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Title

The last plumassier: storying dead birds, gender and paraffection at Maison Lemarié

Authors

Marine Pacault and Merle Patchett

Abstract:

Founded in 1875, Maison Lemarié is one of the last remaining plumassiers (feather-makers) anywhere in the world. In highly concentrated and minutely detailed work the artisans at Lemarié painstakingly treat, dye, and apply fragile feathers to haute couture garments. Mindful of preserving these rarefied skills, Chanel (Global Fashion Empire) purchased the workshop in 1997 as part of “Paraffection”. Paraffection, which roughly translates to “for the love of it”, is a Chanel subsidiary company established to preserve and promote the heritage, craft, and manufacturing skills of highly specialised fashion ateliers. By enacting a visit to Maison Lemarié, this paper demonstrates how its heritage and skills are embodied not only in the artisans working there but also in the feathered remains used and housed in the workshop. Unravelling the stories held in human and avian bodies, we suggest, enables a series of broader geographical reflections on skill, gender and Paraffection.

Keywords: workshop, skill, gender, haute couture, archive

Introduction

Lemarié, le dernier plumassier (*Lemarié, the last plumassier*) is a photo-montage series documenting the workrooms of the last plumassier (feather-maker) in Paris.ⁱ Produced by photographer Marine Pacault, this series first came to Merle Patchett's attention when researching the craft and animal geographies of the plumage trade for her exhibition project, *Fashioning Feathers*.ⁱⁱ Previously displayed as part of that project, Pacault's images are revisited and re-presented here to engage in the "storying" of skilled practice – a theme of growing interest to many cultural geographers.ⁱⁱⁱ This endeavour has three intentions. First, with montage being the "essential gesture of nonrepresentational styles of thought and action," Pacault's photographic montages, presented here in groups of four, expose a sense of the workrooms "in life."^{iv} Second, through Pacault's conversations with, and observations of, Lemarié artisans and Patchett's historical and hands-on knowledge of their crafts, "we take up and develop upon the (hi)stories of practice encountered and enacted in the workrooms. Finally, through our juxtaposition of image-montages and text, the stories of skilled practice at Masion Lemarié are co-authored by photographer and geographer, human and avian bodies, and tools, materials, and machinery, to draw out their geographical significance.

The handling workroom: "avian imperial archive"

<Insert Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4>

The handling workroom is at the center of the apartment on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis in Paris and is home to Lemarié's carefully archived collection of preserved feathers. When Lemarié moved there in 1894, more than 300 plumassiers worked in the Faubourg St. Martin district in geographic concentration. As competitors slowly closed around them, Lemarié bought their inventories, amassing stockpiles of brown-paper parcels exotically labelled "Paradise," "Ara," and "Heron" (Fig. 1). This "avian imperial archive"^{vi} attests to the necrogeographies of the "plume boom" (1880-1914), when hundreds of millions of birds from across the globe were killed to supply the millinery trade. Although London was the imperial centre for the wholesale trade in exotic feathers, Paris was its manufacturing heart. Sweated workshops in the Parisian suburbs were responsible for the large-scale manufacture of farmed ostrich plumes, while those located in Faubourg St. Martin concentrated on the preparation and handling of very fine and valuable exotic feathers demanded by high-end modistes. Lemarié started out as one such luxury feather

supplier and meticulously cleaned, tinted, and trimmed the “skins’ and ‘plumes’ and ‘quills’ of the most beautiful and most interesting unprotected birds of the world.”^{vii}

Lemarié employees are especially protective of their collection’s rare bird of paradise specimens and their samples of heron and egret plumage (Fig. 2), birds that were brought to the brink of extinction at the height of the boom. Although campaigns against “Murderous Millinery” by contemporary conservationists were initially directed at the “feather-brained” followers of fashion, a trade response was eventually demanded.^{viii} Plumassiers joined up with ornithologists to defuse criticism, promoting breeding programmes and the use of domestic feathers. The embodiment of these concessions is witnessed when Françoise sews boas (Fig. 3). She selects ostrich, “collet,” and “marabou” feathers, aligns them on a board that passes through the sewing machine, then twists the scarf, using steam to give it volume. The feathers’ exotic names hide less poetic origins: “marabou” is turkey down; “collet” comes from a cockerel’s neck. Although the first major agreement to prohibit the use of international feather imports was signed in Paris in 1902, it was the Washington Convention, which entered into force in France in 1975, that finally prohibited the export and sale of endangered species. Much of Lemarié’s avian archive falls within the scope of the convention, which is why it now acts mainly as a reference library for artisans like Aurélie, who restores vintage pieces (Fig. 4). Today the most commonly used species in the workshop are cockerel, duck, ostrich, and turkey, and the plumassier’s skill lies in fashioning them into either the “feather from elsewhere” or, as is more sought after by coutouriers, original motifs and fabrics.^{ix}

The making workrooms: “Fleurs et Plumes!”

<Insert Figures 5, 6, 7, 8>

“Fleurs et plumes ! – Plumes et fleurs !” (“Flowers and feathers! – Feathers and flowers!”) is the chorus from the artisans in the making workrooms (Fig. 5). Fleuristes (flower-makers) and plumassiers (feather-makers) have a friendly rivalry at Lemarié. The professions differ in raw material yet are historically entwined. Although Lemarié did not add flower-making to its répertoire until the 1950s, fleuristes and plumassiers share a corporate history dating back to 1776, when the corporation of “marchands de modes (cloth and fashion merchants), plumassiers et fleuristes” was created. The corporation’s (hi)story provides insight into the historic gendering of “Articles de Paris.”^x Before 1776 plumassiers were considered an old and male community, whereas fleuristes were seen as “rather feminine.”^{xi} While there is nothing inherently feminine or

masculine about either activity, the powerful and patriarchal urban craft guilds, of which plumassiers were one, had conspired to confine apprenticeships for girls to a narrow range of trades. As such “the privileges, the work identity, and the customary rights, trappings of artisanal work values, [almost] became the exclusive domain of skilled men.”^{xii}

There were, however, three exclusively female guilds in Paris: the bouquetières (bouquet-makers), linen-drapers, and couturières (dress-makers), all of which were incorporated in the “marchands de modes, plumassiers et fleuristes” and pressured feather-making to become “more free.”^{xiii} Nonetheless, a gendered and hierarchical division of labour emerged, with washing and dyeing often reserved for men and sorting, thinning, and curling reserved for women. The repetitive monotony of “women’s work” is recalled as Lemarié apprentices painstakingly apply “marabou” feathers to Chanel shoes : the order is for 400 pairs, and each pair takes 6 hours (Fig. 6).

A clear gendered division of labour also existed in flower-making, whereby men were traditionally responsible for dyeing, stamping, and cutting and women specialized in shaping and branching. This division, and its associated “gendering of machinery,”^{xiv} is still present at Lemarié. Gerald, Lemarié’s only male fleuriste, has a workshop on the ground floor where he prepares and presses fabric flowers (Fig. 7). The press pictured is more than a century old and, like many 19th-century presses, historically became associated with male labour. However, technologies in themselves were not necessarily the cause of a division of tasks and roles; “more commonly the link was gendered distinctions about machines, tools and skills”.^{xv} For example female fleuristes were thought to suit the shaping and branching work as it required more manual dexterity and, more importantly, could be done at home (Fig. 8). By “putting out” this work to the city’s large and predominantly female homeworking labour force, male artisans, although fewer in number, were able claim exclusivity over the presses and by extension skilled labour. Gerald’s botanical stamps and presses, therefore, witness “the craftman’s [past] successful efforts to monopolize technology and skill” and to territorialize the artisanal space of the workshop.^{xvi}

The fashion workroom: Paraffection?

<Insert Figures 9, 10, 11, 12>

The basic material in the fashion workroom is cloth, and it is worked in every possible way. Fringed, stitched, creased, ironed, and folded, it takes all forms and, like feathers, trims clothing and accessories (Fig. 9). The fashion workroom was originally for milliners and couturières,

which are still the basic trades of its all-female workforce. These trades benefited from the growth in luxury trades in Paris in the 18th and 19th century, and in both, apprenticeship was almost exclusively female, with terms averaging four years in France.^{xvii} Those who completed apprenticeships had the greatest chance of regular employment and of landing the best jobs in the trade. The costs of joining the guild, however, were prohibitive for most. Thus, while luxury “needle trades” opened possibilities for women by creating tensions in the older corporate conception of artisan work, running through the needle trades, and thus access to skilled employment, was a tension with class.^{xviii} Although gender and class tensions are still felt in Lemarié workrooms, the hierarchies of knowledge and creativity that exist between client and workshop, designer and artisan, have to some extent supplanted them.

As with all their creations, Lemarié artisans first receive sketches or photographs from the designers, which they then use to propose several prototypes. Santina, who works the sewing machine, says that after so many years, “it is not creation, it's know-how,” when it comes to producing an effect with or handling a fabric (Fig. 10). Here Santina speaks of the sensory collaboration that takes place between artisans and materials in the making of Lemarié creations, challenging the idea that creativity arises only from individual talent or expression. It is this know-how, what the French call “savoir-faire,” that Chanel sought to safeguard when it purchased the workshop in 1997 as part of Paraffection. Roughly translating to “for the love of it”, Paraffection has been buying up specialist independent ateliers in a bid to preserve their unique skills, which, alongside Lemarié, includes an embroiderer, shoemaker, gold-smith, milliner, glove-maker, and pleat-maker.

Chanel's Paraffection purchases are not so altruistic as the name might suggest. For example, Lemarié has been the exclusive provider of Chanel Camellias, the brand's emblem, since the 1960s. Every single camellia is created by hand, and the workshop makes around 20,000 per year in all possible materials: tweed, fur, satin, organza, cardboard, raffia, butcher paper, leather, and even plastic (Fig. 11). Lemarié's camellia archive, thus, documents the important part it has played and continues to play in Chanel's brand-story (Fig. 12). In this way, Paraffection is as much about safeguarding Chanel's own heritage story as it is about safeguarding particular speciality skills. Moreover, in buying up endangered ateliers, Chanel is fast becoming the sole gatekeeper to the means of making couture. This makes Chanel as a brand very powerful and, to rival couture houses, potentially very dangerous. Chanel, however, insists it has no intention of monopolising the houses it has acquired,^{xix} seeing their “federation of maisons” as a way of resisting cheaper production to be found in emerging markets like China and India. What they argue sets speciality ateliers like Lemarié apart from production in these markets is their close working relationship, both geographically and creatively, with coutouriers that, as Santina sums

up, “do not have our archives.” As our visit to Lemarié’s workrooms reveals, these archives of skilled practice are at once material and corporeal, human and avian, artisanal and mechanical, independent and corporate.

Epilogue

There has been a conceit to this telling. Lemarié is no longer located on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis. In 2013 it moved to Chanel’s “Métiers d’Art” – a complex of workshops located in the Paris suburb of Pantin that was specially built to house the work and archive rooms of its “federation of maisons” under one roof. What this location and grouping means for the future of haute couture and its geographies of luxury awaits investigation. For Lemarié at least, this new configuration confirms its previous address as *Le dernier plumassier* (see Fig. 13).

For cultural geographers, our re-presentation of *Le dernier plumassier* in this paper demonstrates how the juxtaposition of image-montages and text (and the collaboration between a photographer and geographer) can enliven and elaborate on archives of skilled practice. Where previous work has highlighted the geographical significance of the art studio and menders workshops,^{xx} our archival focus on the Parisian Maison enables a series of geographical reflections on skill, gender, and Paraffection to be made. First, telling the stories of skilled practice at Maison Lemarié through montage emphasises that skill is not archived in one particular place (i.e. in heads or hands) but is rather distributed between bodies (both human and animal), materials, and machinery within the workshop. Second, the empirical focus on feather and flower-making enables us to witness how skill has been used historically to enact a gendered division of labour, tools, and machinery both within and beyond the “*Fleurs et Plumes*” workshop. Finally, questioning whether the preservation of Lemarié’s endangered skills (and birds) was “par-affection” (for the love of it) situates the workshop and its practices of making within the global geopolitics of haute couture. A planned visit to Lemarié’s new address will pick up these dangling threads.

<Insert Figure 13>

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Notes

ⁱ www.marinepacault.com/lemarie-le-dernier-plumassier. Last accessed: 21/08/2016

ⁱⁱ www.fashioningfeathers.info. Last accessed: 21/08/2016

ⁱⁱⁱ An increasing number of geographers are employing the form and style of the story to narrate worlds, see: E. Cameron, 'New geographies of story and storytelling', *Progress in Human Geography* 36(5), 2012 pp. 573-592; H. Lorimer and H. Parr, 'Excursions: telling stories and journeys', *cultural geographies*, 21(4), 2014, pp. 543-47. For those specifically engaged in storying skilled practice see: C. DeSilvey, J. R. Ryan, and S. Bond, '21 stories' *cultural geographies* 21, 2014, pp. 657-672; M. Patchett, 'The taxidermist's apprentice: stitching together the past and present of a craft practice', *cultural geographies*, 23, 2016, pp. 401-419.

^{iv} M. A. Doel and D. B. Clarke, 'Afterimages', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 2007, pp. 890 -910, 899.

^v Pacault's photographic fieldwork took place over two days in February 2009. This consisted of freely wondering around the workrooms, taking photographs, chatting with the artisans, and exploring their collections. Patchett spent time learning the history and crafts of the plumassier with master milliner and conservator, Carlos Benevides, as part of the research behind her exhibition project *Fashioning Feathers*.

^{vi} K. Greer, 'Geopolitics and the Avian Imperial Archive: The Zoogeography of Region-Making in the Nineteenth-Century British Mediterranean', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103, 2013, 6.

^{vii} W. T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1913) p. 145.

^{viii} "Murderous Millinery," *New York Times*, July 31, 1898, p. 15.

^{ix} A. Monjaret, 'Plume et mode à la Belle Époque: Les plumassiers parisiens face à la question animale', *Techniques and Culture*, 50, 2008, p. 228-255.

^x C. Lemerrier, "Articles de Paris", *fabrique et institutions économiques à Paris au XIXe siècle*, 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00106161>

^{xi} Ibid, p.4.

^{xii} K. Honeyman and J. Goodman, 'Women's work, gender conflict, and labour markets in Europe, 1500- 1900', *Economic History Review*, XLIV, 4, 1991, pp. 608-628, 613.

^{xiii} Lemerrier, 'Articles de Paris', p. 4.

^{xiv} Honeyman and Goodman, 'Women's work', p. 619.

^{xv} D. Simonton, 'Threading the Needle, Pulling the Press: Gender, Skill and the Tools of the Trade in Eighteenth-Century European Towns', *Cultural History*, 1(2), 2012, p. 180.

^{xvi} Honeyman and Goodman, 'Women's work', p. 618.

^{xvii} D. Simonton, 'Threading the Needle', p. 192.

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} R. Mellery-Pratt, 'Chanel, the Saviour of Savoir-Faire', *The Business of Fashion*, April 19, 2015, <http://www.businessoffashion.com/community/voices/discussions/how-can-traditional-craftsmanship-survive-in-the-modern-world/chanel-saviour-savoir-faire>

^{xx} J. Sjöholm, 'The art studio as archive: tracing the geography of artistic potentiality, progress and production' *cultural geographies* 21, 2014, pp. 505-514; C. DeSilvey *et al* '21 stories'.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

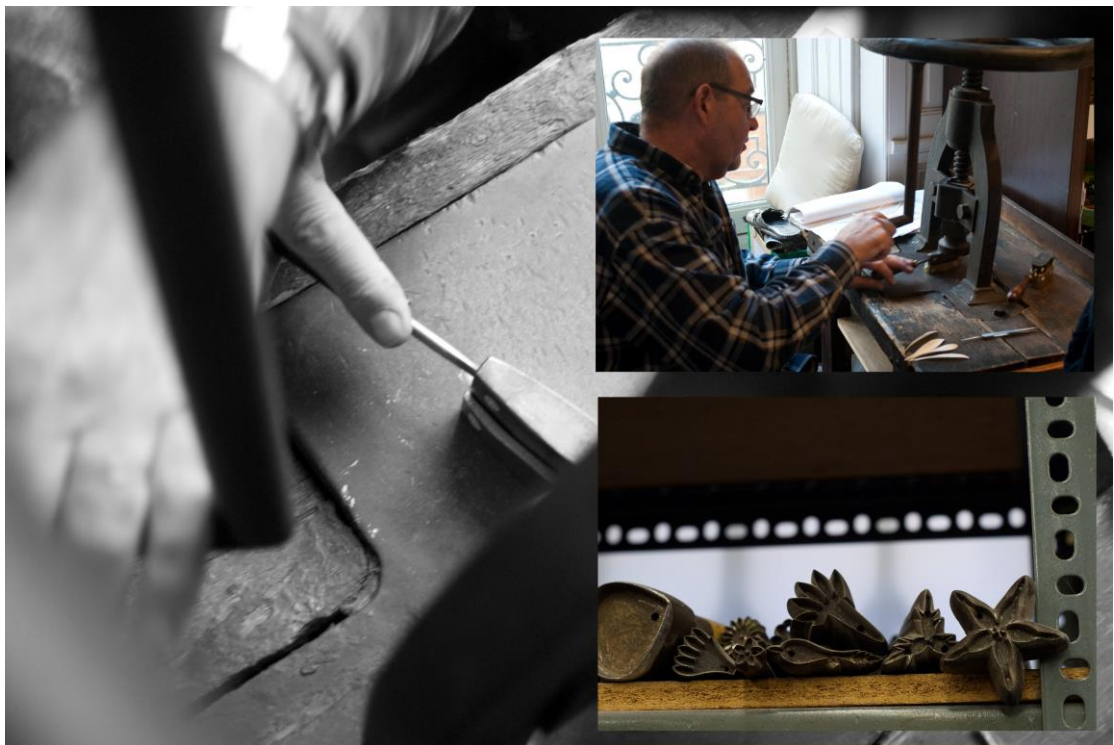


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13