Haute Couturier ALEXANDRE VAUTHIER talks to BBeyond

After graduating from ESMOD (École Supérieure des Arts et Techniques de la Mode), Vauthier worked with Thierry Mugler and Jean-Paul Gaultier before launching his eponymous label in 2008. He has since then presented a collection at Haute Couture Fashion Week in Paris and has many French and international high profile clients and brand ambassadors.
Where do you draw your inspiration? Are you still influenced by the designers you worked for?

I draw my inspiration from the women around me; I listen to them and what I create is a synthesis of the world I perceive around me. The recurrent colours black, white and gold for example, come from vivid childhood memories. My 4 years working with Thierry Mugler taught me the “architecture” of a garment whereas with Gauthier, I learnt to de-structure and work in a 3D dimension when creating a piece; I became less rigid in my approach and was able to incorporate my own sensibilities. After ESMOD, I was still on a learning curve and both designers were “mentors” for me - the richness of what I learnt working alongside them, certainly played a part in shaping who I am now as a designer.

Define Haute Couture in your own words

The couture style is different from Haute Couture (HC). HC is a savoir-faire. HC started with a few day suits, evening dresses, using materials of exceptional quality to make a made-to-measure garment for a specific woman - a dialogue with that woman. It is, of course, the designer's style, vision and creation but it is a tête-à-tête, an intimate conversation with the woman, so that she ends up with the best garment, the one which will fit her to perfection, customised solely for her. I define that as the ultimate luxury - time is irrelevant in the face of perfection. You work with the best materials, you take the time it needs for them to acquire suppleness so that the garment will fall perfectly. That’s what I’m most interested in - to create pieces that are simply perfect.

When you work in HC, you work with all the best craftsmen in the luxury industries, with perfectionists and aesthetes: embroiders (like Lesage), feather masters (like Laramie), jewellers, etc…

Is France still at number 1 in the HC world or is its dominance decreasing?

Without sounding over-confident, I would say that yes, Paris was the birthplace of HC in the 18th century and remains to this day the HC capital of the world, with high ranking couture houses (Chanel, Dior, Givenchy, to name a few) which are the most sought-after in the world. You only have to attend the Paris Fashion Week to get a taste of the international crowd (buyers, fashion editors, publicists, not to mention the celebrities). Pantin, a small town on the outskirt of Paris is where you find the highest skilled seamstresses (petites mains).

‘Fashion can be bought, style one must possess’ (Edna Woolman Chase). In this context, how does HC reconcile the inherent dichotomy?

Style is not a question of money, age or size for that matter. Fashion is IN the clothes and style IS the wearer, I agree. However, I believe that style can be learnt… Every woman has the potential to

Vauthier knows how to sculpt a seductive silhouette - the smooth lines belie a sophistication of cut while the draping technique and marked (oversized) shoulders emphasise femininity.

When he launched his own haute couture house, he partnered with some famous brands: François Lesage, Swarovski, Christian Louboutin, Saga-Furs and others.

His breathtaking creations represent his constant reflection on femininity, sensuality, power and attitude, and the essence of the Vauthier woman.

Vauthier was interviewed by Valérie Hepworth
create an identity that is unique and to express it through how she carries herself, how she grooms herself, what she puts on. For me, style is one part self-knowledge and one part self-confidence: in other words, it’s an attitude. It’s knowing your strengths and weaknesses so that you can accentuate your strengths. Style is a celebration of individuality. It puts in relief the fallacy that there is an ideal body, an ideal woman.

There are currently 18 houses of HC in France; is AV set to become the 19th?

Only time will tell. HC is a passion for me; it requires fastidious work, taking risks, saving what works and discarding the errors. It is also like a springboard for personal growth and I’m enjoying every minute of it.

What are your views on the fashion industry’s enduring worship for and use of size zero models and its impact on young women?

Catwalk models have always been slim; I don’t understand why it’s recently become such an issue. When you present a collection, you want to present it harmoniously. Most girls from model agencies are young, tall and slim. They are, above all, professionals. They know how to walk, to pose, to present a creation in the most flattering way.

Catwalk garments are mainly prototypes, created on mannequins which don’t come in different sizes (the production and manufacturing of the different sizes will come later). Then, every single piece is re-adjusted/ re-defined on each model. Once the casting is done, I have a pretty clear idea of what every girl will wear depending on her morphology (some of the models I’ve used had breasts and a bottom !), what she projects as a woman. Models have changed and evolved with different generations: the 70’s had fuller-figure girls than the 90’s. The 60’s saw very thin models.

I’m not pressurising in any way, nor claiming that beauty equals being thin. The girls I choose are interesting and have beautiful bone structure of course. They ooze, an ethereal quality which re-emphasises the vision. I think that a great part of the debate on anorexia and modelling is misleading: the size of the models hasn’t fluctuated that much over the past decades; however the size of the average woman has gone up tremendously. Weight isn’t the defining element that makes a woman what she is. In that sense, some campaigns are definitely delusory.

When you’re doing a casting to recruit your models, what is the main trait you’re looking for in the girls?

For the runway shows, in fact, it’s never been a question of “I’ll take such or such type of body or morphology”; it’s rather a question of personality and my initial feeling, together with the personal interaction when I meet the model. I’m looking for bearing, poise, natural sophistication, confidence and charisma the girl exudes, because the bottom line is, she will be the one to present my creation and vision. Modelling is not always as glamorous as people seem to think; it’s hard work, rehearsals, and hair and make-up sessions.

I usually do the castings in my showroom next to the Champs Elysees. I try to choose a girl for her presence, her individuality with, at the back of my mind, a dress, a jacket, a gold necklace… I may have in mind a particular girl even before a casting, and it’s not always possible to have that girl as she may have other commitments with another house… As a whole, I look for a certain uniformity of personalities but certainly not in the girls’ body shape: I’m not working with a standard: a standardised woman is a rather unpleasant thought!

Whom would you like to dress in the future?

It’s a question of life encounters… There are many fascinating women that I’d love to dress one day but I’m very happy to leave all that to fate. I already feel extremely lucky with the current AV ambassadors, so different in many ways (origins, age, body shape) yet women who find in my creations a common synergy between femininity and elegance. I really admire them all.
Unique cat-walk garments are often created mostly without practical considerations – is this a PR driven strategy?

I guess you could be forgiven for thinking that exaggerating HC creations to the point where they become impractical or even un-wearable – who can forget Naomi Campbell’s famous catwalk stumble on her enormous platform shoes – is a modern phenomenon to showcase the designers. In fact, when it comes to the idiosyncrasies of HC or high fashion, not much has changed since the late 18th century: gigantic hats, towering wigs, huge bustles that made it impossible to sit down, were extreme in exactly the same way.

HC garments are mainly one-of-a-kind pieces that will be displayed on the catwalk. It is correct to say that these creations are primarily used as promotional vehicles. Since the focus is not on mass production, the HC designers spend much more time on their designs, tweaking the intricacies of the garment and making it as fantastic, flamboyant, elaborate or extreme as possible.

Your comments on the Climate dress by Diffus or the Cigarette Butt Haute Couture?

Unless there’s a hidden message related to tobacco, I’m rather puzzled about that... Or perhaps it is thinly concealed sarcasm? After all, HC is the epitome of luxury and I wouldn’t consider cigarette butts as such – even though their price has gone up!

In my opinion, a piece of clothing is not a pollution barometer either. I do understand and am personally fascinated by all the new technologies which have been developed: a garment that is able to calculate your cardiac pulse, your loss of calories, etc. These have a purpose for sportswear or simply for health reasons. How to create a dress which reacts to air quality levels (with flashing led lights)? I think there are other means already in place to deal with that particular need of gathering environmental information. I don’t believe it is the primary or the essential role of a garment. An item of clothing has already many requirements: to be comfortable, functional, utilitarian, warm, fun, a fashion or materialistic statement, a way to assert oneself... to name just a few, and I don’t think it necessary to add another one.

What is mind-blowing is to mix different craftsmanship as long as it’s done judiciously. The first dress I created for Roisin Murphy had very specific shoulder-pads which I couldn’t find at any wholesalers or retailers. We went from one foam cutter to the next to no avail, we ended up at L’Aerospatiale in Toulouse to have it cut by an engineer in a 3D scanner. We basically sculpted it to the shape I wanted via a specialist in a totally different field. Isn’t that amazing? The collaboration between three different trades: a plastic technician who applied gold leaves with silicon, which were then embroidered by Francois Lesage and an engineer; all of them working towards one goal: to sublimate the aesthetic of one dress...

Fur or not fur?

Fur...
Would you ever consider using your designs to make a political statement?

I'm not in the HC business to do politics. Else, I would have carried on with my law studies at university. Now if you tell me that my vision of women is unquestionably feminine, dauntless and a bit of “a femme fatale” that I hail anti-androgyny… I'm guilty but I promise you, there's no subliminal political message behind my creations or my shows!

Amongst others, Lanvin, Kate Moss and recently Versace and Marni have teamed up with the high street retailer HandM to create affordable collections for the general public. You have yourself, two years ago, created a few pieces for Les 3 Suisses (a French mail order catalogue). The success was instantaneous and tremendous.

Would you consider doing this again?

The collaboration with Les 3 Suisses was wonderful. I was very stressed at first as I was offered the cover right after Karl Lagerfeld who had done the previous season with them. AV was still a very young House and Les 3 Suisses had the audacity to put a basically unknown young designer on their front cover. My double fear was that the DNA of the House would not be received well by their clientele and that my designs would fail commercially. It was a real challenge that I embraced mathematically: specifications, marketing study of colours, shapes, type of clients, etc.

We presented the products couture-style, with superb, elegant photographs by Cedric Buchet, and the collection had a phenomenal success. Since the catalogue’s creation, the AV collection had the highest sales ever (overtaking the major success with Paco Rabanne in 1979). I was certainly elated to see my HC style, perceived by some as too avant-garde, have such an impact on the general public. Suddenly, it was making my product sustainable.

Is HC wearable art or is it just a platform to sell ready-to-wear fashion, accessories, perfume, etc?

Both. Garments are primarily destined to be commercialised and ultimately sold. HC is like a laboratory of ideas, where you develop, try out and create without restrictions new techniques and new materials.

HC is the projected image of the designer and the essence of the house sublimated. It can be compared to Art in that sense.

A catwalk show is a platform to sell and a publicity tool. After all, catwalk shows have been created for that purpose: to show buying customers a new collection.

What do you think of the tribute, from several designers, paid to great works of art for their spring-summer 2012 collections (Jill Sander on Picasso, Moschino on Frida Kahlo, Donna Karan on Philippe Dodard) and more specifically Jean-Paul Gaultier on Amy Winehouse? Is this a cynical use of art to jostle for greater market visibility?

HC imitating art? There have always been regular artistic collaborations in HC using the work of the masters for inspiration: Chanel with Cocteau, Schiaparelli with Dali, then Yves St Laurent and his sunflower embroidery. You can draw inspiration from everywhere – art, music or the cinema for that matter. Some artists are recurrent (F Khallo had already been a theme for J.P. Gaultier), Agnes B for example is very into contemporary art - she sets up galleries but nothing transpires in her collections. Marc Jacobs surrounds himself with Murakami. It’s a matter of personal taste, an inclination just like we all have. I honestly don’t think that an art element in a HC collection would give the designer a wider notoriety or generate more media attention. It’s just that, at that moment in time, the designer was in an arty frame of mind! Remember

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there’s no limit in HC in terms of extravaganza, fantastical and melodramatic creations…

Any hint of what will the AV woman wear in autumn/winter 2013?

I’m currently working on it and it’s not quite yet defined. I can’t obviously give you too many details… I can, however, tell you that the materials I’ll use are materials which have more or less disappeared because of their onerous price tag. That’s what HC is for, to be limitless in every sense. I do personally take great pleasure in re-using, re-discovering and adding a modern touch to materials that have been forgotten.

At what stage can a garment win its vintage and therefore iconic status?

To state the obvious, the passage of time to start with. The word ‘vintage’ was first used, if I’m not mistaken, to describe the old collections of the most famous designers (Chanel, Dior, St Laurent, Hermes, Lanvin) which reflected a precise moment of the history of HC in the 20th century; they became collector’s pieces because you couldn’t just go into a boutique to buy a 40 or 50 years old dress or jacket.

The vintage craze started in the 90’s. Garments could also be sold at auctions with different price tags depending on the era and the state of the garment. Vintage is perennially fashionable. I remember when I was young, anything American vintage (old baseball jackets, bomber jacket, etc.) was the thing to wear.

Now, to become iconic, it’s rather a conundrum… I guess that, at a precise moment in time, closely linked with the socio-cultural or even politico-socio-cultural mood of the period, a garment is going to capture the imagination of the public.
Look at the LBD (Little Black Dress) by Coco Chanel: tainted with scandal when it was first presented (knee-length was considered too short for the time and the colour black was the colour of mourning and worn by servants), it has become the symbol of refinement and stylish elegance. Alaia, Mugler, Lagerfeld, St Laurent, Givenchy and many other famous designers have revisited the iconic dress which is as popular as ever and, I believe, always will be. Another example would be the Paco Rabanne metal dress. He was a precursor in the 60’s by using metal or plastic to create garments. I’m not sure how comfortable the dresses were but I have a few friends who would love to own one and showcase it as a work of art.

What does it say about a woman wearing HC vintage (you regularly see actresses wearing vintage gowns on the Red Carpet of the Oscars for example)? Is it a statement of environmental sustainability, a publicity stunt, or simply a bid to avoid the dreaded faux-pas of being seen in the same dress as someone else?

I’m certainly not aware of any two celebrities wearing exactly the same dress at the same event. Stylists know how to do their job and plan it way in advance to avoid this happening, and may even have a back-up choice anyway. A HC House will never make the mistake of lending twice the same dress. First, because the creations of their latest collection will most certainly be unique garments and not yet found in the ready-to-wear market and secondly they would advise a stylist/publicist that another celebrity has already requested their product.

As for a woman choosing to wear vintage and what that says about her, I can only make conjectures.

I can totally understand that a woman may choose a HC vintage dress because of its timeless appeal, the cut, the material, the colour, the era associated with a particular designer. It could be an expression of a nostalgic desire, a taste for authenticity with a history - a history written in fabrics. It doesn’t necessarily mean that she doesn’t like the latest collections of that particular house, vintage or new, the garment will still bear the ‘stamp’ of the house. Because of who she is, the choice is limitless. The notion of HC remains: sublimation to the extreme whether the dress has a past or not. It also proves in a way that HC and fashion are no longer something short-term and have earned their timeless status just like art. I’m not sure if it’s a trend or a more global fashion phenomenon, a political statement (like with the GCC – Green Carpet Challenge of Livia Firth) but, ultimately, you can’t but admire the beautiful gowns that were delicately, lovingly and exquisitely made for in the first place.

Wearing a vintage dress at an event does not fortunately kill modern unfettered originality from the current established or emerging HC designers. HC is after all about creation, reinvention, revolutions in convention, and ultimate luxury. It’s hyper-dynamic. HC exists to redefine its fluid paradigms and will keep on doing so for a long time.

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