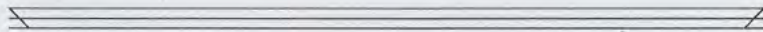


Growing up with a Francophile mother, I had always half-suspected that Paris's reputation as the world capital of style was her propaganda, coasting on the fumes of Chanel ads and old Audrey Hepburn movies.



Paris's status as the world's fashion capital dates back to the late 17th century when Louis XIV centralized and funded schools devoted to arts and crafts countrywide. Style became a matter of national pride.

Then, in 2006, I moved here myself and realized how wrong I was. Those *gamines ingénues* in ballet flats and perfectly fitted little T-shirt dresses really are riding bicycles all over town. In working-class Belleville, tony Saint-Germain, or the groovy Marais there really are young moms in ponytails, skinny jeans, and Bréton stripe T-shirts, and sleek fiftysome-things in angular bobs, with neat handbags and silk scarves, their creases pressed just so. Parisian style is mythical: The chic "*Parisienne*" is natural and feminine, her heels never too high, nor her skirt too tight, nor her makeup too pronounced except for that little pop of lipstick. But it's also real.

That famous Paris look has inspired hundreds of how-to books and sold thousands of plane tickets. It's also sold a lot of luxury handbags, though it must be said, mostly to people who aren't French. Com-

panies such as Chanel and Yves Saint Laurent have made millions off of the trope of the chic Parisienne. As a fashion journalist living in Paris, I've gotten to see how the aura is created, how those beautiful sparkly baubles and little black dresses come to life. There are men and women who train for years to carve a gemstone for a Place Vendôme jeweler. Others toil in the ateliers of haute couture artisans and work tirelessly to invigorate legendary Parisian fashion houses. Their labor makes the glamour possible. They're inspired by French taste as much as they promote it. But that demanding work is most often done in far less glamorous settings than what most people see on the shop floor. It happens behind firmly closed doors. I was able to open some.



THE CRAFT BEHIND THE SPARKLE

It's not the Corinthian pilasters or the bronze central column celebrating Napoleon I that give the Place Vendôme its mystique today. It's what shines in the jewelry shop windows ringing the square. That sparkle has lured both lookie-loos and flush buyers since the turn of the 20th century, when jewelry houses such as Boucheron, Chaumet, and Van Cleef & Arpels first set up shop. The pull is even stronger now, as creativity, daring, and whimsy not seen since the 1930s have returned to the high jewelry market. ("High jewelry" is industry-speak



Artisans train for decades to master the skills needed to craft a single piece displayed inside the cases at Van Cleef & Arpels. Opposite: Île Saint Louis attracts locals and visitors with its cafés and unique specialty shops.



Van Cleef's Mystery Setting is one of the most impressive techniques developed by the jewelry houses on Vendôme. The process is so labor intensive, it might take a combined 600 hours to put together a brooch.



for those really outstanding, technically complex pieces that often feature especially valuable stones.) With the luxury goods boom in Russia and China, companies better known for clothes, such as Christian Dior, or leather goods, such as Louis Vuitton, have recently opened high jewelry divisions. "There is a reconnection to the worlds of art and fashion that has taken place since the end of the 1990s," says Nicolas Bos, CEO of Van Cleef & Arpels. And so the jewelry houses on the Place Vendôme now strive even harder to outdo each other in cleverness and pizzazz. There's Boucheron's translucent globes of rock crystal and pavé diamonds, and next door at Van Cleef

is a brooch that renders a parrot out of multicolored sapphires and diamonds, suspended on a branch made of opal and chalcedony.

Van Cleef is rare among the Vendôme houses in its desire to communicate to the public how its pieces are made. It has opened a series of immersive tutorials in an 18th-century townhouse on Vendôme called L'École; a small museum displays vintage pieces next door to the flagship boutique; and Van Cleef's high jewelry appears regularly on the international museum circuit. In the same spirit, the jeweler permitted me to poke around one of the ateliers in its network, around the corner from Vendôme. As a condition of my visit, I could not reveal the exact location of the workshop, nor could I name any of the artisans I spoke to, nor could we show them in photographs. "We can't afford to have people working with stones being identified in the street and followed," explained Bos. Fair enough.

All I really wanted to see was how they do a Mystery Setting. Patented by Van Cleef & Arpels in 1933, it's one of the most impressive techniques developed by the Vendôme jewelry houses. It is used for bracelets, necklaces, brooches, or any other piece in which Van Cleef wants an uninterrupted flow of gems with no visible metal. I already knew that to create a Mystery Setting, a gem cutter makes tiny jigsaw cuts along the sides of stones, allowing them to be linked together in a sort of train set on invisible metal rails, with no prongs or frames. I didn't know that the process is so labor intensive—it might take a combined 600 hours to put together a brooch—that the house can only produce a few such pieces a year.



The concept shop Springsioux, bottom left, sells jewelry and clothes designed by Eric Charles-Donatien, top right.

It turns out a Mystery set piece starts like any other high jewelry item: with a gouache drawing, then a pewter dummy. Once the mock-up is approved, while the precious metalwork is carved and its rails soldered, a lapidary goes to work on the gemstones. At this atelier, which houses about 40 employees, a handful of stoncutters work in a small room, set off from the main work space. On the day of my visit, the master cutter slowly chips away at the sides of a ruby of about .25 carats, already emerald cut by his apprentice. His tiny stone is affixed to a glob of waxy-looking lapidary cement on a metal rod. A single wrong move and he'll have to start over with a new stone, which would be an expensive mistake.

What inspires someone to pursue a career carving infinitesimal nicks into gemstones? The master says, "It's not just manual work. Each piece is a discovery, every time. I'm never bored."



SPECIALTY ARTISANS

Highly-skilled jewelry artisans don't work exclusively for big companies on the Place Vendôme. There is a freelance network of them through-

out town, particularly in the 8th arrondissement. These craftspeople will pick up the overflow of work from a place like Van Cleef. And sometimes they'll work, using the same techniques, but with materials less precious, for young independent designers such as 28-year-old Annelise Michelson. Her toothy metal "Carnivore" earcuffs and rings are featured on the covers of the major French fashion magazines. Though her accessories are not made from rubies or platinum, and one of her pieces might take one twentieth of the time it takes to make a piece of high jewelry, many of the





Jewelry designer Annelise Michelson, left, is known for her bright, punk-style necklaces. Milliner Sandrine Bourg, below, crafts glamorous hats for couture clients such as Christian Dior, Chanel, and Givenchy.

techniques are the same, and there is nothing mechanized or automated in her work.

Michelson is one of many young artisans with haute couture training. She studied at *École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, the pinnacle of education in the world of handmade fashion arts. So did Sandrine Bourg, whom I visit at her atelier downstairs from her lovely shop near the *Place des Vosges* in the Marais. Here she displays custom-made hats of all shapes and sizes, starting at \$650: There are jaunty, tapered felt fedoras; fascinators decorated with dappled grey pigeon feathers; and sweeping wide-brimmed sunhats. Her subterranean workspace, all of about 150 square feet, is crammed with hat blocks—the one part of her craft she contracts out, to the only carver left in Paris. She uses those blocks as frames to hand-mold materials such as wool, felt, sisal, and banana fiber into the tricky and dramatic shapes she's known for.

When Bourg was 18, she went to work for Madame Josette, a legendary Parisian hatmaker, who told her, “It takes nine months to make a child and nine years to make a hat,” Bourg recalls with an easy smile. “I had just arrived, and stood there with my suitcase in my hand and thought, what?! But this profession was calling me. I knew it was what I had to do. At first she had me just watching, saying that you learn more with your eyes than you do with your hands. That idea is very French and old school, but she was right.”

Those high standards, and the craft trades that are ruled by them, were what brought Bourg back to Paris to start her own business after a seven-year stint in London under Philip





Treacy, one of Britain's foremost milliners. "They say Paris is the capital of fashion, and though I think we must be more global in our vision, I had to come back here," she says. "This is where we still have all the artisans that I contact when we need feathers, flowers, embroidery. We're a little family."

If Bourj needs a feather to adorn a hat, she often calls Eric Charles-Donatien. I first met him seven years ago, when he was creative director of the 133-year-old feather and flowerworks Maison Lemarié. I recall visiting him at Lemarié's Haussmannian apartment in the 10th arrondissement. There, Charles-Donatien and

his staff would work around a table, sewing camellias made from satin, or carefully selecting, shaving, trimming, and attaching feathers to clothes, jewelry, and bags. They used sticks to apply glue as boxes of plumes, some over a century old, threatened to rain down upon us all from the shelves above.

Maison Lemarié is one of the few remaining couture ateliers of its kind. With the rise of automated production in the world of ready-to-wear clothing, there are fewer and fewer brands willing to devote money to handcrafted items. In 2002, Chanel purchased eight highly specialized ateliers, including Lemarié, in an attempt to preserve the skills of these artisans.

Charles-Donatien recently left Maison Lemarié to open his own atelier, where he does featherwork for such designers as Roger Vivier, Christian Dior, and Ralph Rucci. "When I'm training an intern, I try to explain the difference between just sticking some glue on any old feather, and finding the right one, with the right texture, so it's 100 percent the highest level they can do," he tells me. He also hand-makes costume jewelry and leather bags under his new brand, Moye & Da.

"No, it's not an assembly line, what we do," says Charles-Donatien. "And yes, it costs money. But to me what's chic now is not something that's simply trendy or expensive. It's about being conscious of the quality of something, and its conditions of production. Chic right here, right now, isn't a price tag," he says. "It's a connection. It's a more human point of view. It doesn't come just from your brain, it comes from your gut."



PARIS FASHION REINVENTED

The decade between 1947 and 1957 has been called the golden age of haute couture. In Paris, visionary designers such as Christian Dior, Coco Chanel, and Hubert de Givenchy

ushered in a new standard for high fashion that attracted the world's attention. Though the originators of most of the storied houses have passed on, their companies have survived by hiring some of the most exciting young talent in fashion to take over, most visibly in Paris.

One such example is French-Swedish designer Marcel Marongiu, who in 2007 took on the challenge of reinvigorating the brand Guy Laroche. Laroche founded his haute couture house in 1957 and became known for his practical approach to high fashion at a time when Christian Dior's "New Look," with its whaleboning and petticoats, was very much in vogue. Laroche made a mark with fresh minimalism, graphic silhou-



Marcel Marongiu, top center, designs understated, elegant clothes for the Guy Laroche label. His pieces, and those of other haute couture houses, take inspiration from the streets.

ettes, masculine tailoring, and color coordination. “When I was auditioning for the position, I read press clippings and looked at Mr. Laroche’s own sketches, and as I researched, it became really interesting,” recalls Marongiu. He is in his upstairs workspace at Laroche’s flagship boutique on the luxury drag of rue François 1er. “He was making modern, minimal, easy-to-wear clothing—like sweatshirts out of heavy duchesse satin—which was avant-garde at the time. Before him, you had French elegance, but what Laroche did was chic, in the sense that it was contemporary and aware of the times around him.”

Now Marongiu has turned Laroche’s fixation with monochrome dressing into new signatures like bright suits and monochrome separates whose silhouette is more Marlene Dietrich than Jackie O. Other classic Laroche hallmarks, like slits and keyholes, appear frequently, and Marongiu has reintroduced the haute sweatshirt, most recently in silk satin. There’s nothing retro about it.

Most of the *jeunes filles* I see around town are priced out of Guy Laroche’s target market. But Marongiu’s simple clothes, with their body-conscious silhouette—sexy but not sleazy—share DNA with the looks on the street.

“Ever since I was starting out as a designer, I wanted to test myself against the people working in Paris, and show myself I was as good,” says Marongiu. “Paris was and still is the only place where fashion is what it should be: not only commercial nor only avant-garde and crazy. Here you have individual visions, and that’s why I think Paris is so strong.” **A**

ALEXANDRA MARSHALL writes about fashion, food, and travel. Photographer TARA DONNE shot “Maine’s Homegrown Revival” in the November/December 2011 issue of AFAR.

WHERE TO FIND PARIS CHIC

Guy Laroche

Actress Marlene Dietrich is the muse for this house’s fall 2013 collection.
Rue François 1er, Champs-Élysées, 33/(O) 1-40-69-68-00, guylaroche.com

Le Bon Marché

The classic Paris department store carries edgy jewelry from Annelise Michelson.
24 Rue de Sèvres, 33/(O) 1-44-39-80-00, lebonmarche.com

Moye & Da

Eric Charles-Donatien makes jewelry and leather goods under the Moye & Da label.
4 Rue Montesquieu, 33/(O) 1-42-60-97-88, moye-da.com

Sandrine Bourg

Beautiful handmade hats are sold at this milliner’s tiny shop in the Marais.
19 Place Vendôme, 31 Rue des Tournelles, 33/(O) 1-48-87-19-32, sandrinebourg.com

Van Cleef & Arpels

High jewelry has been crafted at Van Cleef’s flagship since 1906.
22 Place Vendôme, 33/(O) 1-55-04-11-11, vancleefarpels.com