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VOGUE

MET GALA 2015

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The STORY of Eau

RE-CREATING ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST LEGENDARY PERFUMES.



Last February, Andrew Bolton, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, found himself obsessed with very old perfume. In particular, he was fascinated by *Nuit de Chine*, Paul Poiret's 1913 fragrance and the first scent crafted by a couturier. It was also the first fragrance to declare itself "Oriental" in nature, for its then-exotic notes of vanilla, sandalwood, and bergamot. Sold in glass vessels designed after Chinese snuff bottles, the fragrance

capitalized on La Belle Époque's love affair with the Orient—or at least with its own romanticized version of it. Women were already flocking to the designer's Avenue d'Antin shop for his signature harem pants, kimono coats, and turbans; *Nuit de Chine* offered the final Orientalist touch—and like carp in a fishpond, his clients snapped it up.

Bolton, who learned about *Nuit de Chine* as he was mapping out this spring's "China: Through the Looking Glass" exhibition, was quickly transfixed. He already had a space (part of a larger display intended to evoke lavish nineteenth-century opium dens) devoted to Poiret, featuring two of his couture pieces, but—not unlike the designer himself—Bolton wanted to complete the story with scent. He tracked down original flacons of *Nuit de Chine* and also hoped to offer Met visitors the sensory experience of the historic perfume itself. There was just one problem: Poiret went bankrupt in 1929 and shut down

perfume production that same year. By 2014, drops of *Nuit de Chine* were as rare as ambergris in the Atlantic.

Bolton enlisted his friend Paul Austin, a longtime veteran of the fragrance industry. Against the odds, he found a surviving sample at France's Osmothèque, the Versailles-based olfactive archive and research institute. Even more amazing, they had Poiret's original formula and agreed to whip up a batch. This enabled Bolton to give exhibitiongoers the full "Poiret effect," putting the century-old scent under their noses, quite literally: It is available at the museum on scented strips accompanying the exhibition catalog.

—JENNIFER CODY EPSTEIN



NATALIA VODIANOVA, IN A DIOR HAUTE COUTURE COCKTAIL DRESS, CHANNELS THE SPIRIT OF POIRET'S TIME.

SIGNATURE SCENT
A VINTAGE BOTTLE AND BOX OF POIRET'S NUIT DE CHINE.

