





ORIGINS

## COUTURE CLUB

THE PRESTIGIOUS CHAMBRE SYNDICALE DE LA HAUTE COUTURE IS AN EXCLUSIVE CLUB THAT WELCOMES FEWER THAN TWO DOZEN MEMBERS INTO IT'S FLOSSY INNER FOLDS. INCLUSION IS GRANTED ONLY TO THOSE POSSESSING THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF SKILL, TALENT, QUALITY AND OF COURSE, A CERTAIN JE NE SAIS QUOI. FOR PARISIAN COUTURIER STÉPHANE ROLLAND, IT'S BEEN HOME SINCE 2008, WHEN HE JOINED THE RANKS OF FELLOW MEMBERS VALENTINO AND DIOR. HERE, THE CELEBRATED DESIGNER, WHOSE CLIENTS INCLUDE PRINCESSES BOTH OF THE ROYAL AND ROCK VARIETY, TELLS *SLT* WHY COUTURE IS NOT JUST A CRAFT, IT'S A CULTURE.

By Julia Seidl

When luxury lover HH Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Missned met Prince Charles for a stroll around the Royal Botanic Gardens in Surrey, England, she opted for a custom grey flannel embroidered dress by couturier Stéphane Rolland for the well-documented event. Known for his sculptural stylings and flare for architectural details, Stéphane is a designer the Sheikha has turned to on many an occasion, including official visits to royal dignitaries in both France (which called for a white silk crêpe gown with a hand painted ombre waistline that was created with only five days notice) and Spain, where one of Stéphane's signature tuxedo gowns in a creamy ivory palette did the trick. Referring to his client as the Arab world's version of Ava Gardner, the couturier is an admirer of her wholesome yet glamorous style, one he often sees in his Middle Eastern patrons. "The Arab woman has an innate sense of seduction and an intense love of fashion," says the designer who launched his couture line in 2007. "Their aesthetic can be as extreme as it is subtle, always well thought out, from the toes to the tips of eyelashes, and that is what I like."

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Royalty aside, precious few have the means - or the occasion - to procure a piece of haute couture for their closet. A gown bearing the official label can command a five-figure price tag, upwards of a million beads and hundreds of hours of hand-embroidery, meaning inimitability and exclusivity are key to the allure of couture. The same principle can be applied to the designers behind the craft. While many create couture, only a select few can add the qualifier "haute" in front (haute couture is French for "high dressmaking"). Tightly controlled by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris through a stringent list of rules that dictate various requirements, including the number of full-time staff per house (at least 15) to the number of pieces per

collection (a minimum of 35 pieces for day and evening), it's a designation that is legally granted by the French Ministry of Industry to just 14 houses internationally. It's a small circle and one that Stéphane never expected to join when he first became a designer.

"I made my first sketches for a dress when I was four years old, which foreshadowed my future. As a child, I didn't realise that fashion was a profession, I just thought it magical in and of itself," says the designer who was raised in Argentina, Paraguay and the French West Indies. "My two grandmothers and of course my mother were significant in my taste for fashion. They each had a different yet distinct style. I began



"I consider myself more an artist than a designer. I need to create all kinds of universes and products, whether it's furniture, sculpture, photography or drawing. All challenges interest me and I don't like to be shut in a single mode. That's freedom."



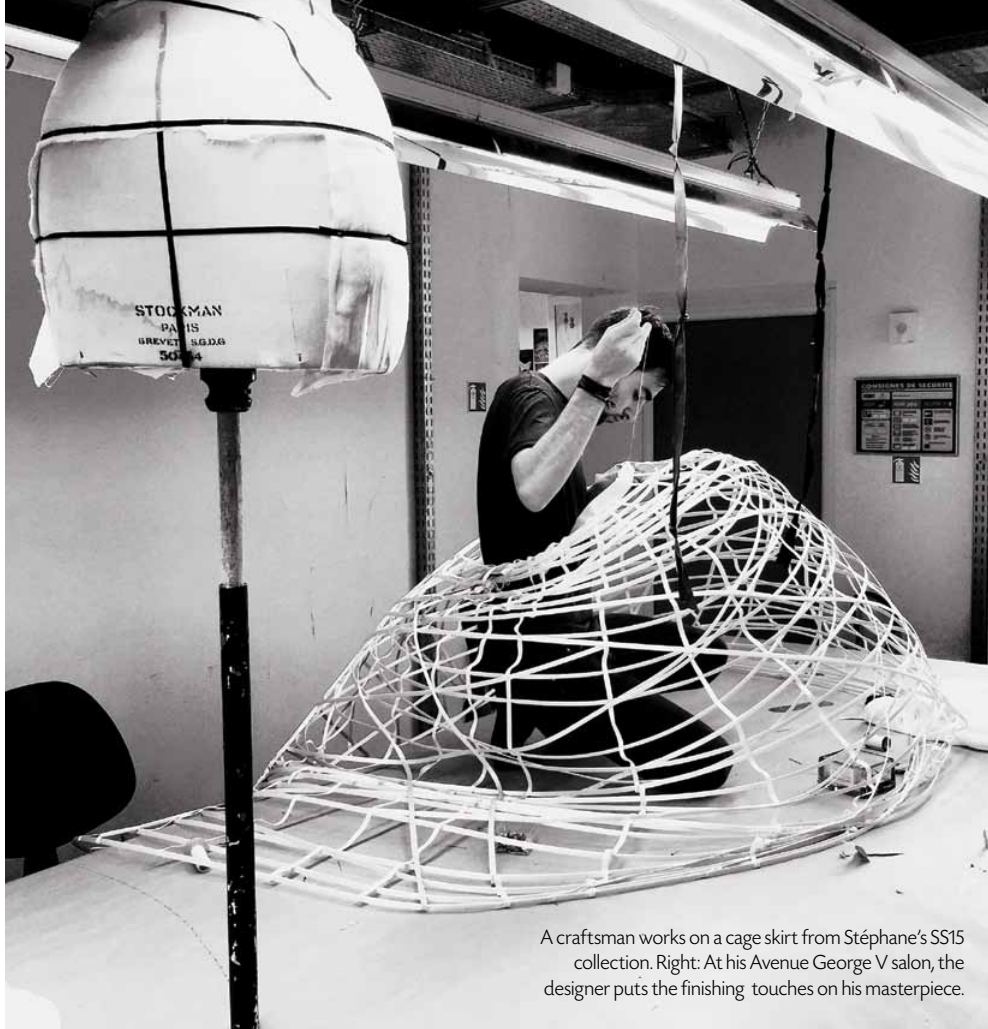
"I structured my collection around Art Deco architecture, gold sculptures from the 1970s and light," says the designer of his FW15 couture collection, shown here in sketches and backstage.

"The signature material of this season is metallic silicone. I worked it into sculpture, mosaics and weaving but gazar and jersey are still my favourite materials."

to read books about designers at a very early age, to devour fashion magazines and to cut out photos I liked in order to analyse and understand what would later become my profession." With encouragement from his parents, whose only condition to supporting his career choice was that he must devote himself completely, he enrolled as a student at the École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, a storied school whose graduates also include Karl Lagerfeld, Yves Saint Laurent and Issey Miyake.

At the age of 20, a role in Balenciaga's menswear department came calling, followed shortly thereafter by the coveted title of Creative Director for the historic French fashion house. "Everything started at Balenciaga, where I revealed myself and where I started to breathe because I could express myself. I discovered Cristobal Balenciaga's archives and it was a great





A craftsman works on a cage skirt from Stéphane's SS15 collection. Right: At his Avenue George V salon, the designer puts the finishing touches on his masterpiece.



unique, fairytale-invoking gowns, creating visions on the increasingly competitive red carpet. For Stéphane, understanding his clients' needs is about more than the event or the dress. "Haute couture is a culture, a philosophy. Creating a unique work for a woman draws on psychology and sometimes even psychoanalysis. This interests me more than simply reducing haute couture to a craft. For me, the world of extreme luxury represents much more. We are at the heart of the intimacy of the self."

emotional experience as well as a revelation," says Stéphane. The great couture house of Jean-Louis Scherrer, who catered quite heavily to the tastes of Middle Eastern clients including princesses in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, took notice of Stéphane's talent and influence on the runways and offered him the top spot in 1997. For ten years, the designer worked at perfecting his masterpieces under the Scherrer label until in 2007 at the age of 40 – and shortly before the start of the great recession - Stéphane went solo and launched his own couture house, taking almost the entire team from Jean-Louis Scherrer with him. "There is no ideal timing for opening a fashion house. I opened mine at the beginning of the financial crisis. It was a risky gamble but it's during

this type of financial crisis that the world repositions itself and I quickly understood that luxury would have an important role to play, if it was fair and true."

It's a wager that has certainly paid off for Stéphane. Since going solo eight years ago, he fast-tracked his way to earning the exalted haute couture label in December 2008, having received the title less than a year after launching, a feat that normally requires four years. As for his impressive client list, it isn't just princesses of royal decree who have been sitting front row at his shows during Haute Couture Week or flocking to his Avenue George V salon in Paris for a custom creation by the legend. Pop princesses from Lady Gaga to Rihanna and Beyoncé have chosen to wrap themselves in his

Nowhere is his intimate relationship with luxury more apparent than in his first boutique in Etihad Towers in Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2013. Citing a desire to pay homage to the region that has offered him so much love and success, it was a natural spot for the designer to launch his first stand-alone store.

With goals of opening more stores, including other locations in the Gulf, Stéphane is embracing his success head on. "Life is made up of cycles of 1, 3, 7, and 10 years, and yet in my eighth year I feel I am starting a new cycle with new desires, and a need to create in a way which is at once more centred and more eclectic with a culmination in the tenth year. But only God knows." ☺

## SAVE THE BEST FOR LAST

KNOWN FOR HIS JAW-DROPPING RUNWAY CREATIONS, INCLUDING HIS BRIDAL GOWNS, STÉPHANE ROLLAND HAS ENLISTED THE HELP OF A FEW FAMOUS FACES TO EXECUTE SOME VERY DRAMATIC CONCLUSIONS.



### YASMIN LE BON, SS12

Flanked by two suiters, the former model and wife of Duran Duran frontman Simon Le Bon walked the runway in a 110-pound silk jersey gown adorned with lacquered metal panels.

### FAN BINGBING, FW12

The Chinese actress flexed her modeling muscles in a white wedding gown dripping in leather which required four attendants to arrange the train.



### CARMEN DELL'OREFICE, SS13

Proving you're never too old to walk down the aisle, the former supermodel stole the show at age 82 in an elegant white tuxedo and cape ensemble.