



Serge Lutens at Ritz hotel in Paris
Photo: Francesco Brigida

SERGE LUTENS

A LIFE'S WORK

'When I am creating, to a certain extent I am a woman. The woman I am creating for is in me. I find women particularly beautiful when they are angry.'

Words ~ Julia Collier

On a rainy August afternoon, I receive a call from the other side of the Mediterranean. Speaking from the intense heat of Marrakesh, Serge Lutens is soft and placid, smooth-spoken. The eloquence of his voice is tranquilising, a pleasure to the ear. There is so much of his impressive career I want to discuss with him; thankfully he is loquacious, so I listen happily to the stream of his beautiful French.

A gifted perfumer, hair and make-up artist for Christian Dior and Shiseido, photographer and filmmaker, Serge Lutens has also designed jewellery and interiors. Take the Salons du Palais Royal Shiseido perfumery near the Louvre in Paris, or the grandiose, lavish riad he designed in Marrakesh; he imagined and created it all to the minutest detail. He withdrew from the crowds several years ago, following his natural desire to live in a reclusive way, far from the frantic Parisian lifestyle. Only rarely does he give interviews or appear in the media; his face is not familiar to the public. When asked the reason for this circumspection, he replies *"I do not particularly wish to be popularised through the media, I have always been rather self-effaced and lived outside of the circle of popularity. This discrepancy appeared when I was a little boy; I felt this constant difference from the people around me. Communication was difficult; it was a very complex situation. Un fossé ne se creuse pas sans raison (Splits don't appear from nowhere)."* This idea of staying distant from the flock, this sort of isolation is what best describes Monsieur Lutens's attitude. When I mention his website, he tells me he does not use the internet. *"Les autres, c'est ce qui nous empêche d'être nous-mêmes: The others, the people around us are what prevent us from being ourselves".*

Born in 1942, Serge Lutens started working as a hairdresser in the

northern French city of Lille, his home town, at the age of fourteen. He says he did not particularly enjoy working in the salon at first, until a young woman walked in one day and helped him reveal his natural gifts. He styled her straight hair with a middle-parting, and decided to cut off a great chunk of it, for a bob-style finish. *"I cut off half of her hair, and I could sense this oppressive silence and astonishment around me. Everyone had stopped working and was just staring at me. What I did was to just carry on cutting away. The client was happy with it; we both were. I think conviction is what makes things and people beautiful."* They were the first snips of what was to become the Lutens classic, par excellence look – short, flattened, sleek hair, powdered-white skin and heavily shadowed eyes. He then started making up and dressing his friends and clients, styling their hair and taking pictures of them. *"I did not choose to do this, I was just placed there and told to deal with it."* And oh, how well he did get on with it! *"It all came to me and I had to teach myself the job. It's destiny. Nothing that we do or achieve has not been already prepared, unconsciously. You know, it's all in the making."*

He explains how various events in his childhood have had a significant effect on his work, underpinning his career throughout. *"I believe only the first seven years of one's life actually determine who one is going to be and what one going to become. You do not know what you are doing at such a young age, and can hardly recall the different events. Still, everything that happens to you in your very early childhood is crucial; once those seven years are over, you merely integrate into society."* What he clearly perceived as a child was the absence of his mother, who was unable to keep him after his birth. *"During her pregnancy she was extremely anxious, and this anxiety was passed on to me. Immediately after my birth I was sent to another household without*



Outside panoramic view of the Palais Royal
Photo: Alain Beulé



Palais Royal Serge Lutens
Photo: Deidi Von Schaewen

my mother. This is how the relationship with mother started; there was none. This relationship was non-existent, therefore I had to invent and create it. It was a fantasized dual relationship; I had to stand in my mother's shoes to compensate for her absence. I took her place, and to a certain extent I betrayed her. I grew up with a split personality; I was my own self as well as being my mother."

Yet the humble Monsieur Lutens does not like looking back; he is uninterested in his past. "I hate old photographs. I do not hang on to them. These pieces of the past slow me down, they tend to stop me from moving forward, and they upset my thoughts. One must not look back at the past too often." He also still shows great admiration for women. "When I am creating, to a certain extent I am a woman. The woman I am creating for is in me. I find women particularly beautiful when they are angry."

In the sixties, he moved to Paris and sent some of his photographs to Vogue; the response was enthusiastic and they almost immediately asked him to start working on the make-up, hairstyling and jewellery for the 1963 Christmas edition. Further collaboration was with the Jardin des Modes, American Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, and photographers such as Irving Penn, Bob Richardson and Richard Avedon.

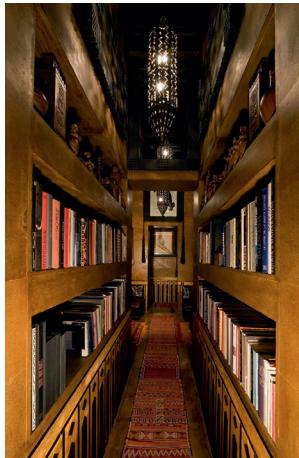
1968 was an exceptional year for Serge Lutens, the start of a brilliant ten-year collaboration with Christian Dior developing Dior make-up lines. That was when he created a very special exclusive range of eye shadows which were acclaimed by the American Vogue with the following words - "Serge Lutens: Revolution of make-up". 1968 would also be marked by his discovery of Marrakesh. His first contact with the enchanting southern-Moroccan city was overwhelming and it has since represented a great source of stimulation and inspiration for him. "Morocco has given me so much. I discovered it through its scents and smells just as a child would have done. I was attracted to it by all its invigorating scents and decided that one day I would create a perfume out of it. I said to myself 'Ooh, this smells nice, I want to change it into a fragrance'."

His successful collaboration with the Maison Dior lasted for over 10 years, with Monsieur Lutens taking his talent to an even higher level and producing photography and films for Dior. The series of the Seurat, Picasso, Modigliani and Delaunay-inspired photographs which he created in 1972 were displayed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Then came his first short films: 'Les Stars' in 1974, and 'Suaire' in 1976, both of which were shown at the Cannes Film Festival. 1980 was the start of the great Shiseido era, when he was invited to rethink and design the Japanese cosmetic brand's image and to create its new make-up lines (and notably the 'Inouï' line). The work he carried out as an artistic director for Shiseido was made famous by the memorably fine, pale, oval-faced, almost birdlike models, with their heavy eye make-up and dark red painted lips, the dominant geometric, linear shapes and the distinct shades of blue, red, purple and black. Serge Lutens has made his world black – or could it be the other way round? "Black is me. It is my coat, my skin, all of my history is black, my blood is black. But black is not a real colour; blue or pink can be black too." This obsession for black also stems from a childhood experience which again involved his mother. "My mother wore a black dress for the first few days that fol-

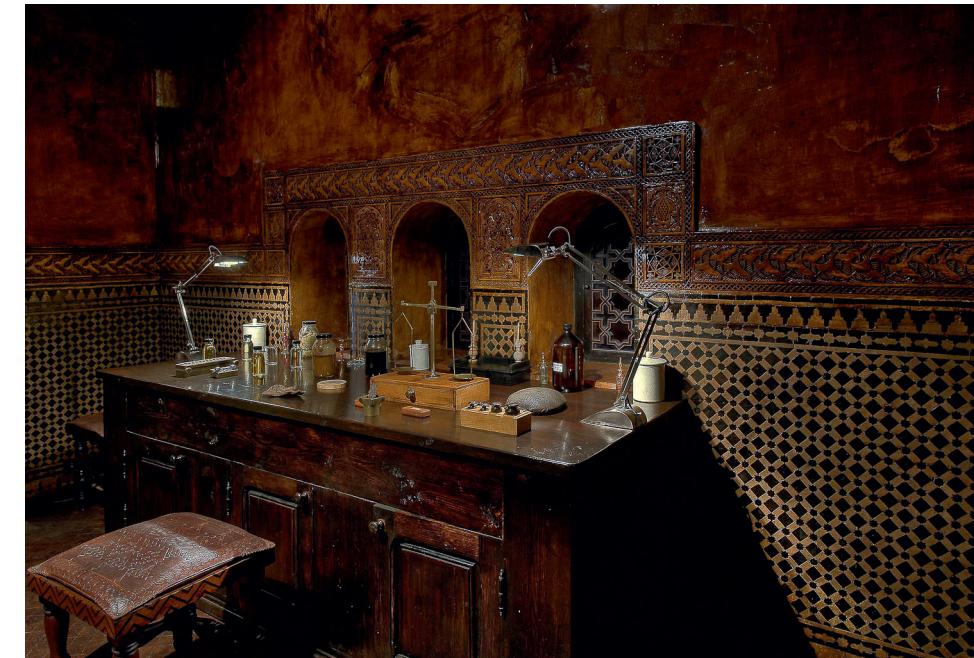
lowed my birth. I remember her showing it to me when I was ten years old. This black presence was tucked away somewhere in my mind during my whole childhood." It was gradually released and took over his spirit and body to become one of the main characteristics of his work. In 1982, he created the legendary 'Nombr Noir' for Shiseido, a deep, dark fragrance walled in a black bottle. 10 years later he opened the very intimate Salons du Palais Royal Shiseido perfumery in the rue de Valois in Paris, just opposite the Palais Royal gardens, a few streets away from the Louvre. Hidden away from the busy shopping areas, it flowered entirely from his own imagination, every detail bathing in a dimly lit, deep purple and black atmosphere. There again, his discreet self was seeking seclusion. "The Palais Royal gardens are like an enclave in the middle of Paris. I specifically chose this location because it is isolated and protected from the rest of Paris; there is hardly any traffic, it is quiet and peaceful. Jean Cocteau used to live nearby and called the neighbourhood 'the Great Wall of China in the heart of Paris'." Monsieur Lutens spent many years in Paris and he describes it as being a "unique city, a world, a society unto itself. I did not consider Paris as being France. It has changed so much though; it is not what it used to be." He crossed the Mediterranean to settle in Morocco, where he devoted a great part of his genius to conceiving his palatial riad. This is obviously a major achievement in which he again recognises another example of the splitting in his personality. "This villa resembles my life, it's like a limb that took a long time to develop."

It seems that this prevailing notion of dual personalities portrays Serge Lutens as a person and as an artist. The fifty something perfumes he has created, his photography, his films, his make-up, all of these are mirrors of his own self. In 1999, still working with Shiseido, he launched his own line of perfume and make-up. 'Serge Noire', 'Fille en Aiguilles', 'Louvre', 'Feminite du Bois', 'Chergui', 'Un Bois Sepia', 'Cuir Mauresque'... his perfumes are authentic, noble, deep and secret, and he has received FiFi awards for several of them. "Perfume is a succession of notes and chords which blend harmoniously. You just have to use the correct notes cleverly, in the right order; that is actually the way it works for most things you achieve." He elegantly named his make-up range 'Le Nécessaire de Beaute' (Beauty Necessities). The fact that his products cannot easily be found has also fuelled the passion for them and preserved the mystery around Serge Lutens. The Salons du Palais Royal is his only shop and the main point of sale in Paris. He does not believe in excessive marketing and advertising, which he finds "anti-creative".

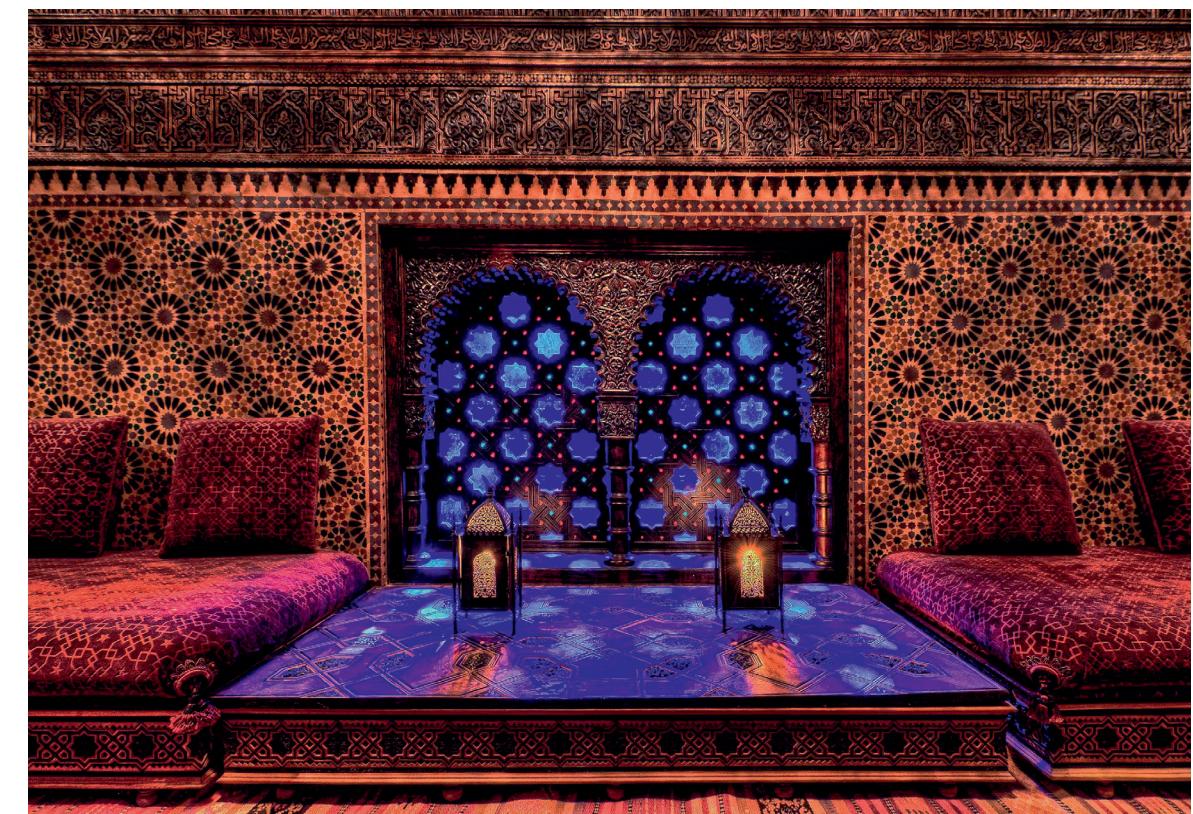
In 2007, he was awarded an Order of Arts and Letters title by the French government to thank him for his outstanding contribution to French art and culture. His exceptional talent has been hailed throughout France and the world, yet Serge Lutens has always remained detached from the buzz. I am intrigued to find out who he really is and how he would define his career. "I do not have a real job. This career had never been planned, it just all happened to me. I sort of arrived here by accident and simply got on with everything; no-one taught me how to do it. I felt the need to release all the negative thoughts and feelings I had inside me and to create something great from them. My work is a rebuilding of my life." When asked where his home and heart are, the poetical Mr Lutens replies "I am nowhere. Where I am does not matter. I only exist when I am creating. Je n'existe que quand je fais." •



Serge's Moroccan Riad Interiors



Serge's Perfume Laboratoire



Grand Salon