

# SCHOOL OF ROCKS

A master craftsman isn't built in a day, but if high jewellery is your thing, L'École, School of Jewelry Arts is a good place to start. Absolute beginner GRACE CAIN pulls on her lab coat

I'M PROBABLY OVEREXPOSING MY PSYCHE by telling you this, but here we go: I frequently have a recurring anxiety dream that I'm back at school, about to sit a *very important* test with no time to prepare. I awake in a state of panic that gives way to gratitude when I realise that I only have grown-up problems to worry about now – and no need to ever return to school.

And yet, as is so frequently the case, I am proved incorrect by an invitation to study (for one day, at least) at L'École, School of Jewelry Arts in Paris. Opened in 2012 with the support of Van Cleef & Arpels, L'École aims to reveal a world of artistry that can sometimes feel mysterious or even intimidating to the uninitiated – and I would consider myself to be in that camp. They don't exactly teach you how to make priceless artefacts in Year 9 art class.

So, putting aside my academic anxieties, I walk to school through a hazy morning on Place Vendôme, Paris' historic epicentre of high jewellery. The octagonal square is empty apart from the one man diligently polishing the windows of number 22, where Van Cleef & Arpels has been headquartered since 1906. Around the corner and inside L'École, my fellow students and I don crisp white lab coats and sit obediently at our workstations. Although the school offers a plethora of different courses to help you discover more about gemology and the art history of jewels, our lesson today is part of a practical series that explores the *savoir-faire* of jewellery-making. Like all L'École's classes, 'From Design to Mock-Up' is taught in small groups by master craftsmen who are – as I will soon discover – as patient as they are talented.

The initial half of our lesson mirrors one of the first steps in the high-jewellery-making process: the *gouaché*, a form of watercolour painting that allows the designer to transform their idea into a realistic render. In the AI age, this traditional art form is a matter of pride for the very few high-jewellery houses (Van Cleef & Arpels included) who remain loyal to it. The magic of a *gouaché* jewel is in the way that it seems to reflect the light, floating against the page in three dimensions. Flawless accuracy is key, because this initial representation will act as a guide for every artisan involved in its realisation – from the model-makers and gemologists to the stone-setters and jewellers.

Patience and precision are the key traits required to be a great *gouaché* painter. I possess neither. We're given a

short time to practise, mixing the correct ratio of water and paint to create varying shades of grey (believe me, it's harder than it sounds). Our task is to paint three diamonds using our newly mixed hues with tiny flecks of pure white to create the illusion of glimmering facets. These diamonds range from tiny to minuscule – the smallest is half the size of my little fingernail. It's immediately evident why it takes *gouaché* painters so many years to master their craft, and I'm doubly impressed to discover that most are either self-taught or have come to the increasingly rare art form via another design profession.

The required combination of dexterity and creativity – not to mention the almost scientific approach to light and shade – proves too much for me. My diamonds look like snowflakes that have been run over by a car. Our teacher tells me it's very good, in the way that someone compliments a child's copy of *Sunflowers*. Then I ask if she would give me a job, and she laughs in abject horror.

The next half of our lesson focuses on the creation of a mock-up. As the first three-dimensional iteration of a design, a mock-up is created in the same way as the final piece but with substitute materials. As well as helping to identify any potential difficulties, it helps the stone-setters to work out the approximate weight of the required gems and offers an estimation of worth. It's a complex job that balances logic with artistry; the mock-up must be strong enough to hold the jewels while maintaining a sense of delicacy.

Today, we're going to be making a butterfly from pewter. The shape is already helpfully outlined, and our first instruction is to saw around the lines – sounds simple enough, but rounding the curled antennae with the hair-thin blade takes serious concentration. I saw for about half an hour, gently blowing glimmers of dust away from the wings as they emerge from the slice of metal. The curves and angles almost defeat my trembling post-caffeine hands, but I'm committed to the symbol of peace that has been close to the heart of Van Cleef & Arpels since its earliest days.

After soldering and polishing, it's time to add the 'diamonds'. We are each presented with a box of twinkling rhinestones in various sizes, and encouraged to find the ones that will best fit our design. I now understand that if I were a *real* mock-up maker, I would have to diligently follow the *gouaché* painting, selecting the jewel in the exact size and shape to match the designer's initial vision.

As the class ends, I realise I have not looked at my phone for three hours. In fact, I haven't even felt the urge to look at it. I'd been so immersed in my tasks that my brain had made no room for anything else, like a sort of meditation (albeit with some low-level stress... painting those diamonds was *really* hard). I'm beginning to understand why people dedicate so much time and talent to these traditional forms of art. All those years of training – and the associated emotional commitments – add a value to Van

Cleef & Arpels' creations that goes far deeper than diamonds and gold. As I leave L'École, I feel like I've been privileged with a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse into how

one person's idea can become someone else's treasure. Perhaps school isn't so bad, after all. □

