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INSTANTLY

ELSA

SHE-WOLF
OF PARIS

Recognition of Elsa Schiaparelli's name is still far too low on the fashionista scale.

THIS ITALIAN NOBLEWOMAN WAS A GIANT IN THE RAREFIED WORLD OF COUTURE, A TRUE ARTIST, NOT SIMPLY A TALENTED DRESSMAKER

like many of her peers, notably her ARCH RIVAL COCO CHANEL. Her extraordinary innovations changed fashion in ways that still resonate 50 years later, and innumerable ideas and concepts continue to be appropriated and copied from her MARVELLOUS BODY OF WORK. Now finally she is being celebrated. Alongside Mrs Prada. They're having an imaginary conversation at the Met. 'Nuff said.

Text MAX BLAGG

GEORGE HOVINGEN-HIENE/RUSSIAN 1900-1910 PORTRAIT OF ELSA SCHIAPARELLI, 1922 COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, HOVINGEN-HIENE/VOGUE © CONDE NAST

WE CHANNELLED SCHIAP in the back seat of a Duesenberg that once belonged to Greta Garbo, in which, for a couple of dreamy hours, we drove around Paris, that "landscape built out of sheer life", as some *flâneur* once observed.

MAX BLAGG: [STROKING UPHOLSTERY.] "This back seat is bigger than my room at La Louisiane! The materials they used for car interiors back in the 1930s were so superior. What is this, the skin of an unborn calf or something?"

SCHIAP: "It is quite embraceable, isn't it? Exquisite texture. And this gorgeous shade of pearly grey. I think it's weimaraner. Just joking! My tanner could do this. Oh, the craftsmen we had, the artisans! I hear everything is made in China these days."

MAX BLAGG: "Yes, almost all the big designers send their stuff there now. The Chinese have even started up factories in Italy so they can use the Made in Italy label, even though it's not exactly what that label used to imply when you walked the earth. Things are really quite different down here nowadays. Let's talk instead about your charmed life, Elsa. [POINTS.] Ooh, there's the Opéra, look!"

SCHIAP:

"D'ABORD, NEVER ADDRESS ME AS ELSA. A HORRIBLE NAME, EVEN FOR A LIONESS."

Secondly, I lived here for a greater part of my life, so it won't be necessary to point out landmarks. I do still adore Paris, even if it doesn't have the urban throb that it once had. [POINTS.] Oh, that's where Les Halles used to be! Calvados at 6am!"

MAX BLAGG: "Certainly, in your day, Paris was more of a cultural epicenter than it is today. It hasn't been the same since they got rid of the *vespasiennes*. But never mind Paris, tell us about your childhood in Italy."

SCHIAP: "I grew up in a very cultured and wealthy family. My father was an expert in ancient art and writing, a curator of medieval manuscripts, so I had a very good education. I wanted for nothing, but it was rather stifling nonetheless. I felt a certain fine madness within me very early on. My parents detected my folie and sent me to a convent school, but that didn't cure me. Ever since I have detested mountains and nuns."

MAX BLAGG: "Your uncle was a famous astronomer, and you spent a long time studying the night skies with him. That must have had an influence."

SCHIAP: "Oh yes, I can steer by the stars if I am in an open boat in the middle of the ocean, but actually, looking at the heavens for extended periods only fed my desire to escape from the family cocoon. It was too comfortable – one didn't have to do anything. That kind of surfeit of money, of ease, it can be stifling for an artist, you know."

MAX BLAGG: "Try telling that to some of the artists I know. But it seems true in some cases, they get lazy and deluded – that fellow who put dead sharks in a miniature aquarium, for example, he is supposedly the richest artist in the world."

SCHIAP: "Oh, I rather liked the spin paintings! The first one or two, anyway. But those cabinets filled with pills? You could buy real art for the price they're asking for those. I'd rather have a thing of beauty than hedge-fund booty. A Caravaggio or a cluster of

medicine cabinets? Easy choice, I think [SHOWS PORTRAIT OF BACCHUS ON HER NEW iPad.]”

MAX BLAGG: “Oh my God, that fat little cherub, so sexy, and those grapes look just like testicles! Oops, I just ate a whole chocolate cookie. I hope the sugar rush doesn’t make me ask anything untoward, about your sex life, say...”

SCHIAP: “I don’t discuss that much, it’s a closed book, unlike that cocotte Coco’s endless escapes.”

MAX BLAGG: “You are referring to Coco Chanel, I presume, your arch rival at that time – but even she acknowledged that you were an artist.”

SCHIAP: “Chanel was intensely envious, and it’s true the competition between us was quite harsh. And we both did new things, like sportswear, for example. But she was so minimalist, I was much more flamboyant. She behaved very badly in the war, and I did not approve of that. Before the war we did move in the same social circles, so the claws were unsheathed quite often.”

MAX BLAGG: “Was it just a coincidence that she picked up her shears again in 1954, the same year that you retired?”

SCHIAP: “The competition, meaning myself, was gone, and people had pretty much forgotten about her wartime horizontal collaboration. She did give me one good idea, though, which was to secure the licensing for my fragrances.”

MAX BLAGG: “The trends you have set are legion – the wedge, which is making another huge comeback this year, but you also introduced the concept of selling couture at retail, and perhaps most innovative, the whole catwalk thing, using different themes and long, skinny, waif-like models.”

SCHIAP: “People are always complaining about the bulimic girls designers use, but the simple fact is they show the clothes off much better than normal-size people – if you see models in the street, they look like freaks of nature compared to ordinary mortals. They are a type of goddess, these ethereal creatures – even if they are rarely blessed with brainpower – and they can elevate the clothes to another level.”

MAX BLAGG: “Your shows had some very advanced themes. One time you were inspired by tattoos. How did that come about?”

SCHIAP: “I was dating a legionnaire, a horrible man, and he was absolutely covered with tattoos. At the time I found them incredibly stimulating. If you read Blaise Cendrars’ novel *Emmène-moi au bout du monde!*, you’ll see he stole my tattooed love god for one of his characters...”

MAX BLAGG: “You spent a lot of time hanging out with artists such as Cocteau, Dali and Giacometti, to name just three.”

SCHIAP:

“COCTEAU AND I COLLABORATED ON A SWEATER DESIGN THAT WAS QUITE SUCCESSFUL,

and all of them brilliant men, so full of ideas. And I worked on his film *The Blood of a Poet* with that marvellous American woman Lee Miller. And I had great fun with Dali, we made some crazy, beautiful clothes – the lobster and the skeleton dresses, and the hats. I used to love visiting Giacometti, always covered with marble dust, those beautiful muscular hands trying to steer me into that shabby little iron bed in the corner of the studio...”

MAX BLAGG: “Sounds so romantic. Being around creative people must have allowed your inspiration to flow freely – the invitations printed on fabric, the perfume bottle in the shape of a torso – Gaultier loved that one – the buttons transformed into bumblebees, the coloured zips. Everything you did still seems very modern.”

SCHIAP: “It was in the air and we just pulled things out of the air.”

MAX BLAGG: “Wallis Simpson wore some of your creations also. Did you see the recent film about her, *WE?*”

SCHIAP: “No, I’ll probably catch it on cable. I heard the costumes were very good.”

MAX BLAGG: “Nancy Mitford, of the famous Mitford sisters, mentioned in her novel *Love in a Cold Climate* that her heroine Fanny wanted to wear the Schiaparelli label on the outside of her jacket so that people would know who made it. That’s actually something that has come to pass, in a terrifying way.”

SCHIAP:

“INDEED – WHAT AN EXTRAORDINARY IDEA, THAT ONE SHOULD BROADCAST ONE’S CLOTHIER’S NAME ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE GARMENT.

Expensive clothing was limited to the rich, no one else really knew about it. It certainly wasn’t advertised. There were very few brands known outside of a small, extremely wealthy circle. Most people thought *Asprey* was the name of Nick and Nora’s dog.”

MAX BLAGG: “The writer Janet Flanner said you have ‘a gift, almost uncontrollable at times, for discovering beauty in lowly objects which have hitherto escaped attention by being universally useful’. That sounds like a description of a modern conceptual sculptor rather than a dressmaker. Like Tony Cragg turning detergent bottles into art.”

SCHIAP: “Janet also compared me to a cabinet maker, which I thought was rather nice. It’s true – what I did always felt more like art than dressmaking, even if I did, at one point, have 400 employees and eight ateliers... But I also monitored every client, opened every letter that we received, so I always knew what was going on.”

MAX BLAGG: “And you never learned to sew, either?”

SCHIAP: “No, that skill escaped me, but I had the best cutters and couturiers and seamstresses to actualise my ideas; they knew exactly how to transform my sketches on paper into marvellous confections. It’s a production method that has since been adopted by many contemporary designers.”

MAX BLAGG: “A final question. You’re being paired with Miuccia Prada for a big retrospective at the Met in New York that will run from May through until August. Do you think you two are a good match?”

SCHIAP: “Well, we are both Italian!”

Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations, May 10-Aug 19; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York