

The New York Times

The Hands That Sew the Sequins

January 19, 2006

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François Lesage showing a Saint Laurent fabric made by his company.

Ed Alcock for The New York Times

EVERY day for the last three weeks in Montmartre, 45 seamstresses at the House of Lesage, France's oldest embroiderer, have been hunched over wooden frames feverishly stitching sequins, rhinestones and beads onto gossamer cloth. Their needlework is so intricate it seems spun from candied sugar. Defying the official French 35-hour workweek, they are rushing to finish some 50 designs for the spring haute couture shows, which begin on Monday.

The women are among the treasured "petites mains" (tiny hands), artisans who labor in workshops, that have changed little in a century, doing the elaborate handwork that transforms a designer's dress into a sumptuous showpiece of luxury. They make ornamental silk flowers, curling the edges with heated tools that look like lollipops. They fashion peau de soie evening sandals on custom lasts and stitch straw for hats and polish buttons shaped like bows and plate them in gold.

It is in part this handwork that explains why haute couture garments come with astronomical price tags: upward of \$25,000 for a suit and \$150,000 for an evening gown.



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A model on the catwalk wearing the results of the many specialized workshops of Paris.

Toil and training alone do not account for the obsession with perfection. A sense of cultural patrimony also drives these artisans. "It's a culture, a philosophy," said François Lesage, 76, the dapper general director of the 125-year-old establishment, which he inherited in 1949 from his father, who bought it from the embroiderer for Charles Worth, the founder of French haute couture.

"It's a way to be dressed outside and inside," Mr. Lesage said. "It corresponds to a certain ethic of rigor and elegance without vulgarity."

Although it is not known how many artisans still work in France's haute couture industry, their numbers are dwindling. Especially diminished are the "fournisseurs," the artisans who work in outside workshops like Lesage, which specialize in a craft like embroidery or ornamental flower making. They supply the fashion houses still selling haute couture clothing - Chanel, Dior, Lacroix and a few others - with the decorative elements and accessories that complete an outfit.

It is handwork that defines haute couture as much as the three fittings required to custom-make a garment for a wealthy client. The dwindling number of regular clients, perhaps no more than a few hundred worldwide, explains why none of the fashion houses make money from couture - that and the expense of the fournisseurs.

None of the ateliers, or workshops, were willing to disclose what they charge the fashion houses, although one, the shoemaker Massaro, where 40 hours are needed for a pair of shoes, said retail customers for its shoes pay a minimum of \$3,000. "But that's for two feet," said Raymond Massaro, 76, the founder's grandson, defending the price.

Since the 1920's, when there were about 10,000 French embroiderers, the population has shrunk to about 200, Mr. Lesage said. In St.-Junien, a small city near Limoges that is the historical site of glove production, there were 120 glove makers in the early 50's. Today only three remain, said Dimitri Soverini, a spokesman for Agnelle, a family-owned couture glove maker. In Paris 60 years ago, 300 people specialized in feather work. Today less than a handful still do.

And yet to view the handworkers as quaint anachronisms would be a mistake, say the defenders of French fashion. Their skills are still central to French design. "Louis XIV's minister of finance Colbert said that fashion could be for France what the gold mines of Peru were to Spain," explained Valerie Steele, the director and chief curator of the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology. "Fashion isn't necessarily about concept but about craftsmanship. You need the people to make the best ribbon, the best lace, the best hats. This is essential to keeping French fashion prestigious and creative."

The number of artisans is diminishing for familiar reasons: the market for couture is contracting, crafts workers are dying off, a younger generation is unwilling to carry on family tradition, and cheaper labor is available overseas.

To guarantee the future of at least some artisans, Chanel has bought six of the oldest workshops that no longer have heirs to run them: Lesage; Massaro; Lemarié, a designer of flowers and feathers; Michel, a milliner; Desrues, a button- and costume jewelry maker; and most recently, Goosens, a goldsmith and silversmith. For the last four years Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel's designer, has paid tribute to the ateliers, which he dubbed the Chanel "satellites," by designing small clothing collections that showcase their handiwork. The most recent was shown in New York in December at the Chanel boutique on 57th Street.

Though Chanel subsidiaries, these ateliers can accept work from other houses and other clients. "Chanel bought us to preserve the knowledge and standard of what we do," said Tanguy de Belair, the chief operating officer of Michel. "They have the security of knowing they can get what they want from us, but they don't prevent us from working for others. We set our own prices. Lagerfeld tells us what to do for his show just as [Marc Jacobs](#) does for Louis Vuitton."

But not all designers are sanguine about the new ownership. Since Chanel bought Lesage in 2002, the American designer Ralph Rucci said, its work has at least quadrupled in cost, requiring him to be judicious in employing the venerable embroiderer and to branch out to other suppliers. At least one haute couture designer, Jean Paul Gaultier, has much of his handwork done in India.

On Rue Ste.-Anne, a street near the Palais-Royal once bustling with milliners, there is now only Michel, founded in 1936. The atelier employs 11 workers, who produce 4,000 hats annually. The process involves multiple steps: three seamstresses use a 19th-century sewing machine to stitch together strips of fine straw from Italy. Two hat makers add stiffeners to the straw and felt, blocking them with pins and strings on one of 3,000 wooden head forms. The hats are dried in a large oven to maintain their shape. Six milliners then assemble the brims and the crowns, garnishing them with ribbons, lace and tulle. And all of this starts from a mere sketch by a designer.



© Courtesy of Chanel
Massaro shods the feet that walk the runway for a minimum of \$3,000 a pair, each pair representing 40 hours of handwork.

Overseeing the production is Nicole Todero, 54, who began in the trade at the urging of her father, a train conductor in Paris. He wanted his daughter, then 16, to work as a seamstress to help support the family of 11 children. In 1986, when the couture business was booming, Michel hired her and trained her in the techniques of haute mode.

Just as Michel is the last of a disappearing breed so, too, is Lemarié. Founded in 1880, the atelier is the sole remaining feather workshop on Rue du Faubourg St.-Denis, a street near the Gare du Nord once lined with similar establishments. The business was passed from generation to generation until André Lemarié (whose resemblance to Alfred Hitchcock has frequently been noted), retired in 2000.

The creative director, **Eric Charles-Donatien**, 33, was plucked from a job sewing men's wear for Hermès. "When I got here, the use of materials was very ladylike," he said. "I mixed the flowers and feathers together. I made the designs more abstract and concentrated on texture." "To make something more edgy I've ruched organza and shredded the edges to make them look like feathers, so you're not really sure what you're looking at."

Last fall, Kate Spade hired Lemarié to create fuchsia and black organza flowers when she introduced a small line of luxury bags and shoes called Collect, costing twice the price - \$600 to \$1,800 - of the regular Kate Spade line. "A lot of times you hear, 'No, this can't be done,' " she said. "But with Lemarié you hear what they can do. When they say, 'You can add this,' the work becomes a collaboration."

Having all of this expertise centralized in Paris allows designers to realize their creative dreams in ways unparalleled anywhere else in the world. For instance, it is common for Michel to send a hat to Lesage for embroidery and then to Lemarié for plumes and petals.

"It's like a laboratory," said Lars Nilsson, the designer for Nina Ricci in Paris, who uses the ateliers to add couture details to his ready-to-wear collection. "It's very Paris and quite unique because you have the connections and you can use two to three skills, like Lesage and Lemarié."

The demand for high fashion ready-to-wear in the last 15 years - made ever more deluxe by couture embellishments - has caused a business shift in many of the ateliers. At Lesage and Lemarié, for instance, 80 percent of the workmanship is done for ready-to-wear and 20 percent for haute couture. At Desrues, founded by Georges Desrues in 1929 in a workshop formerly at the edge of the Marais, the company has swelled from 20 employees in 1984 to 170 today. The original space could no longer accommodate the volume, so the workshop relocated in 1993 to an 86,000-square-foot, glass-and-steel, single-story factory in Plailly, an hour from Paris.

There, in addition to making costume jewelry for Louis Vuitton, Nina Ricci, Lanvin and Swarovski, Desrues produces a million buttons a year for Chanel alone, with only 3,000 used for haute couture.

Despite the volume the production process has not changed much. Artisans carve minutely detailed whimsical shapes like camellias, bows or miniature bottle caps into silicone prototypes, which are then cast into metal buttonmolds. A machine pours alloys into the molds. Once the material hardens, workers use rudimentary tools like tweezers to pry out the buttons. Each is then hand polished and smoothed before being plated in gold or silver.

"It is the same system, step by step for ready-to-wear and couture," said Mr. Lesage, who also supplies embroidery to ready-to-wear designers like Dolce & Gabbana, Celine and Balenciaga. "Couture requires more hours because there is always more embroidery done but for ready-to-wear, you have to be able to make 50 size 38's that are all exactly the same. The exactitude must be replicated by hand. The couture dress is unique and may never even be made to order. It's to attest to the quality of the house and to advertise for the brand. It is a dream of quality with no consideration of cost."

And what would happen to haute couture if the skills of all these specialists die out?

"There would be," Mr. Lagerfeld wrote in an e-mail message, "no haute couture any more."

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