* and Edvard Munch's *Evening on Karl Johan*. The latter is by no means a superficially happy painting, but depicts rainy melancholy and the gloom of life.

Maître d'Art Michel Heurtault of Paris and his passion

In his little Paris atelier, umbrella maker Michel Heurtault creates extraordinary, unique pieces. He is proud that his umbrellas are built to last for generations.

An elegant gentleman's umbrella consists of silk fabric and a maple shaft which was slowly shaped day by day into an umbrella handle. The ferrule is made of genuine horn, not plastic.

The Maître d'Art does everything by hand: the assembly of the frame, the cutting of the individual parts and the sewing of the taut fabric canopy. The individual parts come from selected suppliers or

are collected rarities. The machines, too, such as the automatic punching press for the rosettes, are often older than the shop owner. The finest pieces are hand-embroidered with beads or lace. In addition to umbrellas, together with his young employee Andrea, to whom he is passing on his expertise, Heurtault also makes parasols for private customers or film productions. All of these works of art originate in his atelier in the viaduct arches of the 12th arrondissement of Paris. Michel Heurtault is one of the few remaining artisanal craftsman, perhaps the only one, who still knows how to make umbrellas and parasols. He is self-taught. There was nobody left from whom he could have learned his craft. Beginning in the late 1960s, umbrella production, especially the most important elements of it, shifted to China.

Thanks to his extensive historic collection and his vast knowledge, Heurtault is able to restore umbrellas and parasols of all periods expertly. His creations are sought after around the globe. Japanese and Australian women still love parasols even today. There is an ever-growing awareness of the advantages offered by a parasol.

Umbrella fans, on the other hand, are mainly located in Europe and the United States. Michel Heurtault founded his atelier in 2008, at a time when other firms in this line of business were forced to close. Nevertheless, his unique creations made with old-fashioned craftsmanship found their admirers and buyers. The impetus to found his own business was a personal visit in 2005 by world-renowned French fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. He ordered a Japanese parasol. Today, this handmade parasol belongs to the *Fondation Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent*. Another thing that makes Heurtault special is certainly that customers can have umbrellas and parasols made according to their own preferences. Oversized, elaborately decorated with an extravagant handle, made of select fabric or with unusual motifs – anything is possible. This includes ivory handles with pearl inlays or carved wooden handles in the shape of a wide variety of animals such as ducks, dogs and parrots. There is no customer request that cannot be fulfilled. Of course, this is always also a question of price. A princess from one of the Gulf States chose a handle covered with ray skin. A gem this extravagant can easily cost several thousand euros.

Michel Heurtault played with umbrellas even as a child

However, money is not foremost in Michel Heurtault's mind. Umbrellas and parasols were always his passion. They were his favourite toys even in childhood. When other children his age were playing with cars, he was preoccupied with the mechanisms, ribs and folding technology of parasols and umbrellas. Before reaching the age of 10, he had taken apart umbrellas and reassembled them or had made two umbrellas into one. Michel Heurtault recalls that his mother found this passion very odd. At the age of 20, he began collecting in earnest. He made finds at flea markets and auctions or liquidation sales. Over time, he also received many individual parts from friends and acquaintances. Today he has an extensive collection of special historical interest with more than 3000 examples.

While Michel Heurtault's sisters embarked on "normal" careers, he was drawn toward the world of fashion and costuming. He began his career as a costumer and designer for films and theatre. He also put his technical skills to use as a corset maker for Parisian haute couture. At the request of John Galliano, he designed corsets for Christian Dior, and he designed umbrellas for Hermès on behalf of Jean-Paul Gaultier. At this highest level, he especially studied the technical aspects of an object that shapes the female body from the outside along an elegant line, with flawless execution

and maximum comfort and motion tolerance. He also worked at the Paris Opera. Corsets and umbrella are not at all dissimilar – both consist of countless ribs.

The master is also in demand when umbrellas or parasols are required for historical films. He is the only umbrella and parasol maker who still has the traditional knowledge and the corresponding tools, which are already nearly a century old. Production companies frequently borrow umbrellas and parasols. One of Parasolerie Heurtault's creations appears in the 2015 remake of *Cinderella* with Cate Blanchett. Mia Wasikowska carries another model in her role as *Madame Bovary*. In the costume drama *Farewell*, *My Queen*, Diane Kruger went for walk as Marie Antoinette with a Heurtault parasol. In the Woody Allen movie *Magic in the Moonlight*, a new Côte-d'Azur jet set comedy set in the 1920s, stars Emma Stone and Colin Firth are also seen with authentic parasols from the Heurtault archive.

The highest honour for artisans

In 2013, Michel Heurtault was honoured with the title *Maître d'Art* (master of his art). The French Ministry of Culture confers this title on personages for outstanding achievement in their respective professions. The *Maître d'Art* is the highest title with which an artisan can be honoured in France. Prior to Michel Heurtault, only 107 other artisans received this honour.

Michel Heurtault's contemporary haute couture umbrellas use restored frames from the 1950s and 1960s. The new women's and men's collections are frequently inspired by the Swinging Sixties. The slim, streamlined models for women are made of waterproof silk taffeta in various patterns with leather-covered handles. For the men, he offers the *Montesquieu* model, with a canopy made of Italian rep taffeta and a handle fashioned from stained and lacquered beech wood with horn inlays. There are also more sportive models, for example the black and red silk umbrella with a terrier-shaped art deco handle from his *Moulin Rouge* collection. Heurtault umbrellas are objects for a lifetime. They stand up to any storm and will remain a niche product. Industrial or even semi-industrial production is not an option for Heurtault.

The perfect umbrella according to Michel Heurtault

It must open perfectly so that the tension is distributed evenly. It must tolerate abrupt motions and not turn inside-out in a sudden gust of wind. These are the requirements for a Heurtault umbrella. The appearance and workmanship must be matched with the material and the thickness of the ribs. The range of materials used is diverse; plastic, however, is never used. Materials include silk from Lyon, linen and cotton. Metal rods and premium woods are used for the shaft. The individual operations require thousands of handmade stitches around the ribs. Then the fabric is steamed to coax it into the desired shape. This calls not only for technical know-how, but also artistic mastery when it comes to embroidery and appliqué with lace, pearls and sequins. When Michel Heurtault opens an umbrella or parasol, he doesn't just check whether the stitches form a perfect seam. He also listens to the sound of the runner gliding up the tube. Then he checks the final click that locks the canopy in the open position and whether the weight is evenly distributed between handle, shaft and canopy.

Michel Heurtault and his collection of historical umbrellas and parasols

Michel Heurtault began amassing his collection when he was just 20 years old. It now includes more than 3000 specimens examples of special historic interest. One can scarcely believe one's eyes when he opens the drawers in his Paris workshop. For example, the ivory inlaid shaft of an innocent looking parasol with ruffles conceals a sharp dagger. Nineteenth-century Parisiennes used these to defend themselves against fiends or wild dogs. Another example from the Belle Époque has a handle, the end of which contains an ornately engraved powder box and a mirror. The oldest piece in the collection was produced by Jean Marius. At the beginning of the 18th century, Sun King Louis XIV granted Marius, the inventor of the three-way collapsible umbrella, a five-year royal monopoly on the production of folding umbrellas.

More than 400 exquisite parasols and umbrellas as well as unusual handles from this impressive collection are on display in our special exhibition.

Events in conjunction with the special exhibition: workshops and competition

The special exhibition is accompanied by an interesting supporting programme with workshops and a competition. On specific dates, Michel Heurtault will offer an insight into his craft with all of his characteristic charm and passion. In the workshops, we invite you to unleash your own creativity. Under guidance, visitors aged 6 and over can create their own children's parasol and take it home with them. A parasol unlike any other!

In our competition, we are looking for crazy parasol creations. All it takes to join in is a children's parasol that we provide, plenty of fantasy and creativity. For judging by passers-by, the parasols will be on display in our display windows for 12 days from early January until late February 2016. Of course there are also great prizes to win.

Facts & figures

Opening hours.

Museum, shop and restaurant from 10.00 until 18.00 daily

The Swiss Museums Pass and the Museums-PASS-Musées are valid for the Toy Worlds Museum Basle.

Admission.

CHF 7.00/5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

Media contact

Further information is available from:

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