

Grandmother's Rose

You step off an elevator, you enter a hall that is darkened except for the flicker of shimmering surfaces. They cast a spell before you can define form or image. At the center of this room, you see a chandelier, hanging so low to the floor you might have stepped on it, were it not such a volcano of glitter, gold, glass and brass curves....

There, in that room filled with textiles, beads, feathers and gems, amid threads shaped into silver-gold chrysanthemums, you see human forms wrapped in gowns that were surely created long ago for empresses or goddesses born from the foam of the sea, or from moss-covered rocks and dunes as ancient as the earth. These creations have trains requiring an army of ceremonial carriers and sleeves so long, so heavy with thread and bead, they force the wearer's arm and hand to be motionless and strong as iron.

There, filmed images larger than life, illuminate an entire wall showing models, thinner than a blade of reed, more fragile than blown glass. They float in tiny steps like those of mechanized dolls dancing to some melody of dreams. Their shoes are stacked high, dangerously high, reminding you that feet were once bound so as to prevent rash movement or personal goal. The skin tone of these models—some white, some black, some Asian—reflects not so much their identity as the coloration of the garment. The women's gestures and poses tell of generations of ceremonies, tell of the power and cruelty behind such refinement. Also, they betray a force that molded them, that demanded a human to become a flower, a wisp of cherry branch, or the mother-of-pearl lining of a seashell, its shimmer still clinging to her form. The tilt of a head, raising of a shoulder, or the turning of a hand teach about the heartbreak of a frozen gesture.

...There, in this hall, at the foot of that chandelier, you have just received a lesson on Chinese culture, power, history and art. You are also shown how Guo Pei, the designer and daughter of modern China can tell stories—stories of pride and of longing.

Amidst this ravishing assemblage of motionless human representations, stands a mannequin in a ceremonial gown. On her head she wears a structure, more architecture than hat or crown, the vision of a golden temple with ornamented roof, gold chains hanging from parapets, bells announcing every slight movement of body or air. This mannequin is elongated, white, spare of body, vacant of face—just a structure that holds up a gown and its ceremonial coat. This coat of red and gold, is open at the front, long of sleeve, high of collar, and it frames, nay, it protects a gown spilling out from under the opening.

Bodice and voluminous skirt are a field of red roses, one blossom pressed against the next, the petals curling around a pointed center, just like the roses you see unfolding in the sun of your garden, each one perfect, each one precious. The mannequin, more priestess than woman of wealth, does not appear as young and fragile as the others. She has stature, she is playing a role that requires reverence, respect, perhaps even a curtsy. You stand in wonder.

Then, a young woman, student at this school of art and fashion, gently approaches to give you more information:

Guo Pei, a young fashion designer raised in China, and now celebrated worldwide for her art, became known as the creator of costumes for the Chinese Olympics and for gowns shown in Beijing museums. She creates all of these gowns in her studio, where she employs countless artist-embroiderers who spend years attaching a million pearls, beads and threads to silk. You learn that with these creations she celebrates both the glory of an ancient culture and the new energy, power and drive of its rising from ashes. With her eye on the past, she presents both the beauty, but also the labor, almost servitude, of those who create these works of art.

And then you hear the story:

Guo Pei's family survived the decades of war, of famine, of displacement and political turmoil. Her family lost everything except the memories of life in a once grand empire. There may not have been food, but there was pride in this tradition. Grandmother, by now fragile, would tell of ceremonies and festivals, of luxurious designs. All was lost now.

But then, if the grandchildren had been very good, she would open her shawl and pull from her frayed dress one red silk rose that she kept hidden near her breast. The grandchildren would gather around, marvel at this instance of beauty, its perfection. Grandmother told how such roses decorated costumes, shawls, furniture, even walls. Many hundreds of them. Now all that was left was this one rose she had carried while wandering through destroyed lands, hoping for a place to rest over-night, a bit of food to eat, a safe spot for her starving grandchildren. And she admonished them that seeing this rose was a gift for good behavior, a rare object worthy of veneration for it told of a magnificent culture and of life now gone forever. Then she would again hide the rose inside her garment.

Guo Pei dreamed about that rose, about her grandmother. As she grew, she studied China's ancient traditions, its history, its former greatness and she believed that she must participate in the early stirrings of new life, new energy that would allow her people to rise again. She would show them the beauty that was China, she would show it to the world. So, she began to sew gowns, embroidered them, doubled the skirts until they looked like layers of precious fans, added more pearls, and asked older women whether they still remembered how to embroider a chrysanthemum on velvet using silver thread. Yes, they answered, they could do that, they could teach the young, they would work but also tell the stories of their people. Guo listened carefully.

She presented these works to powerful people in her country. Eventually, she presented them to the fashion stars of Europe and America. Rich and beautiful women came and asked to have gowns created for them. However, the finest examples, the most precious and richly decorated gowns Guo kept for display in museums. They were to be worn only for brief times, photographed in ravishingly beautiful settings that enhanced their expressive power, then to be placed behind glass or on pedestals, objects of great art.

There they are now; for the first time they are shown in America, in the city of Atlanta at the Savannah College of Art and Design. And should you go to see them, then stop at the Dress of Roses, think of Grandmother and the rose with which she tried to save a culture.