



After a long renovation,

Paris' Hôtel de Crillon—for

centuries a regal presence on the Place de la Concorde—is bridging the gap between the past and the future



WORDS NICK CZAP PHOTOGRAPHY LAURA STEVENS

During a recent stay at the Hôtel de Crillon—the Parisian landmark that reopened last summer after a four-year renovation and redesign—I had the persistent feeling that I wasn’t in a hotel at all, at least in the traditional sense of the word. Whether luxuriating in my top-floor aerie, which seemed like nothing so much as the perfect pied-à-terre, or gazing up through a skylight at the gray clouds from the waters of a subterranean swimming pool, or savoring a particularly delectable sole meunière at a chic art deco brasserie, my overall impression was one of easy intimacy, of being effortlessly at home in the French capital.

The only reminders that I was someone’s guest were the attentions of the staff: the butler who communicated via exquisite handwritten notes slipped under the door; the bartender at Les Ambassadeurs, who deftly improved upon a cocktail whose formula I regarded as fundamentally unimprovable; the concierge who secured a beautifully decorated little box so I could transport a few of the hotel’s pastries to the home of a friend in the 15th Arrondissement. And then there was the hostess in the glamorous Jardin d’Hiver lounge who, in spite of her best efforts, could do little to keep my tea from growing cold. The tea was growing cold, you see, because I had forgotten about it completely, transfixed instead by the story of the hotel’s recent reinvention, and by the history of the woman telling it: the project’s artistic director, architect and interior designer Aline Asmar d’Amman.

Situated at the northern end of the Place de la Concorde, the Hôtel de Crillon—now managed by Rosewood—occupies the corner pavilion of one of a pair of monumental facades erected in 1758 by Louis XV’s chief architect, Ange-Jacques Gabriel, who also worked extensively at Versailles, designing both the Opéra Royal and the Petit Trianon. In 1773, Louis XV transferred the facades and the surrounding land to the city, which sold them at auction in 1775. The architect Louis-François Trouard bought the corner pavilion and drafted the

plans for a mansion, which was purchased in 1788 by François Félix Dorothée des Balbes de Berton, Duc de Crillon, whose descendants lived in the property until 1904.

In 1907, the architect Walter-André Destailleur began demolishing and rebuilding the mansion’s interior, save for three historic salons, and in 1909, the structure began life anew as a palace hotel. A century later, in 2010, the Crillon’s then owner, Starwood Capital Group, sold it to a Saudi prince, who chose Asmar d’Amman to serve as the artistic director on a much needed renovation. Although Asmar d’Amman was not an international household name, she was highly regarded by the prince, who some years earlier had commissioned her to design a residence in Beirut, the city of her birth, where her childhood experience during the Lebanese Civil War forged her creative identity.

“I was born the year that the war started, 1975,” says Asmar d’Amman. “My parents’ house was very close to the French Embassy and the president’s palace. It was a very critical area, because neither of them could be touched. But anything outside the perimeter could be demolished. It was quite intense for years, really demolition after demolition. But amid all the destruction, still seeing the sun rise and having to go on with our lives and believing that the war would end, you also find beauty in ruins.” Although it must have been difficult to find the beauty in the ruins of her father’s construction-materials factory when it was obliterated, in watching her father—and Lebanon in general—rebuild, she developed an intense appreciation of the skills that architects bring to the process of reconstruction and renewal.

At the same time, Asmar d’Amman was growing up steeped in French culture due to the fact that after World War I, Lebanon became a French mandate per decree of the League of Nations, whose covenant was signed in the Hôtel de Crillon’s Salon des Aigles in 1919. “When you grow up in a francophone culture in Lebanon,” she says, “you >



Clockwise: Ceiling detail of the Hôtel de Crillon's Salon des Aigles; pool area with 17,600 gold scales; Brasserie d'Aumont. Previous spread: Aline Asmar d'Amman in the Salon Marie-Antoinette



Clockwise from far left:
18th-century pendants
above the hotel's grand
staircase; two images
inside the Suite Duc de
Crillon, including original
woodwork (matching
pieces are displayed at
New York's Metropolitan
Museum)

have a lot of 18th-century lifestyle and decoration. Every home has a French salon, so there's already this kind of vocabulary that is part of the DNA." Asmar d'Amman also fell in love with French literature, in particular Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*—whose iron-willed protagonist struck a chord—and 18th-century poetry, which, long before she visited France, illuminated the aesthetic sensibility of the period. "Reading poetry draws a landscape in



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your mind," she says, "and certainly this poetic dimension of the 18th century shaped my knowledge of the architectural dimension."

As part of her master's degree in architecture at Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, Asmar d'Amman created a thesis project that won her a trip to Paris, where she secured an apprenticeship at the firm of Jean-Michel Wilmotte, an architect known for the tailored designs of his interiors. While working for Wilmotte, Asmar d'Amman developed an appreciation of the micro-architectural nature of interior spaces, which would eventually lead her to pivot to the field of interior design. After working on a series of private residences in Europe, the U.S. and the Middle East, she established the Paris- and Beirut-based firm Culture in Architecture in 2011.

On receiving the Crillon commission, >



Asmar d'Amman composed a brief as ambitious as it was concise. While embracing the hotel's heritage and legacy, the new design would create a bridge between the past and the future—between 18th- and 21st-century living—enveloping guests in an experience of contemporary French *art de vivre*.

While her own firm would design the hotel's historical salons and some of its most iconic suites, Asmar d'Amman needed collaborators in order to maintain the same attention to detail in the designs of the property's other suites, guest rooms and public areas. Intuitively, she reached out to Tristan Auer, Chahan Minassian and Cyril Vergniol, three acclaimed names from the world of residential design. The Crillon, after all, had begun its life as a private house, and there seemed no more natural way to embrace its past than to work with experts in the art of creating intimate personal spaces.

Asmar d'Amman sought a fourth associate, as well, someone whose involvement

Les Ambassadeurs serves a selection of more than 100 champagnes

would tie the Crillon to the spirit of Parisian fashion. She had one person in mind, the eminent designer and 18th-century connoisseur Karl Lagerfeld. Knowing Lagerfeld's predilection for more archaic forms of communication, she invited him to the project via a handwritten letter that she delivered in person. To her delight, he accepted, both because of the elegance of her letter and because he had long held a special affection for the Crillon. As a young boy, Lagerfeld had dreamed of staying at the hotel, and many years later, had acquired the original model of the facades that Gabriel had presented to Louis XV.

As a kind of spiritual muse, Asmar d'Amman enlisted Marie Antoinette, imagining that the monarch had been "cryogenized" some time prior to the fall of 1793 and brought back to life in the 21st century. The young queen had taken a very active role in designing her environment at Versailles, from the coloration and floral prints used in the palace interiors to the gardens of the Petit Trianon. She had also, >



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for a time, taken music lessons in one of the Crillon's historic salons, which now bears her name, so it seemed only fitting that she should be allowed, however indirectly, to participate.

When the members of the team had completed their designs, artisans were enlisted to produce the furniture and decorative elements.

Above from left:
Alcove in the Salon
Marie-Antoinette;
Asmar d'Amman on
the hotel's terrace
overlooking the Place
de la Concorde



Asmar d'Amman insisted that every piece be made in Europe, primarily by French firms whose *Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant* (EPV) label celebrates the highest standards of traditional craftsmanship. Perhaps the most striking example is a set of dining chairs in one of the suites designed by Lagerfeld, upholstered in velvet with a *gaufre* pattern recreated by Manufacture Royale Bonvallet, which nearly 250 years earlier had used the identical tools to produce the same pattern for the wedding of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

The difficulty of acquiring such materials added significantly to the duration of the project, but to Asmar d'Amman there was no other way. "There's a certain ethic in interior design and architecture, to be authentic and true to the story and to fight every fight until the end. I don't know how to pick my fights, and maybe, like Antigone, I think that there's no compromise." She pauses for a moment, reflecting. "But you can't create everlasting, beautiful projects by making compromises." **CL**