

Shocking! The Surreal Worlds of Elsa Schiaparelli.
Exhibition by Olivier Gabet and Marie-Sophie Carron de
la Carrière. Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris,
July 6, 2022–January 22, 2023

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Featuring 520 works set against 248 paintings, sculptures, jewellery, perfume bottles, ceramics, posters and photographs,¹ the exhibition *Shocking! The Surreal Worlds of Elsa Schiaparelli* not only manages to affirm Elsa Schiaparelli as one of the most prominent fashion figures in the decades between the two world wars, but it also delivers a reminder on fashion-as-art, a position, on one side firmly distanced from today's globalised, accelerated and hyper-industrialised system of fashion ideation, production and consumption, while on another, implicative of fashion as related to certain privilege, status and class.

The exhibition opens with a selection of unsigned sketches dating from 1933 and 1953 (Fig. 1), part of the UFAC collection, which, interestingly enough, were never intended to be published because they were ideated as a marketing tool to convey technical information and to promote the collections to clients unable to see it in person. The well-thought targeting is observable throughout the exhibition. The occasion-specific designs, rich accessories production and extravagant aesthetic solutions (Fig. 2 and 3) speak volumes about Schiaparelli's clientele. This aspect is only confirmed and built upon after the brand's resurrection, especially after Daniel Roseberry's appointment as the brand's artistic director in 2019. The exhibition's final section is dedicated to his work (Fig. 4 and 5), unambiguously reconstructing and interpreting Schiaparelli's creativity and legacy, placing it in today's hyper-individualistic society where the 21st-century celebrities and influencers such as Lady Gaga, Chiara Ferragni, Bella Hadid and Kim Kardashian become both the muses and marketing tools of the brand.

A thoughtful parallelism to the brand's heritage and history as a fashion house of the famous is Picasso's portrait of the French performer Nusch Éluard (Fig. 6, a) wearing a jacket by Elsa Schiaparelli. Exposed right next to the painting is the garment designed by Yves Saint Laurent (Fig. 6, b). In the spirit of the

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1. Exhibition page, *MAD Paris*, last consulted on November 24th, 2022. <https://madparis.fr/ExpoSchiaparelli>.

Gesamtkunstwerk, the work of the designer is always complemented by the creations of skilled collaborators such as the jewellery designer Jean Schlumberger, the famous silversmith François Hugo, the artists Alberto Giacometti and Meret Oppenheim and others. Always consistent with the Parisian art scene of the time, the work of Schiaparelli was enriched by the influences of the Art-deco movements and later surrealism, in particular the art of Salvador Dalí. Exceptional are the designs (Fig. 7, a) built on Dalí's works, such as *Femme aux firoirs* (Fig. 7, b). The tradition of co-creation and artisanal collaborations is observable throughout the exhibition. Although the most famous are the accessories and jewellery creations, the garment designs by Schiaparelli also required artistry and mastery of craftsmanship. Starting from 1936, she initiated a collaboration with Albert Lesage — a head of an embroidery studio that would become her go-to person for all the hand-embroidered decorations that Elsa Schiaparelli would want to add to her creations (Fig. 8, b). The collaboration would also continue after 1949 when Albert Lesage was succeeded by his son François Lesage, while the praxis of handmade decorations continues even today, as seen in the A/W 2021–2022 collection (Fig. 8, a).

In my opinion, it is precisely this collaborative aspect of Schiaparelli's work that should be further contextualised and interpreted in light of today's very needed slowing-down debate in fashion. On that note, it would have been purposeful to have an additional layer of reading dedicated to the circumstances in which Schiaparelli's interests, talents and sensibility were developed. Limiting in this sense, the exhibition only provides information regarding the period after Schiaparelli's arrival in Paris in 1927. Thus, no information about her aristocratic background or her preexisting cultural and social capital is mentioned. Considered the very needed decentralisation of fashion, it is paramount that we start addressing specific issues boldly, especially in the context of mass-reaching cultural practices of predominant discourse creation such as fashion exhibitions.

If you are travelling to Paris the following month, don't miss the chance to visit the Christine & Stephen A. Schwarzman fashion galleries where this quaint exhibition, nested in the mesmerising and whimsical scenography created by Nathalie Crinière, awaits you and provides food for thought until January 22th, 2023.



Figure 1: *Shocking! The Surreal Worlds of Elsa Schiaparelli*, exhibition entrance with selection of unsigned sketches dating from 1933 and 1953, part of the UFAC collection. ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 2: Exhibition entrance with wall selection of accessories designed by Elsa Schiaparelli. ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 3: a. *Veste du soir*, Collection printemps 1947 by Elsa Schiaparelli; b. Collection of buttons 1936–1939 and a necklace, 1938 by Jean Clément ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 4: Last section of the exhibition, works by Daniel Roseberry ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 5: Last section of the exhibition, works by Daniel Roseberry ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 6: a. *Portrait de Nusch Éluard*, Paris, 1937 by Pablo Picasso; b. Jacket *Hommage à Pablo Picasso* designed by Yves Saint Laurent for the A/W 1979 collection ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 7: a. Dress by Elsa Schiaparelli; b. *Femme aux froids*, 1936 by Salvador Dalí ©Photos by Nadica Maksimova



Figure 8: a. Schiaparelli by Daniel Roseberry, A/W 2021–2022, detail; b. *Échantillon de broderie*, 1938 by Lesage
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