

Le Scandale

While the rest of the world shut down, many members of Paris's fashion elite refused to let the pandemic get in the way of a good time *By Roxanne Robinson*



The nights were hectic with dinners and cocktail events. In early July, as Paris celebrated the return to in-person fashion shows at its semi-annual couture event, Giorgio Armani, who had been among the first Italian designers to cancel his show in February 2020 as the pandemic first surfaced in Milan, staged an intimate runway show and gathering at the Italian Embassy. One guest remarked on Instagram what a thrill it was to catch a glimpse of the designer up close. Even as a dinner took place outside on the grand *hotel particulier's* grounds, images from inside showed a packed staircase full of guests and crew members overlooking a crowded entryway full of unmasked models. Elsewhere, Mick Jagger mixed with models in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Dior, Chanel and Balenciaga staged significant runway shows, signalling an immediate return to a business model that many industry insiders had predicted would become extinct in a post-pandemic world.

In fashion, it was as if the past 18 months had never happened.

Less than a month earlier, such gatherings had been verboten. That's not to say they didn't happen. In early June, at the chic Club Marigny by Jean-Louis Costes, hidden behind the Théâtre Marigny, guests on the terrace intermingled, gossiped and lingered past Paris's strict 9pm curfew, when service in bars and restaurants was ordered to stop as part of the city's efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus. People chattered on, some gossiping about a party that had reportedly taken place at the home of Pierre Kosciusko-Morizet, the French entrepreneur and founder of e-commerce site Priceminister, with more than 300 people in attendance and a "Burning Man" energy. (His sister is Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, a former politician who was once France's environment minister.)

Kosciusko-Morizet was rumoured to have thrown the illegal party on May 28 before an extensive home renovation. Since-deleted social media posts and other reports claimed the fête required a vaccination certificate, encouraged outrageous costumes, and used *les guetteurs*, or lookouts, a new-found profession since last summer in places like Nikki Beach Club in St-Tropez, to warn of impending inspection by the authorities. The police apparently were called to Kosciusko-Morizet's home, but the outcome of the events remains unclear.

Stories of what people were willing to risk for a good time have circulated in cities around the world. But the French, especially, love *le scandale*, and the high profile of the participants in the debauchery here seems to reflect a broader disregard for restrictions that is part

of the national character, which ultimately prolonged the impact of the pandemic even more than in other European nations.

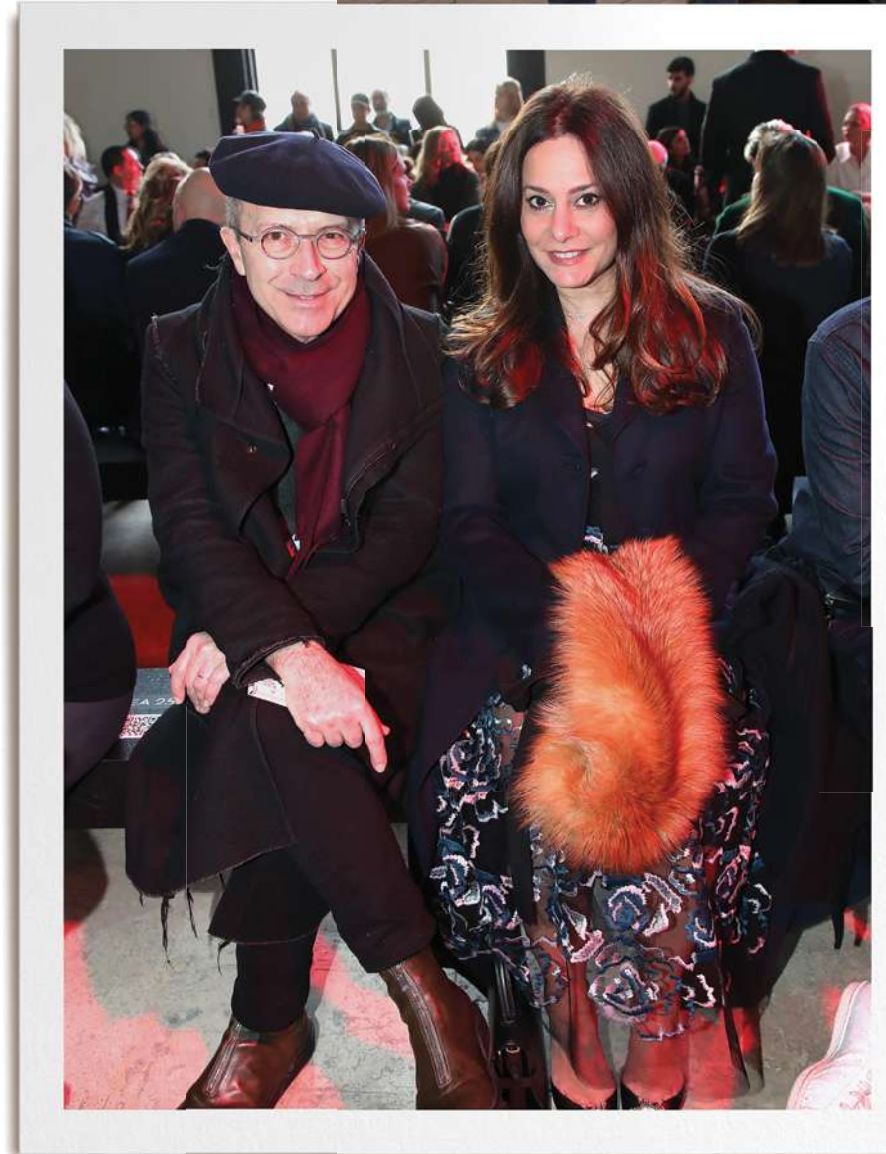
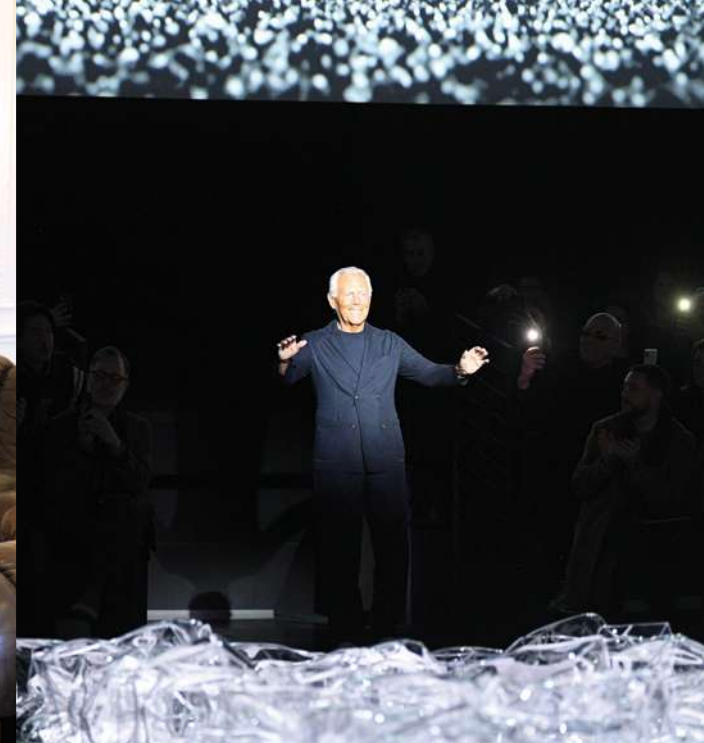
The coronavirus first gripped Paris at the beginning of its February 2020 fashion week; fashion is a particularly apt lens through which to examine the consequences of that hubris. Even as alarms were ringing about the spread of the virus in neighbouring countries, with outbreaks in Switzerland and Italy, the event proceeded as planned, with thousands of editors, models and retailers descending on the city. As the Italians cancelled fashion shows, sporting and musical events against a backdrop of terrifying scenes in the manufacturing region that surrounds Milan, crowds flocked to Paris, and the shows went on at full throttle. The television network Canal+ scandalously (and regretfully) poked fun at the situation in Italy with a "corona pizza" skit. For the next few weeks, the French government "monitored" the situation, banning gatherings of 5,000, then 1,000, which even at the time seemed ridiculous. It was not until March 16 that French president Emmanuel Macron ordered the country into a lockdown, the first of several it would face over the following 15 months. Many people exploited loopholes around the restrictions; while some got away with it, some have had their comeuppance.

Hedieh K Loubier, a jewellery designer and wife of Jean-Marc Loubier of First Heritage Brands, which has owned Delvaux, Clergerie and Sonia Rykiel, is usually a firm fixture on the Parisian social scene. But she took the restrictions seriously, partly due to her experience living through the Iran-Iraq War and partly because she lost family members to Covid-19. She thinks people's failure to acknowledge the threat has been a problem from the beginning.

"You could hear people in the streets at 2am, and they weren't penalised. By the third lockdown, when they said no one could travel, 60 per cent of Parisians left town," she recalls by phone from Corsica in late May.

"There were plenty of dinners with people we know, and they were attended by people who are no longer among us," says Loubier. Fashion designers Kenzo Takada and Alber Elbaz were two of the industry's most prominent victims of Covid-19 during the past year, despite their efforts to remain isolated. "In January, at the Fendi couture show, it was surprising to see how many guests were still at a [supposedly] virtual event."

In early April 2020, a scandal broke when Pierre Jean Chalençon, the host of the television programme *Affaire Conclue* and a Napoleon I fanatic, and celebrity chef Christophe Leroy were busted for hosting illegal dinners at Palais Vivienne, an opulent Versailles-inspired residence where a collection of memorabilia on display includes a throne of the emperors. Chalençon,



Clockwise, from top left: Pierre Kosciusko-Morizet, the French businessman, reportedly threw a party with 300 guests; Giorgio Armani was among the designers to return to live shows in July; Alber Elbaz died of Covid-19 in April; Kenzo Takada's funeral in 2020; Jean-Marc and Hedieh Loubier at the Elie Saab show in February 2020



IMAGES: PHILIP CONRAD (PHOTOGRAPH MORIZET); GETTY IMAGES (ARMANI, ELBAZ, TAKADA, LOUBIER)



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the owner, had been charging €200 a pop to dine on champagne and caviar at his “Diners Clandestin”, or secret dinners, until the events were exposed when M6 media aired a video taken by an undercover journalist for *Zone Interdite*, an investigative, exposé news programme. As a result, the duo was arrested, and at least 100 diners were fined.

Melissa Regan, who runs The MR Agency, an events service representing unique Parisian buildings, leads a busy social life and doesn't feel it has missed a beat since the coronavirus began; it just adapted. “During the pandemic, we [have been] living our best lives,” she says. After her family had Covid-19 in September, newly acquired antibodies made her feel it was safe to socialise. The fallacy of that thinking crystallised when she showed up to the Parisian eatery Balagan on the quiet Rue d'Alger on a Sunday in October. She arrived at 7pm to respect the 9pm curfew, and discovered a scene inside resembling a nightclub. “Girls were dressed in short skirts, high heels and make-up to the nines, Sunday brunch turned into full-on day drinking; they were partying,” she says.

To the broader world, particularly in Asian nations, the scenes of entitlement, like the “covidiot” influencers in the US and parties in France, were shocking. DJ to the fashion stars Michel Gaubert incited social media backlash for his racially insensitive “Wuhan Girls” post depicting a dinner party in Paris in April, where guests sported paper plate masks with slanted eyes. Geraldine Boubil of the blog *Erin Off Duty*, who caught Covid-19 in August, was perplexed by Gaubert's actions. “People don't learn. How can this still happen?” she wondered, adding, “social media will catch you for sure”. Chanel president Bruno Pavlovsky further angered Asian communities when he accepted Gaubert's apology and continued to hire him to DJ Chanel shows. As digital publication *Jing Daily* put it in an article, “Chanel, it's not your apology to accept.”

Most people in fashion remain mum on the subject, even to comment on the mood. Around town, social butterflies Olivier Zahm, Godfrey Deeny, Natasha Fraser and Giorgia Viola, an energetic Italian fashion publicist known for her party organising, each declined to comment for this article when asked at various events.

On the whole, the French are intent on keeping their culture and practices intact, and finding a way around pandemic restrictions. Fashion is no exception, if this year's haute couture event in July was any indication. Louis Vuitton kicked off the week with a star-studded fragrance launch event that corralled mainly Los Angeles-based talents: Katy Perry, Orlando Bloom, Sophie Turner and Joe Jonas were whisked in to celebrate a Frank Gehry-designed perfume bottle. Balenciaga held its first haute couture show in 53 years and recreated the original salon, albeit with au courant cartoonish touches. Though fashion pontificators predicted the end of the seasonal international travel circuit, editors of American publications showed up in force, including Anna Wintour, Samira Nasr and Laura Brown. Not to miss the crowd in hand, Valentino chartered its collection to Paris only to send the whole line-up back to Venice, where the Roman fashion house would invite an international crowd of editors and influencers to the live show overlooking the canals.

This perplexed Dutch couturier Ronald van der Kemp. The designer has been touting the need for sustainable fashion since his 2014 debut, something he refers to as “responsible hedonism”. His collection of exquisite and creative looks made primarily from upcycled fabrics and repurposed fibres was shown in a low-key, one-on-one setting at the residence of the Dutch ambassador to France. He suggested the return to business-as-usual signalled the industry not acting fast enough to change its environmentally damaging ways.

“Not only do we need the Covid-19 vaccine, we need a ‘mind vaccine’ to make changes focusing on being responsible human beings and companies,” he says. “We need to stop this enormous supersizing. No one needs a 100-piece collection shown at an Instagram location; couture is about experiencing the clothes up close.” He also pointed out that recent environmental crises—wildfires in the US and deadly floods in Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands—happening at the same time as this return to the blind pursuit of vanity shows that addressing the pandemic alone will not be enough to end the challenges facing the world. Such is the nature of fashion. Pandemic or not, an industry based on change struggles to change itself.

Clockwise, from top left: Chanel president Bruno Pavlovsky with Anna Wintour in March 2020; DJ Michel Gaubert; designer Ronald van der Kemp at a 2018 show; collector Pierre-Jean Chalençon at Palais Vivienne; event producer Melissa Regan

IMAGES: JOEL SAGET/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (PAVLOVSKY, GAUBERT, MODELS)