



The Art of Fashion **Fashion**

Back to the drawing board

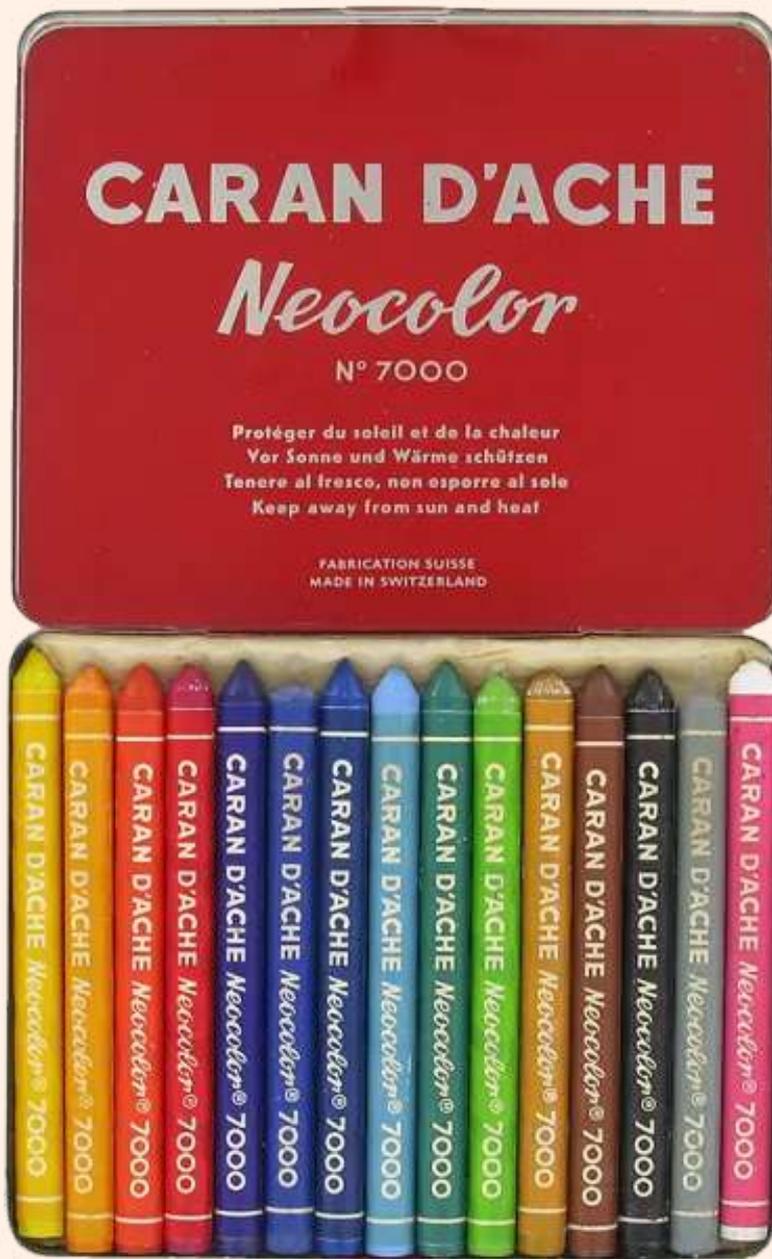
What do Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and Karl Lagerfeld have in common? They were all fans of the same Swiss brand of crayons

Grace Cook FEBRUARY 20 2020

“It’s like Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory in here. And you’ve got a golden ticket,” says Carole Hubscher, the president of Swiss stationery company Caran d’Ache. She is surrounded by trays and vast paper baskets full of what looks like technicolour sherbet. Large sweetie scoops sit inside the vats of cherry red, flamingo pink and deep ochre dust, adjacent to a bright blue hue so intense it might look more at home on the fictional planet Pandora from James Cameron’s *Avatar*.

This kaleidoscopic universe is actually the “colour room” on the manufacturing floor of the Caran d’Ache stationery factory in Geneva. Inside the 1970s modernist building, which is flanked outside by a roundabout decorated with 10-metre high colouring crayons, Hubscher says that the family-owned factory produces “enough pencils to pave from here to Rome” every day. The exact number, however, along with the recipes and machinery used, remains a closely guarded secret lest any rival brands steal the magic formulas — much like that of Wonka’s everlasting gobstopper.

Founded in 1915, Caran d’Ache is something of a jewel in Switzerland’s creative crown — its billboards in Geneva airport sit alongside those for Breitling and Patek Philippe — and every Swiss child in a public school gets a set of pencils on their first day of term as part of an education scheme.



Vintage Caran d'Ache Neocolor wax pastels

From this tiny hub in Geneva, Caran d'Ache produces wax crayons and colouring pencils once used by the likes of Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, as well as fashion's favourite contemporary artists Luke Edward Hall, Isabella Cotier and John Booth — they have painted works for Lanvin, Gucci and Bloomingdale's respectively. The late Karl Lagerfeld created his Fendi and Chanel sketches using Caran d'Ache's Neocolor waxy crayons — his fingerless glove-clad hands dancing across his leather-bound box as he picked out just the right hue for each dress and jacket. Designers Alber Elbaz and Paul Smith are also fans; both have partnered with the brand on sets of coloured pens and vaulted boxes of brightly hued pencils — the latter's Los Angeles store, with its hot fuchsia (and highly Instagrammed) walls, looks strikingly reminiscent of the “fluro pink” crayon.

“We have around 400 colours in our collection,” says colour director Eric Vitus, a former scientist wearing a white lab coat who has cooked up the recipe for each new hue for 15 years

— internally, he’s given the playful nickname “Mister Colours”. There are some 35 steps and 50 hours involved in the actual manufacture of each pencil — new shades can take anything from a day to three months to perfect. Vitus says the flesh-coloured shades are the most difficult to create, but that like Picasso, his personal favourite hues are the ones that draw from the garden. (Picasso famously used hundreds of shades of green, many of which hailed from Caran d’Ache’s Geneva lab.) “It’s humbling work,” says Vitus. “Our pencils are not expensive. But they create works that can sell for millions of dollars!” Indeed: Picasso’s 1954 sketch *Paloma* was drawn using the company’s double-ended Bi-color pencil — cherry red on one end, and bright blue on the other. It sells online for £2.



'Late Lunch' (2019) by Luke Edward Hall



'Garden Near Orford', Rosa Electra Harris at Partnership Editions

Other products are equally innovative. London-based artist Rosa Electra Harris, who has worked with fashion label Shrimps, regularly uses Caran d'Ache's water-soluble colouring pencils, which playfully turn pigment into watercolour paint on the page with a stroke of a wet paintbrush. "It helps a lot when experimenting," she says. "Colour brings everything to life. I love how evocative colour is, how emotive; how the subtlest of tones come out and change when put next to other colours." She says the brand is "nostalgic" as it reminds her of "first discovering my love of art at school".



Vintage Caran d'Ache advertisement



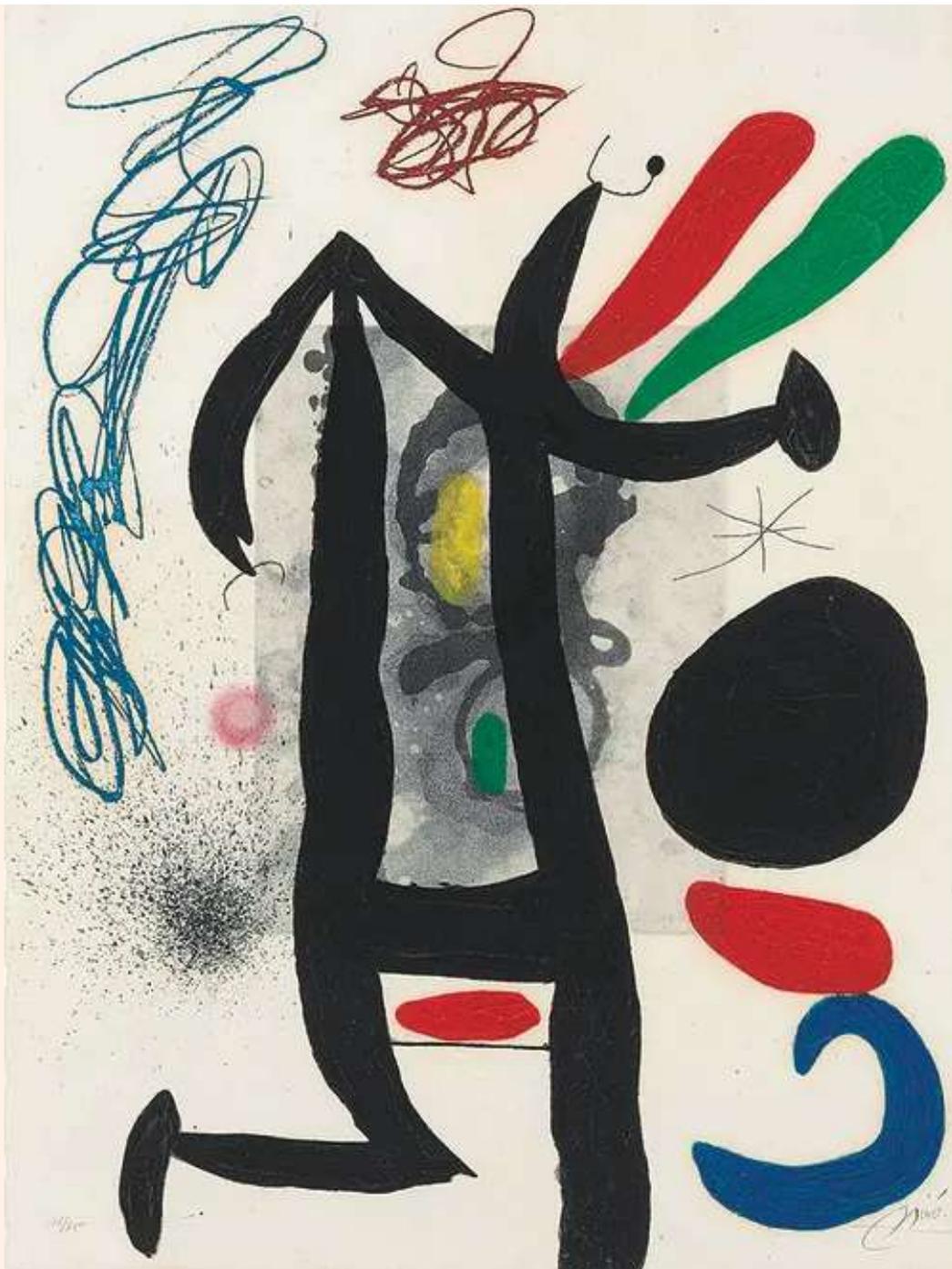
Joan Miró working in his studio in the 1950s © AKG Images

Artist Fee Greening, who has decorated dinner plates for London label Kitri, illustrated a range of ceramic dressing table pots for department store Liberty and designed T-shirts for Florence and the Machine's Hyde Park concert in 2019, has been using the crayons since childhood. "I was obsessed with getting all the crayons in the perfect rainbow gradient with the golden insignia facing up," she says — the glinting Caran d'Ache logo embossed on each pencil was her (and many budding artists') first introduction to branding, in the same way one now associates the interlocking Cs with Chanel.

When Lanvin released its stationery set — emblazoned with Elbaz's illustration of a sketched woman laden with shopping bags — the collaboration was publicised in the windows of Lanvin's Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré store for the duration of Paris Fashion Week. "Our logo represents quality," says Hubscher. "It has power. For artists worldwide, it represents our commitment to perfection."



Fendi sketch by Karl Lagerfeld



'La Presidente' (1970) by Joan Miró © Successió Miró/ADAGP

Greening says part of the brand's appeal for her as a young artist is the history wrapped up in the insignia. "It feels like you are part of a classic institution. Knowing that Picasso and Miró also used them adds some mystique to my everyday working routine."

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