



## Couture instinct

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most stunning dresses

**Plus** The exquisite craft  
of the cobbler, the jeweller  
and the trunk maker

**W**omen and their jewels: Elizabeth I had her pearls, Elizabeth Taylor her diamonds, the Duchess of Windsor flaunted the fabulous panther and flamingo. But if ever there was a jewel that became part of its wearer's persona, then it must be the wide Maltese cross bangles that Coco Chanel wore, all the time, one on each wrist, for day or evening, always with her effortless panache and elegance.

The iconic bangles were made for her by the charismatic Sicilian, socialite-turned-designer Fulco Santostefano della Cerda, Duke of Verdura, some time around 1930. Verdura went on to become a celebrity fine jeweller in New York and one of the most influential jewellers of his age, leaving a trail of 20th-century classics in his wake. To celebrate the 70th anniversary of the designer's New York business, Verdura, the company that still today preserves his name and heritage making jewels to his original designs, is creating a limited-edition of 70 of 'Fulco's cuffs', as close to the originals as possible. Intended to be worn in pairs, each bangle has been signed and numbered.

Harry Fane, Verdura's London representative, says, 'I really can't think of another jewel that's quite so famous or recognisable as these cuffs made for Coco Chanel. They became her trademark and the recognised symbol of her style.'

From his background of cultivated nobility and faded grandeur, the young Fulco took his inheritance and travelled through Europe in the 1920s, on the way meeting Cole Porter and his wife, Linda (who remained lifelong supporters). He arrived in Paris at a time when the city pulsed with fresh intellectual and artistic talent, with an unquenchable thirst for novelty, eccentricity and continual diversion, where the greatest sin was to be boring. Verdura was introduced to Chanel, who was hiring aristocrats, including Russian émigrés, for specialist skills; Fulco was taken on first as a textile designer and then, stepping into Count Etienne de Beaumont's shoes, as Chanel's jewellery designer. Chanel and Fulco worked and travelled together, looking at royal riches and baroque treasures around Europe, fusing influences and inspirations to come



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up with an entirely new genre of jewellery.

Chanel's irreverence for style rules extended to the value hierarchy of gemstones. She decimated the Belle Epoque concept of the jewel as a show of wealth, which she considered the height of arrogance (she called the solitaire diamond a skating rink), daringly advocating a mix of real and faux jewels worn as self-expression and pure ornament. And into the white silence of pearls and diamonds and the frozen geometry of art deco, she injected voluptuousness and intense colour, deep, rich, sumptuous, baroque and Byzantine in inspiration. It was the perfect style-fit for Fulco, who had grown up surrounded by gilt and rococo splendour. He was inspired particularly by an exhibition in Paris in 1929 of memorabilia of the Knights of Malta, and took the Maltese cross as an emblem for Chanel.

The Fulco cuffs embodied this new genre of richly ornamental jewel. Way ahead of their time, they were fantasy jewels made of semi-precious materials, of silver, with creamy-white enamel encrusted with a Maltese cross sketched out and splashed with semi-precious pebble-like

gems, most likely a selection of gems from Chanel's jewel box – she was fond of dismantling and remodelling her jewels. There is, Harry Fane says, a quirky randomness to the arrangement of gemstones. 'There is no logic to the pattern of stones, they are not regimented, which gives the bangles an informality, a special artisan quality and great charm.'

Ward Landrigan, the CEO of Verdura in New York, acquired the original bangles some five years ago from a New York socialite ('a woman of great character, style and glamour') introduced to him by Kenneth Jay Lane, a Verdura acolyte. 'I had been trying to find the bangles, even just to see them, since I bought the company in 1985,' Landrigan says. 'When the lady, in her eighties, yet so chic and coquettish, came

into the office and opened her bag, I nearly fainted.' As certain as he could be that these were the Chanel originals, he promised her he would not reproduce them until after her death.

Landrigan was determined that the limited-edition bangles should be identical to the originals, and carefully analysed their materials and manufacture. He chose yellow gold instead of silver, which allowed the use of a new extraordinarily hard chip-resistant enamel, in a warm winter-white colour. The crosses are composed of gemstones, in most cases exactly the same specimens as the originals, including emeralds, sapphires, rubies, amethysts, aquamarines, Madeira topaz, citrines and prasiolite, each specially cut. The result is a blend of minimal modernity and ethnic echoes, with the opulent, gem-studded Maltese cross oozing nobility and heraldry. Fulco's cuffs pay homage to the designer-jeweller and the legendary woman who shaped his taste for fantasy and freedom, but even more they show the intimate nature of the jewel, its signature of style and femininity, and the potent scent of its memories.

*Price on application (020-7493 5040)*

## Noble heritage

The fantasy cuffs made for Coco Chanel by the Duke of Verdura, which changed the history of modern jewellery, are being re-created in a limited-edition set. By **Vivienne Becker**

**Above** Coco Chanel holds one of the cuffs, watched by Fulco Santostefano della Cerda, Duke of Verdura. **Opposite** Coco Chanel shot by Cecil Beaton, in 1937. **Right** the re-creation cuffs, made from 18ct yellow gold and enamel. The Maltese cross is set with five emeralds, seven sapphires, 14 rubies, two amethysts, six aquamarines, one Madeira topaz, five citrines and one prasiolite



