

8 A LOVING TESTAMENT
TO A LOST ERA

HOLLY BRUBACH

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A LOVING TESTAMENT TO A LOST ERA

HOLLY BRUBACH

At a time when René Gruau was beginning to make a name for himself as a fashion illustrator in the 1930s, a handful of his contemporaries were taking up fashion photography, an exciting new medium with virgin possibilities. Just as the advent of photography had threatened the primacy of painting in the nineteenth century, becoming the preferred means for the sorts of landscapes and portraits previously supplied by small-time local artists, so fashion photography now heralded the demise of fashion illustration, a field dating back some four hundred years, although the denouement would play out slowly, over the next three decades.

Photography was of course capable of doing so much more. Photos of clothes conveyed the kind of information about fabric and design features that Gruau in his drawings merely hinted at or omitted altogether. Photos featured recognizable models who became minor celebrities; the women Gruau depicted were no one in particular. As cameras became more portable, fashion photographs recorded exotic scenes in far-flung locations; Gruau's drawings were set against the backdrop of a blank page.

And yet, against all odds, with his genre seemingly headed for extinction, Gruau took it to new heights. With few if any particulars of the kind that enable the viewer to construct a narrative—no landmarks in the background, no street scenes,

no context beyond a banister or the occasional piece of furniture—he nevertheless managed to conjure an entire world. It is a world in which people attend balls, women dress for lunch, and leisure is a way of life. Contemporary viewers may be forgiven for interpreting his drawings as chic fairy tales of the kind that, for a long time, served as fashion propaganda good for sales. But Gruau's world did in fact exist. It was the world he knew and lived in himself.

Born Count Renato Zavagli Ricciardelli delle Caminate, Gruau was a product of the marriage of two aristocrats: an Italian count descended from one of the oldest families in Rimini and a French noblewoman, Marie Gruau de la Chesnaie, who was seventeen on her wedding day in 1893. It was an uneasy alliance. He was absent much of the time; she was restless and social, with a calendar that revolved around parties and balls. As a Parisienne, she found the Riminese gentry provincial. She never did acclimate to the attitudes and customs of her Italian in-laws, declining their offer to use the family palazzo in the town's historic center as the couple's residence, preferring instead a villa in the surrounding hills of Covignano. There she could entertain friends from Paris when they, like other members of the *beau monde* from all over Europe, converged on Rimini in summer, drawn by its picturesque marina, white sand beaches, and Grand Hotel.

The first-born son died of meningitis. A second son, Guido, was sent to school in England. Renato was born in 1909, in the midst of escalating tensions between his parents. Estranged, they led increasingly separate lives, with Renato and his mother spending only summers in Rimini, moving on to Milan in the fall, to Monte Carlo and Paris in winter and spring. His parents' decision to divorce, when he was thirteen, set off a battle over his future, with his father advocating for a diplomatic career and his mother championing his artistic talents.

By his own account, he began to draw before he could read. "I can't remember a moment in my childhood when I didn't have a pencil in my hand," he said. He drew on any available material, even the smallest scraps of paper. He drew everything in sight: cars, houses, and women's legs, which were mesmerizing and beautiful to a small boy viewing them at eye level. In the pages of his mother's fashion magazines, in their images of women dressed in all manner of clothing, including lingerie and transparent *négligées*, he received an introduction to the lines of the female form. His fascination, at age five or six, was not out of some precocious sexual curiosity, he later explained, but prompted by a more innocent appreciation for the shapes that caught his eye; he was already an acute observer.

Architecture, he decided, would be his profession. When he was eleven, his mother arranged for him to study with Gino Ravaioli, a local painter with a studio at the top of the bell tower of Santa Colomba, Rimini's former cathedral. Over two years of lessons, Renato learned the rudiments of technique—how to mix color, how to choose the right brush. It was the only formal training he would ever receive.

To represent her in the divorce settlement, Marie hired a famous lawyer whose renown was exceeded only by his criminal ingenuity. He swindled her out of the fortune she might have come away with, leaving her financially ruined, with nothing to her name but her jewels and the villa at Covignano. The trial created a scandal, fanned by sensational coverage in the press. In 1923, Marie sold the villa, vowing never to set foot in Rimini again. With Renato, then fourteen, she moved to Milan. This break would mark the start of a precarious new life on the brink of poverty and a permanent exile from the paradise he had known as a child, which survived only in memory.

Setting aside his dream of becoming an architect, Renato resolved, over the next few years, to find work that could help support him and his mother. He would earn his living by drawing, though he had no idea how to go about doing that or what it might entail. Perhaps he could illustrate magazine stories or

book covers, he thought. He put together a small selection of his drawings and went to see Vera Rossi, the editor of a fashion magazine called *Lidel*. Despite his youth and lack of experience, she took him seriously and gave him his first opportunity, suggesting that he try his hand at drawing fashion—a genre that had never occurred to him.

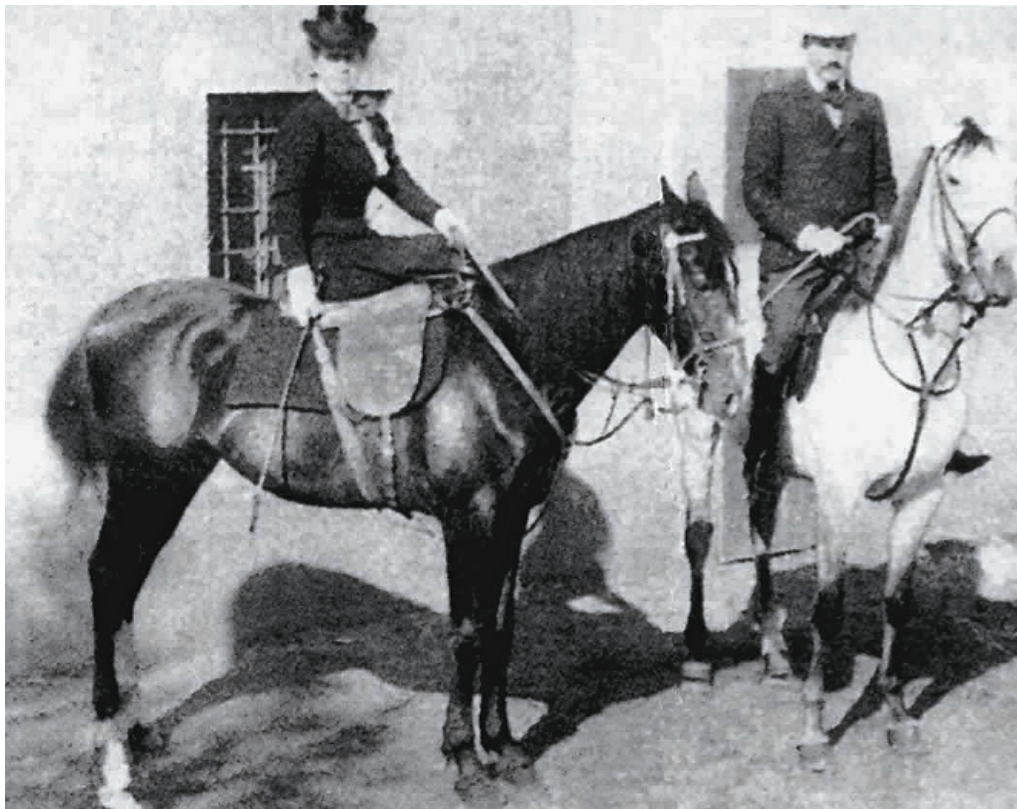
Soon he was on his way, publishing his first drawing at fifteen. A year or two later, he began signing his work "Gruau," adopting his mother's maiden name for his art, below a small star like an asterisk made with four quick strokes. "Renato" became "René." By the time he was eighteen, he was collaborating with Italian, British, and German magazines, making his own living.

Though Milan then was a center of dressmaking and fine tailoring, Paris was still the undisputed capital of fashion. All new styles debuted there, when twice a year the most prestigious couture houses presented their collections to clients and the press. Milanese fashion houses copied Paris originals from pictures or bought them outright and adapted them for their customers. On assignment for half a dozen local fashion magazines, drawing the clothes to be featured in their pages, Gruau acquired a working knowledge of Paris fashion, albeit once removed.

By the start of the 1930s, Milan was in the grip of fascism, with an uncertain future. In 1932, Gruau moved to Paris, taking his mother with him. His portfolio under his arm, with no introduction, he made the rounds of the then-numerous publications devoted to fashion. One assignment led to another. Periodically, he traveled to London, where he peddled sketches of dresses of his own design to supplement his income.

On one of those trips, he made the acquaintance of an Englishman looking to open a couture house, as a present to his wife, on Grosvenor Street, in Mayfair. He proposed that Gruau serve as the designer, and Gruau agreed, proceeding to sketch their first collection. But along with the prestige of the job came endless obligations: supervising work in the studio from morning to night, choosing the fabrics, ordering buttons and lace. It was not long before Gruau felt like a prisoner. He was, he realized, ill-suited to the position, and, on the pretext that he was going away for the weekend, he skipped town and sent word that he was quitting. A long harangue ensued. He had, however, learned a valuable lesson: it would be the last and only time he worked for anyone other than himself.

Back in Paris, he resumed his freelance relationships and soon came to the attention of editors at other publications, including the most important newspapers of the time and two prestigious women's magazines—*Femina*, the direct competitor



The villa of Marie Guau de la Chesnaie among the hills of Covignano, in the province of Rimini, c. 1909 (above). René Guau's parents, Marie Guau de la Chesnaie and Alessandro Zavagli, preparing for a ride, c. 1900 (below)

Cover for *International Textiles*, June 1949



Cover for *International Textiles*, December 1950





PH. M. MORGLER

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Guan

Ad for Le Bas Scandale, *L'Officiel*, 1952



Above and right
Ad for Crescendoe Gloves, 1952



Cover for *International Textiles*, February 1963

Cover for *International Textiles*, September 1959

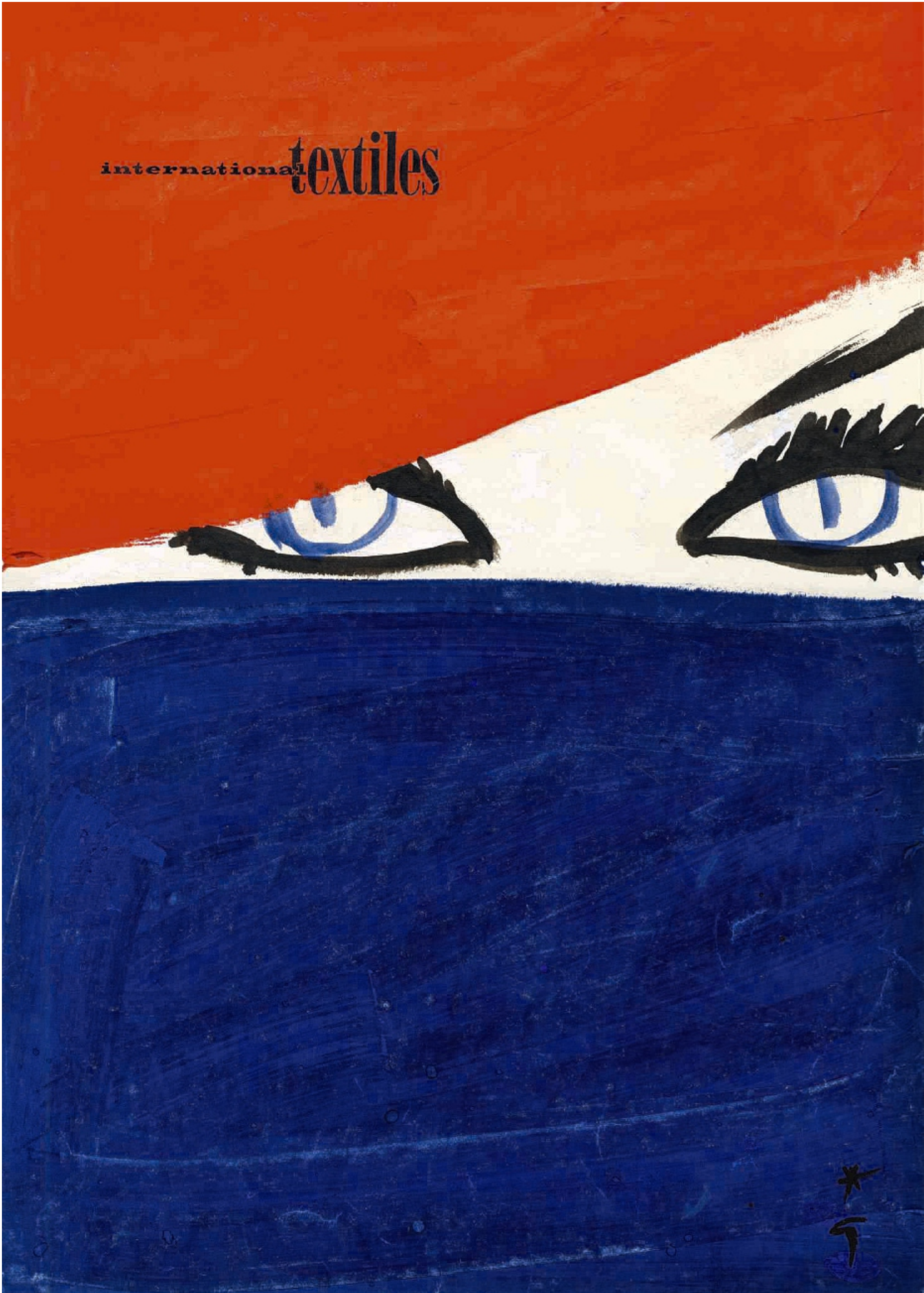




Ad for Les Trois Parfums by Christian Dior
(Diorame, Miss Dior, and Diorissimo), 1961



international **textiles**



Cover for *International Textiles*, January 1961



Cover for *International Textiles*, May 1960

Cover for *Adam*, study, 1953



LIST OF WORKS



page 187
Ad for Blizzand,
1965



page 193
Cover for
*International
Textiles*, study,
c. 1980
Pencil drawing
48 × 37 cm
Collection Kiyoshi
Yasuno, Tokyo



page 203
Theater poster,
1976
Lithograph, AP,
signed
74 × 52 cm
Collection Kiyoshi
Yasuno, Tokyo



page 188
Cover for
L'Officiel, 1964



page 195
Study for Diorella,
perfume by
Christian Dior,
1970
Pencil and ink
with pen
48 × 39 cm
Collection Kiyoshi
Yasuno, Tokyo



pages 204/205
"Sonia," personal
work, 1984
Brush drawing
in ink
34 × 41 cm
Collection Remy
and Verena Best,
Geneva



page 191
Yves Saint Laurent.
L'Officiel,
March 1968



page 196
Ad for Bemberg
lining, 1985
Brush drawing in
ink and gouache
on cardboard
65 × 50 cm
Collection Kiyoshi
Yasuno, Tokyo



page 207
Ad for Les Bas
Christian Dior,
1960
Brush drawing
in ink
65 × 50 cm
Collection Kiyoshi
Yasuno, Tokyo



page 192
Cover for
*International
Textiles*,
March 1974



page 199
"Grand Prix," Lido,
study, 1969



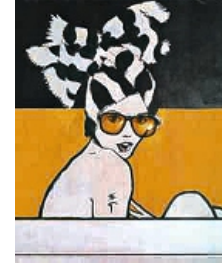
page 209
"Monte Carlo,"
1953
Oil on canvas
Private collection,
Germany



pages 210/211
Cover for *Vogue Paris*, study, 1984
India ink, watercolor, crayons
86 × 107 cm
Collection Kiyoshi Yasuno, Tokyo



page 217
Ad for Van Cleef & Arpels, 1982
Lithograph
68.5 × 55 cm
Private collection, Germany



page 224
"Le Bain," c. 1980
Acryl on canvas and collage
Private collection, France



page 212
"Jules III," one of three drawings for Christian Dior's Jules fragrance, unpublished, 1980
Brush, ink, watercolor, and collage
44 × 31 cm
Collection Jeffrey Sanfilippo, USA



page 219
Yves Saint Laurent. *Madame Figaro*, 1986
India ink and watercolor
40 × 31 cm
Collection Kiyoshi Yasuno, Tokyo



pages 226/227
Portrait, 1979
Brush drawing in ink
c. 39 × 55 cm
Private Collection, Germany



page 213
Ad for Christian Dior's Jules, 1981
Brush drawing in ink and gouache
53.5 × 40.5 cm
Private collection, Germany



pages 220/221
Private Work, 1986
Brush drawing in ink and watercolor
39 × 48.5 cm
Private collection, Germany



page 223
Yves Saint Laurent. *Madame Figaro*, 1986
Brush drawing in ink and gouache on cardboard
39 × 48.5 cm
Collection Kiyoshi Yasuno, Tokyo



page 214
Ad for Eau Sauvage, 1978
Brush drawing in ink and gouache
58 × 42 cm
Collection Christian Dior Parfums, Paris