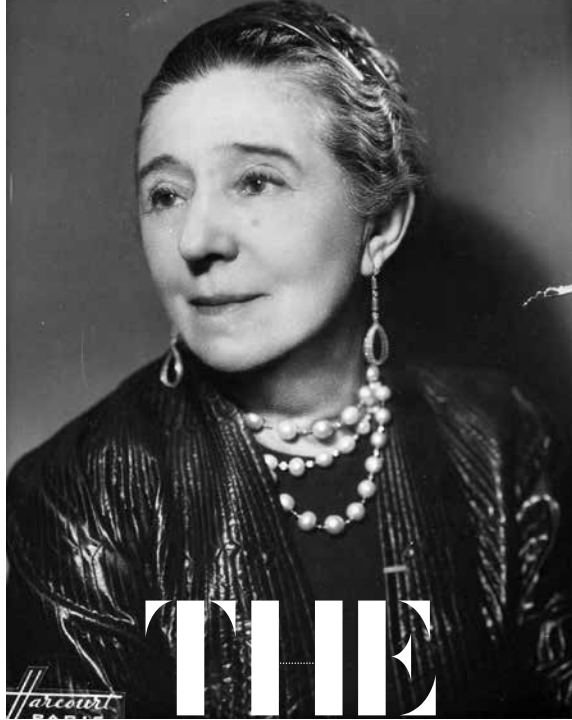


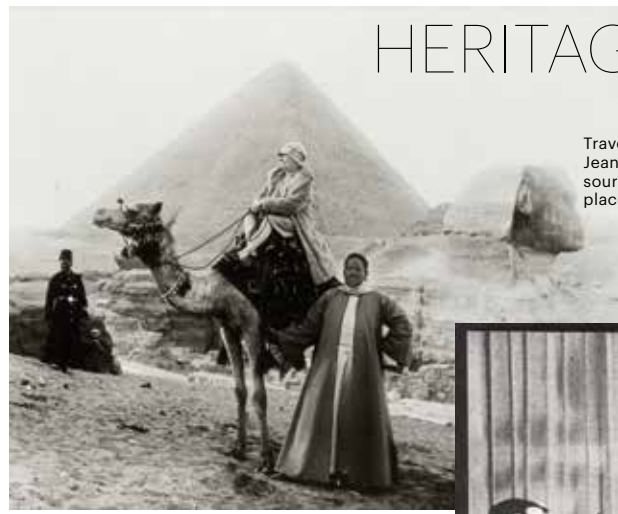
Jeanne Lanvin,
the legend herself.



THE HOUSE THAT JEANNE BUILT

BY ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE
PHOTOS COURTESY PATRIMOINE LANVIN

THE OLDEST COUTURE HOUSE IN THE WORLD, LANVIN, IS CELEBRATING ITS 125TH YEAR AND WE DISCOVER THE MYSTERY OF THE FAMOUSLY PUBLICITY-AVERSE JEANNE LANVIN AS HER PRIVATE OFFICE IS OPENED IN HONOUR OF ITS ANNIVERSARY.



Travel was part of Jeanne's DNA; she would source fabrics from places including Egypt.



Photograph of Jeanne and Marguerite, that inspired the logo first drawn by Paul Iribe, taken in 1907.



Inspecting the final touches on a dress

She

was a modern businesswoman who pretty much created the luxury lifestyle concept. Jeanne Lanvin, one of the first to design a line for children's wear in 1908, topped this with one for young girls, then women, then men, and was "the first couturier to start home décor" explains house historian Laure Harivel.

Her private office, at 16 Rue Boissy d'Anglas, on the corner of the luxury Rue Faubourg St Honore in Paris, still feels like a cocoon of creative spirit enclosed behind secure double-locked security doors.

It was at this address that, in 1889, Jeanne Lanvin opened a very small hat shop that became a very big success. At the age of 30, in 1897, she had a daughter, Marguerite - meaning daisy in French - and from that moment Marguerite became Jeanne Lanvin's raison d'être and the inspiration behind everything she would achieve creatively.

The muse Marguerite, dressed in perfect 'mini-me' outfits, attracted the hat shop customers' eyes - and they wanted the same for their own daughters. "These were very new dresses for the time in jersey and wool - very modern, easy to wear garments" explains Harivel.

Lanvin's children's line was launched in 1908. It became such a rip roaring success that only one year after that she founded her women's couture; followed closely by bridal, in 1911, and Lanvin fur in 1913.

The office is lined with an extensive library of Lanvin's research books on subjects like botany, fashion, theatre and costume.

There is an ambience of calm that is comfortable rather than austere. A black and white photograph from the 1930s sits on her desk. In it, she is completing fittings on two models and, almost uncannily, everything in the room in the image is exactly the same as it is today.

The space is filled with the fruits of her travel. Lanvin sourced the unusual - whatever was different from that available in the France of the early 20th Century. Whether saris from India, Japanese skirts, fabrics from Egypt - all were translated into a series of comprehensive swatch books containing cards, sketches, fabrics, or paintings from Italy, London, Spain.

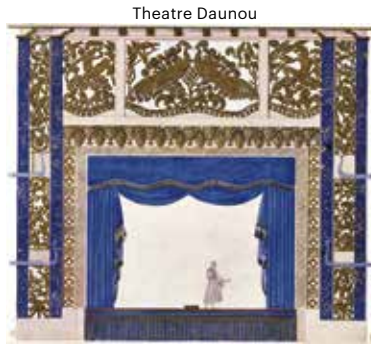
By 1920, the Lanvin home décor division was realised with the purchase of its own building at 15 Faubourg. Lanvin's partner in decoration was the celebrated French designer Armand-Albert Rateau. As Harivel elaborates "furniture, tables, chairs - all her designs" and I discover that the chair I am sitting on even has tiny daisies - or 'marguerites' carved into its wood.

At the same address in 1923, Lanvin Sport was established. The same year witnessed the opening of the Lanvin dyeing factory in Nanterre near Paris - so meticulous was she that she insisted on re-creating the exact blue - the one we know as Lanvin blue today - that she had so adored in Fra Angelico frescoes on her travels in Italy.

The codes of the house of 1925 were two-fold. A day dress would be pure, graphic without volume or embroidery - easy to wear. But by night, the "robes de style" were voluminous,



Embroidered botanical sketches feature largely in her idea books.



Theatre Daunou



Illustrations of hats, 1923.



Lavish embroidery for use in dresses



Theatre Daunou designed by Lanvin and Rateau.

dramatically embroidered, bejewelled (a mix of real and paste), taffeta and silk creations with a mix of sheer to be worn for cocktails or the theatre. “Like Elbaz today”, notes Harivel of the dress currently displayed in the office. Created for an exhibition in 1925 and later for the actress and good friend of Lanvin, Jane Renouardt in Paris, the garment, fragile now - hangs perilously from its pale pink grosgrain ribbon shoulder straps - is so heavy it can only be displayed for two or three weeks at a time.



A 'robe de style'.

Lanvin loved the Art Deco style and she and Rateau together designed her apartment. The three remaining rooms - very graphic, black and white bathroom and boudoir with the bedroom decked out in Lanvin blue - have been housed at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris since 1985.

The duo also designed the interior of the Theatre Daunou - the only theatre in Paris still blue and gold - instead of the traditional red and gold. The Lanvin-Rateau creative collaboration lasted for five years until 1925. At this point Lanvin promptly opened a menswear department and two years later released her second and signature perfume Arpege, a gift for her daughter's 30th birthday, encased in a black ball created by Rateau.

In 1930, she decided to re-do her entire office with the famed decorator Eugene Prince. A pivotal point of the re-design included a very modern-for-its-day three-way mirror that could be angled and moved on a trestle. This innovation enabled Lanvin to view a dress from all angles while sitting in her chair.



A wedding gown from 1923.



A 1929 dress designed for Jane Renouardt



The first Lanvin perfume, My Sin, 1925.



An elaborate evening dress on display. It is so heavy that it can only be displayed for short periods of time.



Cocoon shaped monochrome, 1924.



Dolls crafted from Iribe's illustration for window display

Not one to sit around, she then brought out a, now defunct, cosmetics line creating powder, lipsticks and tanning oil.

In fact she worked in 3D – draping fabric on the model – because she never sketched. “She needed all the inspiration from the books, fabrics, flowers so that she could explain to her employees exactly what she wanted...an embroidery, a sketch” says Harivel. “She took inspiration from ethnic fabrics, jewels, lacquer, shells, velvet...always something new regarding colour, texture, embroidery”.

Creative director of Lanvin since 2002, Alber Elbaz, also begins by draping the fabric in tribute to Lanvin, as Harivel says, “it helps to keep the DNA of the brand...he sketches to have something in his mind but afterwards he prefers to create with the fabric on the model”.

The Lanvin logo, of which Elbaz has added an anniversary twist, represents the love a mother has for her daughter. Reproduced by the illustrator Paul Iribe in 1923 from a photograph taken in 1907 of Lanvin and her daughter hand in hand on their way to a ball. Lanvin then created dolls holding the same poses as in the illustration, attired in gold lamé (one of her favourite fabrics) to dress the boutique window.

Without a doubt, Jeanne Lanvin lived her life way ahead of her time.

The varying styles of her work were modern for their day. A sequin detail in a scrapbook mix of clashing blue fuchsia could have been a forerunner to this season’s loudly clashing colours. The monochrome, the lamé, a black and fuchsia combo - and each dress bestowed with a name. A coat with huge fur collar and cuffs could have sauntered straight off last week’s Parisian catwalks. The mid-20s bridal gowns are slim line, elongated, exceptionally modern and partnered with point-toed pumps.

Jeanne Lanvin was prolific. She presented four collections per year – two main and two pre-collection or ‘entre saison’. Yet, each collection consisted of a whopping 250 looks.

She was astute – her look books preceded any boutique opening. They were sent to prospective clients in a hitherto ‘unconquered’ country who could effectively mail order the clothes. Only when she had enough clients in the respective country would she open a boutique.

Publicity averse and modest, Lanvin let her clothes to do the talking. The only advertising she permitted was for the theatre as she dressed many actresses – such as her good friend the actress Jeanne Renouardt - for performances and publicity tours in South America. Each sketch is named by play and actress but sadly not by illustrator “as they were so numerous”.

Lanvin could be described as brisk in terms of her success. Very quick, very new, modern, bang bang bang one after the other did she hammer out the production lines. And the whole shebang was housed at one address – that’s 1200 members of staff – for fashion, hats, bridal, theatre, menswear, home interiors, perfume, embroidery, “nowadays we are 200!” in three buildings.

Was she a control freak? She certainly had control and wanted all the employees from each discipline to work under one roof. She outsourced nothing - all was in-house. Yet, the superlative legacy is that, as Harivel puts it, “We have all the atmosphere of those days, all the decorations from the 1930s paintings, some dresses, photos... we still have the archives of 1925 and all those embroideries - because she wanted her whole workshop at Rue de Faubourg. We had the chance to preserve and conserve everything”.

Jeanne Lanvin always maintained that if it hadn’t been for her daughter she would have remained a milliner, “she never stopped working until her death - she was in this office and she wanted really to create every day.” And until her death in 1946 - she still designed hats.