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THE WORLD OF FASHION

FEATHERED GLORY

In a studio in Paris, an old craft is given new life.

BY BURKHARD BILGER

There is such a thing as too much beauty. So the stuffed bird on the counter seemed to be saying. It was a Himalayan monal, *Lophophorus impejanus*, Liberace of land fowl. Its head was emerald, its neck amber and gold, its back a phosphorescent violet that flared to a sunburst at the tail. A pouf of feathers jutted from its head like a tiny bouquet. Named for Lady Mary Impey, the wife of the Chief Justice of Bengal in the late seventeen-hundreds, it had a stout, ungainly body swaddled in bright plumes as if for an audience with the maharaja. It was a turkey that wanted to be a hummingbird.

Eric Charles-Donatien held it up to the light. "It's almost too nice," he said. "Do you have one that is just a little bit broken?" The shopkeeper frowned, then sent her assistant off with a nod. I trailed along, curious to see what she'd find. This was one of the finest taxidermy shops in Paris. Whenever some wild captive dropped dead within a thousand miles—a victim of sunstroke or virus, homesickness or honey-roasted peanuts—chances were that it would soon appear here, miraculously restored. A family of polar bears stood in one corner, a young giraffe in another; a flight of white pigeons hung from the ceiling, and baby owls peered from the shelves. "I could surround myself with these birds," I heard Charles-Donatien say. "They're a reminder that we're all animals."

Charles-Donatien is a plumassier. He designs feathered clothes and accessories for the fashion industry. Or, to put it another way, he takes the keratinous appendages of modern-day dinosaurs and crimps and cuts, glues and sews them to fit the bodies of undernourished mammals. All fashion is a kind of metamorphosis—a chance to try on a different skin. The great designers are like the capricious gods in Ovid, reaching down to turn this mortal into a spider, that one into a swan, that one into a constellation. A plumassier tries to make people as beautiful as birds.

"Feathers are about seduction," Charles-Donatien told me. "They are meant to attract. And we are happy to know that the male birds are always the most beautiful." Charles-Donatien's parents are from Martinique, but he was born in France. He has an almost posh Parisian accent, but his English, like the Creole that he spoke on the streets as a boy, has kept its island lilt. He turned forty-five last week and frets about his weight, but to a less professional eye he still looks pretty lean. He exercises a few days a week, sometimes suspended from a hammock in an aerial-yoga class, and mitigates the occasional Nutella binge with abstemious greens and grains. His head is shaved, his features round and boyish, with half-moon brows—a merry mask of a face, as of some impish spirit. When I asked Robert Barnowske, a former vice-president of apparel design at Vera Wang, what he first thought when he met Charles-Donatien, he laughed: "Who is this hot guy showing me feathers?"

Charles-Donatien had come to the shop that morning, as he often does, to hunt for material. The world is full of birds, but the loveliest ones are off limits to plumassiers, protected by international conventions against the trade in exotics. Even antique feathers can be used only in the occasional, one-of-a-kind piece, and then only if the client agrees never to take it out of the country. All other feathers now come from farmed animals—goose, duck, chicken, turkey, pheasant, and ostrich. They're by-products of the food industry, cut and dyed to resemble more colorful birds. A plumassier is like a goldsmith who can afford to work only in bronze, or a jeweller who makes do with rhinestones. No dye can match the in-lit glow of a scarlet ibis, from the carotenoid pigments in the shellfish it eats, or the refracted colors of a peacock's tail. So Charles-Donatien haunts the flea markets and taxidermy shops of Paris, eyes peeled for a flash of feathers.

When the assistant and I returned, she had a bird tucked under her arm. We'd found it in one of the cryptlike spaces beneath the building, where misfit animals were kept for parts or repair. There was a stork down there, and a red fox, a wild boar, and a horse's head staring up from the floor. A tiger skeleton skulked along one wall, and, on a table behind some wood ducks and a turtle, we came upon an Indian peacock. It had a musty smell and a melancholy look of neglect. Charles-Donatien turned it around in his hands. The wings were intact, but the tail had lost some feathers, and the belly was missing a patch of down. It was an extravagant oddity—a flamboyant bird of exotic origin, once common in the city's shops but now reduced to a handful of sightings. It was a lot like him.

"It's perfect," he said.

Paris was full of exotic creatures that morning: it was Fashion Week. Outside, on the rain-slicked cobbles near the Palais Royal, models tottered past in vertiginous heels as the locals looked on. It was their version of the monal's mating dance: one group strutting and fanning its tail feathers while the other tried to appear unimpressed. The analogy was imperfect—female monals are the plainer birds, chestnuts and cream, their plumage like avian overalls—but

"Feathers are about seduction," the plumassier Eric Charles-Donatien says. "The male birds are always the most beautiful."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PARI DUKOVIC

hard to avoid. People have been dressing up as birds since the Stone Age. Feathers are where fashion began.

Earlier that week, I'd visited the ethnological museum at the Quai Branly. Its exhibits were a reminder of just how fainthearted modern designs can seem compared with their predecessors. There were mourning masks from Melanesia with cascading beards of cockerel feathers; headdresses from Brazil and the Marquesas Islands, surmounted by feathered fans and diadems; skulls from Papua New Guinea topped by black plumes from a cassowary—a huge, reclusive bird that can gut a person with a stroke of its talons. In the forests of French Guiana, young initiates were once wrapped in mats of quilted, rainbow-colored feathers that depicted spirit animals. The mats were embedded with hundreds of stinging wasps and biting ants, dipped in a vegetal narcotic. It was the initiate's job to show no pain when the insects woke up.

The most astonishing work came from Mesoamerica, where the Aztecs used feathers like mosaic pieces, to create intricate tableaux of gods and martyrs. Caravans of *pochtecas*, or feather traders, moved through the rain forest as far south as Colombia, exacting feathered tribute from weaker tribes. Hummingbirds, parakeets, macaws, motmots, spoonbills, cotingas, and other species were killed or captured by the thousand, sometimes altering their natural ranges. Some were skinned on-site, but most were trapped or anesthetized with poison arrows and brought to the imperial aviaries in Tenochtitlán. There they were hand-raised on worms and grain and plucked for use in Montezuma's workshops. In Peru, the biologist Thor Hanson writes in his 2011 book, "Feathers," the Inca rubbed their parrots with poison-arrow frog secretions so that their colors would change with the next molt. In Hawaii, more than eighty thousand mamo honeycreepers were used to create King Kamehameha I's golden cloak. The bird is now extinct.

After the conquest, Cortés sent crates of Aztec featherwork to the king of Spain, along with codexes tallying the birds and the down collected. The most beautiful pieces made their way across Europe, enthralling Albrecht Dürer and the Holy Roman Emperor, among others. In France, a taste for feathered hats took hold under Louis XIV and quickly grew into a craze. Ostrich feathers were shipped in from Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Madagascar, and dyed black, green, lilac, rose, sky blue, and yellow; heron feathers were brought from Germany and Turkey to adorn the Knights of the Holy Spirit. "The madness for feathers has reached a point of excess one never could have suspected," the journalist Louis-François Métra wrote in the winter of 1775. "Hats that would have seemed ridiculously tall a few months ago no longer suffice." Prompted by Marie Antoinette, who doubled the height of her feathered hat for a ball thrown by the Duchess of Chartres, women were soon wearing hats as high as two and three feet. Arguments broke out at the opera, where viewers could no longer see the stage, and the finest ladies were forced to kneel in their carriages to clear the ceiling, or else stick their heads out the window. "When a woman thus coiffed dances at a ball, she is compelled to continually bend down as she passes beneath the chandeliers," the Count of Vaublanc noted in his diary. "It is the most graceless thing imaginable."

Paris had twenty-five master plumassiers at the end of the seventeen-hundreds. A century later, it had hundreds, making fabrics for Hermès, the Folies-Bergère, and the Moulin Rouge. In London, the feather market went through nearly a third of a million egrets in 1910 alone. In New York, Hanson writes, a bird-watcher named Frank Chapman counted more than forty species of feathers on women's hats on a single walk, and those were only from native birds. Some ladies had taken to wearing whole birds on their heads by then—an economical choice, given that feathers were more costly, by weight, than anything but diamonds. Among the treasures that went down with the Titanic were more than forty cases of feathers, worth upward of 2.3 million in today's dollars.

And then, belatedly, people had had enough. The Carolina parakeet and the Cuban macaw joined a lengthening list of extinct species: every ounce of feathers represented six dead birds and many more abandoned chicks. On Cape Cod, *Good Housekeeping* reported, forty thousand terns were killed in a single season by one agent of the hat trade. Such massacres were entirely the fault of women "and their thoughtless, stupid devotion to 'style,'" the conservationist William Hornaday wrote in the *Times*, in 1913. "On their heads is the blood of the slaughtered innocents." (He failed to include hunters, clothing designers, and mill owners—most of them men.) Five years later, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed, prohibiting the hunting and sale of all non-game birds in the United States and Britain. The interstate shipment of migratory birds had already been banned.

When a status symbol turns to stigma, the damage can be hard to undo. The feather trade has long since shifted to sustainable sources—its ethics no worse than the leather industry's, its environmental impact softer than cotton's. Yet the taint of its history, like the blood thrown on fur coats, may never wash completely clean. Of the four hundred and twenty-five feather houses in Paris in 1919, only four remain. Just one, Maison Lemarié, is still devoted to couture. Charles-Donatien was trained there and became the artistic director before starting his own studio, six years ago. He is, by some accounts, the last of the great plumassiers. "I don't know anyone else in Paris who can do what he does," Vera Wang told me.

"When I tell people we do feathers for clothes, they hardly think it's possible," Charles-Donatien said one morning, in his studio. "They think, Oh, that must be for stage shows." He picked up a pair of tweezers and extracted a pink ostrich feather from a small mound on his desk. He dabbed the quill in glue and affixed it to an intricate arrangement on the flap of a satin handbag by Roger Vivier, then paused to vape and assess. A Bach flute concerto played in the background, the notes flitting about in a ghostly flock. "Beauty is never enough," he said. "Meaning is more important. If something catches people's eyes enough to make them move around it, they will build a story around it. And that will not just be about beauty."

The feathers on the table were from an ostrich farm in South Africa, in the

CHROME

Years he lives alone on Montezuma Road. Delivers newspapers

during dawn's darkest hours. Marine layer hangs like gunfire

over the Gulf of Tonkin. Optical illusion: how cleverly the war begins

in his '93 Mazda MPV. We sail I-15 South as though it's the Thu Bồn River,

flee Hội An's cinnamon-forest barricade, viscera-flooded streets.

American soldiers peeling his house apart, straw by straw.

His uncles wearing nothing but nametags around their necks, lying

in a ditch of saw-toothed rocks. Flies spewing from a missing eye.

We grab doughnuts at a panaderia in North Park. A stereo beneath

La Virgen croons "Como la Flor" while I probe a glazed exit wound:

wedding ring he never gave my mother. Too poor for love, too ruined

for ritual. I dance with him. My feet atop his feet, shadow in his shadow.

Our song doesn't end even when it does, even when Yolanda pushes a bullet

through Selena's back. We keep going. We remount his chrome motorboat

as daylight singes sheets of warm air, revealing another imitation of Heaven.

My father in the rearview mirror: sky I go blind scouring for the sun.

—*Paul Tran*

desert of the Great Karoo. Most of the others in the studio came from a local importer: goose from northern Europe; pheasant from South America; chicken, duck, and turkey from Asia. Some would keep their natural color—"It gives a very animal aspect to the finished work," Charles-Donatien told me. The rest would be bleached, dyed, and treated in the studio. Each species has its own particular shape and structure: ostrich feathers are incomparably light and airy; rooster tails have a languid arch. Goose feathers are rounded at the tip; turkey feathers are squared off—you can layer them like marquetry or glue them to a ribbon and gather them into a flower. "You have to respect them for their textures but use them to express what you need," Charles-Donatien said.

As he worked, he kept up a giddy running monologue: about deadlines and designers and his inordinate love of shoes ("They're a tribute to this hidden part of the body that carries you around all the time"); about the difference between featherwork for the stage and for fashion ("They do things that can be seen from five or ten metres; we do things that have to be perfect from five centimetres"); and about a boyfriend, in Holland ("He's a dentist. He doesn't give a fuck about fashion"). At one point, his phone buzzed with a text from his younger sister, who lives in Brussels with her Belgian husband. She had just given birth to a boy. "He looks like hell!" Charles-Donatien said, giggling. "I told her, 'What's wrong with you that you can only have white babies?'"

Like a lot of intensely social people, Charles-Donatien insists that he is, in truth, a bashful soul. "I'm a Caribbean flower!" he told me. "I like to be lonely a little bit." His studio is hidden on a backstreet at the edge of the Marais, tucked behind a Lebanese restaurant and a chocolate store. It's part workshop, part gallery, part laboratory, with displays of featherwork set among modish furniture, all overseen by two stuffed crows, Jekyll and Hyde. Three apprentices were bent over drafting tables in the back. They were piecing together decorative clasps for a set of Louis Vuitton bags, from bins of bright-red, white, yellow, and aquamarine feathers. The scene, for all its fashionable trappings, was a deliberate throwback: an atelier of the old school, devoted to handwork.

"We all know what fashion is today," Charles-Donatien said. "It's a shit ton of money. It's a lot of names. The world has become tough, rough, and rude. That's why you build a place like this, protected as much as you can from the outside. Because even in the hard times we have in fashion now, when everything is based on numbers and marketing and nothing emotional, really, clients still want to dream."

That week, in addition to the bags for Vuitton and Vivier, he was working on a purse for Cartier, jacket ornaments for Margiela, jewelry for Manfred, headpieces for Dior, a feathered alcove for the Hôtel de Crillon, and an exhibit on the subject of time. In the spare moments in between, he planned to attend Vera Wang's induction into the Légion d'Honneur—the French equivalent of a knighthood—and the première of her new collection, on which he'd been working all winter. "Sometimes it's hard to even explain what I do," he said. "We try to be grounded, but sometimes these tornadoes take us with them."

Featherwork is a collaborative art. It belongs to the circle of ancient guilds whose craft gave rise to the fashion houses: tanners, weavers, furriers, embroiderers, and lace-makers. Charles-Donatien has worked with Yves Saint Laurent, Donatella Versace, Alexander McQueen, Calvin Klein, Marc Jacobs, and Jean-Paul Gaultier, among others, and helped shape some of their most iconic clothes. His work ranges from

Feathers embellish a dress from Vera Wang's 2017 fall collection.

accessories and embellishments to feathered dresses for celebrities such as Beyoncé, Nicole Kidman, and Sarah Jessica Parker. Yet his name is unknown to most buyers and his contributions usually go uncredited. He is a *fournisseur*, in the dry French phrase—a supplier—though what he supplies may be the most memorable part of a design. "One of the reasons I've succeeded in this business is that I've stayed in the background," he told me. "I'm there but not there."

Charles-Donatien's best-known work has been for the Met Ball, the annual fund-raiser hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute. These are high-tension acts, strung between creativity and compliance, bouts of waiting and bursts of frantic labor. His first gown for the event, designed by Peter Dundas for Kim Kardashian, in 2015, was a see-through yet somehow virginal mixture of beads, embroidery, and ostrich feathers, some of them cut to look like vulture. His second, for the singer Rita Ora last year, was an even greater challenge. Designed by Vera Wang and inspired in part by Josephine Baker, it was a skimpy, halter-topped affair, with a long, fluttering train. Wang first discussed it with Charles-Donatien in Paris, then sent him the silk-and-organza base from New York. He had one week to cover it in silver feathers.

"She said, 'You do whatever you want, but it has to be just stunning,'" Charles-Donatien recalls. The dress needed three kinds of feathers, he decided, each of which had to be painted and arranged in a different way: short goose feathers at the bust, tightly fanned to provide support; long, loosely gathered rooster feathers at the hips and belly; and a riot of ostrich feathers in the train. Those at the top would be brightly gilded, while those below would have a softer finish. There were thousands of feathers to paint, one by one, so he did the work in his courtyard, under an umbrella in the driving rain, while a neighbor complained about the smell to the police and to city hall. "By the end, everything was covered in silver and we all looked like phantoms and maniacs," he says.

The dress Charles-Donatien sent back to Wang was a combination of her lines and his textures. When he attended the fitting in New York, two days before the ball, he recalls, Ora was as happy as a girl at a prom. "Then the next day I get a phone call. The dress is too extravagant, too sexy. All the holes showing her skin need to be covered." So he went back to work. He hung the halls of Wang's office with plastic tarps and painted hundreds of additional feathers, then spent the night in a frenzy, adding them to the dress. By the time he was done, it was ten the next morning. Then came another call: on further reflection, and after another fitting, the dress looked best as it was before.

Seven hours later, the feathers were back in their original spots. Charles-Donatien later heard that Ora and Wang caused a "huge sensation" when they made their entrance at the ball, but he was already headed to the airport. "Back to my Parisian bubble," he says.

Charles-Donatien is used to stepping in and out of the shadows by now. "I love darkness," he told me. "It makes people seem on the same level." His father is black, his mother Indian. He grew up Catholic in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, and remains one of the few black designers of modest origin in his industry. "Thirty years ago, in the Paris suburbs, a black person saying he wanted to be in fashion—that was the weirdest thing ever. The weirdest," he told me. "Fashion was a small world for the few, the happy few."

Late one morning, he took me on a

scooter ride to his old neighborhood, in Asnières-sur-Seine. The weather had broken the night before, and Paris was bathed in cool midwinter sun, every column and cornice etched clear. He had me climb on the back, then rode northwest up the Rue de Clichy, past his current apartment in the less than trendy La Fourche district. ("The fashion people I know, they don't want to come to this neighborhood. They all assume I live in some chic apartment in the Marais. *Ah non!*") We crossed over a ring road and under the Seine, the buildings growing plainer and sootier with each expanding circle, from Beaux-Arts to brutalist. Charles-Donatien's own scooter wasn't working, so he'd rented the fastest-looking machine he could find and sang Prince's "Let's Go Crazy" as he rode. He wove through cars and trucks at speed, cantered over curbs, and gunned down sidewalks, a hornet's cloud of other scooters around him. At one point, I heard him yell, "I don't want to die here! I don't want to die here!" But more in glee than in fear. "This is nothing," he told me, when my shoulder bag whacked a passing car mirror. "Usually, I ride much faster."

He hadn't been back here since high school. And though the neighborhood seemed largely unchanged, revisiting it now, on this fleet, shining machine, was thrilling and strange. We passed a halal butcher and a line of men in prayer caps outside a mosque; we swung by his old elementary school and the apartment where one of his girlfriends used to live. When a driver leaned out to yell at us for buzzing his van, Charles-Donatien turned and shouted a Creole obscenity, then peeled out. "Fifteen minutes in the neighborhood and I'm already talking that way again," he said. "Don't mess with me!"

His parents had no money and few belongings when they arrived in France, in 1971. But they were well educated. His mother, who had taught in an elementary school in Martinique, found work as a secretary, while his father, who had taught in a junior high, studied computer programming. They would later get well-paying jobs in city government and the stock exchange, but in those early years the most they could afford was a two-bedroom apartment, two miles from the last station on the Métro line. The building was a dingy, concrete high-rise—a bleak remnant of Le Corbusier's dream of a Ville Radieuse, with strip malls and blacktop where the parks were supposed to be. Charles-Donatien stepped off the scooter and gazed up at the façade, then stretched out his arm and counted up the floors—one, two, three. He traced his finger along the balcony to the right, then stopped at a curtainless window with a chipped green frame.

"That was my sister's and my room," he said. "I remember, the hallway was so creepy. The doors to the apartments were recessed, so you never knew if someone was hiding there. It was the perfect place to kill someone." For kicks, he and his friends would nab shopping carts and take turns riding them up and down the hall, running as fast as they could. The place where they didn't go was the ground floor—now a parking garage, but then a shadowy warren of retaining walls, open to the outside, where dope dealers worked. "It was the kingdom of the wind—a maze going in and out," he said.

On weekday mornings, he would step outside with his backpack on, glance behind him for any sudden movements, then sprint all the way to school. He ran to bus stops, judo lessons, friends' houses, the supermarket. He never seemed to stop.

"Every kid thinks he's special," Charles-Donatien told me. "In my specialness, I used to imagine that I was an angel, and that I was put here because I had lost my wings. But one day I would get them back." Later, his dreams of flight took other forms: ice skating, playing the flute, aerial yoga. In his twenties, he even took a job as a baggage handler at Charles de Gaulle airport, just to be close to planes. His mother did her best to encourage these interests—to keep him off the street and at the *centre sportif*. "She did everything she could so we didn't realize where we were living," as he puts it. But she was a pragmatist as well as a meliorist. "Do you have a place to sleep?" she would ask him. "Do you have two parents? Do you go outside naked? No? Then you have no issues. You want to be proud? Do something!"

That something, to her bafflement, was designing clothes. When her son was four years old, she remembers, he saw their neighbor working at a sewing machine and declared that he would one day do the same. By the age of ten, he was devouring the fashion pages in *Jours de France*, sketching clothes, and critiquing her wardrobe. By fourteen, he had settled on a career in design. His parents reacted about as well as could be expected. "They wanted me to be aware of a certain reality," he told me. "Being black in France in the seventies—my mom told me that she sometimes went to bakeries that would not give her bread, even with me in her arms." Still, his father eventually gave in. He had only one condition: Eric had to be accepted by the top design school in France. To his son, that meant the École Duperré.

The admissions process for Duperré, as for all France's élite schools, was a model of merciless rigor. A few thousand applied every year and were promptly winnowed down, according to their portfolios and grades. (Even fashion designers in France have to be book smart.) The remaining hundreds came to Paris for an entrance exam: a single sheet of paper on which they had to create a design and explain it. "I got so nervous that I covered the whole page with drawings," Charles-Donatien remembers. "I didn't leave any room for the writing." Rather than start over, he simply wrote over his sketches, turning the text into part of the design—a palimpsest. In a class of seventy, he says, he was the only black student admitted.

Charles-Donatien's draftsmanship was well below the norm at Duperré, as was his sense of shape and line. For a design student, this was like being bad at math at M.I.T. "I was not considered good," he told me, as we swung past the school on the scooter. He glanced up at the building—a daunting Romanesque structure, with the words Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité carved above its arched lower windows. The students were on break, clustered out front in windblown scarves and bright plastic boots, smoking cigarettes with an offhand elegance. "We weren't that fashionable," Charles-Donatien said, laughing. "Now they already have Givenchy."

What he had, at that age, was a rare eye for color and texture, and an irrepressibly creative mind. "I can have

a thousand ideas in a second," he told me. "It's like I'm opening a drawer and just picking something out." Most students at Duperré dreamed of being head designers, but Charles-Donatien gravitated toward fabrics and accessories, and he had a knack for working with others. His teachers said that he was more of a politician than an artist, but there was an art to collaboration, too, he found. "A designer says, 'I want a big flower. It has to be spectacular,'" he said. "Some of them mean this"—he circled his thumb and forefinger. "And some mean this"—he threw his arms wide. "That is what I love about working for others. You have to enter their heads and think with them. It gives me more pleasure than working for myself."

He went on to earn a second degree in clothing manufacture, then landed an internship at Hermès, France's oldest and most august fashion house. And he still knew nothing of featherwork. Then he met André Lemarié.

The grandson of Palmyre Coyette, who founded Maison Lemarié in 1880, André had transformed the business from a fancy hat shop into a wide-ranging purveyor of featherwork and embellishments. When Charles-Donatien was introduced to him, by a publicist for an ostrich farm, he recalls, Lemarié asked him to come by with some samples of his work. It was just a courtesy, Charles-Donatien assumed. But he went to a costume shop and bought some bright, tacky feathers of the sort you might use for a Mardi Gras outfit. ("I am blushing right now to think of it," he told me.) He cut and shaped them, mixed them with metal and linen threads, then wove them into a variety of flat, abstracted fabrics. They hardly looked like featherwork at all.

"Have you ever examined the feather of a bird?" Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-founder of evolutionary theory, once wrote. "No man in the world could make such a thing." Feathers are even harder to fake than fur, their structure being vastly more complex and varied. Falcon feathers are stiff, like jet-fighter wings, for stability at high altitudes; owl feathers are soft and barbed, to muffle their descent on prey; sandgrouse feathers soak up water, so their chicks can sip them in the desert. The range of designs would put any wilderness outfitter to shame. Bald-eagle feathers zip up to keep out moisture; mourning-dove feathers rotate individually to control flight; golden-crowned-kinglet feathers keep the bird's body so insulated that it may be a hundred and forty degrees warmer than the air. "If human hair were similarly diverse," Thor Hanson writes, "a person might combine a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard with a teased hairdo taller than the Statue of Liberty."

Yet none of this compares to the complexity of bird color. The leaf green of a quetzal's tail, the cerulean blue of a tree swallow's back, the golden-eyed wings of a great argus are the work of an infinitely patient genetic process—mutation upon mutation, like paint layered on canvas. Some feathers are pigmented. Others have structural color: nanoscopic bubbles, lattices, and granules that scatter and refract light. Still others have both, the ornithologist Richard Prum, a professor at Yale, told me. The green broadbill of Sumatra and Borneo, for instance, has feathers that blend prismatic blue with pigmentatious yellow. Add to this the ultraviolet hues that birds can see and we can't, and you can start to imagine how bedazzling a Himalayan monal truly is—how nearly hallucinatory to the female watching him dance. "All the beauty is in the feathers," Wallace wrote. "I almost think a feather is the masterpiece of nature."

To what purpose? Why bother getting so dressed up? Why would natural selection favor a bird built like an "Eat Me" sign, with a tail so long that it can barely lift off? The problem so bedevilled Darwin, he once confessed, that the mere sight of a peacock's feathers made him sick. He could only conclude that animals, like people, must have "a taste for the beautiful." Sexual selection isn't only about finding the strongest mate, he wrote in "The Descent of Man." Some species just have a thing for shiny feathers or neon stripes, elaborate nests or melodious voices. Select for them often enough and they breed peacocks and angelfish, bowerbirds and nightingales.

It's not always pretty. Birds, like fashion designers, can let their tastes get away from them: electric-blue scalps, candy-striped beaks, Day-Glo orange Mohawks. "The examples go on and on," Prum writes in his recent book, "The Evolution of Beauty." The club-winged manakin has feathers that whistle prettily when rubbed together, but they're not much good at flying. The penis of the Argentine lake duck can grow to sixteen inches—the biggest in the world relative to its body—but it shrinks to a nub in the winter, when the bird is courting a mate. "Is it any wonder," Prum writes, "that many of the world's most exquisitely beautiful and aesthetically extreme creatures are so rare?"

Biologists have tried their best to make sense of all this—to find some sly advantage in every avian extravagance. Darwin's theory of mate choice made no sense to Wallace. Birds aren't beauty-pageant judges, he insisted. They can't make aesthetic decisions. Beauty, to them, must be a proxy for fitness—an "honest advertisement," as biologists later put it, for a suitor's strength and vigor. The more complicated the mating dance, the more coördinated the dancer. The longer the tail, the brawnier the peacock that can afford to lug it around. The brighter the feathers, the fitter the bird.

Prum doesn't buy it. Whatever the consolations of taste, he says, its practical benefits are often left far behind. "When the object of desire and the desire for it coevolve, you can get a kind of runaway process," he told me. "It can run right off the edge. That is the experience that many of us have when we look at the fashion pages." Prum has a term for this: "aesthetic decadence." Call it haute couture.

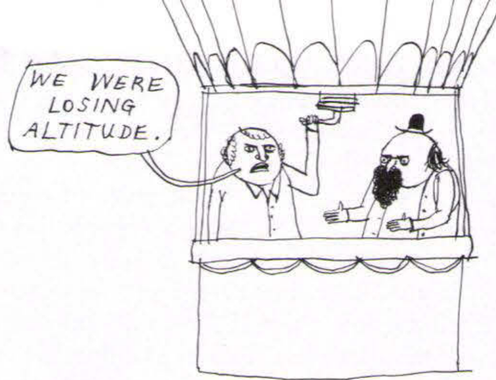
Maison Lemarié was a storehouse of such indulgences. When Charles-Donatien joined the business, in 1996, soon after showing his samples to André Lemarié, its workshops were lined from floor to ceiling with drawers and shelves. Instead of books, they held bundles of brown kraft paper stuffed with antique feathers of every sort: egret, tanager, mandarin duck, honeycreeper, jungle fowl, bird of paradise. "It was like going back in time," Robert Barnowske recalls, of his first visit with Vera Wang. "If you needed the perfect shade of

mauve, they'd take down a bag marked '1883' and rip open a corner so you could see a bit of feather. I always wondered what was in some of them—maybe a few dodo feathers."

The Lemarié staff was small, mostly female, and possessed of superlative, unfussy skill. They would huddle shoulder-to-shoulder around long, cluttered tables, sewing pleats, pinning patterns, and threading plumes through netting. They would stitch or glue feathers, one by one, to gauzy substrates of silk, organza, or muslin, until the fabric flexed and flowed like a living thing. "You'd go into one room, and the ladies would be making camellia flowers for Chanel, heating spoons over Bunsen burners, molding each petal by hand," Barnowske says. "Then you'd go down the hall and Eric would be working with Jean-Paul Gaultier, making a dress for Princess Caroline." Compared with the teeming workshops at Hermès, this was a family affair: tight-knit and fiercely loyal, filled with gossip, laughter, coaxing, and chiding. It was like home.

The year Charles-Donatien arrived, André Lemarié was seventy-one—a dapper gentleman "with the face of a country curé and the enthusiasm of a child," as a profile in the *Times* put it. The fashion houses, in those years, still operated at a stately, seasonal pace. Every six months, the city's craftsmen and *fournisseurs* would make their rounds from house to house with sample cases, to show off their latest creations: François Lesage with embroidery, Gérard Lognon with pleats, Raymond Massaro with shoes, and Robert Goossens with jewelry. "It was like church," Charles-Donatien told me. "M. Lemarié and I would go all around the city together. He introduced me to M. Saint Laurent, M. Ferré, M. Lacroix—the last big names in this industry—and we would pass M. Lesage in the waiting room and say, '*Salut!*'"

Charles-Donatien spent his early years at the firm mastering traditional feathercraft techniques: how to thin plumes with a blade or a torch; glue them *à plat*, to lie flat in artfully irregular rows, or *en retrousette*, to curve against the cloth for a fuller effect. But as he moved up, gradually, from apprentice to artistic director he began to chafe at the narrowness of his art. "M. Lemarié was old school," he says. "Feathers had to look like feathers. That was one of my fights with him. I wanted our work to evolve and keep going—to become a proper part of our world. Or we could just wait for M. Saint Laurent to order another ostrich scarf."



In 2000, after much lobbying, Charles-Donatien persuaded Lemarié to let him make a trip to New York. It was an unlikely target. American fashion was in one of its ascetic phases, all monochrome fabrics and severe geometries. Featherwork was the last thing on designers' minds. Featherwork was Zsa Zsa Gabor in a marabou boa, Cher sitting bareback on a horse, singing "Half Breed." On his first trip to the city, Charles-Donatien brought the usual boxes of samples and swatches, stacked on a dolly and cinched tight with a belt. He took the subway to save money. It was an era when you could still see designers like Carolina Herrera in person, before an army of handlers and corporate go-betweens intervened. Yet he came home without a single order. "That was tough," he says. Though the Americans professed astonishment at the work, they had no idea how to use it—how to insert this exotic material into their already polished designs. "They didn't need us," he says. "So we had to create the need."

The next time he was in New York, he took cabs. Instead of bringing squares of fabric, he studied each designer's lines and tailored ready-made pieces to fit them: a pocket trimmed in overlapping feathers; a sleeve covered in the soft, dense plumes that grow close to a turkey's skin. But most of all he created

new techniques and textures: he roughed up the feathers to look like fur, or stitched them so close to the backing that they felt as smooth as snakeskin; he mixed them with beadwork in collages, or lacquered and bent them like armor plates. "I'd never seen feathers manipulated that way," Barnowske told me. "It was like he was bringing the old tradition into the next century. So I showed them to Vera, who loved them. And then we started ordering quite a lot."

Wang has since become Charles-Donatien's closest and longest-running collaborator. The two share a love of Paris and its tradition of exquisite handwork, and a peculiar insider/outsider status within it. Although Wang grew up on the Upper East Side, she has been travelling to France since she was six years old. She studied ballet and figure skating there as a teen-ager (she just missed making the 1968 Olympic team), spent a year at the Sorbonne in college, and later moved to Paris, where she worked as a European editor for American *Vogue*. Her induction into the Légion d'Honneur, in a ceremony at Les Invalides, where Napoleon is buried, was the ultimate validation of that history. It was also an irresistible cross-marketing opportunity.

The day after the ceremony, Charles-Donatien and I went to see Wang's new collection, at a private showroom in the Marais. The theme was Napoleon and Josephine. With Charles-Donatien's help, Wang had taken the classic elements of Napoleonic style—peacoats with officer's stripes, gauzy gowns with Empire waists, fleurs-de-lis and fur stoles, like a French hussar's—and reimagined them as sexy evening wear. "It's insane!" Marius Carluci, who was then Wang's director of collections, exclaimed, as a model strode past in a corset of golden feathers. "She's an avatar! A young pope!" Charles-Donatien laughed and shook his head. "It's like an animal transforming into a woman."

When I'd visited Charles-Donatien's studio earlier that week, I'd seen studies for this collection pinned to a board above a drafting table. Some of the feathers were silky to the touch; others were stiff and lustrous. In one sample, the feathers had been gilded to look like tarnished bronze, then layered like fish scales; in others, they resembled seashells, armadillo plates, blackened fingernails. Charles-Donatien pulled down a sample that he especially fancied, though Wang hadn't used it. It was black fox fur embedded with a glossy ridge of blue-black feathers. "They're from a goose, but no goose has feathers like this," he said. I told him that it looked like the hide of some mythological beast, and he smiled: "*J'adore les chimères!*"

In the finished collection, these ideas played out in unexpected ways. Almost every outfit bore a striking embellishment: a coat of arms, an embroidered badge, a feathered breastplate, tufted sleeves. If you looked closely, you could see patterns in the designs: a heraldic eagle, a pair of rising phoenixes. These were refined, modern designs, yet they had a rude vitality—as if they might peel from the cloth at any moment and take flight. "There are many, many ways to do featherwork," Charles-Donatien said. "The Chinese would do flat embellishments almost like cloisonné. Beautiful, but to me very dead. When I do wings, I like them to look like they came from a bird. They have to be alive."

The pieces in the showroom were as yet one of a kind—final prototypes of Wang's designs. Over the next few weeks, they would be worn more than a hundred times as they travelled from city to city, gathering preorders. "Paris, London, Moscow, Hong Kong—everyone has the same brands now, the same experience," Eka Iukuridze, the owner of Les Suites, an haute-couture boutique in Paris, told me. The Dior store looks the same wherever you go, she said. It's only the clients that change. One season, her shop will be filled with Russians, flush with oil revenue, favoring slim lines and lots of gold. Then oil prices will drop, the yuan will rise, and there will be nothing but Chinese, wanting short skirts and demure necklines. The sexiest dressers tend to be Middle Eastern, Iukuridze says, the most conservative ones French: "The Parisian lady who is very chic—you almost never see that anymore. It's like a game of being the same."

Six years ago, when Charles-Donatien left Lemarié to start his own studio, the firm was moved to a facility outside town by its corporate owner, Chanel. It was the end of an era. The new facility is well lit and equipped with every modern convenience, but it's no longer a world of its own. The time of house calls and tea—of craft inspiring design inspiring craft in a gracious, self-reinforcing cycle—is almost gone. "Now the designers call only when they need you," he told me. "Often, when I show them something new, they'll say, 'Oh, I didn't know you could do that!' And I think, Well, of course you didn't, because you don't come to my studio and I don't come to you."

The industry is still capable of magnificent things, Mariza Scotch, a friend and collaborator of Charles-Donatien's who has designed accessories for Ralph Lauren, Salvatore Ferragamo, and Edie Parker, among others, told me. But its efficiency often comes at the expense of more personal ideas. "Lemarié was articulating this very tender, beautiful process with very rare materials," Scotch said. "Now it almost doesn't matter how something smells or feels or changes in different light. What matters is how it will appear in a photograph of a show or a social-media feed. There is this obsession with attracting views—it's like a visual mixtape. But those screen views are in direct conflict with the feather from a rare bird that has been kept for a specific client for the right moment, when it will be revered."

On the last morning of Fashion Week, I went to meet Charles-Donatien at the Place de la Bourse. We were looking for a van. The night before, we were riding home from the studio in a taxi, when his cell phone buzzed. He peered at it for a moment, then let out a low, contented chuckle. The message was from a woman who claimed to have a stock of antique feathers to sell. The details were sparse, as if she were afraid of divulging too much over an insecure line. But she said that she could be found at La Bourse this morning, in a white van next to the flea market.

Charles-Donatien had arrived a few minutes before me, dashingly attired, as always. His black cashmere overcoat had a sweeping cut and the collar was up; his loafers were polished to a brilliant

shine. I started to compliment him on the outfit, but he held up the flat of his hand. "No. No. Do not say anything that is not true." Fashion Week had wrung him out. He'd been up until four in the morning two days earlier, preparing peacock feathers for the Margiela show, missing Wang's celebration party in the process. His eyes were bloodshot, his face still puffy from sleep, but he couldn't bear not to see these feathers.

The owner of the van was a small, gray-haired woman in granny glasses and a green khaki coat. When Charles-Donatien approached her, she gave him a quick once-over, then wrenched open the back doors of her vehicle. The seats inside had been replaced by stacks of wooden crates, plastic bins, and battered drawers, all filled with bundles of yellowed newspaper. Charles-Donatien unwrapped them with practiced hands. "Mainly ostrich," he said. "The black ones are dyed, the brown ones natural. Those old ateliers must have had them forever." He lifted a long, pale-orange plume out of a package. "Bird of paradise. And there are a few egret and heron feathers as well. There just aren't enough for me to make something. That's my dilemma."

I picked up one of the newspapers that he'd unwrapped. It was dated Wednesday, July 31, 1944. "FRANCO-VIETNAMESE TALKS RISK BEING BROKEN OFF," one headline read. Another, from the following year, reported on the sensational trial of Antoinette Hugues, who styled herself the Countess of Bernardi. The court had recommended the death sentence for her and her accomplice, a M. Marcadet, for betraying one of their friends to the Gestapo in exchange for a quantity of gold. "Until the end, the Countess of Bernardi maintained the sangfroid and dignity of a woman of the world, victim of appearances," the story noted. The only hint of her anxiety, on the day of her sentencing, "was that her yellow turban was a little more poorly knotted than the day before."

And for just a moment I was back in the *ancien monde* of Paris fashion. When only a few aristocratic families could afford to patronize the top design houses, ordering hundred-thousand-dollar dresses for each ball or state dinner. When they would send their children to Chanel for a pair of pants or a summer blouse, the way Parisians now flock to Uniqlo or Zara. When haute couture was a thing made to order in Paris and Paris only, of French fabric, by a few esteemed designers handpicked by the Chambre Syndicale. When the care and money spent on beauty had no practical limits.

Charles-Donatien paints and lacquers goose feathers in his studio.

It's possible to be both nostalgic for that time and discomfited by it—to believe that haute couture is one of the glories of culture and an emblem of its excesses. Like a bird of paradise preening on a branch, weighed down by its luxurious tail, fashion can never truly justify its costs. Yet it brightens the world. "It's like an irrationally exuberant market bubble," the ornithologist Richard Prum told me. "Its value isn't linked to function. But I find that beautiful and fascinating—I'm overjoyed by it. It means that life is about more than just adaptation. That subjective experience is a force in nature."

Charles-Donatien shot a last, regretful look inside the van. He had no need for these feathers. They were too plain to use as ornaments, too few to make a dress. He turned to the owner and lifted his palms in the air. "I can't take all of them," he said. "But I am tempted. I do love old things." The woman grinned. "Just set aside what you need and make me an offer," she said. There is no such thing as too much beauty. ♦