

Shopalong Kassidy

The rich *are* different: they have more money than other people. And some of them like to spend it on very, very expensive jewellery. CHRISTA D'SOUZA travels to Paris to meet Kassidy Choi Schagrin, one of the world's handful of consumers of haute joaillerie, and discovers how billionaires buy their baubles



HAUTE STUFF

In her suite at Le Meurice jewellery lover Kassidy Choi Schagrin tries on a 300-carat diamond “scarf” by Leviev, with the assistance of the brand’s director of security John Fallon.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUILLAUME BONN

If the world of haute couture is an exclusive one—supposedly there are only around 200 serious clients in the world—then the world of haute joaillerie, or high jewellery, makes it look positively mass-market. The tiny tribe of shoppers who can afford and choose to spend way, way upwards of a quarter of a million pounds on a pair of earrings or a necklace, that miniscule section of the population who think of pretty much anything under the £25,000 mark as “starter”, they are themselves rare and precious jewels as far as the industry is concerned. But how does the highly guarded process of high-jewellery salesmanship work? And is “salesmanship” quite the right way to describe the discreet, oh-so-close relationship between client and vendeur (or vendeuse)?

Here I am, then, on a peerlessly sunny day in Paris, on the final day of the haute couture shows, to find out. This being the first time the jewellery houses of the Place Vendôme have twinned with the haute couture (and shown their wares as official members of the *Chambre Syndicale*, haute couture’s trade union), there are quite a few high-jewellery customers in town to kill two birds, as it were, with one stone.

The house that has embedded me is Leviev, very much the new kid on the block, having opened its first boutique on New Bond Street only in 2006 and as yet having no presence whatsoever in Paris. But Harry Winston, Graff and all those other purveyors of killer rocks should take note. With Leviev’s might as the largest cutters and polishers of diamonds in the world, they’re obviously a force with which to be reckoned.

to have a look at, as well as “something she didn’t ask for, but that I know she’s just going to love. . .”

After a minute or so, the door of said client’s palatial suite at Le Meurice, overlooking the Tuileries, opens. “Helloooo, come on in,” purrs its girlish but immaculately made-up occupant, a coquettish yet elegant hybrid of Lucy Liu and Samantha from *Sex and the City*, in bare feet and a bathrobe. “I’m just trying to figure out what to wear to the Jean Paul Gaultier show, come help me choose!”

Say hello to Cassidy Choi Schagrin, the Washington, DC-based socialite, philanthropist, front-row regular and, of course, high-jewellery lover. “Haute couture and high jewellery go hand in hand—how can you wear one without the other?” says this Cambridge-educated aeronautical engineer. “Now then, I’m just trying to figure out what I should wear. Maybe one of these. . .” She points to a collection of hats, one of which Gaultier made as a tribute to Michael Jackson. “I wasn’t sure how to wear it, so they sent a picture over of what it looked like on the runway. . . What do you think?”

The affair between Leviev and Schagrin, a seasoned buyer of high jewellery both estate and modern, is a recent one. The wheels were set in motion by fellow philanthropist and couture enthusiast Suzanne Saperstein on Valentine’s Day last year. Saperstein, one of Schagrin’s LA posse (along with Paris’s mum, Kathy Hilton, Wolfgang’s wife, Gelila Puck, and the designer Monique Lhuillier), had thrown open the doors of her Versailles-inspired château in Beverly Hills (since sold to Mariah Carey) for a lavish benefit and live auction to benefit the Los Angeles Children’s Hospital. Some \$250 million worth of Leviev jewels were on display—including an eight-carat green diamond, the largest ever certified by the GIA—all nestled amid a riot of peonies, orchids and calla lilies. Schagrin bid on a pair of flawless 30-carat heart-shaped diamond earrings—and was outbid. But her interest

HOW DOES THE HIGHLY GUARDED process of high-jewellery salesmanship work?

With me is Lisa Klein, Leviev’s vendeuse, brainstormer, executive vice president and director of marketing (and wife of the company’s young, handsome executive director, David Klein). She has just been flown in from the company’s Manhattan headquarters at the behest of one of its clients. Usually the identity of a high-jewellery client is top, top secret, but because this particular customer is such a good friend of Klein’s, and because Leviev is a company that prides itself on doing things slightly differently from everyone else, an exception has been made.

A few paces behind us is John Fallon, Leviev’s director of security, a worryingly fit figure of man who prior to joining the company spent 22 years in the New York Police Department. Anywhere serious rocks from Leviev go, there goes Fallon. In his hand is an innocuous looking holdall, which contains a few little bits and pieces that Klein—a glamorous 26-year-old in satin Stella McCartney heels—has brought over for her client

was piqued and when Lisa, in honour of Saperstein, decided to throw a canary-diamond-themed cocktail party in the Madison Avenue salon the following May—“Canaries are Suzanne’s favourite, so everything was yellow, the candles, the peonies from Japan, even the cocktails!”—Schagrin stopped by.

“It was just this instant connection,” recalls Schagrin. “I didn’t feel as you often so tiresomely do in these situations like it was this big sales pitch. It wasn’t: ‘You have to. . .’ It was more like: ‘Welcome to our home. . .’ But I’m old-fashioned about things like that. I expect a certain level of decorum and courtesy. I’m old-school. For example, I often wear gloves to cocktail parties.” (Custom-made, if you please, by either Hermès or Sermoneta in Venice.)

Oh, but enough talk! Let’s, please, see the goodies! Fallon takes a couple of black velvet rolls from his trusty holdall and the three of us find ourselves clasping our hands in expectation.



Madame Cassidy Choi Schagrin
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SHOWTIME

Clockwise from top left: the doorman at Le Meurice doffs his hat to a similarly hatted Cassidy Choi Schagrin; en route to Jean Paul Gaultier's haute couture show, Leviev's director of security John Fallon helps Schagrin slip a diamond ring onto a gloved finger; Leviev's Lisa Klein fastens a necklace clasp for Schagrin; two of the Leviev pieces chosen by Klein for Schagrin; Schagrin weighs up the 300-carat Leviev diamond "scarf"; Schagrin waits for her driver after the Gaultier show; catwalk models at the Gaultier show. Centre: Klein surrounded by Leviev items in Schagrin's hotel suite, and (below) a couture-week invitation addressed to Schagrin.



How to describe the first piece? A snake? A waterfall? Something fluid anyway, for that is what this extraordinary "scarf" of diamonds, all 800 of them, totalling over 300 carats, looks like, winking and glittering in the watery, morning sun. "It feels like..." Schagrin stops to consider the piece, which took seven months to craft and costs somewhere in the region of, well, Klein won't say, but she doesn't say no when I mention a figure of \$3 million. "Let's see, diamond silk? But just feel the weight of it..."

The pair of them start playing dress-up, Klein threading the "scarf" through the belt loops of her skirt and then tying it Gibson Girl-style under her hair before handing it to Schagrin. "Hmm," says Schagrin, expertly knotting it round her neck. "Are you sure if I wear this to the show, which I think I probably will, that it won't look part of the couture outfit?" And then, with a girlish giggle, "Maybe I should wear it this way for one half of the show and round my waist for the other... I swear, last time at the couture I must have changed ten times in one day and I never took the elevator from my room to the lobby at the George V, I always took the grand staircase, because isn't that part of the fun of the couture, making an entrance?"

Born in Vladistock, the daughter of a once wealthy and influential Korean with Mongolian heritage—"He told me we were descended from Genghis Khan and never to forget it!"—Schagrin describes herself as having been born into immense wealth, then fallen into poverty, "but always followed by great good luck". When she was 11 and her father suddenly lost his fortune, she was sent to school in America. By her teens she was already interning at the Department of Defence. She then went on to read physics at Georgetown. While at Georgetown, and later at Cambridge, where she got a PhD in engineering, she continued to work, until she married her American husband (also an engineer) and had her two children.

Home is now Washington, DC—"Don't they say home is where your photos are?"—but she also keeps a suite at The Ritz in London, because England is where her beloved children are being educated, one at Eton, the other at Oxford. "I tend to dress down when I'm visiting either of them," she says with a little smile.

And now for the unveiling of the next two pieces. First is the Leviev version of a charm bracelet, each charm a different fancy diamond sitting in a bubble of pavé diamonds. Then there is a cocktail ring, a rectangular parcel of white diamonds wrapped with a ribbon of pink diamonds, then, nestled in its centre, a pale, almost pastel-green diamond. "Look at that," says a delighted Schagrin, slipping it on her finger. "It reminds me of those Lily Pulitzer pinks and greens everyone wore back then! Oh, God, in those days all I wanted to be was a preppy and have a name like Bitsy. Of course, now when I see this sea of Caucasian faces in the front row I'm extremely proud of my mishmash heritage..."

The "surprise", meanwhile, which Klein had made up specifically with Schagrin in mind, is a pair of five-carat round brilliant-white diamond studs, veritable fog lamps compared to the perfectly decent-sized ones I put on specially for today. Schagrin fairly claps her hands in delight. "See?" she says, as Klein holds a mirror for her while she puts them on. "They don't look oversized on me because I've got these cheekbones,

these wide Mongolian features—whenever I’m photographed my face is twice the width of any of my friends!” It’s true. They don’t look at all over-the-top or blingy on her. At the same time, they look every penny of the nearly half a million dollars they are worth, and once she has them on it is difficult for any of us, silent John Fallon included, to take our eyes off them. “Oh, dear,” says Schagrín with a theatrical sigh. “Am I really going to have to go back to billable hours for these?”

Schagrín may not work, but, as she is proud to point out, it is she who pays for her jewellery and haute couture. “OK, I’m old-fashioned and I like the guy to pay for dinner, but every piece of haute couture or jewellery I have, I have bought with my own money. That’s very important to me. I’m not just another bimbo married to a rich man!” Bimbo? This Cambridge-educated engineer? This highly discerning consumer who, in supporting her passion for high jewellery and couture, knows exactly the value of what she acquires? I should think not.

Two hours later, and after much deliberation (in the next room the closets bulge with the collection of Christian Lacroix, Armani Privé and Chanel haute couture she has brought with her), we’re good to go. Schagrín has plumped for a subdued

Since 2006 the retail end of the business has grown. As well as New York and Boston, there are now boutiques in Dubai and Moscow. But as Klein is keen to point out, they’re not desperate to expand. “We’re big where it counts and we have no intention of opening a boutique in every city or diversifying into handbags and pens and so on.”

The point, too, is that all-important vendeuse/client relationship. Certainly Klein and Schagrín are fast friends. Tonight, for example, they will be having supper together at Osmose, a hip kosher restaurant in the 16th recommended to Klein by a friend from New York. Schagrín is keen to show Klein her own favourite restaurant in Paris, Les Ombres, on the roof of the Quai Branly museum. Soon, if they can coordinate their calendars, they plan to take a girls’ trip to Moscow. And next time Schagrín is in New York, she wants to take Klein to her favourite spa, the Caudalie at The Plaza, owned by her great friend Florence Cathiard, “the most charming and brilliant businesswoman in France”. In between, they’ll be emailing constantly. “Lisa and her husband David, they’re like family to me,” says Schagrín, “and that means a lot. I support a bunch of people in the luxury world. But they have to be nice. If they’re not nice, I won’t support them.”

We are now in the front row at the Jean Paul Gaultier show, Fallon in the row behind us, as always. Schagrín is being filmed

“WHAT’S THE POINT OF KEEPING IT all hidden in closets and treasure chests?”

tweed wrap with a leather trim designed by Gaultier for Hermès, with an LBD by Chanel underneath: “The perfect backdrop for diamonds.” The equally understated lampshade hat she wears atop her glossy black hair is one she had made in Paris a decade ago and gives the outfit a distinctly Audrey Hepburn look. “That’s funny,” says Schagrín, “because she was the inspiration behind my first taste for haute couture. In fact, I own one of the three original dresses she wore in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

Tied casually round her neck is that diamond lariat or scarf, and on a white-kid-gloved finger a big milky-white flower-petal ring with a three-carat centre stone. Off for a quick lunch before the show with her dear friend Sandrine de Montmort (who brings a signed copy of her latest book, *Un Autre Maupassant*, as promised), Schagrín gives herself a quick glance in the mirror. “I suppose that’s the one good thing about getting older,” she murmurs. “Wasn’t it Holly Golightly who said it’s tacky to wear diamonds before you’re 40?”

The massive Leviev empire was started from scratch by Lev Leviev in 1971, after his family emigrated from Uzbekistan to Israel. It’s an extraordinary rags-to-riches story. Starting out as an apprentice diamond polisher, Leviev is now, at 53, a billionaire with far-reaching interests all over the world. The company has substantial interests in several of the largest diamond mines in the world and an estimated annual turnover of \$2.5 billion. In other words, chances are all those high-jewellery houses on the Place Vendôme are getting some of their best, most serious diamonds through Leviev. “The top, top one percent, though,” says Klein, with well-deserved smugness, “we keep for ourselves.”

by a German camera crew. A young interviewer who reverentially trailed her yesterday in the front row at Chanel is keen to know what she is wearing and in particular, as she stares Mowgli-like at Schagrín’s ears, the provenance of those extraordinary studs. “Well, I guess I just have to get them,” shrugs Schagrín, as more flashbulbs go off. Just before the show starts, Gaultier’s couture director, Claude Mialaud, comes to say hello and her gaze lights immediately upon the diamond scarf, nestled discreetly underneath Schagrín’s coat. “Hey,” she jokes, taking hold of the trendy pearl one she is wearing round her own neck, “wanna swap?”

In stark contrast to some of the glum, bored faces being affected in the front row, Schagrín looks like she is hugely enjoying herself. “Oh, but I am!” she confirms with genuine exuberance. “I love the couture because it is the one time it makes sense to really, really dress up. I like to showcase my beautiful things, I’m flattered when people compliment me on them. What’s the point of keeping it all hidden in closets and treasure chests, or indeed looking so darn miserable in it? I have worked all my young life to be financially independent,” she goes on, lightly touching one of her earlobes and smiling as another flashbulb goes off in her face, “and I am truly and deeply grateful for the life I now lead. I may have to ‘visit’ the piece I hanker for a few times, mulling it over, doing the math, before I can actually get it. But if I want it, I’ll somehow make it work financially. I love my diamond scarf, but I don’t know, I might have to think about it for a while. These earrings, though, I can tell you. They’re for sure.” □