

# The Skirt Chronicles



# STONES PATLA KIJIE

*It is impossible not to notice her rings or her, for that matter. Catherine Levy, also known as Dorette, welcomed us one morning in her atelier. While we were talking, she started displaying and opening boxes of earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and rings. Later on, she brought to the table her stone boxes and drawings, accompanied by instructions for the Indian artisans who make the jewelry. On most pages, there was a coded message that read: stones patla kijie, meaning "leave stones flat."*

**HAYDÉE TOUITOU:** Can you tell us about the very first memory you have when it comes to jewelry?

**CATHERINE LEVY:** I don't remember the very first piece of jewelry I had—that's a bad sign—but I do remember my mother's Pierre Cardin jewelry. This was in the 1960's when Cardin was in fashion and was known for pearls and designing jewelry with miniature metal springs. I still have them by the way. I remember trying to make her a brooch with a little rock. What I remember best are the necklaces we used to make out of rabbit dung. We had a house in the mountains and during the summers the weather was so nice, and the dung was perfect for making necklaces. They really made beautiful pearls. That was in the early 1970's—the hippie period. I also remember very well a Navajo turquoise bracelet—a simple cuff—but I remember it

as a treasure. It was a gift from an American woman my father was working for. And there was a necklace from Dior my mother had with a lot of semi-precious stones—ametiste, cytrine—in muted colors that were not flashy, but not necessarily pastel either. I actually remember so many pieces that it would be impossible to list them all. I loved jewelry.

**SARAH DE MAVALEIX:** Is the jewelry that you wear yours or are they ancient Indian jewels?

**CL:** This one is ancient Indian and the rest are mine. This is the new cauliflower<sup>1</sup> style I am developing. The Indian vintage one I bought in Jaipur was extraordinarily well-made. I just did an exhibition on costume Indian costume jewelry. Let me show you. I might have some in my pockets. You always need to have jewelry in your pockets.

<sup>1</sup> In French, the word for cauliflower is *chou-fleur* which literally means "flower cabbage."

**SOFIA NEBIOLO:** There is a natural element in your work that is quite important.

**CL:** The idea with Dorette is that you can wear the pieces all the time—when you do your gardening, when you do the dishes. It's jewelry you cannot lose. It breaks my heart when clients lose them, but I am not going to start adding security devices to the jewelry because you can always see those. You increase your chances of losing them if you take them off and put them back on.

**SM:** You never take them off?

**CL:** I do when I go to bed, however, I never change what I wear because I have no time to change.

**SM:** When you create a new piece like the chou, do you start by doing the prototype yourself?

**CL:** Usually, I do prototypes that I wear myself. The prototype is there for the artisan to easily understand how to make it, which doesn't stop the artisan I work with from doing what he wants sometimes. Speaking of the *chou* ring, in the town of Arezzo, they have a tradition of making engagement rings called *fede canine*.<sup>2</sup> I absolutely adore these rings. For years I lurked

around trying to buy one simply because I didn't know how they did it technically. Finally last summer, I bought one at the flea market for one hundred euros, and in exchange I had to kiss the guy! It was quite unravelled with stones missing, but in a way it was perfect because I could see what was inside and how it was made. Making jewelry is all about the finishing touches—certain details do change everything.

**SM:** Do you sometimes start with a drawing?

**CL:** If it's complicated sometimes I do, but for the most part not really. I am much more at ease with the actual material. I try things out with silver, but with gold you can always melt it again. The fact that you can recast gold is something that appeals to me.

**SM:** Do you find it beautiful or sad when people choose to recast a piece of family jewelry?

**CL:** Well, I do find it to be a great opportunity, but then it can be quite appalling sometimes. Personally, I don't enjoy doing it. Even when I am brought pieces I find ugly, it always hurts me to destroy a piece just to get the stones out because I see the work that has been done. It is quite violent it's true. At the same time, it is stupid to keep



Jewelry by DORETTE, Cotton pyjama CHARVET.  
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Silk blouse CHARVET, vintage silk embroidered culottes BERNHARD WILLHELM.

things you never wear because they are so outdated. I just did an engagement ring with a sapphire and little diamonds of a quality I never use because they were retrieved from another piece. The result was so beautiful, and the woman was so happy. That was quite nice.

SS: It is interesting how you work with stones that are not considered very beautiful.

CL: It's typical me. I enjoy doing things with things that are peculiar, almost left behind by others. In a way, it was the same idea with the rabbit dung creations.

SS: I guess that's not really the norm in Jaipur?

CL: In India, the idea of working with stones is mainly pleasure, and there is also a respect for the stone itself. It is accepted with its faults—a little too much so by the way. It is touching, for example, when you have little two millimeter diamonds all beautifully rose cut, and they all have the same defect because they come from the same batch. They might all have a black dot in the center, for example. I find it marvelously crazy. Otherwise, they cut them in a way in which the stones are quite flat—most of them at least—so they give

off the most color, the most light, but this way they don't weigh too much. With stones, the value is in the weight. This sense of lightness, of poetry is something I love. When I buy stones, it can be a hustle because I have to check them one by one, since they are accepted with their defects. That's what makes every piece of jewelry unique and one-of-a-kind. Also, the idea is not to make jewelry that you can brag about. It has to be a pleasure to wear them, and they should not be heavy. I have caved though and made some brag-worthy pieces. I have never made tiaras, but I have made one or two cho-ckers.

SM: So you would accept orders of that sort?

CL: Of course! But who is going to order something like that? But of course it would be a lot of fun.

SM: What is the most fun type of piece for you to make? Would it be a necklace?

CL: Everything is fun! Every ring is fun to make because every ring is its own challenge—like figuring out how the colors go together. The best moments are when I receive a new prototype and the result is good. This makes me really happy. When

everything arrives from India and we unpack it all, it is quite complicated to label everything correctly right away. Sometimes some pieces arrive broken; that is why it's so great to have the atelier to do the repairs immediately.

**SM:** Technically, you have everything here to make a ring?

**CL:** Of course, yes. I have a great collaborator as well. It is very important for me to go against the current of delocalization. It makes sense to have them made in India, since I love Indian jewelry, and the stones, and the economy of material that makes the pieces light. It is simply a savoir-faire that suits me best. No one here, in Europe, would agree to only make one-of-a-kind jewelry. It is quite similar to haute couture in a sense. I tried once in Italy, but they were hallucinating and probably thinking I was crazy. They'd rather have their factories completely deserted—spiderwebs on every machine and erotic posters from the 1970's that have never been replaced—trying to compete with China and their supply chains rather than trying to do something different with me.

**HT:** Do you have more than one manufacturer in India?

**CL:** I currently have two. One of whom I have been working with for some time now. I started doing everything on my own twenty years ago, and I started working with this one maybe ten years ago. It's a peculiar relationship. It really was providence that put him on my path. He doesn't speak English, has a moustache, and gets fatter every time I see him—over there being fat is a sign of prosperity. It's quite funny because I speak a little Hindi, but we can't understand each other at all. He understands what I need him to, of course, yet he can't help but do things his own way sometimes. For instance, there is a way of mounting stones that is common almost everywhere in the world, in which you elevate a tiny bit of the stone to pretend that the head is bigger than it actually is, while it actually stays hollow underneath. Personally, what I love is when it's extremely flat and when it's extremely close to the skin. I also love irregularities and when there are some higher than others. But he loves putting everything at the same level, so sometimes I have to scream at him, "Stop! Stop!" Then the stones stay flat most of the time, but then they will start going up and up again quite sneakily, especially when I haven't been there for a long time.



Custom shirt CHARVET.

**SM:** Do you spend a lot of time in India?

**CL:** No. I'm realizing that I see him only four times a year, which is enough to work well together. I never have to send him pictures or anything! But I do have someone there translating because he uses the argument of there being a language barrier and pretends he doesn't understand what I mean.

**HT:** How long have you been speaking Hindi?

**CL:** I don't speak Hindi well, but I know he understands me. It's just that he has this tendency of pretending he doesn't.

**SN:** And do you always go to Jaipur?

**CL:** He is actually in Delhi. Before, I was going to Bombay and the manufacturer there was doing everything extra flat—too flat even. Now, I work with one man in Delhi and the other in Jaipur, but the one in Jaipur is overworked. He speaks perfect English though, which is a great help with having no limitations with regards to communication. But everyone wants to work with him, so he's completely overworked. He only does a little work for me.

**SM:** Do you ever buy stones outside of India?

**CL:** Never. I am allergic to others so much so that in my head the price of the stones can only be in rupees. If someone tells me it's such and such price in dollars or euros, I have no idea what they mean. It's crazy!

**HT:** How long did it take you to switch from doing only rings to other types of jewelry?

**CL:** The earrings I have been doing them for quite some time now. The *poissarde*<sup>3</sup> earrings I have been doing them for quite some time now. I love being inspired by traditional jewelry.

**SM:** I have been meaning to ask you if you enjoy following the traditional rules and techniques of jewelry making?

**CL:** I love traditional jewelry. I really do. I find it so beautiful. All of my books are at home, and it's a great comfort to imagine an evening on the couch looking at those books filled with images of ancient jewelry from India and elsewhere. I love this craft and making objects that people cherish is such a pleasure.

**SM:** Do you like diamonds?

3. On the left, a pair of earrings in French, pastiche of the "poissarde" style. Today, the term is used to describe earrings with an S-shaped contour on the ear, a style originally worn by fishermen wives.



and belt CHARVET, vintage velvet skirt SAINT LAURENT RIVE GAUCHE.  
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CL: I love them a lot, but it makes me feel quite uneasy. Ethically, the conditions surrounding extractions from the mines, like those in South Africa, are deplorable. It is amazing to work with diamonds though because you can heat them and they won't break. You can weld over and over on the diamond itself. I find it so beautiful because it is so hard that when it's cut the surface reflects like a mirror. It's incredible!

INTERVIEW BY THE SKIRT CHRONICLES  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARIE DÉHÉ  
STYLED BY SARAH DE MAVALEIX  
MODEL TINA ROZEN



SM: Do you often make jewelry for men?

CL: No, but I would really like to! Some of my friends wear them and love them. One of them actually sent me a picture this morning with his text reading, "Notice my wrist!"



scarf and robe CHARVET.