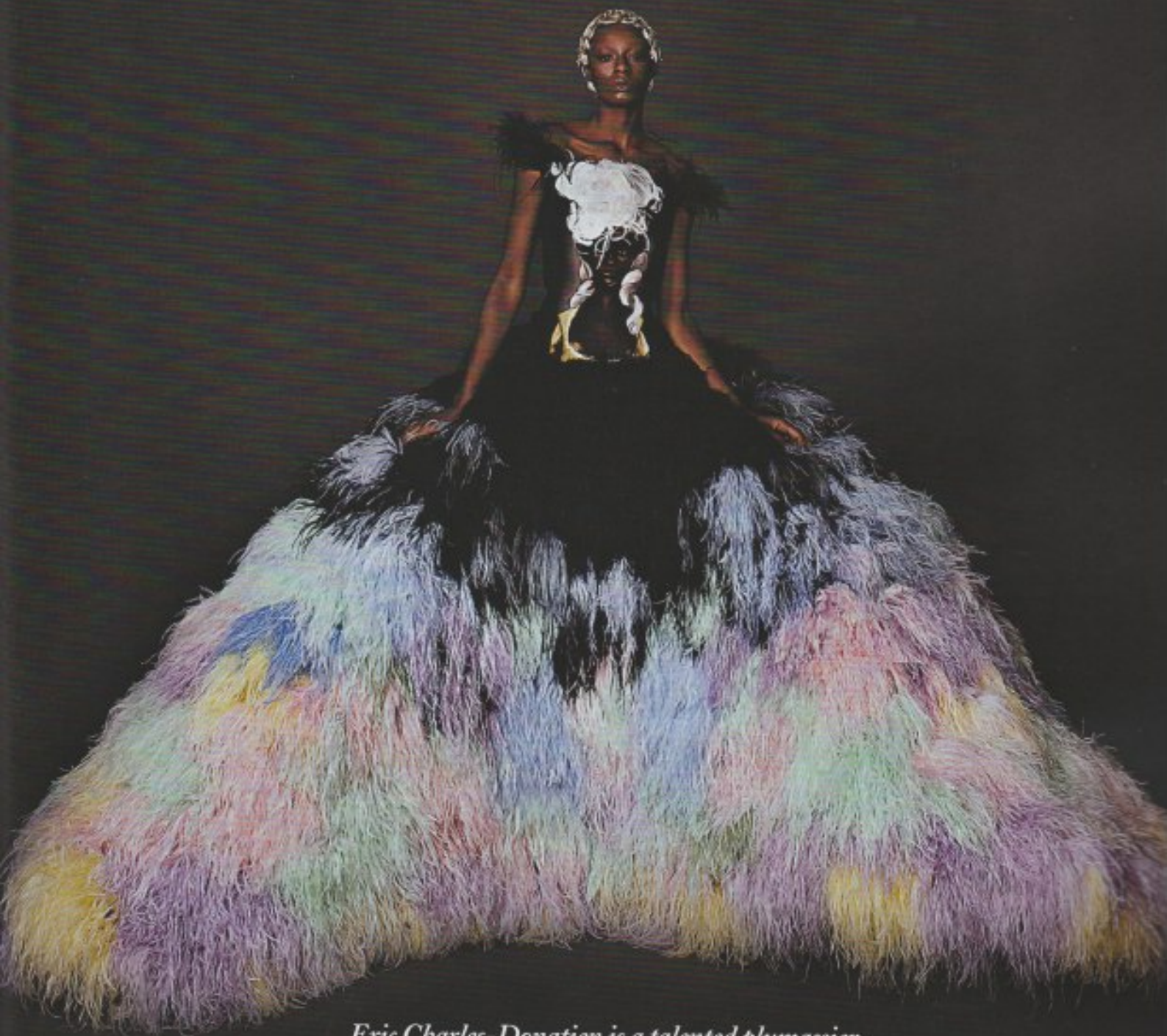




Eric Charles-Donatien in his Parisian atelier. Opposite page, a sumptuous decoration on a dress designed by London fashion house Sorapol in 2015.

# IN FINE FEATHER



*Eric Charles-Donatien is a talented plumassier whose formal vocabulary is as delicate as it is rigorous. His wonderful feathers decorate the creations of the greatest couture houses*

*by Julie El Ghouzzi*



"Madlight" is a lamp inspired by the light produced by candles; the feather wings evoke purity and freedom. Right, a dress by Christophe Josse (2011), decorated with hand-painted feathers.

"Take the tip of a downy ostrich plume and a fluffy fragment of marabou." What would otherwise sound as a bizarre invitation is actually perfectly normal in the atelier of a *maitre d'art* who has dedicated himself for more than 20 years to an unusual material that is charming and coquettish, soft and caressing, but that can also prove capricious and difficult to handle: feathers. Eric Charles-Donatien is an acclaimed feather master and designer who has built his career in exceptional contexts. For 15 years he was the artistic director of the famous Maison Lemarié (the last *plumassier* in Paris, acquired by Chanel in 1996), in whose effervescent atelier, as he likes to recall, he had to continuously invent new and spectacular ways to sew, cut and dye feathers to decorate the most beautiful haute couture dresses. How did it happen that this young *maitre* started working with feathers? By chance, but also thanks to his passion for this material. He enjoys remembering the years at the school of applied arts and, later, at the École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne: "I was not very good at drawing, so for me to work directly on the materials was a way to make up for this deficiency. My vision is based on colour, and this allows me to understand the structure of things." Charles-Donatien presented one of his first projects in Lebanon in 1995, at a salon dedicated to artistic decorators. Thanks to a series of fortuitous and fortunate events, his project, which also included feathers, was shown to André Lemarié. "If you can make more of these, we will certainly ask you for some samples," he was told. Eric Charles-Donatien, who was then working as an intern at Hermès, succumbed to the charm of the legendary feather virtuoso and to the prestige of his atelier. "The little old ladies, the impressive collection of coloured and multiform feathers, the dust: it was like a couture version of Émile Zola!" Thus began a great adventure for the young creator, who had preferred the modesty of a workshop to a career as designer at one of the leading *maisons*. "I thought I would only

be there for a few months. But I ended up staying 15 years," he says. At Lemarié, Eric Charles-Donatien was appointed artistic director and in charge of all the atelier's operations. At the same time, he felt the strong desire to learn how it was done and acquire the knowhow. "I used to play hide and seek, just to spend a little more time in the workshop," he pleasantly remembers. No doubt, his precise and accurate knowledge of the techniques allows his creations to fully unfold their spectacular nature. It must be said that Eric Charles-Donatien is without doubt one of the most talented *plumassiers* of his generation, and an exhibition dedicated to his works will soon be held in Paris. Charles-Donatien explains that very early on he was more attracted by the materials than by the forms. But this alone cannot explain the brilliance and uniqueness of his talent. He certainly possesses the capacity to cooperate closely with the creative heads of fashion houses, often remaining hidden in their shadow. When the greatest designers impart their wishes to Charles-Donatien, he and his team have to understand their (sometimes decidedly ambitious) decorative intent and know how to interpret it with feathers: mastering the technical difficulties of this craft, Charles-Donatien transforms an idea into a (beautiful) product.

Chanel, Dior, Saint Laurent, Jean Paul Gaultier, Roger Vivier, Vera Wang and Roberto Cavalli are just some of the prestigious fashion brands for whom he has brought this vibrant material to life. In 2010, after the death of André Lemarié and before the atelier moved to its new and modern premises, Eric Charles-Donatien started his own business and founded a company, which he perceives and lives as a creative workshop. Feathers cut in the form of scales, colourful and iridescent aigrettes: his formal vocabulary is as delicate as it is rigorous, and it knows no boundaries. He transforms everything he sees, everything he hears, into absolutely original creations. "I have found that the way I work is very similar to a digestive process: it takes me some time to use what I see. Immediacy is not useful to the result." In addition to the feather atelier, Eric Charles-Donatien works with leather and metal on his accessories collection, thus adding always new materials to his creative vocabulary that sums substance to sense. His workshop is also a place where knowledge and skills are passed on: it is a point of honour for Eric Charles-Donatien to offer young people the opportunity to see and learn a trade. Because his spirit is light... like a feather. ([ericcharlesdonatien.com](http://ericcharlesdonatien.com))

