Big Big Families
And how they get that way.
By Melissa Fay Greene
The White House

After turning fashion on its (white-boot) heel in the 60's, Courrèges is back in orbit.

By Lisa Eisner and Román Alonso

As fashion fables go, there is one that has been floating around about the morning that Anna Wintour, editor of American Vogue, and one of her editors, Hamish Bowles, met Madame Courrèges, the woman behind the designer André Courrèges. He’s nearly 80 and retired, and spends his days painting and sculpturing, while she runs the house that many credit with changing the fashion silhouette. Courrèges has been on the tip of every fashionista’s tongue, so it’s no surprise that Anna wanted to have “coffee.” When Anna and Hamish arrived, Madame Courrèges introduced herself, served them their “coffee” and walked out — never to be seen again. This is the rumor of how that meeting went, and it has been repeated over and over again, making Madame Courrèges a kind of folk hero. Politically correct she’s not. So, who is this mysterious Coqueline Courrèges?

Susan Train was fashion editor of American Vogue in Paris when she and Diana Vreeland attended the 1965 show that put Courrèges “on the map.” “The girls were sporty, tanned, jumping around and smiling,” she recalls. “They were terrifically different from the solemn models that were slinking around other salons. Vreeland was just mad about Courrèges. The skirts were short compared with those of other designers. They got everyone into tunics and pants, and there was lots of white, which was such a shock.” The Courrèges look was completely revolutionary — predating Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” by three years. How prophetic that the Courrèges spirit had such a big influence on the fall 2001 collections. Even Rei Kawakubo praises Madame Courrèges for her “independence and never-compromising attitude” and feels a “similar spirit.” Getting the stamp of approval from the designer of

Photographs by Lisa Eisner
Comme des Garçons is like being knighted by the queen of cool.

Things haven't changed much at Courrèges since André and Coquelique broke away from their mentor, the great couturier Balenciaga. In 1963 Balenciaga gave them his blessing, five of his clients and a down payment on the apartment they still live in. The Courrèges aesthetic was developed and completed by 1965, and they've been writing for all of us to catch up. In fact Madame Courrèges does not believe in the word "vintage." She does not like it because to them "vintage is now." The house's designs are perennial; they are made from the same fabrics; they are manufactured in the same factory. They even use the same patterns. Why change? She says she believes in perfect design. The Courrèges stores, studios, offices, home and every stitch of furniture are designed in collaboration with Jean Prouvé, their architect for more than 40 years. The Courrèges have a vision of the future and stuck to it — a future they feel is still to come.

Coquelique Courrèges is 66, looks 10 years younger and moves with the agility of a teenager. When she talks, passion pours out of every turned page. She's almost childlike in her appearance: she wears no makeup, a taffeta hairnet, a white piqué romper, white short socks and orange Mary Janes — every day. She's a Becky Fuller of fashion. She has an electric car heisted by a crook into her studio so that she could study it and redesign it. She's interested in fashion that liberates the body: she admires Le Corbusier, Coco Chanel and Cristóbal Balenciaga and is a devotee of Carl Sagan. Madame Courrèges is an original, a rebel, a mad scientist, an inventor, a sage. She's André's partner and soul mate, carrying on their dream of Courrèges.

Q: In the early 60's you created the Courrèges woman. What was that concept?
A: André and I needed to get out from under the influence of our mentor, Balenciaga. The aim was to keep his philosophy and reasoning but to adapt it to something that would be accessible to a new, younger generation.

So was it the 60's generation that inspired you?
No, we were inspired by the generation of the year 2000. What we imagined would come in the future and what we would encounter. The first confirmations of our vision was when man walked on the moon in 1969.

Note that we are in the year 2001, what do you think?
It's very disappointing. In 30 years, you would have...
When he stopped working six years ago, I tried to bring back the chemistry, but the whole is better than the parts. ... When he pulled back, I pushed forward.
to be more personal in our communication with them, so we would sign our notes with two flowers. A cornflower for André and a daisy for me. Then one day a client said, “You think that you are so innovative, but these flowers are childish.” We were offended by this comment. So, we drew and drew and came up with the A for André and the C for Colette. Everyone thought it was AC — André Courrèges. How typical of a man!

Were you the first designers to put your logo on the outside of the clothes. What was your reason behind that?

We started putting the logo on the outside of the clothes because of knockoffs. When we went to America in 1965, we discovered we were being terribly ripped off. We weren’t rich, and to see our ideas being copied made André furious. André decided that we would not be copied anymore because we were going to copy ourselves. So in 1965 we stopped production and set up our own manufacturing and distribution. That was the beginning of “Couture Futures.”

You stood at the height of your success. You stood for years and built our own factory that made our designs more readily available. It was a form of courage that is still in me. I felt the same courage five years ago when we got the company back. Courage is amazing and formidable. It goes with your values and your life. If you just want everything to be easy, then you’ll always be run by the mill — you’ll never advance.

What kind of woman were you designing for?

As first couture clients from all over the world — socialites and ladies who lunch. Women who wanted to be elegant. Then in '67 modern working women — professionals, doctors, lawyers, ... Women who wanted to be recognized and respected by men for what they do.

Most fashion designers don’t think of design the way you do. I don’t think they are driven by the desire to make women’s lives easier. It’s more about how women look.

This is why it is regrettable that the couturier is no longer around today; at least to the same extent. It is the couturier’s job to revolutionize and create need, not just work with fabric. You have to really know and understand women and all of their needs. A client is not just a woman with money to spend.

You really pushed the idea of the couturier going from dressmaker to lifestyle creator.

You must understand your customer and
We started with the dress. But then the woman looked really modern, and the man didn’t. So then we focused on the man and his wardrobe. Once man and woman were on equal levels of style, their houses seemed old-fashioned. The home needed to be modernized. Furniture! André was saying things like: “Look, they have cars but live in these Louis XIV-style homes. Why don’t they just ride in a horse and carriage?” Humans, architecture, cars, objects, we did it all. All objects need adaptation to people’s lives at that particular moment.

What about the city you designed?

During the 60’s the salon was still the big thing in France. The wife was supposed to serve the husband in the salon, and she would eat alone in the kitchen. It was absurd and revolting! We couldn’t understand why people’s lives were so backward with so many advances going on. So for us there was a perpetual revolution and proposing of new ways of life. That’s why we wanted to design the City of Lights.

Where was it going to be built?

In Pau, where our factory is. But politics got in the way.

Anything you’d like to design that you haven’t yet?

Oh, yes! First and foremost, the couture of DNA.

You mean the design of human beings?

Start with men, they need more help! André says that we need to keep nature balanced. We design to make women more beautiful, but in nature it is the opposite. The male is always more beautiful. The male peacock always has the prettier plumage. And you’re going to fix that! I’ll make it contemporary.

Why is the Courrèges aesthetic still relevant?

Because it’s stripped down to structure and purity. It’s pure, and it functions. It’s modern because it works.

Why white?

Several reasons. First, because our customers already had many black dresses. Second, black is the color of mourning, and this saddened us. Third, André would ask the customers, “How often do you clean your dress?” One woman replied, “Oh, two or three times per year.” Fourth, women in white always stood out in social events, which was very important. André and I come from the Basque country, where there is lots of light. My father wore white, I wore white, pelota players wore white and the houses were white. It was also around this time that the washing machine was invented.

This was very different from Balenciaga. He was all about black.

Yes, and we were using synthetic fabrics, while he was still using wool and silk. As a new generation, we rolled with the punches. Balenciaga taught you to listen to your customer, but never give them just what they ask for. You have to analyze their needs and then come up with the best solutions. It’s all very psychological. Couturiers are part sociologist, part craftsmen.

How did you and M. Courrèges meet?

I met André at a dance in my hometown. I was 15 and he was 27. He invited me to dance but he was so démodé, he thought he knew how to dance but he didn’t. We were opposites from the very beginning. Two years later I arrived at Balenciaga, and he was there.

How did you two work together?

André is older, so he knew how to handle me and get the best from me, by respecting and putting me in a state of mind that pushed me forward. André knew exactly where he wanted to go with his experience at Balenciaga. I was young, atypical and revolutionary. Our minds came together in a positive competition — not to win, but to find a solution. When he pulled back, I pushed forward — a constant push and pull.

Sounds like a true partnership, although he seemed to be more the face of the company.

From the beginning we had an agreement that he would be in the foreground. I am more comfortable in the background. André is a designer — always putting his ideas on paper. I work out the idea in my mind — I’m more of a problem solver. There are areas a woman is stronger. When he stopped working six years ago, I tried to bring back the chemistry, but the whole is better than the parts. We are complete soul mates, nothing ever came between us — that’s what always made us move forward — I miss that.

It must have been a dream for you to go to America in 1969 and watch the launch to the moon.

It was wonderful. The biggest, most famous astronauts were there, and they answered all the questions simply so that people could understand them. In France people can put on airs, but Americans are very simple and show themselves as they really are. They are not hypocritical.

Was there anything from that experience that influenced your designs?

The dream and philosophy of space travel.

What is your spirituality? What is God to you? The line between good and bad, black and white. It is very important to me.

A Courrèges church would be a natural.

There is a convent built by Le Corbusier. He asked Courrèges to design the nun habits. We couldn’t agree on the design of the bras! So, we quit. The mother superior was very nice, but she wasn’t in control of her troops! In Brittany there was a monastery that had us do the same for the monks, but as we say in France, “The dress doesn’t make the monk.”

For more on Going Home, see Fashions of The Times.