

Fashion ateliers: dream weavers

Designers may take the plaudits, but their couture wouldn't be haute without the skills of seamstresses, embroiderers and feather virtuosi. Georgia Dehn meets the unsung heroes of the ateliers.



By Georgia Dehn. Photographs by Noemie Goudal

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Six seamstresses wearing white lab coats are hunched over a wooden frame at the House of Lesage, the oldest embroidery atelier in Paris, feverishly stitching hundreds of tiny cut-glass beads, faceted silver sequins and pearls on to a stretch of snow-white sheepskin. Their hands weave metallic thread with extraordinary ease as they toil to complete the intricate panel for a frock coat. It will be a key garment in Chanel's annual Métiers d'Art catwalk show, a collection that was launched by the label's artistic director, Karl Lagerfeld, in 2002 to celebrate the culture and philosophy of specialist couture ateliers.

The level of skill that the women possess is rare and refined.

It is their elaborate handiwork that transforms a design into a showpiece: a 'work of art', as François Lesage, the 80-year-old master and last remaining heir of the 150-year-old establishment, puts it. He inherited the atelier from his father in 1949. Today he works as much on ready-to-wear collections as he does couture. The Métiers d'Art collection, Lesage says, is a

bridge between the two. It shows off all the skills of the 'petites mains', the seamstresses, but isn't affordable only to the super-rich.

Lagerfeld designs nine collections for Chanel each year. His Métiers d'Art line is, he says, the one most closely inspired by the spirit of Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel. Last year it was her obsession with the English aristocracy, and her affairs with Arthur 'Boy' Capel and the Duke of Westminster. This year it references Russia, and her relationship with another lover, the Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich, who introduced her to the perfumer Ernest Beaux, who created Chanel No 5 in 1921. To protect the work of the artisans who work in them, Chanel has bought six specialist ateliers, including Lesage. The others are the milliner Michel; the shoemaker Massaro; the button and costume jewellery maker Desrues; the goldsmith and silversmith Goosens; and the feather and decorative flower expert Lemarié. Lagerfeld showcases their work in the Métiers d'Art collection, and they continue to produce work for other prominent fashion houses such as Dior, Balenciaga and Hermès.

It is six days before the Paris-Moscow catwalk show, and in a back room at Lesage, Emily Barrell, 31, the only Englishwoman to work at the atelier, is stitching black and gold sequins on to a drawing of the Chanel logo. Designs such as this one may be used to adorn accessories for the show, but Barrell says Lagerfeld is still undecided whether or not they will work: 'He works a lot on impulse. He may decide he would like 10 of them the day before the show.' Or it may simply end up added to the extensive archive at Lesage.

When, in 1924, François Lesage's parents bought the atelier from Albert Michonet, the embroiderer to the designer Charles Worth, with it they inherited an opulent archive. Lagerfeld visits the archive for inspiration, choosing samples he thinks will work for a collection, putting them in his bag to take home with him. A week or so later, he delivers them back to the atelier with a drawing of how he sees the embroidery realised on a garment. This takes place about a month before the final collection has to be ready for the catwalk.

'Karl has chosen a lot of very involved samples this time,' Barrell says. 'One of them, only about the size of an A5 piece of paper, took 50 hours to complete, and his drawing showed the embroidery covering two whole outfits.' Barrell spent 13 hours simplifying that sample into a lighter, but still exquisite, version of the original, and it is this glittering ornamentation that the six seamstresses are labouring over today. 'Otherwise it would have been impossible.'

Barrell has worked for Lesage for two and a half years. She studied textile design at Central Saint Martins College in London, but says she learnt none of her embroidery skills there. 'I just made stitches up as I went along,' she says. 'I had no idea how technically based embroidery is. Since I've worked here I've advanced in my skills a lot, but there are so many specific stitches and techniques, and it takes years of practice to be precise, and quick, at all of them.' Barrell wrote to Lesage when she graduated to ask for a job. In fact, she ended up selling the embroideries from her graduate collection to Chanel to use for an haute couture show. She may not be as technically advanced as some of the artisans who have spent a lifetime working here, but, as

Lesage explains, 'It is important to have the creative who can collaborate with the designer and those who have expert embroidery skills.'

The problem is that the number of expert embroiderers left to pass on the skills to the next generation is dwindling. 'I see it like this,' Lesage says. 'Fashion is a big ocean and sailing in that ocean are luxury cruise boats. The only reason they are luxurious is because every night the little boats visit them and bring flowers, perfume... girls, if you want. It's the same as this industry – you only have the people in Paris with the archives and the know-how, and the concept is to protect that, which is why I opened the school at the atelier [in 1992].'

At the Lemarié atelier, artisans are perfecting the plumes and folding the flowers needed for Lagerfeld's designs. Elsa Pechon, one of 30 staff, sits surrounded by drawers that pour out petals cut from organdy, chiffon, satin and tweed. Pechon, who has worked at Lemarié for 12 years, having previously worked as a florist, is known as la reine des camélias, and has just started work on a nude chiffon and satin camellia. It is one of 21 posies that will adorn a black satin dress for the collection. Each posy has 39 petals and will be applied to the dress using a traditional seaming technique called piqué retourné. An estimated 200 hours will be spent working on this garment. Each year, Chanel orders about 20,000 camellias to meet the demands of Lagerfeld's designs. A basic camellia takes Pechon 20 minutes to create, whereas a more detailed design, such as the one she is working on today, can take up to an hour and a half. 'The most stressful thing about my job is that we're never given enough time,' Pechon says.

Inside a small room with crooked floorboards, brown-paper sacks filled with feathers are stacked from floor to ceiling, labelled with marker pen: cop chincelle, peaux de pie naturelle, petite cosse ailes de pelican, morceaux de lophophore... Eric Charles-Donatien, the atelier's 38-year-old design director, looks swamped by these bags, as he waves his arms about and declares the importance of staying humble when you work with feathers.

'A lot of people think that you can transform a garment into something more beautiful by covering it in feathers. But, in my opinion, you can destroy a piece,' he says. 'The challenge is to use feathers to enhance a design. If you are not careful, you can miss the point of what the designer wants.'

Charles-Donatien was plucked from his job sewing menswear at Hermès 12 years ago, and has learnt everything he knows about feathers from André Lemarié, whom Charles-Donatien describes as 'the old daddy of the feather world'. When Lemarié was established in 1880, it was one of hundreds of feather ateliers in Paris – 'there were no hats without feathers then,' Charles-Donatien says – but today it is practically the only one left. Lemarié retired from the family business in 2002. 'André Lemarié changed the way this business worked when he took charge in 1946,' Charles-Donatien says. 'He started collaborating with Dior, Chanel and Saint Laurent. It was the beginning of fashion as we know it today.' Charles-Donatien says that when Chanel bought the atelier, one of Lagerfeld's main objectives was to make sure that it continued to have as much artistic

freedom as possible. Through Charles-Donatien, the artisans are welcome to present their own ideas to Chanel, which is something Lemarié introduced.

Back in the studio, Charles-Donatien is stroking a precious-looking stuffed bird with iridescent wings: the lophophore, a nearly extinct native of the Himalayas, not used by feather workers since the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. 'We have two here and they're kept in the safe – they're like the crown jewels,' he says. Charles-Donatien has been striving to recreate the metallic sheen of a lophophore feather, with dyes and paints since he came to Lemarié. 'I find it amazing that we are surrounded by metal and shiny things, but we are just not capable of recreating this.' He holds the bird in the air like a trophy.

These days, the majority of feathers used at Lemarié are from chickens and turkeys; the 'Rolls-Royce' of the plumes, the feathers from a bird of paradise, are seldom used, and only in haute couture. The workshop has many more than two birds of paradise, but again they are kept in the safe, and treated like royal tiaras.

Charles-Donatien is most excited about the impressive pink gown that the atelier created for Nicole Kidman to wear in the three-minute film directed by Baz Luhrmann in 2004 to advertise No.5. As Kidman bounds into the frame, a long train of ostrich feathers glides behind her. The dress took six people two weeks to stitch from 50m of tulle and 200 ostrich feathers, by hand. 'It is like having a baby,' Charles-Donatien says of the most labour-intensive piece Lemarié has produced in recent years. 'Sometimes you suffer, but later you forget the pain.'

Six days later, international press, celebrities and members of the team at Chanel enter the Théâtre le Ranelagh in the 16th arrondissement of Paris. Lesage and Barrell are sitting next to each other on crimson-velvet seats. Anna Mouglalis, who will star as Coco Chanel in the upcoming film about her relationship with Igor Stravinsky, is on her way.

When the curtain rises, an all-Russian cast of models snakes through a recreation of a Parisian nightclub in the 1920s and up the central aisle, wearing the garments that the ateliers have spent more than 2,000 hours working on. It is a feast of magnificence. Each outfit has been accessorised with an astonishingly elaborate kokoshnik, the traditional Russian head-dress. After the show, a Slavic orchestra performs in the foyer. What does Lesage think of the collection, the showcase of the artisans he has spent a lifetime training? 'The secret is what you do tomorrow. All I know right now is that this special collection was Karl's idea, and he's a man extraordinaire.'

The Paris-Moscow Métiers d'Art collection will be available from mid-June ([chanel.com](http://www.chanel.com))

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/5387710/Fashion-ateliers-dream-weavers.html>