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Chanel Puts Craftsmanship In Focus With Le19M Exhibition

● Bruno Pavlovsky explains how the event underlines the importance of skilled labor in the face of AI, generational transition and debate about the value of luxury goods.

BY JOELLE DIDERICH

PARIS – Chanel's craftsmanship hub Le19M is landing in Tokyo with an exhibition that unites the skills of its specialty workshops in Paris with the know-how of Japanese and French artists and artisans.

La Galerie du 19M Tokyo, which opens to the public on Tuesday, underlines the importance of skilled labor in the face of AI, generational transition and debate about the value of luxury goods, as the house prepares for the first show by its new artistic director Matthieu Blazy.

The event also highlights the specificity of Chanel, which started acquiring some of its specialized suppliers in 1985 in order to safeguard their know-how – often when their owners retire.

It now heads a network of 60 manufacturers, between the "métiers d'art" houses grouped under the 19M umbrella, and production sites in locations including France, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Thailand, Cambodia and India.

"What all these people share, no matter where they are in the world, is a passion for handicraft and the expertise behind it," Bruno Pavlovsky, president of fashion and president of Chanel SAS, told WWD.

The Tokyo exhibition marks only the second time Le19M has traveled outside France, following a residence in Dakar, Senegal, in 2023 to coincide with the luxury brand's Métiers d'Art show. After a repeat showing of that collection in Tokyo, Chanel decided to deepen its relationship with local creatives.

"It ended up being one of our most successful shows ever: Our clients loved it, the press response was strong and it

translated into great sales in the boutiques. It was a real turning point for us in Japan," Pavlovsky said.

Chanel tapped a panel of personalities to curate the "Beyond Our Horizons" strand of the exhibition: director and writer Momoko Andô; Casa Brutus editor in chief Yoichi Nishio; Shinichiro Ogata, founder and creative director of multidisciplinary design studio Simplicity; curator Kayo Tokuda, and Aska Yamashita, artistic director of Chanel-owned embroiderer Montex.

Looking to the Future

Among the 30 people they selected are Xavier Veilhan, the French contemporary artist who designed several sets for Chanel haute couture shows in collaboration with former creative director Virginie Viard, and Akiko Ishigaki, a Japanese artist who has helped revive traditional textile techniques and restore ancestral garments on the subtropical island of Iriomote.

Also featured are several descendants of storied, family-run Japanese firms. Zengoro Eiraku is head of a 500-year-old Kyoto potter, while Ryo Kojima is the 10th-generation leader of lantern-maker Kojima Shoten. Several of the artists and artisans collaborated with Le19M on their creations.

"It's incredible to see how much working with artists and craftspeople, especially those rooted in Japanese culture, with its deep sense of refinement and precision, can push the boundaries for the maisons. The results are extraordinary, and to me, they truly reflect Chanel's approach to design," Pavlovsky said.

"What we aim for is always this meeting point between the vision of a designer and traditional know-how. These skills have been passed down for generations, but they need to keep evolving in order to look toward the future, rather than staying locked in a past that is no longer relevant," he added.

The free exhibition is scheduled to run until Oct. 20 at the Mori Arts Center Gallery

and Tokyo City View indoor observation deck on the 52nd floor of Mori Tower in the Roppongi Hills urban complex.

It will also include the 100th anniversary retrospective of embroiderer Lesage, making its international debut. It features a selection of ornately embellished outfits from the likes of Chanel, Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent and Schiaparelli, alongside highlights from Lesage's archive of 75,000 samples, which it bills as the world's largest collection of fine embroidery.

A third section, designed by ATTA – Atelier Tsuyoshi Tane Architects – introduces visitors to the know-how of Le19M.

"In a world where craft is increasingly disappearing, not only in the arts but also in architecture, it is vital to create spaces like Le19M that honor and preserve these heritages," Tane said in a statement. "This installation is a commitment to highlighting the significance of handmade work and ensuring that these skills and knowledge are passed on to future generations."

Talking to Gen Z

Highlighting the human touch is especially important as Gen Z customers question the intrinsic value of luxury goods amid ballooning prices, and after a wave of viral TikTok videos by Chinese manufacturers claiming many European luxury goods are actually made in their factories.

"There's a lot of discussion around pricing right now, and I understand why. But I also think there's often a lack of understanding about the depth of the craftsmanship involved," Pavlovsky said.

With the price of a Chanel Medium Classic bag almost doubling between 2019 and 2025, he has attempted to give more insight into its fabrication process and opened the doors to one of the brand's leather goods factories in France for the first time.

While rising raw material costs have driven inflation, it's also become more expensive to hire, amid a chronic shortage of skilled workers across the luxury sector.

"Honestly, if those increased costs mean



The poster for La Galerie du 19M Tokyo by Eric Pillault.

better conditions for the people who produce our raw materials and who work upstream in the supply chain, then that's a good thing. This industry is still one of the few where machines haven't replaced the human touch, because so much is done by hand, and that means we can't reduce our production costs," Pavlovsky said.

One of the roles of Le19M has been to draw fresh blood into the sector. Inaugurated in 2021, its headquarters on the outskirts of Paris house 700 employees in a striking building designed by award-winning architect Rudy Ricciotti.

The site is home to embroiderers Lesage and Montex; shoemaker Massaro; feather and flower expert Lemarié; milliner Maison Michel; pleater Lognon; grand flou atelier Paloma, and goldsmith Goossens, as well as the lingerie and swimwear brand Eres.

To date it has received 180,000 visitors. While exhibitions are the biggest draw, the site has also welcomed more than 5,000 people to its open days, including 1,600 students from nearby schools who might feel intimidated to step into Chanel's offices in central Paris.

"Chanel, by nature, can seem out of reach for many. But with the connections we've built through the Galerie and Le19M – with schools, with community groups – we've made real inroads, and I've seen some of those same young people come back and join the workshops," Pavlovsky noted.

As Blazy gears up for his debut on Oct. 6 during Paris Fashion Week, the executive is even more committed to bringing in a new generation of craftspeople to support the designer's vision.

"What we're doing is working to integrate the haute couture house into the world we live in today," he said. "It has to be grounded in the reality of the present. We can only continue to thrive if we stay rooted in the world around us and get people engaged."

Black lace photograph by François Guibé. Runway by Giovanni Gastel.