

Robert Piguet:

As Remembered By An Eighteen Year Old Apprentice Designer, Hubert de Givenchy

Piguet's Atelier, Designs, Perfumes, Friends And Clients

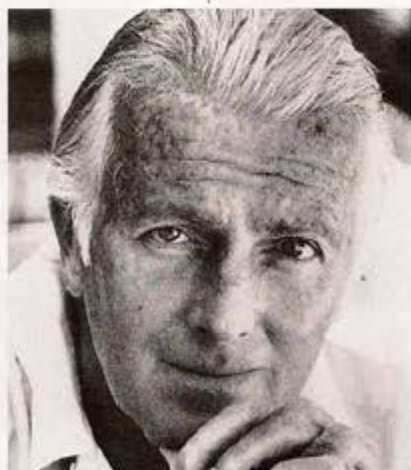
by Sarah Colton



Robert Piguet

When I first contacted Hubert de Givenchy in May 2004 and asked if he could speak to me about his experience working with Robert Piguet in the 1940s, I was immediately touched by his enthusiasm for the man and his fragrances. He said, "I'm glad to hear that Fracas and Bandit are being re-launched in Paris. They are lovely perfumes."

Sixty years after the original launch of Bandit, and half a century after Robert Piguet's premature death in the prime of his life, precious little is known about the man. All that remains of his legacy are a small collection of dresses, perfumes, photographs, and the rare memories of people who knew him. Putting them together, we can almost, but not quite, capture the spirit of a man and a vision, and then—it disappears—eluding our grasp, and we are left with nothing more than an exquisitely haunting memory: bold, classic, sensual, deeply moving, ordered yet not quite understandable, elusive and ephemeral. Perhaps, like the unique sillage of his perfumes, created by the controversial and avant-garde feminist perfumer of the time, Germaine Sellier, this is appropriately so, and what makes his perfumes the signature for those individuals who instinctively stand apart in a crowd. In a world of facts and figures, often glaringly exact and precise, the perfumes of Robert Piguet do not state, but rather imply, the ineffable beauty of the deeply unknown and the desperately unattainable.



Hubert de Givenchy



Robert Piguet



ROBERT PIGUET COLLECTION

The following cameo is based on an interview with Mr. de Givenchy on June 16, 2004.

Having worked previously for Jacques Fath, I joined Robert Piguet's design house as an apprentice designer in 1943 at the age of eighteen.

The time just following the Occupation and the war was a fabulous moment. This was an era of renewed energy for all the design houses which had survived the war, a revolution in proportions, followed almost immediately by Dior's 'New Look.' This met with a burgeoning demand from clients from around the world (Europe, the Middle East, the US and South America)—all hungry for the innovations coming out of Paris.

Robert Piguet was a tall, elegant and distinguished man. Often dressed in navy blue suits with thin white stripes, he was always impeccably well-groomed and put together. The son of a Swiss banker, he had a Protestant temperament—likeable, even-tempered and refined. He was a *grand* patron. Not secretive, but a very reserved, and (unlike Jacques Fath, who was often out in society), a very private person. Not a big talker, he did, however, like to tease in his own particular style. Sometimes he would say to me, "But Hubert, does it not bother you when you go out and people stare at you or make remarks because you are so tall?" And I would answer, "But sir, you have a car and a chauffeur, so you aren't used to being in public where people are always going to say things. What do you expect me to do, answer back to every person?"

Piguet's couture house mirrored his Swiss origin, and was orderly, professional, and disciplined. There was an inimitable air of calm, perfumed, luxurious, impeccably maintained elegance without extravagance. (Nothing like the follies you see today.) All of this was reflected in his designs and perfumes. He knew how to attract serious,

capable people, such as his excellent Director, Mr. Roger, an outstanding *première d'atelier*, as well as a very good sales team.

By comparison, it was nothing like the exuberant, joyous atmosphere at Jacques Fath's atelier, where I had worked the year before. At Fath, I was happy to go to work every day. At Piguet, it wasn't as much fun, but I was better paid. Fath was just getting started, whereas Piguet was already solidly established financially. Piguet's family had money to begin with, and, he was successful in his own right.

The atmosphere of Piguet's atelier was a reflection of his rigorous organization, his classic taste, his elegant

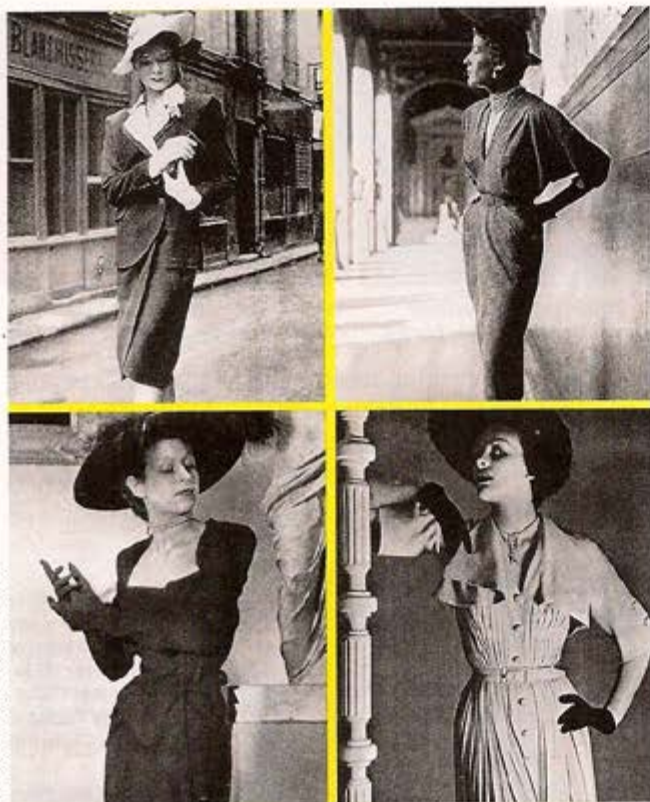


Hubert de Givenchy in his couture house

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and cosmopolitan clientele, and his friends, many from the theatre, whose presence, especially at tea time, animated the day.

At five in the afternoon, he would stop for tea and fruit tarts, and some of his actor friends would be there with him. There was a little light over the door to his office which said, "Wait" or "Enter," and from time to time, he would invite me to join them for tea. Here, I met Yvonne de Bray, a well known actress who played with Jean Marais in Cocteau's *Cherie*, and the actress, Marcelle Prince. Other friends included Jeanne Toussaint, the well known jewelry designer for Cartier, and Marie Louise Bousquet, who represented *Harper's Bazaar* in Paris. George Marny was another close friend. The costume designer, Christian Berard, was also a close friend and regular guest. He was always present for tea at the end of collections. Piguet respected his taste, and allowed him the last word about the final collections. He would look at the collection and say, "Bob, you need to add this, take this out and change that."

His clients—beautiful, elegant and cosmopolitan women—were often close friends, as well. The Duchess, Solange d'Ayen, a close friend and client, was also a great beauty. She had classic taste, nothing fantastical. Like the Queen of Romania, she always wore black because she had lost her husband and son in the war. She would often come in as a friend, and Piguet would tell

me to show her my designs because she had such good taste. She was always complimentary. This was also the time of the Court of Egypt, and the elegant and refined sisters of King Farouk were faithful clients. Another important client was an American woman who had been born a Rockefeller and who married the Marquis de Cuevas. She was a very good client, bought a great number of his creations, and liked to come and see the collection before the shows.

Piguet's designs were luxurious without extravagance, always in the very best of taste, and very much appreciated for their classic and sober elegance. He had a classic style—not comparable to Balenciaga or Dior, but he was serious, classic, a good essayist, and had a good team.

Similar to his fashions, Piguet's perfumes were exceptional, each with a very special, unique fragrance. Both *Fracas* and *Bandit* are excellent 'jus.' I was working with Piguet when he launched *Bandit*, and many original promotions were designed around the theme. The dresses all had names like 'Armed Robbery' and 'Hold Up.' And I remember one with a jersey cagoule-type headpiece. There were some outstandingly creative photos as well, including one in which a knife was breaking a perfume bottle and the perfume was flying out.



Bandit advertisement from *Vogue*, 1946 Courtesy of Special Collections, Gladys Marcus Library, The Fashion Institute of Technology

It was understood that I would eventually work for Christian Dior. He, too, had worked for Piguet prior to my apprenticeship, and was now on his own. Dior thought it important that I vary my background in order to evolve and improve, and advised me to work for Lucien Lelong following my year with Robert Piguet. After my departure, Marc Bohan worked for Piguet, and also, the very handsome Jean Pascal, who later became a famous actor. Three or four years after I left Piguet, he became ill and closed his couturier house.

Editor's note:

Very little is known about Piguet after this time—why he became ill, or what he did between the time of closing his house in 1947 and his death in 1953. We can only imagine that, had his health allowed, this extraordinarily man would have continued to evolve in this fabulously innovative period during which Dior was so enormously successful, and de Givenchy was to open his own house. Robert Piguet had a hand in training more future fashion talent than probably anyone before or since.

Piguet's choice of Germaine Sellier for the creation of his perfumes offers clues about a certain avant-garde disposition of his character. In addition to being the first woman perfumer in a profession dominated by men, Sellier was known to be 'devilish' and unconventional. Following Piguet's lead and the launch of *Bandit* in 1944, others recognized Sellier's talents, including Pierre Balmain for whom she created *Vent Vert* (1945), *Jolie Madame* (1953), *Monsieur Balmain* (1964), and *Nina Ricci*, for whom she created *Cœur-joie* (1946).

Sultry and exotic, *Bandit* was Sellier's second perfume for Piguet, and was the first chypre fragrance for women. Deliberately evoking the image of the bad girl, the outlaw, it was meant as a mischievous and seductive statement—not for every woman—but perfect for a certain woman who knows how to conceal beneath the most classically elegant demeanor and style, the wildest, most untamable heart. Piguet understood and encouraged this woman, and it is, perhaps, to this woman that Piguet's legacy speaks most strongly. Piguet knew her and called her by name: *Bandit*. His fashions embolden her; his fragrance gives her license to move with confidence in the shadows. She knows who she is. She is *Bandit*, the very stealthiest of outlaws.

Other Robert Piguet fragrances include *Baghari*, *futur*, *Cravâche* and *Visa*. BF



Robert Piguet in his atelier with Christian Dior (r.)

