

# Brand New

Ramdane Touhami's new European luxury group Honmono is off to a lightning start, with thirty L'Officine Universelle Buly boutiques set to open worldwide in the next year and a chain of French cafés due to roll out across Asia – he's the manic mastermind behind some remarkable brands.

**T**ry to accomplish a task in Paris beyond being a tourist, and you will likely confront a favoured French phrase: *ce n'est pas possible*. The ever-energetic 42-year-old Ramdane Touhami, however, is absolutely deaf to it. "*Ce n'est pas possible?* It's not true, everything is possible," he quips with a cheeky smile. "You just have to be crazy. *Et voilà*. Nothing stops me. When I say it's possible, it's possible."

I have finally managed to catch up with Touhami on a stiflingly hot day in a Paris. We have found solace in a café in the upper Marais district, where he is fitting out the interior of his second Buly boutique in the city, a cult 19<sup>th</sup> century French pharmacist's brand beloved for its aromatic potions, powders, soaps and perfumes, which he has revived. The 185-square-metre space perfectly illustrates Touhami's anything is possible mindset for it won't just house Buly but also a Japanese florist specialising in delicate dried arrangements and Café Tortoni, a revival of the famed Belle Époque coffeehouse on the Boulevard des Italiens. Along with his aristocratic wife, Victoire de Taillac, the self-described "cosmeto-geek duo" travel the world in search of beauty secrets, in their own flavour of 'gypset-chic' (an oxymoronic contraction of gypsy and jet-set).



Apparently, an atlas of their exceptional findings will be coming out in September, published by Penguin Random House, but the fruit of their labours is actually already available in Buly's various stores in Paris, Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong and London, through products like the very finest Japanese rice powder, a select collection of water-based perfumes, and a Minebari comb used by Japanese Emperors that's made of 300-year old trees, dried for 100 years then softened in camellia oil for three years with a price tag to prove it.

A lot of connoisseurs of Parisian luxury might not have heard of Touhami, or de Taillac for that matter, but they'll definitely be familiar with Cire >



**Above:** For the past two decades, Ramdane Touhami and his wife, Victoire de Taillac-Touhami, have led a nomadic life, living in London, Paris, Jaipur, Tokyo and New York but now they're back in Paris.



**Above:** Buly 1803's perfumes are based on water and not alcohol because they feel the latter is too harsh on the skin and actually degrades the lasting power of the scent itself.

Trudon, the world's oldest candlemaker.

Founded by the Trudon family in 1643, it once provided candles to France's cathedrals, nobility and, most famously, the royal court, supplying Versailles on a daily basis during the time of the Sun King, Louis XIV. Well, it was Touhami and his wife who revived and revamped Trudon in 2007, despite the fact it had been dormant for over 120 years. They were instrumental in helping it regain a cult following, especially among A-listers and designers, some of whom even collaborated with the brand. But in 2011 they moved on, selling their stake to their partner Olivier Blondeau.

A Frenchman of Moroccan origin, Touhami's story is a colourful one, especially the way he tells it – with the allure, grit and timing of a stand-up comic. Touhami is the grandson of a Moroccan hero and son of an apple picker from France's conservative deep south. A troubled kid, he was kicked out of one school after another in the Tarn-et-Garonne region of France but with a revolutionary spirit and communist bent, he arrived in Paris at the age of 19. He lived for a year on the streets before eventually launching a series of subversive t-shirt and fashion brands and making a name for himself in the Parisian creative class. "I know Paris by heart because I walked it entirely by foot." I ask him what he loves about the city despite, or perhaps because of, his difficult start. His two-word response tells the tale of his talent: "The details," he responds before proceeding to take out his mobile and show

me just the photos he's taken within the last 20 minutes: wooden forms carved above doorways, marble engraving, a tinted blue window. Details are everything to this man.

I then discover how every salesperson at Buly must learn calligraphy from the brand's in-house master calligrapher, so that they can hand-address customers their acquired products. The head of protocol for the Japanese emperor even works with them, directing their in-house 'Art of Gifting'. Go to the newly renovated Hôtel Crillon in Paris, and you'll find Buly amenities in the rooms, with its soaps engraved with guests' initial – and not in any old font – one uncovered from an 18<sup>th</sup> century book used at the court of Louis XIV. Touhami then hired someone to vectorize it into digital format over the course of a year, "And then we had to engrave it on a soap. A machine that engraves on soap didn't exist, so we invented one." Clearly, if Touhami has an idea, *c'est possible*.

His magic is a unique mix of original, authentic product and iconoclastic artistic direction. "I believe you have to start from the product, not from the image of the product." His track record of taking heritage brands and adding a revolutionary combination of perfectionism and reinvention is far from your average brand relaunch. He sees heritage brands as just a perimeter for work, a boundary in which to structure his essentially creative drive and around which he forms a set of rules. These rules not only help (and complicate) his work, but they are also exactly what craft an ironclad brand identity. At Buly 1803, for example, there is no plastic – anywhere – along with hundreds of other rules regarding packaging and typography that control every aspect of a client's experience.

A revolutionary spirit meets sleepy old-French heritage brands? Oscar Wilde had something to say to this effect: "It is only the modern that ever becomes old-fashioned." Is this obsession with old made anew have something to do with nostalgia?

"I don't care about nostalgia. The 18<sup>th</sup> century? I wasn't there. The 19<sup>th</sup>? Wasn't there either," says Touhami at his typical fast pace. "Curious – yes – not nostalgic. It's not the same. I'm interested in a moment, fascinated and curious but I have very little nostalgia. You know why? Because I think the best is yet to come." ■



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