



HARALD GOTTSCHALK

2

sketches preserved in the Opera's archives. "Luckily, I have a good memory," Fouache declares, referring to the fact that the often unwieldy documents, assembled in over 200 heavy bound volumes, are at one end of the enormous Palais Garnier and the jewelry room is at the other. But she is just as likely to make the connection in the most unlikely of places. She cites the incident when she was browsing through somebody's record collection a few years ago and spotted one of her unidentified pieces on the cover photo. The portrait of a woman singer, circa 1880, was all Fouache needed to make the proper connection with a Palais Garnier production of Verdi's *Aida*.

Restoration can be as simple as polishing a tarnished fitting or as elaborate as restringing the hundreds of tiny hollow pearls that trim a tiara when the original binding thread has rotted away. "It looks easy enough," Fouache admits, "but it's extremely difficult and complicated." Every effort is made to retain the original fabric on pieces with cloth backing. Sorting and cleaning loose stones to prepare them for soldering is another painstaking task. "I'm exhausted, sweating, and filthy when I'm done," confesses Fouache.

Once a piece is completely cleaned

and/or restored, it is photographed, and Fouache writes up a detailed description of it noting the title and performance dates of the show; the form and materials, specifying colours; where it has been or will be displayed; an estimated value (starting at 60,000 francs [UK £5,882; US \$10,000] per piece) for insurance purposes; and whether or not the piece has been restored.

Each description also includes a number corresponding to the sturdy cardboard cartons where the pieces, wrapped in high quality tissue paper, are stored once they've been rescued and identified. Fouache's descriptive listings are then keyed into a computerized data base. "There are malcontents who say I'll no doubt expire before I've managed to catalogue the entire collection," jokes Fouache.

It's been less than two years since the jewelry collection, formerly under the jurisdiction of the Creation Department, was made a part of the collection of the Museum of the Paris Opera. Under this new, far more protected, status the pieces will never again be worn or cannibalized for spare parts. And there are, accordingly, no plans to move the collection to the new Opéra de la Bastille. Two books, one devoted to the Opera's jewelry collection and another highlighting its costumes, are

currently in the works.

Although Fouache is a long way from cataloguing every object in her elegant and sparkly domain, she has been assembling theme exhibitions drawing on the collection for the past five years. "Jewelry is a revelatory tool for examining the era in which it was made and worn," she explains. "For example, the first thing they did during the French Revolution was to appropriate all the valuable jewelry, the gold, and the silver. It was all the rage for women to wear emblems of the Revolution, such as earrings in the shape of miniature guillotines, fashioned from worthless materials."

Two fairly recent developments should help this gem of a collection a great deal. Van Cleef & Arpels Perfums have become the official sponsor of the restoration, and the students of the Ecole de la Bijouterie de France, who are in training to become jewelers, have begun carrying out hands-on internships helping Fouache to restore individual pieces. "The students are totally enthusiastic about the chance to handle these wonderful old pieces, and they do an excellent job," says Fouache.

Now that the proven expediency of glue has taken the place of carefully wrought mounting, and plastic has been substituted for pearls, Fouache points out that the stage jewelry used today has no inherent or symbolic value. And while Fouache claims there is an undeniable magic on stage that results from wearing such authentic fakes, she also admits to the impracticality of re-employing the old jewelry -- "It's much too heavy. It would be impossible for the performers to carry out today's dynamic staging. In the heyday of the Opera, staging didn't matter. The singers just stood there and sang. We presented *Boris Godounov* not too long ago, and it would have been out of the question to re-use the crown we have here. The poor man wouldn't have been able to move — it weighs a ton."

The magic to which Fouache alludes is evident when the jewelry is not worn. "People respond to these pieces when they're put on display," she says having witnessed the wonderment on countless faces. "It's not a question of education or culture — it's a question of sensitivity. They're part of the French patrimony and we'll never see their equal again."