



*Esquire*

**THE  
BIG  
BLACK  
BOOK**

**Style and luxury for men**

Issue N°9  
Spring/Summer 2017  
UK Edition



£6



# 45

## The luxury leather experts

Drive yourself to distraction at Connolly

When you're assembling a creative team to head up a new retail venture, you could do worse than recruit these four experts: the former head of leather goods at Hermès, Couli Joubert; erstwhile Prada designer Marc Audibert; co-founder of The Workers Club, Adam Cameron; and knitwear wizard Lorraine Acornley. They're a tough crowd to corral. But when the venture is being helmed by Isabel Ettegui – the wife of the late, great Joseph Ettegui, the man behind luxury retailer Joseph – you can see the appeal. The project is the relaunch of Connolly.

Founded by the Connolly family in 1878, the brand made its name producing high quality leathers for the automotive industry. Bentley and Rolls-Royce were among the company's prestigious clients. Connolly also produced the leather for the benches in the Houses of Parliament. In 1995, Isabel Ettegui took control of the creative

THE NEW CONNOLLY  
FLAGSHIP PREMISES  
IN LONDON. BELOW:  
THE BRAND'S OWNER,  
ISABEL ETTEDGUI

identity of the brand and opened the first Connolly clothing store on a Belgravia mews in London.

Featuring an interior by the revered French designer Andrée Putman, and more brilliantly considered luxury basics than you could wave a hand-rolled silk scarf at, it was an instant hit with discerning shoppers. In 2000, the brand moved to roomier premises on Conduit Street (once again designed by Putman) but then, in 2010, Joseph died and Isabel closed the doors to the store.

Now, Isabel Etedgui has returned to the fray and is breathing new life into the brand. There's a shiny new three-storey shop on Mayfair's Clifford Street, just off Savile Row, with an array of unashamedly beautiful things to purchase. It's a retail haven the likes of which hasn't been seen since Joseph's heyday.

Joubert's sumptuous geometric leather bags, wallets and leather goods sit at the entrance to the shop alongside Acornley's expertly crafted cable-knit jumpers in jewel shades. Audibet's monochromatic, unisex collection – of high-waisted, long line frock coats, perfectly cut wool trousers and beautiful silk shirts – is housed in the back room on the ground floor, while Cameron's modern sportswear (the coffee-bean brown shearing coat is the star of his show) is situated on the lower ground floor. Upstairs there's a space resembling the most stylish sitting room you've ever set foot in, finished with a curated selection of Gilles & Boissier furniture, which is all for sale (the Parisian architects also designed the store, worth a visit to see on its own). There are pieces by other fashion designers, too, such as driving shoes by Car Shoe and ties by Charvet.

"It's nice, I think, to bring in some smaller designers and buy in a small amount of those," says Etedgui. "I want to buy in brands which work well with Connolly, otherwise it's too boring. All our hats come from Viennese company Mühlbauer, and these guys are world famous in their own right, so the fact they want to sell to me is a great thrill."

It's Etedgui's magnanimous approach to retail and luxury – an approach shared by her late husband – which is palpable in the store. It's a warm, welcoming space that feels thoughtfully curated for a specific customer. It's true to the brand's heritage, too. Etedgui has worked with the Connolly family to ensure that the label will carry on producing leather interiors for key clients on a small scale. There's a space dedicated to the made-to-order automotive interiors service in the basement of the store, next to the cashmere dressing gowns. "We're not going to do cut parts for Toyota," Etedgui smiles.

Etedgui is mindful of keeping her customer base loyal. "I think people relate to Connolly because of heritage," she says. "Basically, the Connolly family invented this finish for car leather which prevented it from cracking. In those days they used real products. Maybe people connect with it because it's rooted in that. You've got to know your customers, you've got to connect. I had an 80-year-old come into the store the other day and ask to sit down. He told me he was at school with the Connolly boys, and I asked which ones. He said he didn't know – they were all called Connolly, they all went by their surnames. Then he brought out this wallet that was from the very beginning, when they were on the mews, and he told me he loves it and that it means so much

to him. I mean, how many people go into [other stores] and say that? So maybe the key is to just do two shops in the world and that's it..."

For now, Etedgui, who describes herself as "a shop keeper", will continue with the one store and keep the collections simple, elegant and, above all, wearable. "What I'm hoping is that some of these pieces will come back each year. We're not trying to change the face of fashion. Things will be refined but it's always going to be good quality, long-lasting pieces."

When pressed on the future of the brand, the intensely likeable Etedgui is conspiratorial and expansive all at once. "I have so many crazy ideas, you know. I'd love to do a Connolly by the sea [collection], for instance," she says. "I'd love to do something on the Riviera, like all our stuff for boating or summer holidays. I'd like to play with the idea of what flagships are. They're not pop-ups but they are site specific. I know there's an old boat house in Monaco, maybe that's what I'll do – sell vintage sarongs from a boat house. Maybe." **ENDS**  
4 Clifford Street, London W1; [connollyengland.com](http://connollyengland.com)



By Teo van den Broeke / Photographs by Jamie McGregor Smith