



Animal Keepers

The story of French jewellery house Cartier's precious menagerie and the people who collect them

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Karen Soh visits London often. Presumably, it is to visit her children who are studying there, but her family isn't so sure sometimes. "I go to Harrods a lot when I'm there," the mother of four confesses with a laugh. Her children have even coined a word for her shopping sprees. "They say, 'Mummy's Harroding!'"

It was on one of those trips to Harrods in 2017 when Soh acquired her first high jewellery piece from Cartier, a ring from the Les Oiseaux Libérés collection featuring two parrots in white gold with sapphires, emeralds, onyx, black ceramic and diamonds. "It caught my eye so I made my husband buy it for me," she recalls.

The purchase marked the start of her Cartier collection focused almost exclusively on high jewellery and Soh's inauguration into an exclusive circle of collectors—a circle that includes famous names such as Wallis Simpson, the duchess of Windsor, and Mexican actress María Félix—who are particularly enthralled by Cartier's menagerie.

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Félix was known for her appreciation for the maison's reptilian designs. In 1968, she commissioned a platinum, white gold and yellow gold snake necklace adorned with 2,473 brilliant and baguette-cut diamonds with a total carat weight of 178.21. It was a masterpiece that was hard to top, but Félix managed to do so in 1975, with the now-famous double crocodile necklace. It was made in yellow gold, with one crocodile set with 1,023 brilliant-cut fancy intense yellow diamonds totalling 60.02 carats, and the other with 1,060 emeralds totalling 66.86 carats.

The crocodiles were fully articulated and uncannily life-like, spurring rumours that Félix had provided Cartier's artisans with a live model by waltzing into

the boutique with a baby crocodile in tow. Although the truth of this account was never corroborated, it was certainly within the realm of possibility, given the actress' larger-than-life personality.

Unlike Félix, Soh has a little less room in her life for spectacular high jewellery. She readily admits that her collection isn't very practical.

"I seldom wear jewellery to work," she says. As the medical director of Privé Clinic, she has to keep her hands unencumbered in order to perform aesthetic procedures. But this hasn't stopped her from collecting. In fact, it's quite the opposite. "When I have an opportunity to wear them, my jewellery has to stand out," she explains.

THE QUEEN OF THE JUNGLE

Since its founding in 1847, Cartier has displayed a penchant for animal-inspired designs, sculpting a veritable zoo out of precious metals and stones throughout the years. But although parrots, flamingos, snakes and crocodiles have all had their chance in the spotlight in the French house's display cabinets, its most favoured animal resident is undoubtedly the panther.

The maison's affinity for the big cat began with Jeanne Toussaint, Cartier's director of fine jewellery in the early 20th century. She was the original panther. Often seen dressed in a full-length coat of panther fur, she was Louis Cartier's muse—his Petite Panthère, as she was affectionately called. Despite her nickname, Toussaint's influence on Cartier was anything but small.

In 1913, the Cartier heir commissioned illustrator Georgette Barbier to create a painting that was to be used on an invitation to a jewellery exhibition. Barbier came back with *Dame à la Panthère*, depicting a woman

Karen Soh wears her own Cartier Panthère jewellery and watch





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wearing multiple pearl necklaces, with a black panther at her feet. The woman in the painting was believed to have been based on Toussaint. The illustrated panther was the first usage of the big cat in the maison’s imagery.

The following year, the brand unveiled a woman’s watch set with black onyx on the bezel to imitate the panther’s spots. In 1917, Louis Cartier gifted Toussaint a cigarette case decorated with the figure of a panther.

Toussaint seemed to embrace—and indeed, even enjoy—the comparisons made between her and the animal. When she came on board as the artistic director of Cartier’s jewellery department in 1933, she wasted no time in expanding her pride of big cats. The panther began to appear with more frequency in Cartier’s masterpieces.

LOYAL SUBJECTS

With more exposure, the maison’s favourite feline began to gain more admirers. In 1948, Toussaint created a brooch for Simpson that resembled a panther sitting on an emerald. Carved out of yellow gold with black enamel spots, it was the first time the jewellery house replicated the cat in its entirety. It didn’t take long for the duchess to add another panther to her collection.

Panthers and crocodiles have long formed part of Cartier’s design lexicon, and the brand has attracted powerful women through the ages

A year later, she purchased a second brooch, this time with the feline sparkling in pavé white diamonds and blue sapphire spots, perched on a 152.35-carat sapphire cabochon.

Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, a French statesman, activist and United Nations high commissioner for refugees in the later half of the 20th century, was also a keen collector of Panthère de Cartier pieces. He made three significant orders in 1958: a pair of

panther head earrings, a transformable brooch that could also be worn as a clasp on a necklace, and the maison’s first double panther head hinged bangle.

As for Soh, it may have been diamond-pavé parrots that made her heart flutter four years ago, but just as the collectors who preceded her experienced, the allure of the panther is irresistible.

Her first Panthère de Cartier ring was acquired last year, at the brand’s high jewellery showcase. When worn, it resembles a panther, with a diamond body, onyx and blue sapphire spots and emerald eyes, resting with its tail wrapped around the finger.

“It reminds me of our holiday in a safari, where we (her husband and her) saw leopards sitting in a similar position on a tree,” she reminisces. “It was an instant decision when we saw it. We decided to buy it on the spot. I think it’s the perfect first Panthère de Cartier piece.”

Since then, Soh has added at least three more pieces to her collection. One is a two-finger ring with a panther that looks as if it is pouncing across the hand on a solitaire diamond, while holding a sapphire in one paw. This, as with most of Soh’s Cartier jewellery, was purchased on a whim. “It caught

my eye when I was at the Cartier store to collect another item I had ordered,” she says with a laugh.

A GROWING APPRECIATION

Quick decisions have come to exemplify Soh’s jewellery collecting style. “Most of my pieces have been quick decisions. I know when I see it whether it is something for me,” she shares. “At this stage of my and my husband’s lives, we are not waiting for significant events to happen before buying jewellery. We buy if we have the opportunity to, and we like the piece enough.”

She points out that when it comes to one-off high jewellery creations, availability does not often coincide with special occasions. Encountering her next acquisition often depends on luck—being at the right place, at the right time.

It’s clear that Soh’s affinity with the brand is one that grows with every piece she collects. “When I wear Cartier, it feels like it’s quite private to me. It has to do with the attention to detail—in the way the eyes of the panther are set, the shape of the piece, and the finishing. Everything fits perfectly. Collecting has been a journey of learning for me. The more I collect, the more I appreciate different aspects of the finished product.”