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Designing With Feathers, the Old-Fashioned Way

By NAZANIN LANKARANI

PARIS — In a former artist's studio here in the 14th Arrondissement, the heart of an old bohemian quarter that a century ago was the stomping grounds of the likes of [Picasso](#) and [Modigliani](#), Nelly Saunier practices her own art in a nest of plumes.

Working alone in the atelier that she also calls home, Ms. Saunier, a master plumassière, is one of the few remaining feather designers in France practicing with exceptional skill a craft in danger of extinction.

“The art of feather-making reached its apex in the 1920s, with nearly 500 ateliers in Paris, and an entire industry organized around this métier,” Ms. Saunier said in an interview. “There was a time when society women wore exotic feather ornaments matched to each of the intricate outfits into which they changed several times a day.”

From the feather-ornamented dream-catcher, a symbol for the web of life in the ancient cultures of American Indians, to the revelers of the carnival of Venice, the feather, like the craft of the feather maker, has throughout the ages been an object of spirituality, stature, mystery and frivolity.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, feather makers were closely linked to headdress-purveyors of the aristocracy, catering initially to a male clientele.

“It was Marie-Antoinette's desire to be noticed by wearing plumes in her headdresses that revolutionized the use of the feather from an emblem of royal distinction into a fashion accessory for women,” Ms. Saunier said.

By the end of the 19th century in Paris, which was the global center of the feather fashion activity, there were more than 800 feather makers employing more than 6,000 people.

Today, barely a handful remain in France, among them the Maison Lemarié, owned by [Chanel](#) since 1996, and the Maison Février, known for its stage and costume designs.

Ms. Saunier, 46, is a veteran feather-ornament designer, having discovered a passion for

the plume at the age of 14.

“I knew early on that I wanted to work with my hands,” she said. “After trying out different ateliers in Paris, I discovered the art of plumasserie. Immediately, I knew it was my vocation.”

After completing her studies at the Octave Feuillet vocational school and the Olivier de Serres École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d’Art, a design school in Paris, Ms. Saunier was ready to put into practice a passion for birds and nature.

Today, she creates extraordinary pieces for some of most renowned couture houses, stage designers, jewelers and interior decorators in Paris. Private clients also call on her directly for custom-designed ornaments for their home or an accessory for a special occasion, like an unusual wedding bouquet.

Patience and precision are de rigueur for a plumassière. The parakeet boléro she made for the designer [Jean Paul Gaultier](#) in 1997 took more than 1,100 hours of work.

“Feathers always conjure up a sense of fantasy in people,” Ms. Saunier said. “They seem to carry with them fabulous stories.”

Last year, for the excellence she has shown in her field, Ms. Saunier was awarded the [Liliane Bettencourt-Schueller](#) prize for “L’Intelligence de la Main,” given annually to one or more exceptional artisans working in France.

A year earlier, she was named Maître d’Art by the French minister of culture, a lifelong distinction given to date to fewer than 100 professional craftsmen whose exceptional skills epitomize the finest crafts and traditional skills of France.

Over the years, laws passed to protect endangered bird species combined with evolving fashion trends have made feather ornaments less widespread, and today feather makers are only allowed to use the plumes of farm-raised birds.

Still, techniques of feather making have changed little.

“Fashion designers imagine the effect they desire,” Ms. Saunier said, “but only the feather maker knows how to set the feathers so they come alive.”

The process begins with a drawing, her own or that of a designer, from which the feather-maker constructs the piece, one-feather at a time, from the foundation up, just like the plumage of a bird.

Feathers in their natural condition are delivered to her studio from farms in France,

North America and South Africa.

Occasionally, Ms. Saunier will find exotic feathers of extinct or endangered species, like the bird of paradise or the white egret in flea markets.

In her kitchen sink, she washes the feathers with soap and water to remove their natural protective coating, then applies a chemical compound to remove bacteria.

In her bathtub, the feathers are tinted, treated with sulfur and set to dry. Finally, Ms. Saunier steams them individually to restore their original texture and softness. Only then does her artistic work begin.

Feather mountings are constructed, with each layer glued to the next or attached to a mold using a brass holder with utmost care to ensure that the completed piece moves and is soft and perfect.

“This craft demands a lot of patience and endurance,” Ms. Saunier said. “It requires that you inhabit the material like a sculptor penetrates the wood he carves.”

Eager to cross the boundaries of craft into art, in recent years Ms. Saunier has gravitated toward the artistic side of her work.

“I am interested in the range of possibilities offered by a craft that is now midway between couture and sculpture,” she said. “The feather allows the artist to create an object of natural poetry.”

Her next goal is to find an art gallery to exhibit her one-of-a kind sculptural pieces.

“The general public cannot fathom the possibilities that this material offers to a creative mind,” Ms. Saunier said.

To transmit her knowledge, Ms. Saunier teaches at the Octave Feuillet school and trains an apprentice to pass on her knowledge to another generation.

“Teaching this craft is a way to open new doors,” she said, “and maybe a few windows to let the birds fly.”

