

Fleur Fatale

Cartier deftly portrays the orchid's vibrant drama with a fanfare of high jewelry—the prelude to the house's next banner collection.

BY LAURIE KAHLE

PERHAPS MORE THAN any other flower genus, orchids captivate with their countless forms and enticing color spectrum. The origins of orchids date back 120 million years, though humans first encountered them in Asia 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. In medieval Europe, the erotically shaped plants were used to concoct aphrodisiacs as well as fertility potions. To the Greeks, they symbolized virility. When orchids appear in dreams, they supposedly represent subliminal desires for delicacy and romance in personal relationships.

"The orchid is the most phenomenal flower that exists," says Bernard Fornas, president and CEO of Cartier. "It has a strong personality. There are as many as 5,000 varieties, and many symbols are linked to the orchid." This potent combination of versatility, sensual beauty, romance, and symbolism made the orchid an ideal motif for the next major Cartier collection of jewels: *Caresse d'orchidées par Cartier*, a prolific line that is expected to have a life cycle of several years.

Last fall, New York City hosted the collection's international launch, which traditionally opens with a big bang—in this case, 38 high-jewelry pieces dripping with diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and rubellites. The premiere included seven one-of-a-kind creations, some of which required as long as two years to fabricate. "Only a few artists are capable of making such miracles," says Fornas, who notes that the unique pieces were sold by the following day.

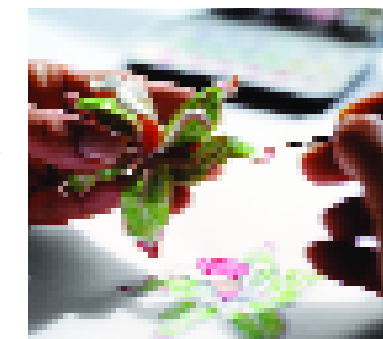
"We cannot make 100 of these pieces. They require golden hands, and golden hands do not fall from the sky." Just as in fashion, Cartier propagates the parade of couture designs into more moderate and basic production pieces that it ships to its 245 boutiques worldwide.

The stones drive the designs of extremely limited high-jewelry pieces, explains Fornas. As Cartier acquires extraordinary gems, it creates jewelry to showcase them. "We are running all over the world for exceptional stones all the time," he says. "We are now buying stones for pieces that will be in the market two or three years from now."

Indeed, a single stone was the genesis of *Caresse d'orchidées*, says Jacqueline Karachi-Langane, the high-jewelry atelier's creative director, who came upon a pink sapphire that reminded her of a flower. "Generally

the stone—the color, form, spirit—is the first inspiration," she says. "The spirit of the stones gives spirit to the jewelry." She decided to create a floral ring, but she wanted to present a special flower, something very feminine; she chose an orchid, a form that had long been in Cartier's repertoire. Karachi-Langane and company executives immediately recognized that the ring could be the basis for an entire collection.

At Cartier, each piece of high jewelry starts with a drawing or a three-dimensional wax model that the designer translates onto paper. The sketches, which specify the selected stones, then go to the workshop, where Xavier



PHILIPPE GONTIER

The No. 29 orchid brooch with a faceted spinel center stone (opposite) began as a wax model and sketch (above).

Gargat and his team evaluate them for feasibility and cost. Gargat oversees the atelier, where 60 craftsmen work primarily on unique pieces, prototypes, and special orders. Once an executive committee approves a piece, the manufacturing process begins.

First the sketch is drafted onto graph paper and marked with specific dimensions and specs for spaces that will hold the gems. "Here, people must work with their heads before they start working with their hands," says Gargat. Throughout the process, the jewelers may encounter problems with the designer's initial concept, requiring a back-and-forth exchange to resolve the issues.

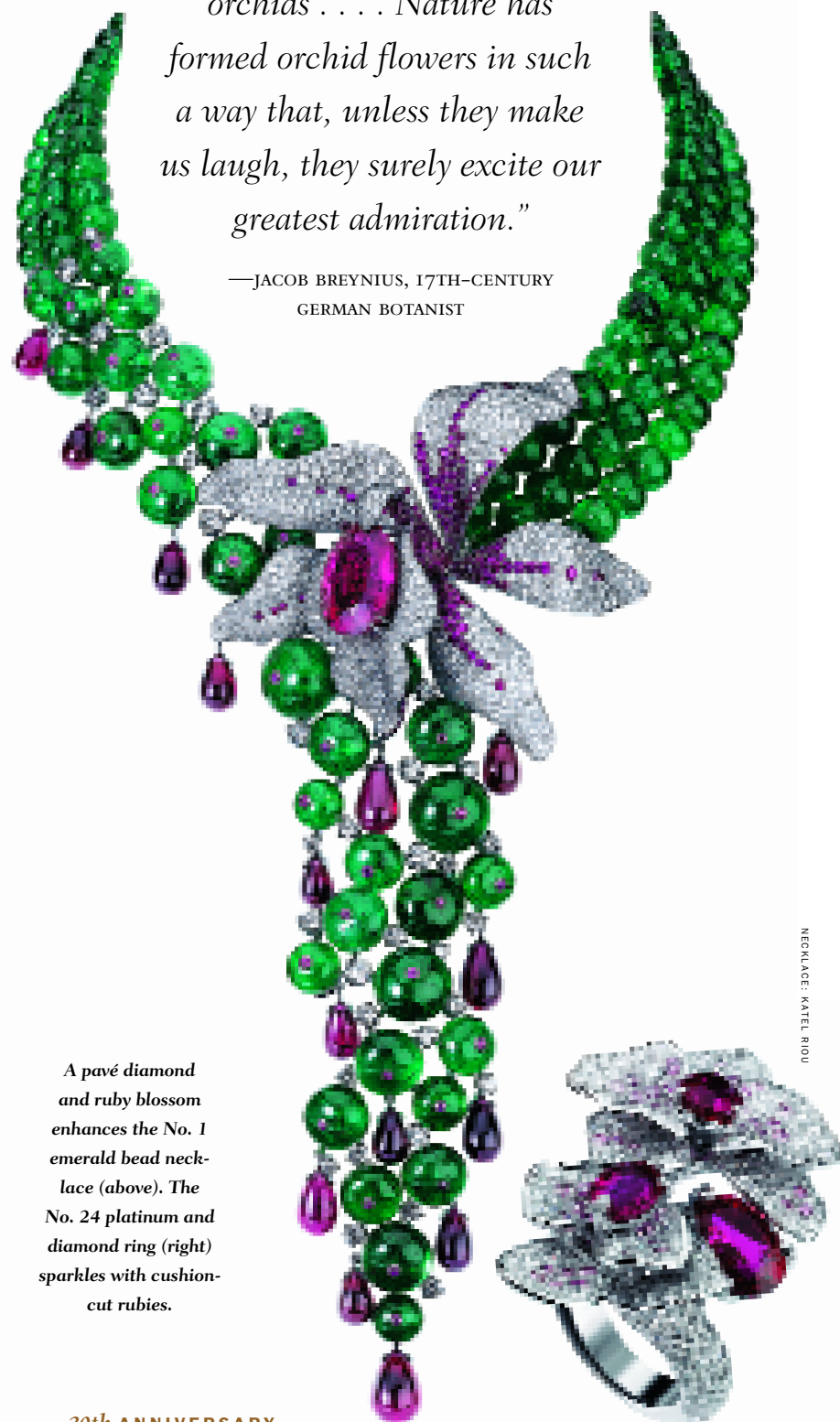
The design for one orchid brooch, for example, dictated large batches of gems of the same hue, as well as varying shades of that color, to create the tonal gradation of the flower's intricate pavé pattern. Assembling such a cache of stones proved difficult. The other challenge was making the piece appear light and blossomlike despite its large size. "The technical difficulty and the aesthetics are integrated, so major teamwork is required to achieve success," says Gargat.

Using manual tools, the jewelers start with raw pieces of precious metal, which they cut and drill holes into to form the design's skeletal components. Before a piece is appointed with gems, a craftsman uses a cotton cloth to polish the back of the form and each individual hole that will hold a stone. This process enhances the light refraction through the gems. One of the firm's five setters then fixes the gems into the metal form, securing each stone with six prongs. A six-prong setting takes longer to make, but it is stronger than other settings, and the metal is less visible. Once the stones are in place and the piece has been thoroughly polished, a jeweler assembles the finished product.

Quality assessment is ongoing throughout the process. Ultimately, quality controllers in Cartier headquarters examine each finished piece

"If nature ever showed her playfulness in the formation of plants, this is visible in the most striking way among the orchids . . . Nature has formed orchid flowers in such a way that, unless they make us laugh, they surely excite our greatest admiration."

—JACOB BREYNIUS, 17TH-CENTURY
GERMAN BOTANIST



A pavé diamond and ruby blossom enhances the No. 1 emerald bead necklace (above). The No. 24 platinum and diamond ring (right) sparkles with cushion-cut rubies.

NECKLACE: KATEL RIOU

for flaws. “There is zero tolerance for defects,” says Gargat. “This is probably the most demanding workshop in the world. This is a corporate culture, an attitude that is distinctly Cartier.”

Masterful artisans are rare assets, so Cartier invests in educational programs, such as its own polishing school, to train the next generation of golden hands. “It’s not easy to find talent,” says Gargat. “Many people will want to learn, but few will persevere. It’s a very demanding job that requires time to earn a decent living. Very few get to the point where they become experts.”

Cartier trains apprentices, but then encourages them to work elsewhere. “Ideally, it would work like the old guilds,” he explains. “They train here, then travel to open their minds, and come back with enriched skill and know-how.”

While producing the Caresse d’orchidées collection, Gargat’s team also has spent the past year developing a high-jewelry collection to commemorate December’s reopening of the historic Paris flagship at 13 rue de la Paix.

The Rue de la Paix collection comprises pieces that evoke the historical flavor of such iconic Cartier collections as Tutti Frutti from the Art Deco era. One piece, reveals Karachi-Langane, features a historic pink diamond, the 128.48-carat Star of the South. “It is very interesting to work with stones like that, because they have a history and you feel very humble before them,” she says. “It’s not a matter of making a nice design, but of creating something that will not take away from the personality of the stone.”

Rue de la Paix, where kings and Cartier’s most famous clients once came to commission their jewelry, also will be the new address of the company’s high-jewelry workshops. “The jewelers are very excited to move to rue de la Paix,” says Gargat. “It is like Mecca for them. They feel greatly rewarded to be able to work in such a mythical place.” *

Cartier, 800.227.8437, www.cartier.com

AN UNCOMPROMISING POSITION

BY LEE SIEGELSON

CHALLENGING THE ABSENCE of soul, detail, and uniqueness in mass-produced adornments that flooded the market after the industrial revolution, Cartier returned artistic spirit to its métier by encouraging creative freedom unencumbered by marketing or manufacturing efficiency concerns. Thus the house established a legacy of Art Deco masterpieces unrivaled in both depth and caliber of work.

The Model A mystery clock, the original and most sought-after of all the mystery clocks, was the defining objet d’art in and of its time. The Model

A represented a departure from traditional timepieces with its revolutionary design and futuristic concept, articulated in bold geometric forms. In contrast to the Model T, Henry Ford’s 1908 automobile that symbolized the efficacy of mechanized mass production by assembly line, each Model A was produced entirely by hand by a team of master artisans—watchmaker, designer, goldsmith, enameler, lapidary, gem setter, engraver, and polisher—and required as long as a year to make.

The clock’s unorthodox design creates an optical illusion, with the hands appearing unattached to the body and floating at the center of a translucent dial. The illusion, or mystery, was achieved by affixing the hands onto separate crystal disks, with toothed metal rims driven by gears that are concealed in the clock’s frame and

attached to the movement in the case.

Maurice Couet, a technically skilled and imaginative 28-year-old clock maker who had studied the creations of French magician and clock maker Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, designed these intriguing timepieces. More than intellectual statements addressing society’s obsession with the intangibility of time, these clocks

remain potent symbols of Cartier, which made some 90 one-of-a-kind Model As, primarily from 1913 to 1930.

At Siegelson, where we purvey rare jewelry and artifacts, one of our most treasured possessions is an early

Lee Siegelson is the third-generation owner of Siegelson, a dealer of fine diamonds and gemstones, special jewelry, and objets d’art that serves high-end international retailers.

Model A (below) that once belonged to William Andrews Clark, U.S. senator and copper magnate. This circa 1915 piece—made of rock crystal, mother-of-pearl, nephrite, and diamonds—is nearly identical to the first Model A created in 1913, which was sold to J. Pierpont Morgan, the financier and art collector. Queen Mary of England, Queen Victoria Eugenia of Spain, and King Farouk of Egypt were among the other notable figures who possessed Model As. Joseph Stalin received a Model A as a gift from General Charles de Gaulle.

The Art Deco period at Cartier was a time of inventiveness, when design broke free from established paradigms. Today, the Model A stands as a defining moment in the company’s esteemed history. *

Siegelson’s Cartier Model A clock, circa 1915.

