

In Fine Feathers

France's plumasserie virtuoso reveals how nature and craft combine to capture the world's wonder.

Text by J.H. White
Produced by Peggy Liu

A teenager sits perched in the arm of a grand old oak tree, hanging in the village of Sucy-en-Brie, a quaint Paris suburb. A bright yellow Serin lands further down on the thick branch, just out of reach, catching the girl's eye and wonder. Drawn to the young girl's gaze, the bird begins to hop toward her. Delighted, she reaches out to her

feathered friend, who thinks twice and flies off. But only after leaving a gift... a feather of a hundred shades of gold, with textures as rich as the rising sun. She picks it up, light shimmering on it like a key, an invitation to explore an imaginative new world.

"From a very young age, I have been passionate about nature and fascinated by birds," says the now grown plumasserie



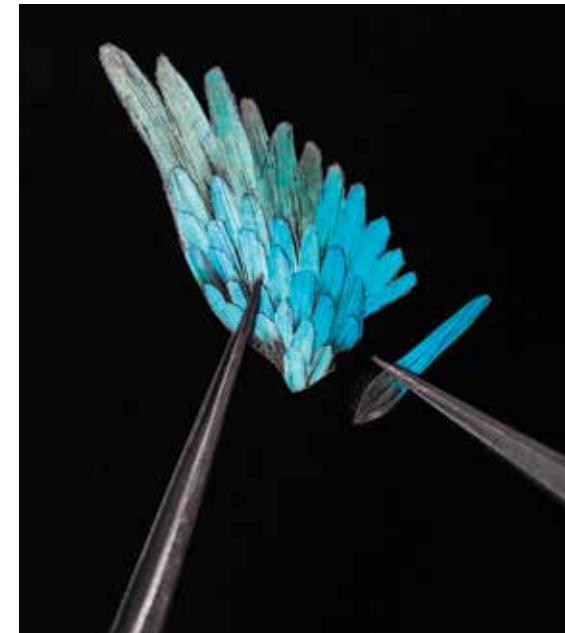
Photography by François Marquet

France's Minister of Culture and Communication honored Nelly Saunier as a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters in 2008.



In a partnership with Piaget, Saunier creates a piece adorned with peacock and Lady Amherst pheasant feathers that transports you back to the Golden Age of plumasserie between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Photography by Sébastien Coindre © Piaget



Saunier's whimsical, delicate design of tiny plumage for the Lady Arpels Collection breathes life into her feathered friends.



virtuoso Nelly Saunier. "Feathers move, beguile, and inspire me. I am sensitive to the purity and simplicity of nature: birds are born with their own elegance; there is no deception in their appearance." While a bird sings its simple life, Saunier has crafted a lifetime of work from its plumes that is anything but basic.

Her feathered fashions have strutted down runways in collaboration with Jean Paul Gaultier, nested on necks and wrists with Harry Winston and Van Cleef & Arpels jewelry and have even peacocked their way through Hollywood fairytales like *Pan*.

"The art of featherwork, for me, has no limits in its ability to express emotions in all artistic worlds, cultures and mediums around us. It transcends these worlds."

Symbiosis

Saunier never nests on her laurels. Seeking new ways to reinvent decades of wisdom and craft feeds her now as much as ever. "Feathers are an extraordinary material — it is a world within a world." With each new design, Saunier spawns a new life, now part of a greater whole.

"Each partnership agrees with the principles and code of ethics I adhere to in my personal life. It is necessary to

renew one's approach and oneself each time, to reinvent, whilst offering a completely new aesthetic proposal, one that is unprecedented."

When working with Harry Winston, she conjured intricate pendants, brooches and watches that painstakingly married feather, metal and stone in ways the world of fine jewelry could never have anticipated.

Art | Treasured Hands



Saunier harmonizes exquisite jewelry and feather design with peacock feathers to create the Ultimate Adornment Timepiece for Harry Winston.

"Harry Winston is, for me, the beginning of a story in the extraordinarily delicate world of the infinitely small," she explains. "It was necessary to adapt the usual uses of feathers, so as to keep its natural beauty while turning the creation into a wonderful illusion."

A collaboration with famed compatriot Jean Paul Gaultier enchanted the world of haute couture with a parakeet bolero of vibrant rainbow plumage and a jacquard sweater fabricating *trompe-l'oeil*. "I used feathers to create the illusion of wool. The feathers simply became wool with panache," she smiles coyly.

Her multi-faceted commitment to her craft shepherded her to a collaboration with renowned furniture maker Thierry Drevelle. "Thierry works with rare tree species, exotic wood species," she says. "We both share the same passion for the preciousness of materials, their preservation and renewal."

As their expertise intertwined, their decorative works "became an adventure. Our goal was to make two worlds meet that had never rubbed shoulders before — the marquetry of feathers and wood. We developed a really excellent artistic collaboration and also a personal one."

Cycle of life

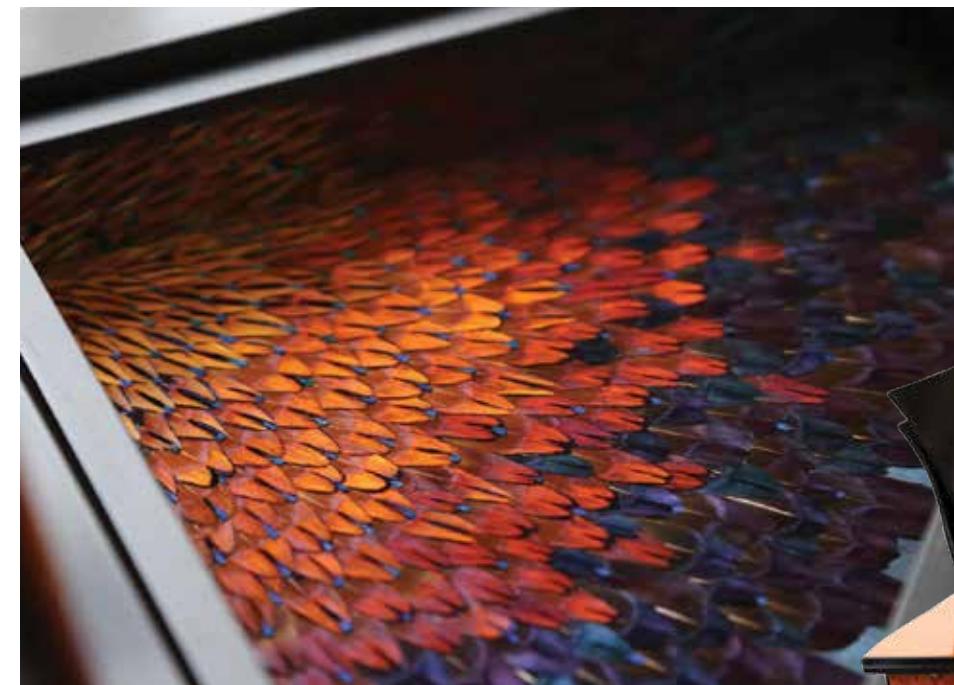
"Feathers are my life — it's a state of being, a state of mind," Saunier says. "The feather itself becomes an emotion." Breathing life into plumage surprisingly does not start with a refined skill of hand.

"To capture the beauty, the different textures and infinite richness of the feather, you must have a thorough knowledge of our feathered friends." She closely studies her winged companions: how they fly and why, their reaction to the elements of sun, wind and weather, shadows and darkness. Her travels to exotic places and long walks with ornithologists enlighten her too. "This type of learning is a work in progress. My wisdom deepens every day."

Synthesizing the mental and the material is what makes Saunier's work so different, so alive. "I use drawing as a basis for expressing my ideas, but I also do research on the composition of the feathers: diagrams, sketches, color pallets, fabric swatches, texture pallet," she elaborates. "Upon completing this time-consuming research, I visualize the effects, the lines, the resonance of colors, and I assimilate them into my work."

Photo courtesy of Harry Winston

Photos courtesy of Nelly Saunier



A shared love for conservation spawned a beautiful collaboration with esteemed furniture-maker Drevelle Christian-Thierry — an experience for Saunier that was as fulfilling emotionally as it was artistically.



Pay it forward

Saunier's pledge to preservation extends past protecting her little playfellows and the planet. Historically, feathers were in fashion in France, from trendsetter Marie Antoinette's extravagant plumed pouf to the quilled caps covering the streets of Paris a century later.

With the peace and prosperity from 1860 to 1914, the arts thrived, including plumasserie. There was a *joie de vivre* — a joy of living.

For artisans like herself, "demand was high because women wore feathers on their hats and changed attire often," Saunier explains.

But with the financial crisis and War in Europe, feathered fashions became a luxury people could do without. Now the houses of plumasserie can be counted on the fingers of a hand. But Saunier refused to let her craft die.

"The art of featherwork, traditionally, is intimately linked to infinite precision and relies on specific techniques so that the creations persist over time while sublimating the medium. I applied myself to pass on this rigorous precision of ancestral know-how, to avoid the

disappearance of this tradition, so that new generations will understand its use."

After 20 years of passing her passions on to the next generation at the Octave Feuillet vocational school in Paris, she now handpicks her apprentices. And her devotion to her art — both the creation and conservation — seems to be

doing its magic. "When I started teaching, feathers as a medium were not as fashionable as today."

In 2008 and 2012, the French Minister of Culture and Communication honored Saunier with the titles of "Maître d'Art" and "Chevalier

des Arts et des Lettres" for her profound influence in the teaching and crafting of plumasserie. "He was touched by my long and artistic journey, and my will to perpetuate and persevere in defending and promoting a rare endangered expertise so as to avoid its extinction."

Her recent travels took her to the prestigious French institution Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto, Japan, where her legacy continues.

"A world within a world." It's true — Saunier's labors of love do uncage a universe of beauty just waiting to fly away.