



Paper trail

MARIANNE GUÉLY *may not be a fashion designer, but she creates her own kind of couture for many of the world's most prestigious luxury houses*

IT'S AROUND THIS TIME OF YEAR that retailers unveil their elaborate window displays to mark the start of the holiday season. In Paris, Galeries Lafayette is considered a frontrunner in the art of festive *mise en scènes*, invariably employing marionettes, animatronics and all manner of lighting effects to bring to life a carnivalesque crowd-pulling take on Christmas.

A few streets away from the famous department store, at number 46 rue de Provence, you'll find a very special studio with two large windows that are perennially decked out with beguiling props, all of them handmade. This is the workplace of Marianne Guély, a specialist designer who creates fantasy worlds out of paper; they range from large-scale installations

and dramatic backdrops to accordion-style greeting cards too beautiful to store away in a drawer.

Guély is well known in the world of luxury: she has collaborated with almost every prestigious maison you could name, including Christian Dior, Baccarat, Harry Winston, Van Cleef & Arpels, Piaget, Prada, Hermès and Louis Vuitton. These projects vary in scope and size; she

and her staff design everything from baroque press invitations (I spy one such invite, created for Cartier and shaped like a crocodile, on her desk) to tumbling cascades of flowers, sculptural light fixtures and immersive paper 'gardens', replete with quasi-vegetal twists and tangles that look unbreakable despite the diaphanous nature of their material. The designer now



Hotel Le Scribe Paris Opéra in paper, crafted in minute detail down to the ironwork swirls of the balconies

employs a whole team of creatives who hail from all sorts of artistic backgrounds, including theatre design, architecture and fine art.

Elegant and polished, with a neat blonde bob, Guély is effusive about her craft. The designer has an extraordinary way of articulating what she finds so magical about a material that most of us barely use to write on these days, given our predilection for digital devices.

"Just like a couture fabric, paper can be cut, perforated, creased, pleated and frayed," she says. "So, you see, all of the caprices of high fashion can be applied to this medium, only with more ease and confidence." Guély describes the act of 'making' as a sort of chrysalis process, since her creations are structured from an accessible and affordable material that is elevated into the realms of art by shape, narrative and context. "You can create a sense of reverie with paper that never clashes with the landscape of luxury design," she explains from behind her desk. "In fact, what you discover is that these paper worlds actually enhance other areas of beauty and prestige."

Guély's 'office' is more like an exotic study crammed with books, paintings, corporate cards (including one shaped like a tiny throne) and paper sculptures of all shapes and sizes: delicately perforated tropical blooms; a gigantic rose that doubles



as a wall lamp; mini maquettes of a Christian Dior boutique; and a leather-stitched monkey with 'fur' crafted from thousands of tiny strands of gold-coloured paper, rendering it as soft and fluffy as a plush toy.

Animals, like flowers and plants, feature heavily in Guély's work. The studio recently produced a paper jungle for luxury Swiss watchmaker



A Christmas card for the Culinary Institute Lenôtre. Left: the Cartier crocodile card

Patek Philippe, which was shipped to Singapore for the marque's special Watch Art Grand Exhibition. Encased within glass vitrines, these verdant sculpted scenes featured adorable sloths, monkeys, birds and exotic flowering plants, meticulously made by hand using complex layering, molding and folding techniques. The exhibition now over, Guély says she's excited to welcome home her menagerie of paper pets.

"We work with metal, alabaster, textiles, leather and bamboo, but paper is my first love," says the artist who set up her business 20 years ago, having studied industrial design at Paris' prestigious ENSAAMA School

"Paper is honest. You can't cheat"

of Art and Design. "I was destined to work somewhere like Renault, but I was always more drawn to craftsmanship, a 'design and build' ethos. In the end, I gravitated towards art and fashion rather than the world of automobiles. What I have always loved about paper is that it is honest. You can't lie or cheat. If you create an effective form, it's at once elegant."

One of Guély's most challenging commissions was for Paris' Opera Garnier last year: to mark the premiere of classic ballet *La Dame aux Camélias*, she flanked the inside staircase of the famous landmark with huge gossamer fans in paper and tulle. "It's a historic building and there were many rules to follow," she reveals. "Fixing the fans against the stairs in a way that conveyed lightness and grace without harming the setting was the biggest hurdle."

Like a ballet, paper art installations are temporary: sometimes the works stay up a week, but often they are dismantled within a day. For Guély, this is part of the allure: "An event can be a few hours or an evening, but you may remember it for ever. What I love is the potential to form lifelong memories inspired by these ethereal worlds."

One of Guély's first jobs was to create an elaborate floral table centrepiece in paper for a private dinner organised by style icon Inès de la Fressange on behalf of luxury footwear brand Roger Vivier. At that time, around 2005, Guély was on her own, using her own metal cutting dies to 'cookie-cut' the paper via a professional press. Today, designs are often produced on digital or laser-cutting machines, though she still turns to the traditional method for many of her floral shapes. The dies, though, are much bigger and are stored in her workshop in Aubervilliers, a north-eastern suburb of Paris, where the bulk of the agency's large-scale works are made by a young workforce of around 15-20 artists.

"I love discovering new techniques and different methods of practice," Guély says. "I now work with metal, but I've also moved towards alabaster, which has a translucent quality just like paper. Being open to different disciplines is part of the adventure, and I visit art fairs and attend industry conventions as much as I can. But leave me in a stationery shop and, well... I'm not going to leave empty-handed. I can seek them out anywhere, even in the most secluded spot. Even in the middle of the countryside!"

Story by ALEXANDRA ZAGALSKY