

## The world in their hands

Maison Lesage. Haute Couture Embroidery | By Patrick Mauriès

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In 2007, aged 78, the master embroiderer François Lesage became an Officer of the French *Légion d'honneur*. Symbolised by a line of blood-red threads on one's lapel, this award is one of the highest in France. After his induction, Lesage assembled the needlewomen of his firm. 'The little stain on my *boutonnière*,' he told them proudly, 'is composed from the drops of all your blood.' Dozens of pin-pricked fingers applauded. Underneath their feet, in the building's basement archive, sat more than 70,000 swatches of fashion history.

The book *Maison Lesage* is more than the tale of a business: it offers privileged entrée to a secret world. Over its 221 pages, it follows a single family – Albert and Marie-Louise Lesage, their son, François, and their grandson, Jean-François – as they elevate and modernise an ancient craft.

From handmade flowers to bespoke lace, the haute couture supplier obeys a pitiless calendar. It also wrestles with constant changes in technology. So while

Lesage deploys skills from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, it has also introduced endless innovations. The first occurred in 1924, the year of Albert's debut as proprietor. Fifty-seven years earlier, in a town called Lunéville, piece-workers sped up their embroidery by adding a *crochet* (small hook) to every needle. This meant they had to work from a fabric's 'wrong' side, but it made production dramatically faster. For years, traditional needlewomen (*mainteuuses*) scorned the *Lunévillaises*. But Albert saw how to use them. Under his direction, their technique dressed the Jazz Age – Lunéville needles made possible lavish beading and heavy fringe on the lightest, most diaphanous goods.

This discovery attracted clients such as the fashion designer Madeleine Vionnet, whose distinctive bias cuts posed an equal challenge. The work Vionnet commissioned from Lesage made the maison's reputation; it also flooded Hollywood with slinky, glittering gowns.

A specialist studio like Lesage survives by meeting demands; often these are expressed in an unconventional style (Yves Saint Laurent demanded that François recreate 'the sky reflected in my chandelier'). However vague or difficult a client's vision, it must be delivered. Lesage is famous for ingenious interpretations, whether it's embroidery incorporating flowers made with shredded chiffon, Murano glass 'soap bubbles' or the latest in thermoplastics.

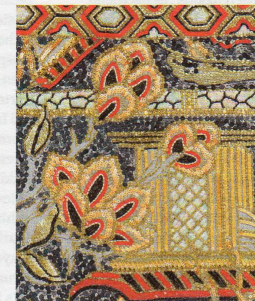
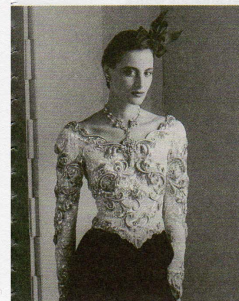
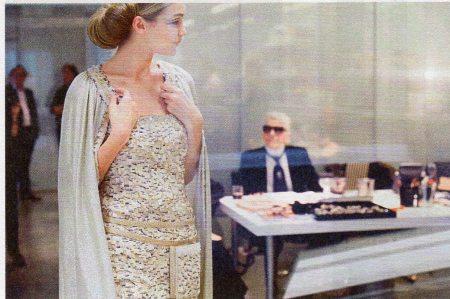
The book is a perfect read, not just because its splendid photos lift the spirit: it's because Maison Lesage was built out of chance and tragedy and its story contains as much suffering as skill. During the First World War, founder Albert Lesage (1888-1849) was taken prisoner and, over four years, saved his sanity by sketching. The drawings won him a job in Chicago – American earnings that allowed him, back in France, to purchase another embroidery firm: the 66-year-old Michonet & Company. Acquired by Lesage in 1924, Michonet had supplied Charles Frederick Worth – the inventor of haute couture.

As Maison Lesage, the business soon flourished. Its client list would become a dictionary of fashion, including Vionnet, Patou, Schiaparelli, Coco Chanel, Balmain, Givenchy, Lanvin, Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Lacroix and Karl Lagerfeld.

Again and again the company almost foundered. It had to weather the 1929 Crash, the 1930s Depression, the Second World War with its Nazi occupation, the 1970s oil crisis, recession in the



Far left: Gigi Hadid with Karl Lagerfeld during fittings for the Chanel Spring/Summer 2016 Haute Couture collection. Clockwise from main image: embroidery for Worth, 1948, and Chanel, 1983; Inès de la Fressange models Chanel's Autumn/Winter 1983-4 Haute Couture collection; the cover of *Maison Lesage: Haute Couture Embroidery*



1980s and the global woes of 2008. And there were family deaths: Albert's eldest son and presumed successor died of meningitis at 17. Albert himself passed away at just 61. When François took over, he was barely 20 – and he had never seen a catwalk show. But the maison's creativity has been equalled by its spunk. Whatever a problem's gravity, Lesage conquers it with grit and a commitment to craft.

By the 1990s Lesage, in partnership with French weaver Maria Messner's ACT3 (Association Création Tissage 3), 'reinvented' Chanel's trademark tweed. The results, jaw-droppingly rich in colour and texture, are now central to Chanel's repertoire. François further secured the firm's future in 1992 with Ecole Lesage, the school he created to train fine embroiderers. By the time he died in 2011, his maison's future was fully secured.

The family's third generation is just as audacious. Albert's grandson, Jean-François, fell in love with Indian embroidery and by 1995 he had created a maison in southern India – a Chennai-based studio he called Vastrakala. Today, it employs 200 artisans and the large workforce maintains techniques no longer supported in France. Recently it has worked on one of Napoleon's thrones, panels from Victor Hugo's home and textiles for the bed chamber at Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte.

In the world of haute couture, François Lesage is a name as well-known as Christian Dior. 'He was not merely a master; he was one of few whose work could astound me,' said the late Karl Lagerfeld. But François himself saw his maison's art as the sum of its *petits mains*: its collective of extraordinary makers. 'In haute couture,' he wrote, 'the essence of embroidery is to engineer the new and to do it perfectly. Unlike machines, the hand knows no limits.' Cynthia Rose is an arts journalist and broadcaster based in Paris