

# Fermob: the global conquest of the French Touch

by

■ **Bernard Reybier** ■

CEO, Fermob

## Overview

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a farrier created a workshop in Thoissey in the Ain *department* which later became Fermob. This business experienced ups and downs in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and only had nine employees when it was bought by Bernard Reybier in 1989. Reybier had always dreamed about having his own company, and embarked on an ambitious strategy which included international marketing and collaborations with talented designers. Initially, this project was greeted with puzzlement and even derision. Nevertheless, Fermob was chosen to supply the chairs for Times Square, Broadway, and for Harvard. It also worked with the New York Bryant Park Corporation to help to transform this public park, which had a reputation for being a 'no-go' area of the city, into a famous scenic New York landmark with a French Touch, reminiscent of the style of the Parisian Luxembourg Gardens which incidentally is also equipped by Fermob. Always trying to be different from the norm, Fermob adopted a sustainable development approach in 1996 before this concept even became well-known. As its brand has grown, it has won markets around the world where its French Touch has captured the imagination worldwide.

Report by Élisabeth Bourguinat • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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I come from a family of entrepreneurs, and I always knew that one day I would become one myself. After studying at the Lyon Business School (EM Lyon), I worked in the export department for an SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) in the capital goods sector. After this, I had various jobs at Black & Decker, an American hand-held power tools company, first as a project manager, then a key accounts manager in charge of domestic clients, and finally marketing director of one and then two divisions. In 1989, having held positions of responsibility in sales management in important companies in the food-processing industry, I decided that I had enough experience to be able to manage my own company.

### A struggling ironwork workshop

I came across Fermob by chance. It specialised in the manufacture of metal garden furniture. At the time, it was an ironwork workshop which only had nine employees. It had once employed as many as thirty people, but this small company had suffered as a result of the boom in sales of plastic chairs which can be bought for next to nothing in the local supermarket. The shareholders had successively reduced the number of employees, but the situation continued to go downhill, and it was decided to sell the workshop.

The company's catalogue only had four pages and two product ranges; the old-fashioned chair with swirls which had existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the traditional, folding Bistro chair with its wooden slats which needed painting every summer. A third piece of furniture evolved from a chance encounter between Fermob and Pascal Mourgue. He had designed a very contemporary product which was a very flat metal writing desk inspired by furniture dating from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I fell in love with this product, and this was a determining factor in my decision to buy Fermob. I thought that this piece of furniture embodied Gustave Eiffel's vision that iron was a source of creativity. Steel is a wonderful material and has existed for as long as one can remember. It is very malleable and is undoubtedly one of the materials which lends itself best to conveying the creative ideas of a designer or artist. Chair legs made with 10 mm-wide steel wire are very resilient.

### Twenty-five years of happiness

My friends were very surprised by my decision to buy Fermob. In view of my career path, they had thought that I would rather have managed a larger company. As far as I was concerned, I saw it as an opportunity to rebuild a company starting from almost nothing, and letting my imagination run wild. When I bought the company (or rather, the workshop), it had no sales, financial or organisational structure.

This choice also appealed to my ambition to manage an industrial company. Despite my business school studies, I have always been fascinated by manufacture, and when I was looking for a job, I excluded anything that was related to the service industry or retail. I have never regretted my decision; it has given me twenty-five very happy years.

It has also been twenty-five consecutive years of growth which have seen our turnover increase from 1 million to 44 million Euros.

### Strategy

The strategy which I employed for Fermob in 1989 has not changed subsequently. Furthermore, I am convinced that consistency is a key factor in our success.

### A global company

The very first day I called a meeting of the employees, and told them that we were going to become a global company. Many years later, they admitted that the day I told them this, they thought I was completely crazy.

I explained that with our niche in this market, we did not stand any chance of reaching a large volume of industrial production if we only concentrated on the domestic market.

This deliberate emphasis had the advantage of being very clear to my colleagues and the people we subsequently recruited. From the very start, the product database was translated into three languages: French, English and German. The person who was in charge of orders at the time only had very rudimentary English. I told her that if she knew how to say 'chair' and 'table' that that was enough. Shortly afterwards, I told all my colleagues that they had to speak foreign languages. I did not say that they had to speak them fluently in order not to stress them.

I did not create an export department. I do not see why we should treat a French client any differently from a German or an American client.

### *An innovative company*

The second part of my strategy was innovation. In a market as wide as ours with numerous brands, I thought it was essential that we should stand out.

First of all we developed the products, not according to their function (chairs generally have four legs!) but from an aesthetic and ergonomic point of view as well as from the ways in which they could be used and which paints were suitable. Initially I contacted large companies like Renault Véhicules Industriels and Rhône Poulenc, both of which occupy an important place in the Lyon industrial scene, in order to learn about their metal treatment processes. Colour was a wonderful field of innovation for us. We started with just two colours – racing green and white – but now we have twenty-four, and we are recognised as experts in this area.

We also made innovations in the organisation of the company. For example, in response to the very seasonal nature of our market with a difference in demand ratios of 1 to 8 from winter to summer, we decided to arrange our working time on a seasonal basis in 1991. This meant that we were operating illegally for a few years but it was essential to adapt our organisation to market cycles.

### *The central place of design*

Fermob's third strategic approach is the recourse to design, and how this is related to the use, comfort, ergonomics and aesthetics. We try to add poetry and harmony to this mix. However, we should not confuse design with art. As I have a tendency to say 'If art is the question, design has to be the answer.'

When, in 1989, I decided to make design a strategic factor for Fermob, this resulted in a few scornful remarks in the press. Today this word has become a leitmotiv, but at the time, it was far from the case.

On the other hand, we never tried to be a leader in the general furniture market. In terms of design, we made certain choices, and in particular we have always been in favour of simplicity. If you like baroque, which is perfectly respectable, it is unlikely that you will find what you are looking for at Fermob. We have to be clear with the decisions we have taken, in the talks we have had with our customers, and in the trust we have established with them.

### *Owning one's roots*

I am not a supporter of the "made in France" brigade and I do not like this slogan. However, I fully stand behind the origins and story of our company, and it so happens that our company is French. No design nor creation process can possibly exist from nothing. There is always a sequence of events, as borne out in the history of art, and this process is all the richer and stronger because its inspiration finds its source in a traditional, age-old foundation.

Last December, I held a press conference at the French Embassy in Tokyo in front of about forty Japanese journalists. I always begin by telling the company's history, starting with the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I mention the Luxembourg Gardens, also the Eiffel Tower, the Industrial Revolution, Bonnard, Matisse and Dufy, and I talk about our work with colour. These Japanese journalists were extremely attentive, and I am convinced that

many people who manage French companies are not sufficiently aware of the kind of appreciation or recognition that most foreign countries have for France and its culture.

Allow me to make a link between this recognition and the fact that on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, 47 heads of state came to Paris to take part in the solemn march in remembrance of the victims of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. I believe that it was only on this day that many French people discovered the extent to which our country symbolises universal values. My company, Fermob, and I are insignificant compared to what happened on that day. However, I am nevertheless convinced that throughout the world there is a very strong expectation, curiosity and desire regarding to the values which France embodies, not only freedom of expression, but also in the art of living and design. I try to convince my fellow entrepreneurs about this.

### *Fermob's values*

The last keys to Fermob's success are the values which we upheld and put down on paper about fifteen years ago. For an SME with less than 100 employees at the time, this was a bit unusual. However, during difficult times which we have experienced for the past few years, the fact of sharing values and thereby having stable points of reference makes one's colleagues stronger and more resilient in the face of adversity. When the only point of reference in a company is a fixed, quantified target and one does not reach this objective, everything collapses. Values, however, do not change as a result of economic events.

Fermob's values do not conform to any sort of hierarchy. They include the joy of living (I hope that this is noticeable in our range of products), an aesthetic sensitivity, a sense of responsibility, empathy with others, and respect for the environment.

Since 1996, respect for the environment has become a central theme in our production. We could no longer manufacture garden furniture and ignore nature. It was even more important that our customers in California, Germany and other countries in Northern Europe were pioneers in the sustainable development approach, and that we responded to their expectations. Furthermore, a study carried out in 1996 among employees had shown that respect for the environment was a value for which they were prepared to stand up. Respect for nature is a major feature in our company. Our workshop is situated in the countryside, not far from the Saône river, the Bresse plain and the Dombes ponds. One of our employees is the president of a local hunt, and another is president of a fishing society! This is why I decided very early on to invest in a paint production line which did not pollute the environment. This was an important gesture because this investment represented one quarter of our annual turnover.

### *Creating a brand*

It was only when I had re-sized Fermob's collections and our industrial facilities ten years ago that I decided to develop the Fermob brand name. To do so, I went back to my roots and drew on my experience as a marketing director.

Fifteen years ago, I was stunned to see that the automobile industry, despite the huge amount of resources it had, focused its sales pitch on car engines and their power and speed, rather than promoting the purposes of the car. One must not forget that the consumer does not only buy a product for what it is capable of doing, but also the story that goes with it. This means that the company has to be responsible, because in order for the story to be a good one, it has to be true and coherent, and this requires therefore transparency with customers.

## **The French Touch**

When we started to get noticed at important furniture salons like the International Milan Furniture Fair, no-one realised that we were a French company. They thought we were Italian. Today, we embody the French Touch, and this is one of the reasons people buy our furniture.

In 1991, New York's Bryant Park, situated on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 40<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Streets was considered to be one of the most dangerous places in Manhattan with an average of one violent death every day. When

Rudy Giuliani as Mayor started to transform New York, the Bryant Park Corporation (which managed the park) invested in a great deal of work to regenerate it. We were lucky enough to be part of this operation, and started by selling 200 garden chairs to the Corporation. Today, there are 3,000 Fermob chairs in Bryant Park. They stay outside throughout the year, day and night, whatever the weather. This park has become one of the safest places in Manhattan and is a showcase for the cleanliness of New York.

This opportunity was our passport to numerous American organisations as because of it, our reputation spread. When New York City decided to make Times Square partially pedestrianised, Fermob was the company chosen to supply the chairs to equip this square which is visited by 160 million people every year. In total, there are now 12,000 Fermob chairs in New York City: as many chairs as there are taxis! Our presence on Wall Street is not because we are quoted on the New York Stock Exchange, but because of our chairs which line the pavements of this famous street.

A few years ago, we were chosen by Harvard to bring some conviviality to the university gardens and to help 'make bridges' between professors and students. The chair model chosen was Lounge: these chairs are low and comfortable, and come in six vibrant colours. They are inspired by the chairs we have in the Luxembourg Gardens. I am convinced that the reason our products were chosen is because they represent in some people's eyes, a piece of the Sorbonne, the Century of Enlightenment and '*Les Encyclopédistes*', which Harvard has in a way appropriated by buying our furniture which is so symbolic and seeped in history. This order was followed by sales of chairs to Stanford and Yale. Fermob was also chosen by Google to equip part of the patio areas of their American offices. As they explained their decision to us, 'we saw your products in New York: you are a dynamic company a bit like us!'

Last year, we decided to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the patent of the folding Bistro chair which was registered in 1889, the year in which the Eiffel Tower was built. On this occasion, we designed and built a replica of the Eiffel Tower, 13 metres high, made with 324 red Bistro chairs, assembled and welded by our employees. The number 324 is a reference to the height in metres of the Eiffel Tower. Our Bistro Tower took pride of place for a few weeks during the summer of 2014 on the Champ de Mars lawns in Paris, not far from its big sister, the Eiffel Tower. The day after the press conference following the inauguration, I learned from Reuters that our Bistro Tower was the second most requested subject: 226 television channels had bought the images, and articles were published in publications as varied as Italian Vanity Fair, 'Le Journal de Mickey', and the business pages of 'Le Figaro'.

## Fermob today

In 1989, Fermob employed 9 people with a turnover of one million Euros. At that time I was told that it was impossible to succeed in an old-style profession which required a large labour force. Today, the company has 200 employees and has a turnover of 44 million Euros, 48% of which is generated abroad in approximately forty countries.

We have positioned ourselves in the middle-of-the-road market. I am aware that many people say that such a position is worthless and has no future, but my company has shown them to be wrong. During these last 25 years, we have grown, and our profit has increased. In 2014, growth was positive in all our global markets except the Italian market.

The Fermob brand name is now a reference point in our professional sector, not only in France, but throughout the world.

# Discussion



## The first salons

**Question:** *In the beginning you had nine employees, you made no secret of your global ambition and people thought you were crazy. How did you manage to get started?*

**Bernard Reybier:** I never spent a penny on market research. However, I did what is now called 'benchmarking'. I analysed the results of two of my competitors whom I admired. Both of them made a large part of their turnover abroad, and their primary markets were the United States and Germany. I immediately registered Fermob for a garden furniture salon in Germany and I bought a plane ticket for the United States.

Originally I chose not to invest in marketing because I trusted our products. I gave priority to our sales development by trying to co-ordinate it with the development of our industrial facilities. It was only from 2004 onwards that I started investing a significant amount of money in marketing.

**Q.:** *In your first salons you only had a few products to present, and they were a bit out-dated. What did you sell to the Germans?*

**B. R.:** The German market is not an easy market. Generally speaking, one has to be at a salon three consecutive years in order to get noticed. The first year, people walked by without stopping. The second year, they said 'Oh look! They're still there!', and the third year, they came to talk to us.

Having said that, initially I managed to highlight a unique characteristic which was in keeping with what we were and what we wanted to do. At that time, in 1989/1990, it was common to exhibit garden tables which were set with crockery and artificial flowers. I decided to get rid of all these accessories and to choose something more original: every morning, we put fresh flowers on our tables. It was also less expensive than buying plates! People came to see us and said 'your stand is not like the others'. This was exactly what I had hoped for.

## Rust and pinched fingers

**Q.:** *The main thing about garden furniture is that it has to be put into storage in the winter to avoid problems associated with rust. To ease storage, the chairs fold but when you try to fold them, you pinch your fingers. Have you made any innovations in this area?*

**B. R.:** The problem with rust has not been totally solved but we have made a great deal of progress. We have been helped by the fantastic, silent steel revolution. When I bought my first second-hand car, I lifted the car mat to count the number of holes in the bodywork. There then followed a period when an anti-corrosion guarantee lasting seven years was sold. Today, when you buy a car, if you ask the seller what the risks are from rust, he won't believe his ears! Not only are the new steels much more resistant to corrosion, but they are protected by polyester powder paints which are extremely resistant to rust. We asked for advice from companies like AkzoNobel and DuPont de Nemours who helped us a great deal. They also liked working with us because we asked questions about problems which were unusual. Even a small company can put important innovations into place if it knows how to ask the right questions of the right people.

The problem of pinched fingers has not been completely resolved. Security standards have helped us to make progress. We have installed small, protective plastic pads on the feet and we have tried to improve security in our design. In 1996, we created the Dune chair which has a seat which is slightly rounded and when pushed forward to close, it almost folds naturally. We have not yet found the secret to very flat furniture which folds by itself, but we are still looking!

## The folding Bistro chair

**Q.:** *Your iconic product, the folding Bistro chair, is not really ergonomic. The back is not supported, and it is not very comfortable.*

**B. R.:** You are right. The Bistro chair has a number of faults, but it also has some good points, for example, its price: it is the least expensive of the range. Furthermore, throughout the world it is considered to be representative of the French Touch. We have improved it by making it completely metallic, and painting it in twenty different colours.

At the same time, from 1996 onwards, I asked Pascal Mourgue to design a model which did not have the faults of the Bistro chair. The result was the Dune chair which has a folding metal structure and is covered with a stretched, technical fabric. This chair is now in its 19<sup>th</sup> year of production, and continues to sell well at a higher price than the Bistro chair.

## The designers

**Q.:** *Do you call on well-known designers, or do you also have an in-house design team?*

**B. R.:** Apart from Philippe Starck, who is known throughout the world, most of the designers' names are not well-known by the general public. Customers do not go into shops asking for products made by a specific designer. They trust that the brand will have a good creative team. Therefore, it is not the name of the designer which sells the product, but the quality of the product.

I have often noticed young designers who subsequently have become famous in our field like Patrick Jouin. I saw one of his prototypes in an exhibition and I wanted to work with him. Since then, he has had an exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris and one of his products was chosen by the Museum for Decorative Arts, and he has just designed the new bar at the Paris Ritz Hotel.

I also call on our own team of in-house designers who have become more professional due to the recruitment of graduates from the major design schools.

**Q.:** *Have you put a formalised innovation process in place?*

**B. R.:** I created an inverted pyramid with three levels and 'deliverables' at each stage. The 'exploration committee' chooses about two hundred and fifty ideas each year. The project committee keeps sixty of these. The technical development committee works on thirty of these. This process is very formal, but this does not prevent the fact that from time to time some ideas go directly from the exploration stage to the development stage.

## Management of diversity

**Q.:** *You have a very wide range of models and colours. How do you handle these variations in your industrial processes?*

**B. R.:** Our three main activities are shaping, in other words cutting out steel or sheet metal and giving it a shape; assembly, which takes place essentially by automated or semi-automated electrical welding; and the finishing stage, in other words anti-corrosion treatment and then painting.

The seasonal nature of our business encouraged me to put an organisation in place which was half-way between industry and craftsmanship. For the shaping, it is mass production in order to reduce costs. Some pieces of the Bistro chairs, for example, are produced by a machine which is capable of making 5,000 pieces an hour. The half-finished pieces are stored, and then the pieces are assembled and painted in mass production according to the size of the orders.

Our success is based on a fine-tuned combination of these two approaches.

## Made in France

**Q.:** *Why do you not like the expression 'made in France'?*

**B. R.:** I took part in a meeting at Bercy (the French Finance Ministry) whose aim was to regulate products made in France. I am opposed to this sort of measure, not only because one has to determine the percentage of the product which is made in France which would be extremely complex and would encourage large retail groups to find ingenious solutions which are barely legal, but also because I think that any form of protectionism is extremely dangerous. We cannot develop our exports while closing the door on our neighbours.

On the other hand, I happily accept my status as a French company. I am proud to have created 190 jobs in my country, and to have saved 60 others by recently buying a company which was struggling.

**Q.:** *Are all your products made in France?*

**B. R.:** In view of the volume of our products and their seasonality, we need to manufacture them near our markets in order to minimise both costs and delivery times knowing that air transport is very costly and transportation by boat may take four to five weeks. As our main market is Europe, it is logical that we have an industrial location in France where the company began. But because I now hope to develop the brand in Asia, I have an Asian industrial partner and we manufacture one-fifth of our products in Asia. A French team helps to decide on the equipment to be used, and controls the processes in order to guarantee the same quality as in France. If the company continues to grow, I shall have to think about setting up a factory on the American continent.

**Q.:** *The expression 'made in France' appears several times in your catalogue.*

**B. R.:** Most of our production takes place at our factory in Saint Didier sur Chalaronne, and this expression is used above all when people mention our most iconic product, the Bistro folding chair which today is manufactured entirely in our French factory.

## Infringement

**Q.:** *I get the feeling that copying your models must be relatively easy. What have you done to avoid this happening?*

**B. R.:** I am happy that you think that our models are easy to copy because that proves that they appear to be uncomplicated which is our aim. Having said that, it is not as easy to make a copy as one might think. The rigidity of steel and aluminium has to follow very precise specifications. For the models which include canvas, the correct tension of the canvas is not very easy to achieve, and the process which we have perfected to do this has been patented.

None of this has prevented our models from being copied, but most customers know what they are dealing with. They realise that if a copy of our chairs is sold for 19 Euros in a supermarket whereas the Fermob model sells for 100 Euros in our Parisian shop, that there are reasons for this difference. They know that the quality is not the same. Our Bistro chair, for example, stands out because of the rigidity of the steel, the anti-pinching system and the silent foot pads.

What is more annoying is the unfair competition from manufacturers who not only deliberately copy several characteristic elements of our products, but use some of our names or elements from our advertising campaigns. In these cases, we launch legal proceedings and, a few years ago, we won a case which led to the destruction of 2,500 fake chairs. We are currently in a legal battle with a retailer who went so far as to take the names of our Fermob paint colours, 'Aubergine' and 'Capucine'. This case should not be too difficult for our lawyers.

However, I am outraged that in the fight against counterfeiting, we only target the manufacturers and not enough is done against the retailers. A Vietnamese manufacturer is not the person who makes the decision to copy one of our models. It is much more likely that it is the buyer from a major retailer who shows him models from our catalogue which might be of interest. Retailers are therefore complicit in counterfeiting.



Not all retailers behave in the same way. Some understand that it is not in their interest to confuse their customers. In Australia, our products were the object of infringements, and one retailer took the initiative to encourage all the other retailers to take joint action against the manufacturer, explaining to him that if he did not withdraw this product the retailers would not buy anything from him any more. The threat worked.

## Where we are in the market

**Q.:** *Fermob quality comes at a price. Is it out of modesty that you regard yourself as middle-of-the-range?*

**B. R.:** We sell the Bistro chair for 50 Euros and our other chairs sell for 80, 120, 150 and 250 Euros. In international salons, there are chairs for outdoors which cost between 500 and 600 Euros each. Our chairs are therefore in the middle range, certainly when compared to the world market. As far as the French market is concerned, you could say that we are near the top of the middle range.

## Export

**Q.:** *You mentioned that you had not generated any specific organisation for export sales. What do you mean by that?*

**B. R.:** My sales network is not organised by country. Until recently, one of the sales managers was in charge of both Paris and England. Another manager is in charge of Germany and Spain simply because she is Spanish and she speaks German very well.

**Q.:** *Nevertheless, export is a trade. The oldest French business school, ESCP, founded in 1819, was specifically created to train exporters especially in trading with the colonies.*

**B. R.:** At that time, it was obviously justified to train specialists in export and to devise organisations, country by country, in the knowledge that each country had its own language and currency. The world has changed since then, and has become more open. The fact that the same salespeople can do their job in France as well as abroad is very satisfying. It gives them some perspective and ideas.

## Competitors

**Q.:** *Who are your competitors?*

**B. R.:** Our market is not sufficiently important to be of interest to big groups. Our competitors are small companies with a few national leaders, especially in Spain and Italy. Most did not know how to market their products in the way we did. It is likely that in a very mature market it would have been more difficult for us to succeed.

Our real competitors are elsewhere. Since we know that our products are not absolutely essential, our potential customers have the choice of buying our furniture or taking a weekend in Provence or in a winter sports resort.

## Internet sales

**Q.:** *What has been the effect of the digital revolution on you?*

**B. R.:** We made the decision to have a presence on the Internet but only via furniture specialists like Made In Design, Delamaison or Camif. We also have our own on-line sales website which is closely connected to our physical distribution network. A study carried out in various European countries showed that in our sector most customers want to have direct physical contact with the products to see the quality of the materials or the comfort of a piece of furniture for themselves. On-line sales will reach perhaps 15% of the turnover in a few years, but I doubt that they will replace retail sales.

We rely a great deal on social networks to promote our brand. In our new catalogue (which I prefer to call an 'album', because, unlike a catalogue, it does not present all our ranges), photographs of the models are taken

at 'real' people's homes; customers have agreed to take part in this exercise. A few years ago, I was at a photo shoot with a model who, when posing, pouted, as if she was bored by her job. As a result I decided to stop working with professional models. We ask our 'fans' to let us come to visit them in their homes in France, Switzerland and Denmark. We bring the latest models and colours, and we take photos of them in their gardens. These photos tell real stories.

■ Presentation of the speaker ■

**Bernard Reybier:** CEO of Fermob. He was behind the renaissance of his company, transforming it from a metal workshop with nine employees into a middle-market company which has become a reference in the garden furniture sector.

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