Charlotte Casiraghi opens Chanel’s constructivist couture on horseback

By Godfrey Deeny - 25 January 2022

Just when people were talking about a couture season of intimate shows, along comes Virginie Viard, and artist Xavier Veilhan, with a mega ambitious metaphysical set and constructivist collection for Chanel.
The action opened Tuesday morning with Princess Charlotte of Monaco attired in an anthracite Chanel wool bouclé couture jacket with jeweled buttons riding her horse Cusco around the set, walking first before exiting at a canter.

Talk about a ‘wow’ factor in a show, with the Grand Palais Éphémère reinvented as a series of twisting sandy catwalks, core carpet platforms, and tubular seating. Giant rings and moving rosettes providing striking backdrops as the celebs arrived – from Elsa Zylberstein, Pharrell Williams, Anamaria Vartolomei and Abd al Malik to Margot Robbie, Carole Bouquet, Sofia Coppola, Vanessa Paradis, split between two shows at 10 a.m. and noon.

Over all of which floated 20-square meter Andon lights; enormous pills the size of super-lorries and massive staggered box sculptures. At the center of which, DJ Sebastien Tellier on a plateau 10 meters high, ramping up a great stomp and buck electronic funk soundtrack.
All told, a brilliant visual display dreamed up by Veilhan, France's guest of honor at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

Throughout, the collection referenced graphic 1920s designs and shapes. Though nothing looked too retro. Opening with crisp pants suits with the classic four-button jacket made in bouclé wools of Egyptian blue or copper hounds-tooth. Viard cut multiple coat-dresses in ecru; raspberry or strawberry check, pairing some with marabou feather sleeves. All anchored by two-tone Mary-Janes, noticeably with heels inspired by the 1920s. Worn on a cast with what the French call an Oeil au beurre noir, meaning a black eye.

“The geometric shapes made me want contrasts, great lightness and a lot of freshness: ethereal dresses that float as if suspended. Lots of flounces, fringes, macramé, bright lace, iridescent tweeds, colorful jeweled buttons,” enthused Viard.

But Viard's big idea was the cutaway skirt, slit right up the middle to the waist, and worn over knee-length lace shirts in white or gold. For evening, she mixed up layered chiffon cocktails and columns with bouclé wool biker jackets and boleros. And included lots of shiny platinum-hued woven columns, blending in entre-deux-guerres glam. Climaxing with a long dress entirely embroidered by Lesage with constructivist camellias in black, white and coral beads, again worn with a little black jacket.
Mixed into the set was a cool posh punk scratchy video projected on two mammoth screens of Casiraghi – the official Chanel Ambassador - on Cusco in a paddock and forest, shot by Norwegian photographer Ola Rindal. The equestrian moment jumping between imagination and reality, rather like this couture collection.

And, as the show rose to a climax, Tellier suddenly began mock playing a gigantic abstract wooden mandolin, as Williams fist-pumped his appreciation in the front row.

“The idea for this décor came from a longstanding desire to work with Xavier Veilhan. His references to constructivism remind me of those of Karl Lagerfeld,” Viard told FashionNetwork.com, in the post-show backstage.

“I like this similarity of spirit between us, now and across time. In addition to creating the show décor with its references to the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s, Xavier wanted to work with Charlotte Casiraghi. His artistic universe is full of horses and Charlotte is a skilled rider,” added Virginie.
This was the first Chanel show since the announcement that the house’s owner, the Wertheimer family, had appointed a new CEO, Leena Nair, who joins the fashion mega-brand from Unilever, where she was director of human resources. Though Nair, who begins her new job on Monday, Feb. 1, was not present this morning in Paris.

However, the current CEO and clan chief Alain Wertheimer, sitting discreetly in the second row, spent half the show taking snaps and videos with his iPhone, normally a sign that a luxury boss is in a good mood.

As well he should be, after a highly accomplished collection, albeit not terribly experimental, and the best staging in Paris in several years.

Far too often Viard is slightly downgraded by certain critics as talented designer who lacks the vision of a great creative director. Today’s show should put a stop to that chatter.

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