

FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

Clark Kent vs. Superman: Unmasking the Actual Superheroes of Haute Couture

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Abstract

This research intends to rectify the 'off-the-record' status of contemporary artisanal textile innovators by recording and analysing their professional work experience, personal narratives and design output. The luxury value, quality and aesthetics of haute couture are frequently exhibited through the textiles created by hand, requiring exceptional skills and creativity. The continued reliance on hand skills is in contrast to the modern industrialised technological age. 'Artisanal' as a prefix is ubiquitous and used today by diverse industries as a marketing tool but is significantly absent in the reporting of haute couture collections.

Luxury brands that produce couture collections, highlight an illusion of the handmade, but currently the strategy of naming fabric creators is rarely manifested within the realms of haute couture. Historically couture houses did acknowledge and credit their textile collaborators, so the question is 'when and why has this practice changed?' Consequently, the makers of the luxury textiles are now largely unknown and equally undervalued. Are these practitioners the 'Clark Kent's' of fashion, anonymously applying their artisanal skills for the accreditation of 'Superman' who comes in the guise of the celebrity designer and luxury fashion label?

To ascertain the contemporary contributions of makers, who continue to exhibit handmade artistry within the couture industry, primary material and sources, the generosity of individual textile designers, couturiers, established European ateliers and museum collections are employed to demonstrate an overview of current collaborative systems. In the context of today's cultural climate, with its celebrity fascination, the accreditation of artisanal fabrics has been obscured and largely masked. Only the figureheads of design houses are given notoriety and recognition and celebrity endorsements are 'encouraged' through favours offered to famed clients of luxury brands.

Social media coverage emphasises the personality cults of designers and celebrities, whilst hand skills involved in the creation of haute couture are ignored and often exploited. It is the enviable lifestyles of couture designers that generate fashion news and not the material reality. Although recent studies address some issues of imbalance and ambiguity within the evolution of haute couture, the visibility of luxury textile creators has rarely been investigated and is certainly under-represented in academic research (Black et al, 2013).

Keywords: haute couture; artisanal; textile; embellishment; accreditation

Who makes Haute Couture?

Using narratives provided by contemporary artisanal textile contributors to the haute this paper examines the current decline in the accreditation of contemporary artisanal textile innovators. The illusion of handmade is commonly used by luxury brands to add value, however, the hand skilled practitioners of fabric creation, so integral to haute couture are rarely acknowledged or credited. In the past recognition of the various collaborators, contributing to a couture house and its collections was commonplace, so the question must be asked “when and why has this practice changed”? The individuals and collective ancillary trades making and embellishing luxury textiles for haute couture are now obscured remaining unknown, uncredited and potentially undervalued. Are these hidden practitioners the ‘Clark Kent’s’ of fashion, anonymously employing their artisanal skills for the accreditation of ‘Superman’ who comes in the guise of the celebrity designer and luxury fashion label?

Negotiating Ordinariness and Otherness: Superman, Clark Kent and the Superhero Masquerade by Brownie and Graydon (2016) discusses how the civilian disguise of Clark Kent within the world of Superman facilitates him some degree of ‘normalcy and anonymity’. Similarly, the world of haute couture fashion frequently highlights the handmade processes involved in luxury textile production, but the naming of these fabric creators is rare. They remain shrouded in secrecy, often employed in the shadow of couture houses and their creative directors who like superman lay claim to the notoriety and adulation associated with their role (McDowell 1994). By remaining in the secrecy of their profession, in this fashion context, both Superman and Clark Kent can carry out their individual roles while collectively compiling the collections for display on the runways of Paris. Interestingly, Brownie and Graydon (2016) also note that the anonymity poses a danger in that it ‘reduces the status’ of Clark Kent as an individual and results in the ‘masking of their profession.’ This is the central to the discussion presented as surely the same could be said of contemporary textile creators. Their status is eroded, but their anonymity may also provide security as they carry out their skilled handwork in virtual anonymity. The work that they realise is visible and powerful, vital to the creations of the couturiers but in contrast they do not crave what Brownie and Graydon (2016) called the ‘extreme attention’ that is assigned to Superman, preferring to be ‘liberated from the responsibilities of the superhero lifestyle’ and continue with their artisanal output inconspicuously.

A social constructivist paradigm has been employed, where oral histories and personal accounts become part of the research through interaction (Colman 2015). This approach adds a vibrant and engaging dynamic to the research. Social constructivism has a history in both sociology studies and in philosophy and engages the premise that we can learn from the culture in which people are emerged by interpreting their first-hand accounts and insights (Colman 2015).

To evaluate the contemporary contributions of artisanal makers, a comprehensive study of primary material and sources has been consulted and is currently being compiled as part of a larger ongoing research project aiming to illuminate the systems and function of the handmade in the contemporary context of mass-market fashion. These collaborations include generous contributions from individual textile designers, couturiers, established European ateliers and museum collections in order to provide an overview of current practices in supply systems behind the catwalks of haute couture. This paper will consider four major contributors of textile embellishment, an Italian textile manufacturer, a Parisian embroidery house, a freelance mixed media artist and a French maker of silk flowers and other trimmings. Additional contributions from various hand skilled practitioners are included as they are best placed to give accounts of their own professional experience and anecdotal recollections.

In the context of today's cultural climate (with its celebrity fixations), an analysis will be made as to how and why the accreditation of artisanal fabrics has been obscured and largely masked. Only the iconic figureheads of design houses are favoured with celebrity and public recognition. The added value that fame imbues on a luxury brand extends to its notional clients when celebrity endorsements are ensured by loans or gifts to be worn at awards ceremonies and other press worthy events.

Social media coverage emphasises the personality cults of designers and celebrities, whilst hand skills involved in the realisation of haute couture are deemed irrelevant. It is the inevitable richly clothed lifestyles of 'glamourheads', (a contemporary idiom coined within fashion industry circles relating to celebrities and influencers) that generate fashion news and not the creativity of the makers. Although a few recent studies have addressed some issues of imbalance within the evolution of haute couture, the visibility of luxury textile creators has rarely been investigated and is certainly under-represented in academic research (Black et al. 2013: 9).

The cloak of secrecy spreads wide within the fashion industry as is reported by Fashion Revolution, the non-profit 'global movement calling for a fairer, safer, cleaner, more transparent fashion industry' (fashionrevolution.org 2019: no pagination). Each year The Fashion Revolution team compile their Transparency Index, a report based on their belief that:

Transparency is the first step to transform the industry and it starts with one simple question: Who made my clothes? We believe this simple question gets people thinking differently about what they wear. We need to know that our questions, our voices, and our shopping habits can have the power to help change things for the better. With more citizens encouraging brands to answer 'who made my clothes? We believe Fashion Revolution has the power to push the industry to become more transparent.
(fashionrevolution.org 2019: no pagination)

The 2018 edition of the Fashion Transparency Index reveals that the industry struggles with the implementation of transparency. The report looks at 150 'of the biggest global fashion and apparel brands and retailers' reviewing, ranking and analysing them based upon information each is willing to divulge about 'Their suppliers, supply chain policies and practices, and social and environmental impact' (fashionrevolution.org 2019: no pagination).

In the overall analysis it is reported that '...information shared by major brands and retailers remains difficult to navigate, jargon-heavy and shallow...' (Ditty 2018: 28). None of the major players in the luxury industry are being transparent and the majority refuse to disclose their supply chain with a lack of disclosure from Luxury brands, Dior refused to disclose anything, Chanel scored just 3%, only three participants considered as Luxury brands published any form of supplier list with 'Hermès' the only Luxury brand to disclose information on both suppliers and 'processing facilities' (Ditty 2018: 28).

There are several reasons for this veil of silence, dubious production chains within ready-to-wear for one but in the context of this analysis we must also consider the pact of anonymity that exists between the couture houses and its elite clients. The 2007 BBC documentary, The Secret World of Haute Couture, was able to access a few of the exclusive international clientele of haute couture (estimated today to only number 200). Although these clients agreed to participate in the documentary, both Chanel's, Karl Lagerfeld and Dior's, John Galliano refused to disclose any information, with Galliano

stating: 'I have a kind of doctor-like relationship with my clients, I don't like to talk too much about them because that's part of the mystery of haute couture too' (Kinmoth 2006: no pagination)

The identities of haute couture clients are never revealed in much the same way as the real makers behind the elaborate couture fabrication. The rise of the designer as celebrity is highlighted by Christopher Breward in 2003, one particularly resonant anecdote is his thought on the manner in which Coco Chanel increased her profile attributing this '...to the understanding of the value attached to celebrity in contemporary society, and the potential for applying the creative mystique of the couture designer to a broader swathe of the fashion market' (Breward 2003: 47).

The shift in focus onto the creative director as sole subject of design acknowledgement is a fairly recent phenomenon (McDowell 1994) and to understand this change in perspective it is important to compare it with past relationships between luxury textile manufacturers and designers. Historically, it is apparent that naming the source of fine textiles was considered a mutual publicity advantage. This is clearly illustrated in an advertisement for the British Couturier, Hardy Amies which appeared during 1958 and can be seen on page 27 of the October 1958 copy of British Vogue. Within the description of garment advertised, the textile is assigned to the famous British fabric manufacturer Sekers. The narrative enhances the black and white image of a lady in an evening gown in front of a mirror by describing its 'glowing peony red and gold gown in Sekers brocade'. Recognition of the fabric origins helps to reinforce the importance of using a luxurious textile, and the naming allows for direct contact to be established by others desiring the same or similar fabrications (Hardy Amies advertisement 1958).

Professor Iain R Webb (Fashion editor for several magazines including Blitz and Elle and the author of several recent publications), noticed the ubiquitous reporting of fabric suppliers when researching past issues for his Vogue Colouring Book:

...looking back, it is funny having done The Vogue Colouring Book, you look through those magazines from the 40's and 50's, 30's, 40's and 50's. The fabric makers were all credited, they were given that credence and that sort of respect. (Webb 2018: no pagination)

The people with real insight as to the impact of the current lack of recognition for their contributions are surely the purveyors of luxury textiles. The views of four contemporary textile suppliers' who continue to employ hand skills in their production are further described and elaborated, commencing with an Italian supplier of Luxury Silk woven and printed fabrics.

Mantero Seta SpA, an Italian heritage textile manufacturer in Como, Italy

Professor Webb's words were echoed by Moritz Mantero, the President of the legendary Mantero Silk manufacturing company based in Como, Italy for more than a century. Mr Mantero described how during this period in his company's history it was common for fabric manufacturers to feature alongside the various couturier's and other contributing trades (Mantero 2016b). He described this unique relationship as beneficial to both 'couturier and fabric maker' and went on to emphasise 'the willingness' of the couturier to promote this recognition in the belief that the textile origin would help sell the displayed garment. Through the use of text with the imagery, the naming of the fabric source helped amplify aspiration relaying to the consumer that the fabric was 'exclusive' and from 'Mantero

Seteria' (silk factory). All of these connections were believed to further elevate the status of the garment for reasons outlined by Mr Mantero:

Why? Because then once the garment model was designed by Dior for example, and the fabric was Mantero, the dress manufacturer who bought the model from Dior automatically had the fabric from Mantero. That's the way it was, especially when the retailer business was important. The fabric design by Mantero for Dior was connected with the [garment] model and the manufacturer was obliged to use your fabric and so the name was, for the retailers, an additional illustration of the fabric. (Mantero 2016b: no pagination)

It was with obvious regret that Mr Mantero acknowledged the premise of this paper, 'It's sad, but even if the fabric is the major part of the garment...we don't get credit' (Mantero 2016b: no pagination).

A further inhibitor to the luxury textile manufacturer is the previously mentioned conspiratorial nature of the current fashion system, where designers obscure the source of their textile contributors. This is a circumstance confirmed by Lucia Mantero, the daughter of Moritz Mantero, who reflected: 'Our Clients... are a little bit jealous to say that they are working with us. They do not really want the rest of the clients to know that we are working with them' (Mantero 2016a: no pagination).

Figure 1 shows the Mantero printed textile designer Anna Canevesi at work hand painting designs for one of the many luxury clients. The workstation has the appearance of any artist's studio, however, when examining the background more closely, the office environment of a corporate institution becomes apparent. The artisanal nature of the hand skilled workstation is in sharp contrast to the digital necessities of the corporate environment surrounding it. The artistry displayed within Mantero S.p.A. is dazzlingly impressive and the words of the hand painters working there can only give credence to the current status of their skills.



Figure 1: Anna Canevesi, one of the printed textile designers at Mantero Seta SpA hand painting a silk design at the company headquarters. The corporate environment and workstations are apparent in the background.

During interview Anna Canevesi revealed that: 'The credit depends on the work and the client, but are we credited by name? My name? No Never' (Canevesi 2016: no pagination).

The Head of Design at Mantero, Laura Fedriga, was the inspiration for the title of this paper when she modestly stated:

You know what makes me ok, it's the difference between Superman and Clark Kent. We are Superman! Nobody knows who we are, we are like heroes, we do a big job, we do important work, but nobody knows, and we don't care. Ok, we can fly! Whatever! you can't! That's enough, it's definitely enough for me'. (Fedriga 2016: no pagination)

Mantero as a company showcases both woven and printed textile prowess for the luxury market and boasts an illustrious list of Luxury fashion clientele including Alexander McQueen, Cartier, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Vivienne Westwood, Christian Lacroix, Valentino and many others with working relationships that have lasted decades. Chanel has been a valued Mantero client for over forty years the relationship has been nurtured and sustained through a mutual appreciation of the skilled crafts that complement each other (Mantero 2016b).

There are parallels between the recollections of Mantero with that of the French embroidery house of Lesage. Both recognise that the accreditation of hand techniques has declined to the point of obscurity. This reality was emphatically verified through interviews with practising artisans within these companies.

Lesage, heritage embroidery design studio, Paris, France

Chanel under the creative direction of the late Karl Lagerfeld has gained a reputation for buying up many of the skilled hand craft contributors to their fashion output under their 'Paraffection S. A.' (the English translation is 'for the love of') subsidiary, established in 2002. The purpose of this subsidiary is declared to be the conservation and promotion of the craft, heritage, skills and manufacturing knowhow of artisan workshops that contribute to the fashion system (Thomas 2018).

As of 2015, Paraffection S.A. '...has purchased at least twelve companies, both local and national makers...' including Desrues, a company specialising in ornamentation and button making, Lemarié, who create three dimensional embroideries with feathers and flowers, Montex, embroidery specialists and Les Ateliers Lognon who are renowned for their expertise in pleating fabric (Thomas 2018: 151).

One highly significant acquisition by Chanel under its Paraffection initiative in 2002 was that of Lesage (Lesage-paris.com 2018). This renowned embroidery house based in Paris has existed for more than 150 years and is synonymous with embroidery embellishment for Haute Couture. The long history of the house is documented in their enviable archive which houses embroidery designs and samples including those of famous couturiers of the past including Vionnet and Schiaparelli which sit alongside other contributing designs from artists such as Cocteau (Barrère 2017: no pagination). Hubert Barrère the current Artistic Director of Lesage, was appointed personally to the role by Mr. François Lesage shortly before his death in 2011. He puts an interesting perspective on Chanel's takeover of the various artisanal suppliers:

Today, honestly, if Chanel did not exist or if Chanel does not want in the future to work with handicraft, the hand professions, a minimum of fifty percent of the handicrafts in Paris would disappear. (Barrère 2017: no pagination)

Could there be a downside and potential danger in the perceived patronage of Chanel?

A tour of the Lesage workrooms reveals a variety of hand skilled workers embroidering for exclusive clients. Behind etched glass a dress for a famous actress' upcoming red-carpet appearance was being embroidered but could not be viewed. The protection of the client and the necessity to have the work remain only synonymous with the design house was actively protected at all cost. In conversation with Loubia Simon (Mr. Barrère's Assistant) she described the reserved and reticent demeanour that is required from even the most regarded of ateliers: 'You have to be humble, and you have to be very, very careful because even if you get credit you just keep yourself to the side. That's the most important thing' (Simon 2017: no pagination).

Although the sumptuous work of Lesage is often on display, especially during red-carpet season and on the Haute Couture runways of Paris, the opinion of Mr. Barrère is that the Lesage name is rarely cited or remembered outside of fashion circles. This privilege is reserved for the designers and fashion houses. Mr Barrère when asked about how credit is distributed admits: 'It's difficult to respond to that really! It's touchy!' (Barrère 2017: no pagination).

Therefore, it is fair to assume that accreditation or acknowledgement is a diplomatic issue between the couture houses and the textile creators. The complexity of intellectual property and accreditation issues were further highlighted by Mr Barrère:

A lot of brands don't say its Lesage... but often for Lesage it's the relationship between brand and big suppliers, but where is the creation? Is it the unique creation of the brand or is it a collective creation with the suppliers that is a question of the intellectual property. Its... imagine you have five very important suppliers all working on the same dress and you say it's Dior/Chanel with atelier... it would be like a wedding list. (Barrère: 2017: no pagination)

Lesage has featured in press and been named, there has been a book about the company and exhibitions. The company has gained some celebrity, perhaps because of the esteem in which Mr Francoise Lesage was held by designers and staff. Madame Aline Gonzales is an embroiderer who previously worked at Lesage and taught at the École Lesage embroidery school, she reminisces about working for Mr. Lesage with genuine affection stating that working there under him had a 'familial' atmosphere that he actively nurtured (Gonzales 2018: no pagination).

Rebecca Devaney, a graduate of Ecole Lesage and freelance embroiderer in Paris, also recalls how the Lesage employees enjoyed the atelier atmosphere:

...when I was training at Lesage in this school, it used to be that the Lesage studio was at the same place where the school is now and a lot, like Aline and Muriel were the two teachers that I worked with the most... they would speak an awful lot about monsieur Lesage out of respect and that atmosphere in the studio, there was that familiarity... When people talk about him you can feel the love and admiration. (Devaney 2018: no pagination)

The familial atmosphere seemed to go some way towards recompensing the lack of outside credit.

Rebecca's appreciation of the medium of embroidery is something she believes all those who work in the medium share. When describing her passion for embroidery she said: 'I find it so fulfilling... Even the professional training I did, when I finished that piece... I will be buried in that piece of embroidery, I will. The pride! I can understand the time and effort that went into every stitch' (Devaney 2018: no pagination).

Her completed embroidery piece, which showcases the various hand embroidery techniques and took over can be seen in figures 2 and 3. Rebecca also described another form of recognition and way in which the various embroiderers felt valued:

The embroiderers are usually invited to the fashion shows by the ateliers that they work for. The more experienced embroiderers don't really go anymore, but they have an encyclopaedic knowledge of collections if you ask them what their favourite work was, and they will describe it in regards to the amount of work involved (usually working through the night etc), the choice of colours and materials and the impact of the finished piece. (Devaney, 2018: no pagination)



Figure 2: Detail of an embroidery sampler completed by Rebecca Devaney at L'Ecole Lesage. Each student must produce this sampler to showcase the various techniques necessary to work in Lesage.



Figure 3: Rebecca Devaney with her finished embroidery sampler created while enrolled at L'Ecole Lesage. This sampler took a full year to complete.

The sheer joy and passion of completing a piece of work and seeing it on a catwalk was one form of reward. The sheer passion for embroidery is another motivator, allowing these skilled workers to feel valued. Mr Barrère reinforced this idea and his passion for the work he oversees stating: 'Honestly....What is my life? My life is to create... That is my life. I would like to believe that the handicraft and the work of handicraft has a soul, and even if you don't see that, or realise that, you can feel the difference' (Barrère: 2017: no pagination).

In truth there is a much more immediate necessity for many of these embroiderers. They see themselves, not as creatives but as simply employee's and are happy to be acknowledged and valued with the payment they receive for their skilled work;

The creation is really the property of the brand, because when the designer or the team imagines the collection, they have an idea of what they want. We propose something, but they make a choice and this choice is an act of creation, and they bring that and keep that as their creation and so the result is the creation of the brand... Of course, you are giving something, you don't give, because you are paid for that, you work on that, but you are only one part of the story. (Barrère, 2017: no pagination)

Although the initial proposal or embroidery idea may come from Lesage, it is the couturier or designer who ultimately selects and chooses the design. The designer of the embroidery or idea is viewed as the owner of the intellectual property: 'For the embroidery we do not use new techniques, it's a mix of the techniques created in antiquity... but when we use a new fabric, material, new supplies we adapt the techniques for the materials... We are supplier, not a fashion luxury brand' (Barrère 2017: no pagination).

The heritage and expertise of Lesage is universally acknowledged within the luxury fashion industry, a company that has flourished within this creatively demanding discipline since 1924. Lesage has functioned because of its in-house skilled embroiderers and designers who view themselves as suppliers. As well as employing companies like Lesage, couture houses will sometimes turn to individual freelance designers with proven high levels of artistic achievement. Counted among the best of these is London based freelance embroiderer Karen Nicol.

Karen Nicol, Freelance embroidery designer, London, UK

Unlike the various companies and organised ateliers who are suppliers to the haute couture houses there also exists a myriad of freelance textile creatives who anonymously donate their creativity and skills to the various designers and luxury fashion houses. Differing from those employed, by a company like Mantero or Lesage, these individuals depend on the continued desirability of their designs to endure.

Karen Nicol is a successful freelance designer who has contributed to many fashion collections from haute Couture and private commissions through to ready-to-wear. She is currently finding notoriety as an embroidery artist, bringing her couture embroidery techniques to another audience. Specialising in 'Irish, Cornelly, Multihead, beading and hand embroidery techniques' (Nicol 2017: no pagination). She keeps a 'scrapbook' of her techniques which is then used as a glossary of her skills to show to clients. This she feels allows them to see the techniques and interpret designs, tailoring them to their individual requirements.



Figure 4: Karen Nicol's 'sample scrapbook' used to show potential clients the various embroidery and embellishment techniques she employs.

In the last quarter of a century her client list has included private commissions for the King of Qatar and the Pope, as well as various designers and fashion houses including Alexander McQueen, Jasper Conran, Marc Jacobs, Julien Macdonald, Betty Jackson, Bruce Oldfield, Givenchy, Chanel, Antonio Berardi, and Schiaparelli (karennicol.com 2017).

Karen has been a mentor to many young designers and passed on her creative skills during her time at the Royal College of Art where she was integral to the launching of the MA Mixed Media degree (date) and continues to be a visiting lecturer at the RCA and various other colleges, worldwide. In recent years Karen has gained notoriety in a fine art discipline as an artist working in mixed media embroidery. She is currently artist in residence at De Montfort University where she is exploring this side of her creativity more fully. It is telling that Karen's reputation and name has become widely recognised in artistic circles but her work within the fashion industry is typically uncredited. When asked about this paradox Karen claimed:

Valued and acknowledged... When you are doing the work, you are hugely valued and hugely acknowledged but as soon as the shows been and gone you are forgotten. No, you are not credited as a textile designer at all. I was once, I think Elle was doing something... the top 100 people in fashion or something like that and they asked five people that I worked for, for my name and nobody would give it to them, it was only the last one that actually admitted who actually did their embroidery. (Nicol 2017: no pagination)

Karen Nicol has gained a reputation and standing with designers and private clients that has meant customers repeatedly return with commissions. This she sees as a compliment and recognition of the labour that has been involved:

Well just the fact they [the clients] come back is fantastic, and it is an expensive subject and it does add an awful lot of cost to a garment. So, it is brilliant if they want to use it, it's fantastic. (Nicol 2017: no pagination)

Although Karen's work is frequently in demand by couture houses, she maintains that '...as a textile designer, you are not credited at all' (Nicol 2017: no pagination). Although she does speculate that, the nature of the work, may in some way contribute to this phenomenon:

I was just thinking about textile designers not being recognised and wondering if we were often to blame being naturally the kind of people who are more inwardly focussed obsessives in the minutiae of embellishments so different from the more gregarious outward looking fashion designer and suddenly realised I'd been the perfect example, I was recognised last year by being made an RDI, hugely flattering to me to be counted amongst all those 'proper designers' architects, industrial designers etc. I was absolutely flabbergasted. (Nicol 2017: no pagination)

Each year the title 'Royal Designer for Industry' (RDI) is awarded in the United Kingdom (UK) Granted by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) only 200 designers may hold the title at any given time. Designers from all disciplines can achieve the award if they have accomplished '...sustained design excellence, work of aesthetic value and significant benefit to society' (thersa.org 2018: no pagination).

The fact that Karen did not consider herself to be in the same league as other (what she calls) 'proper designers' reinforces the idea of the 'humble' artisan, mentioned previously by Loubia Simon at Lesage and reaffirmed in the words of Laura Fedriga at Mantero when she stated that she preferred the situation where 'nobody knows who we are'. Is it perhaps endemic of the very nature of the artisan that they are more in tune with the processes of their work than with the acclaim and notoriety that continues to be in short supply?

Embellishment exists as a surface. It can be a somewhat shallow enhancement such as the hand painted fabric designs of Mantero or can become a totally three-dimensional addition applied to a fabric in the manner of Lesage or of Karen Nicol. There also exist small ancillary makers that are creating independently handcrafted pieces that are added on to a couture garment. This is the artisanal sphere of another important supplier to the various Paris couturiers, the historic and independently owned Legeron family business.

Ets Legeron, 'fleuriste, plumassier,' (flower and feather makers) in central Paris, France

Ets Legeron has been a flower and feather maker in central Paris since 1727. The current owner is fourth generation artisan who claims to have learned the trade from his 'mother's womb' having been passed the business from his great grandfather who bought the company in 1880. The studio is the last independent maker of specialist hand crafted flowers, feathers and trims that are so essential and desirable to the making of unique fashion (Legeron 2018: no pagination).

The almost antique atmosphere of the atelier of Legeron is charming but functional. Well-aged drawers are bulging with handmade and painted flowers, in a variety of luxurious fabrics and colours, ornamental trims in exotic skins, sit next to decorative designs made from high tech fabrics and synthetic latex. Flocks of feathers transform themselves into plumes in this garden of cloth bouquets. Figure 5 shows an employee of Ets Legeron with 36 years of experience working in the company surrounded by the stitching and steaming tools, and various boxes and drawers of essential embellishment components necessary for the making of illusionary blooms.



Figure 5: This Legeron employee with 36 years' experience in the company, stands in her workstation surrounded by the various boxes old and new, filled with the necessities for carrying out the highly skilled work she does.

The historical relevance of the company status as the last independent flower and feather maker in Paris is a point of some Pride for Bruno Legeron:

In the past, when all the women in the street wore hats, there was a much bigger demand for our work. Now we have only ten employees, until recently, we had fifteen, but we had to let some go. There are only two houses in Paris that specialise in these things now, Lemarié, which is owned by Chanel and us, but we remain independent. (Legeron 2018: no pagination)

The history of Legeron well reflects the vagaries of fashion trends but also illuminates the fading stability of personalised relationships with hands on designers: 'In the past, I was going to Givenchy and it was Mr. Givenchy, same with Saint Laurent, now I'm dealing with the stylist or assistant, it's not the head of the house anymore (Legeron 2018: no pagination). This phenomenon has added to the stresses of the job. In dealing with various people who have little knowledge of the skill and time involved in each creation the job has become more difficult. 'Before, they knew what work was involved. Now, they want everything right now, but they don't know it takes time' (Legeron 2018: no pagination).



Figure 6: Bruno Legeron using his grandfather's original cutting tools to create silk petals for floral embellishments.

Still using the original tools inherited from his great grandfather, examples of which can be seen in figure 6, little has changed for Legeron in the techniques and processes employed in the making and construction of their silk flowers but what has been noticed is the change in attitude toward the value placed on the skilled artistry:

We do our job. Back in the day it was more valued, for instance if we were making dresses for fashion shows we were getting into the fashion show for free. Not anymore, it's customers first and then journalists, but very rarely now are we given tickets to go and see a fashion show. It's not a big deal because now you can see it all online, but the girls who work here would be happy to go and see it live so they can see their work. We used to be known to all the biggest designers, now I am famous at Saint Laurent, for example, but to the design assistants. We do our job because we like it, we are not devalued, but it has changed. Comparing with the last 20, 30 years we feel less valued and considered by the houses because our relationship has changed. We deal with people on placements sometimes, it's more complicated now. (Legeron 2018: no pagination)

It would be a misunderstanding to regard this paper and its observations as a defence of the elitism of luxury fashion. Rather, it is a plea for the retention and recognition of highly creative and skilled work. This is an age-old paradox since one cannot exist without the other. Our contemporary culture with its uniquely challenging technologies puts haute couture under threat and consequently its suppliers. If the skills here discussed are to survive the issue of adaptability comes into question. Can technology be a potential solution for the survival of future artisans?

Conclusion: Self-spotlighting - Opportunities for contemporary artisans

In conclusion, it is clear that the profile of the couture fabric suppliers, and artisans has declined to the point of invisibility. The reasons for this; as proposed earlier, can be attributed to cultural and technological pressures. The domination of celebrity centred media has, it seems, left little room for any other story, but there is a way to reverse the shroud of anonymity imposed on these essential trades. Surprisingly, the solution could lie in the publicity potential of social media itself. Here could be the future platform for artisanal visibility and recognition.

Will Superman even admit there is a Clark Kent, or might Clark Kent tell the world he is actually Superman? Both Karen Nicol and Hubert Barrère have started to populate personal Instagram accounts with images of their skilled output and are harnessing this platform to help disseminate their work to a wider audience. Karen Nicol is vocal in her appreciation of the platform. 'I enjoy Instagram, it's great... it's nice to put things up and get things out and get comments and feedback on it, it's quite interesting' (Nicol 2016: no pagination). The ability to broaden this type of global sharing exists and is in the hands of these makers. Perhaps the belief that they are mere 'suppliers' is a constraint that causes some to refrain from fully utilising this activity.

As with Fashion Revolution who initiated a call for individuals to harness social media, particularly Instagram and ask the question 'Who made my clothes?' the response has been far reaching. A responsive campaign has caused many to respond with visuals and the hashtag 'I made your clothes' (fashionrevolution.org 2019: no pagination). The impact of this campaign proves the ability of social media to not only reach a global audience but also influence it, gathering momentum and becoming a 'global movement' or phenomenon that facilitates important conversations and perhaps initiates a move towards a more transparent industry (fashionrevolution.org 2019: no pagination). For the artisans contributing to this research and others who work within this system, exploiting the capabilities of the various social media platforms to visually demonstrate their skilled output could go some way to help facilitate a return to visibility and the recognition now lacking in this industry.

It is unlikely that the acknowledgements given to textile producers in former decades will reoccur so individual makers must take advantage of social media and the global reach it permits in order to expose their identity and promote the hand skilled creative contributions they make to haute couture. This can happen through visual content and explanation, the beauty of the skills can have great impact when viewed in detail. The work of Clark Kent in this context of haute couture supply systems, is integral to the preservation and adulation of Superman and the various luxury brands, creative directors, designers and celebrities synonymous with haute couture.

For the individual designer and small studio, the opportunity to showcase their work has never been greater thanks to the global stretch of the internet. Metaphorically speaking, the puppets of haute couture could cut their strings and lift the curtain that has been drawn over their identity and their

work. It may be the beginning of a re-balancing within the industry and a return to the more ethical ways of the past when respect for artisanal skills were more evident.

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