



In Defense of Expense

THE NEW GENERATION OF FRENCH HAUTE COUTURE
by ILIA SYBIL SDRALLI / photography OLIVER BUHAGIAR

Haute couture or high fashion is a designation given to garments that are fitted in person and made to order in-studio for private clients. In the strictest sense, haute couture houses should be French, having a workshop that employs 15 or more full-time employees. Twice a year, the houses will stage elaborate shows—spring/summer and fall/winter—setting their sartorial tone and unique vision for the season to come. Established houses such as Chanel, Dior, and Givenchy have been the tastemakers in Paris for over half a century, though that is beginning to change.

In the past, the success of a big fashion house's fall or spring show could lean heavily on a favorable review in magazines such as *Vogue* or *Women's Wear Daily*. Today, ascendancy is measured in digital impressions and social-media activity. Bloggers and influencers control the narrative. Collections are now being recorded and uploaded onto YouTube and Snapchat and Instagram, making the need to physically be in Paris or Milan or New York for a week unnecessary. Apps and Online chatter seem to be in a tug-of-war with haute couture. The shows are expensive, showy, and to some, antiquated. But for a select group of new designers, haute couture fashion represents an opportunity to create for a big stage. This new generation of French couturiers, including Stéphane Rolland, Julien Fournié, and Alexis Mabille, argue that haute couture is not a broken or outmoded system at all.

"Ten years ago, I knew the world was going to move," says Rolland, founder of Stéphane Rolland haute couture. "All of us are consuming like crazy, and we expect more and better at the best price with the fastest delivery. So, haute couture rules temper that system," Rolland continues. "In our foolish universe, time is the real luxury. Let's take time—time to think, to observe, to savor the beauty, the unit, a dress made for you exclusively."

When asked about the kind of modern woman he'd like to dress in haute couture, Rolland presents the image

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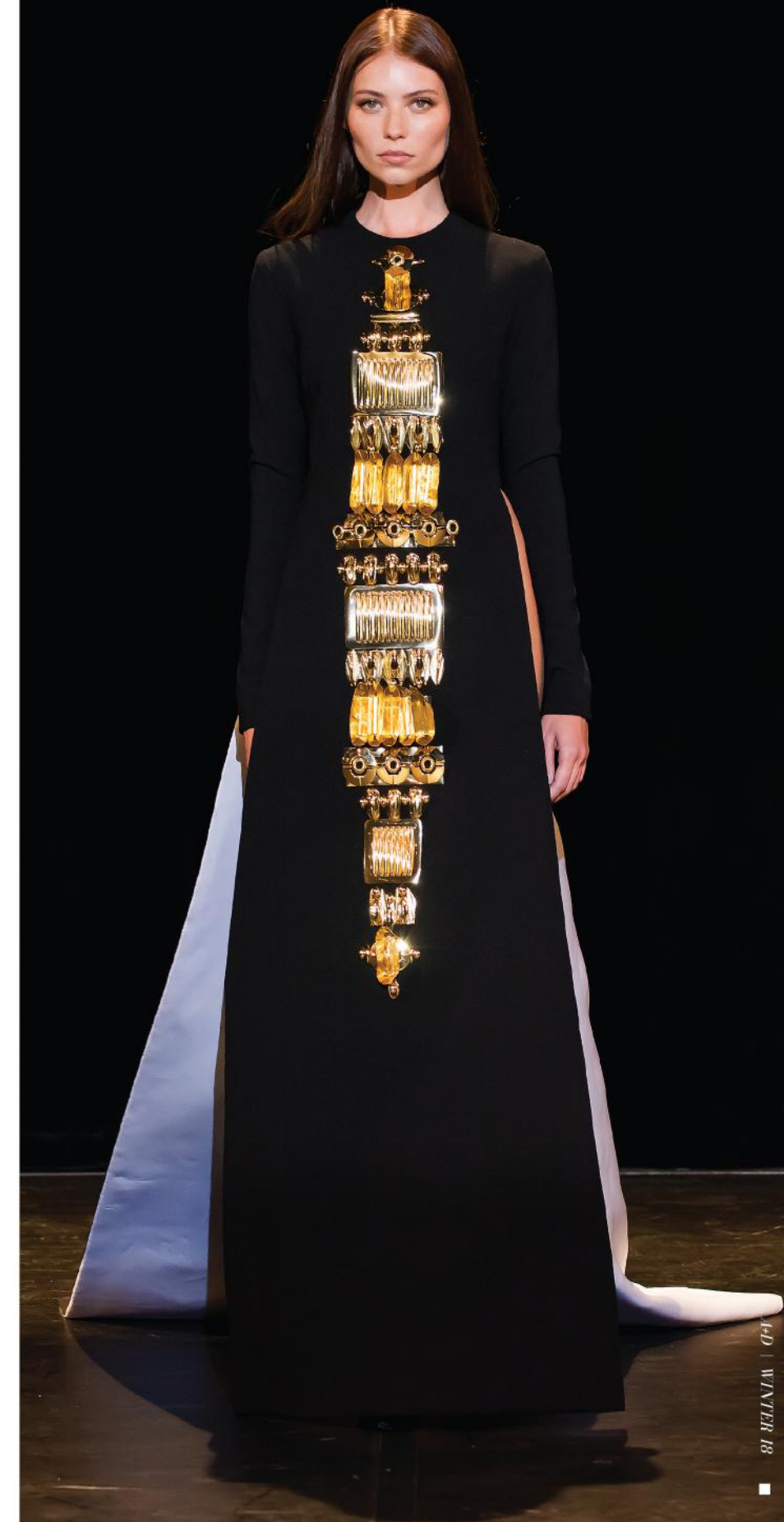
~ *STÉPHANE ROLLAND*


of a stylish, fearless individual who, as he puts it, could be every woman. “Age, shape, religion, and culture do not influence me,” he says. “Personality makes the difference. When a woman comes to me, she already knows why. I want my dresses to help women feel stronger and more powerful.”

Fournié appreciates haute couture for its prestige and discreet clientele. “We are already dressing [celebrities]. I cannot disclose their identity, which is one of the rules of haute couture,” Fournié says. “The more ‘masstige’ brands (mass-produced collections) pay celebrities to wear their clothes. I think the exact opposite: If a lady wants to wear my designs, I think she should become a customer. I find it healthier, don’t you? Now, if you want the name of a celebrity I would like to imagine dresses for, here it is: Eva Green.”

Mabille is another young and established couturier. His approach has been more laissez-faire, with the market choosing him: “For me, haute couture was a kind of dream,” he says. “But I started to present, and soon clients just came to me. It wasn’t really a choice.” Mabille firmly believes that in this social-media-dominated world, it’s craftsmanship that matters. “Being unique while using the power of the ateliers’ petites-mains (little hands), this is haute couture’s greatest ability,” he says.

All three of these breakout French designers understand the value of haute couture, both for their own careers as well as for the movement of the industry itself. Even if technology has ramped up the pace of consumption, haute couture will remain a safe haven where designers can take their time. Designing sophisticated garments is important. As Mabille puts it: “It makes us dream.” ■





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