



La Seduction: How the French Play the Game of Life

By Elaine Sciolino

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The hidden truth about the French way of life: it's all about seduction—its rules, its pleasures, its secrets

France is a seductive country, seductive in its elegance, its beauty, its sensual pleasures, and its joie de vivre. But Elaine Sciolino, the longtime Paris bureau chief of *The New York Times*, has discovered that seduction is much more than a game to the French: it is the key to understanding France.

Seduction plays a crucial role in how the French relate to one another—not just in romantic relationships but also in how they conduct business, enjoy food and drink, define style, engage in intellectual debate, elect politicians, and project power around the world. While sexual repartee and conquest remain at the heart of seduction, for the French seduction has become a philosophy of life, even an ideology, that can confuse outsiders.

In *La Seduction*, Sciolino gives us an inside view of how seduction works in all areas, analyzing its limits as well as its power. She demystifies the French way of life in an entertaining and personal narrative that carries us from the neighborhood shops of Paris to the halls of government, from the gardens of Versailles to the agricultural heartland.

La Seduction will charm you and encourage you to lower your defenses about the French. Pull up a chair and let Elaine Sciolino seduce you.

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Editorial Review

Review

The New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice

"Crackles with the sharp, rueful wit of an outsider who has achieved some insight into Gallic dos and don'ts largely by running afoul of them herself. . . . Carefully researched and lucidly argued, *La Seduction* develops a wonderfully suggestive theory of French pleasure."--Caroline Weber, *The New York Times Book Review*

"An entertaining journalistic journey through France."--Stephen Clarke, *The New York Times*

"[Sciolino] begins by describing what went through her head the first time a president of France kissed her hand. She also writes about Dominique Strauss-Kahn, whose behavior prompted one French comic to suggest that women better wear burqas in his presence. This is much better to read about than why French women don't get fat."—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

"Deliciously detailed, smart, and sassy, *La Seduction* is one of this summer's not-at-all-guilty pleasures."—*The Boston Globe*

"Sciolino turns stereotypes into insights in this exhaustive and, yes, sexy examination of France's culture through the lens of seduction. . . . Her enlightening book offers a fundamentally admiring analysis of what she calls 'an essential strategy for France's survival as a country of influence.'"—*People*

"Strategy is everything for the French. That's what Elaine Sciolino discovers in her book *La Seduction: How the French Play the Game of Life*, a look at why the food is so delicious; the perfumes so beguiling; the languid conversation of Paris cafes so intoxicating; the French so, well, French." —*Los Angeles Times*

"Sciolino captures the anachronistic heart of contemporary France – and learns the hard way why one must always dress well, even when going to buy a baguette."—*Vogue*

"In this entertaining analysis, the former Paris bureau chief of *The New York Times* spills the secrets of the enviable French way of life."—*InStyle*

"The Pulitzer Prize for premonition must go to Elaine Sciolino, longtime New York Times correspondent in Paris, whose *La Seduction* mentions Strauss-Kahn throughout and offers a reason for the current unpleasantness: Americans do not understand the French art of seduction."—*Financial Times*

"Extraordinarily thorough [and] captivating. . . . The subject is irresistible: you're being pulled into a rarefied world where the lights are always dimmed, the people always beautiful and the carrots always sublime. If it's not a complete France, it's a wonderful side of it that's certainly worth visiting."--*The Spectator*

"Playful ... Ms Sciolino kits herself out in towering heels and a black, silk wrap dress, and tries to get to grips with France's culture of seduction. [*La Seduction*'s] great merit is that it gets the topic right, sketching the background to a culture in which sensuality defines so much of public life."—*The Economist*

"Yes, the book will make you want to fly to France to sip champagne — maybe even find some stranger to seduce — among the wondrous gardens of Versailles; to stroll past the Eiffel Tower and its carefully layered paint job so that its color appears uniform in any light; or attend a power dinner party where risotto with scallops is the first course and the conversation is at once head-swimmingly sophisticated and seemingly effortless."—*Associated Press*

"Elaine Sciolino proves to be a perfect guide through French culture. . . . The book proves to be as seductive as its subject matter and most readers will probably race through it, wishing they were leaving for Paris tomorrow."—*Connecticut Post*

"If the European nation hasn't yet cast its spell on you, 'La Seduction' will have you planning a rendezvous from the very first chapter."—*Metro*

"In her last book, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*, Sciolino showed a knack for understanding perplexing places. As an Iranian who lived in France for 18 years, I know both countries reasonably well, and to my mind, she nails them both."—*Bloomberg.com*

"I savored many of Ms. Sciolino's comments. . . . Someone dropped into a foreign culture often sees things clearly that natives often don't grasp."—Mireille Guiliano, *The Daily Beast*

"Sciolino's charming tales of the French art of seduction will entertain and delight readers, and instruct us in how best to embrace life's joys and celebrate every moment of our lives and loves."—*Bookpage*

"An American journalist in Paris offers a serious, skeptical study of France's quintessential 'soft power.'"
—*Kirkus*

"Witty and keen-eyed"—*Publishers Weekly*

"*La Seduction* had me humming 'I love Paris in the springtime.' Elaine Sciolino proves that Paris is the most fascinating, elusive, and glamorous place on earth – and that the French are the most seductive, maddening, and stylish people in the universe. Who could not be seduced?"--Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana*, *Duchess of Devonshire* and *A World on Fire*

"What a delight! Elaine Sciolino's multiple talents and considerable experience – as a sharp-eyed reporter and a marvelous writer – are on full display in this delectable account. Just when I thought I'd heard everything about France, Elaine reveals my favorite subject to me all over again. And makes me fall in love all over again, with the charms and the foibles and the elegant and earthy joie de vivre."--Patricia Wells, author of *The Paris Cookbook* and *The Food Lover's Guide to Paris*

"This is a book by an American woman who sees the French as a charming, seductive, and fascinating people, and Paris as the world's most exciting city. How sweet it is to see ourselves through her eyes!"--Nathalie Rykiel, president and artistic director of the fashion house Sonia Rykiel

"A book to be savored by every hedonist. A must-read introduction to French contemporary culture."--Alain Ducasse, chef and restaurateur

"It took an American woman and a journalist to write a truly exciting book about France and the French. Elaine Sciolino brilliantly captures the French character, looking at us with humor, curiosity, and at times admiration. Her book shows the power, charm, and seduction of 'the French touch.' Enjoy!"--Bernard Kouchner, former foreign minister of France

About the Author

Elaine Sciolino is the author of the award-winning book *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*. She is a Paris correspondent and former Paris bureau chief for *The New York Times*, having previously served as the newspaper's chief diplomatic correspondent and UN bureau chief. In 2010, she was decorated a chevalier of the Legion of Honor. She has also been a foreign correspondent for *Newsweek*, based in Paris and Rome. She lives in Paris with her husband. Visit Elaine Sciolino's website at www.ElaineSciolino.com

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LA SEDUCTION (Chapter 1) Liberté, Égalité, Séduction

It is not enough to conquer, one must also know how to seduce.

—Voltaire, *Méropé*

Le plaisir... is something so much more definite and more evocative than what we mean when we speak of pleasure.... To the French it is part of the general fearless and joyful contact with life.

—Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*

The first time my hand was kissed à la française was in the Napoléon III salon of the Élysée Palace. The one doing the kissing was the president of France.

In the fall of 2002, Jacques Chirac was seven years into his twelve-year presidency. The Bush administration was moving toward war with Iraq, and the relationship between France and the United States was worse than it had been in decades. I had just become the Paris bureau chief for the *New York Times*. Chirac was receiving me and the *Times*'s foreign editor, Roger Cohen, to make what he hoped would be a headline-grabbing announcement of a French-led strategy to avoid war. When we arrived that Sunday morning, Chirac shook hands with Roger and welcomed me with a *baisemain*, a kiss of the hand.

The ritual—considered old-fashioned nowadays by just about everyone under the age of sixty—was traditionally a ceremonial, sacred gesture; its history can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome. In the Middle Ages, a vassal paid homage to his lord by kissing his hand. By the nineteenth century, hand kissing had been reinvented to convey a man's gallantry and politesse toward a woman. Those men who still practice it today are supposed to know and follow the rules: never kiss a gloved hand or the hand of a young girl; kiss the hand only of a married woman, and do so only indoors.

Chirac reached for my right hand and cradled it as if it were a piece of porcelain from his private art collection. He raised it to the level of his chest, bent over to meet it halfway, and inhaled, as if to savor its scent. Lips made contact with skin.

The kiss was not an act of passion. This was not at all like the smoldering scene in Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* in which the narrator "blindly, hotly, madly" seizes and kisses the hand offered to him by a lady in pink. Still, the kiss was unsettling. Part of me found it charming and flattering. But in an era when women work so hard to be taken seriously, I also was vaguely uncomfortable that Chirac was adding a personal dimension to a professional encounter and assuming I would like it. This would not have happened in the United States. It was, like so much else in France, a subtle but certain exercise in seduction.

As a politician, Chirac naturally incorporated all of his seductive skills, including his well-practiced *baisemain*, into his diplomatic style. He kissed the hand of Laura Bush when she came to Paris to mark the return of the United States to UNESCO; she turned her face away as if to prevent giving him the satisfaction of her smile. He kissed the hand of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—twice in one visit. He kissed the hand of Angela Merkel the day after she became Germany's chancellor, fondling it in both hands; she repaid him by announcing the importance of a "friendly, intensive" relationship with France.

It turned out that Chirac was too ardent a hand kisser. Catherine Colonna, who was Chirac's spokeswoman, told me later that he did not adhere to proper form. "He was a great hand kisser, but I was not satisfied that his *baisemains* were strictly executed according to the rules of French *savoir faire*," she said. "The kiss is supposed to hover in the air, never land on the skin." If Chirac knew this, he was not letting it get in the way of a tactic that was working for him.

The power kiss of the president was one of my first lessons in understanding the importance of seduction in France. Over time, I became aware of its force and pervasiveness. I saw it in the disconcertingly intimate eye contact of a diplomat discussing dense policy initiatives; the exaggerated, courtly politeness of my elderly neighbor during our serendipitous morning encounters; the flirtatiousness of a female friend that oozed like honey at dinner parties; the banter of a journalist colleague that never ended and never failed to amuse. Eventually I learned to expect it, without quite knowing why.

Séduction and *séduire* (to seduce) are among the most overused words in the French language. In English, "seduce" has a negative and exclusively sexual feel; in French, the meaning is broader. The French use "seduce" where the British and Americans might use "charm" or "attract" or "engage" or "entertain." Seduction in France does not always involve body contact. A *grand séducteur* is not necessarily a man who easily seduces others into making love. The term might refer to someone who never fails to persuade others to his point of view. He might be gifted at caressing with words, at drawing people close with a look, at forging alliances with flawless logic. The target of seduction—male or female—may experience the process as a shower of charm or a magnetic pull or even a form of entertainment that ends as soon as the dinner party is over. "Seduction" in France encompasses a grand mosaic of meanings. What is constant is the intent: to attract or influence, to win over, even if just in fun.

Seduction can surface anytime—a tactic of the ice cream seller, the ambulance driver, the lavender grower. Foreigners may find themselves swept away without realizing how it happened. Not so the French. For them, the daily campaign to win and woo is a familiar game, instinctively played and understood. The seducer and the seduced may find the process enjoyable or unsatisfying. It may be a waste of time and end without the desired result. But played well, the game can be stimulating. And when victory comes, the joy is sweet.

That's because seduction is bound tightly with what the French call *plaisir*—the art of creating and relishing pleasure of all kinds. The French are proud masters of it, for their own gratification and as a useful tool to

seduce others. They have created and perfected pleasurable ways to pass the time: perfumes to sniff, gardens to wander in, wines to drink, objects of beauty to observe, conversations to carry on. They give themselves permission to fulfill a need for pleasure and leisure that America's hardworking, supercapitalist, abstinent culture often does not allow. Sexuality always lies at the bottom of the toolbox, in everyday life, in business, even in politics. For the French, this is part of the frisson of life.

Even though France is the fifth-largest economy in the world, for many decades the French have bemoaned and documented the decline of their country from its lofty position as a once-mighty power. The trend line was fixed forever when the Germans invaded the country in 1940 and the French succumbed. Ever since then, the French have struggled with an inferiority complex even as they proclaim their grandeur. "Declinism" has become a national sport.

These days, the sense of decline extends far beyond the spheres of military or imperial power. The French way of life itself is under fire. Globalized capitalism means everything is faster, more efficient, less thorough, and less personal. The French landscape has fewer family-owned farms and more industrial warehouses. Designer bags once hand-crafted in small ateliers are made en masse in China. Perfumes once blended by artisans in Grasse are produced according to market research specifications in laboratories in New York. Billboards on the highways leaving Paris advertise instant rice. A chain of supermarkets stocks nothing but frozen food. A restaurant on the Île de la Cité in Paris serves what it calls traditional onion soup made from freeze-dried packets. The art of intricate French-style back-and-forth diplomacy built on refined language and form is threatened by e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and the twenty-four-hour news cycle. The French are being pulled into a world that devalues their expertise and celebrates things they do badly.

There is much that is unlovable about France: the sclerosis in its educational system; the blindness and unwillingness to acknowledge and embrace ethnic, religious, and racial diversity; the emphasis on process and form rather than completion; the inelegant and often brutal behavior that sometimes surfaces in prominent political figures.

And yet the French still imbue everything they do with a deep affection for sensuality, subtlety, mystery, and play. Even as their traditional influence in the world shrinks, they soldier on. In every arena of life they are determined to stave off the onslaught of decline and despair. They are devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and the need to be artful, exquisite, witty, and sensuous, all skills in the centuries-old game called seduction. But it is more than a game; it is an essential strategy for France's survival as a country of influence.

The insight that led to this book came in the spring of 2008. It was a particularly uneasy moment in France. Nicolas Sarkozy had been president for just a year, and a recent poll had determined that the French people now considered him the worst president in the history of the Fifth Republic. His failure to deliver quickly on a campaign promise to revitalize the economy was perceived as a betrayal so profound that a phenomenon called "Sarkophobia" had developed. There was little in Sarkozy's clumsy personal style to help him counter it.

Around this time I read a new book written by a thirty-four-year-old speechwriter at the Foreign Ministry named Pierre-Louis Colin. In it, he laid out what he called his "high mission": to combat a "righteous" Anglo-Saxon-dominated world. The book was not about France's new projection of power in the world under Sarkozy but dealt with a subject just as important for France. It was a guide to finding the prettiest women in Paris.

“The greatest marvels of Paris are not in the Louvre,” Colin wrote. “They are in the streets and the gardens, in the cafés and in the boutiques. The greatest marvels of Paris are the hundreds of thousands of women—whose smiles, whose cleavages, whose legs—bring incessant happiness to those who take promenades. You just have to know where to observe them.”

The book classified the neighborhoods of Paris according to their women. Just as every region of France had a gastronomic identity, Colin said, every neighborhood of Paris had its “feminine specialty.”

Ménilmontant in the northeast corner was loaded with “perfectly shameless cleavages—radiant breasts often uncluttered by a bra.” The area around the Madeleine was the place to find “sublime legs.”

Colin put women between the ages of forty and sixty into the “saucy maturity” category, explaining that they “bear witness” to “an agitated or ambitious sex life that refuses to lay down its weapons.”

The book was patently sexist. It offered tips on how to observe au pairs and young mothers without their noticing and advised going out in rainstorms to catch women in wet, clingy clothing. It could never have been published in the United States. But in France it barely raised an eyebrow, and Colin had obviously had fun writing it. The mild reaction to a foreign policy official’s politically incorrect book tells you something about the country’s priorities. The unabashed pursuit of sensual pleasure is integral to French life. Sexual interest and sexual vigor are positive values, especially for men, and flaunting them in a lighthearted way is perfectly acceptable. It’s all part of enjoying the seductive game.

The sangfroid about Colin’s book made for a striking juxtaposition with the hostility toward France’s president. To be sure, the flabby economy was one reason Sarkozy was doing so badly at the time; another was that he hadn’t yet mastered the art of political or personal seduction.

But he was trying. Sarkozy’s second wife, Cécilia, had walked out on him a couple of years earlier, returned before the election, and dumped him for good after he took office. As president of France, he couldn’t bear to be seen as lacking in sex appeal. Nor could he afford to. In the United States, mixing sex and politics is dangerous; in France, this is inevitable.

In the weeks after Cécilia’s final departure, Sarkozy had presented himself as lonely and long-suffering, but that had seemed very un-French. Then he had met the superrich Italian supermodel-turned-pop-singer Carla Bruni and married her three months later. On the anniversary of his first year in office, Sarkozy and Bruni posed for the cover of Paris Match as if they had been together forever. Sarkozy looked—as he wanted and needed to—both sexy and loved.

My understanding of the rules and rituals of the game of French seduction did not come suddenly but evolved over the years. It began with my very first day in France when I was a college student. I arrived in Paris late on a summer night in 1969, armed with a backpack and two years of high school French. America had landed on the moon that day, and the newspaper seller at the train station celebrated the event—and my arrival—by kissing me on both cheeks.

Later, I lived and worked for many years in France, first as a foreign correspondent for Newsweek, later as bureau chief for the New York Times. I covered stories in cities, in small towns, on farms, in poor immigrant housing projects and well-appointed drawing rooms. In time I came to see the extravagant attention given to seduction in France as a manifestation of something deeply embedded in French culture. Seduction is an unofficial ideology, a guiding principle codified in everyday assumptions and patterns of behavior so well established and habitual that they are automatic. It comes so naturally that often it isn’t acknowledged or even understood by the French. But when seduction’s role in their lives is called to their attention, they are often fascinated by the idea and eager to explore it.

Armed with the realization that seduction is a driving force in French life, I felt as if I had put on a special pair of 3-D glasses that made confusing shapes snap into sharp focus. It suddenly became clear that the French impulse to seduce applies to many features of French life. The tools of the seducer—anticipation, promise, allure—are powerful engines in French history and politics, culture and style, food and foreign policy, literature and manners. Like much else in France, the power and influence of seduction are profoundly centralized. Paris, the capital of France and home to French corporations, media, fashion designers, and intellectuals, is also the place where seduction and its hold on French life are most palpable. Wherever I go in the country, all roads seem to lead back to Paris, and in much the same way, the cultural imperative of seduction that is nurtured in Paris remains a potent force even in the grim suburbs and the distant countryside.

A key component of seduction—and French life—is process. The rude waiter, the dismissive sales clerk, the low-ranking bureaucrat who demands still another obscure document is playing a perverted version of a seduction game that glorifies lingering.

When I decided to explore the meaning of seduction à la française more systematically, as the French themselves might do, I began with words. I set up a Google alert for the words séduire, séduction, and séduit in the French media. I sometimes got as many as a dozen hits a day.

Then I did an analytical study of these alerts over a three-month period. My researcher and I found 636 occurrences of the words falling into nine categories. Some were predictable, like love/sex, fashion/style, and tourism; others were more unexpected, including the seductive powers of presidents, commerce, gastronomy, the arts, “anti-seduction” (people and items lacking in seductive techniques), and the military-sounding opération séduction. (In English, opération séduction becomes something tamer: “charm offensive.”)

The two largest categories, with more than ninety articles apiece, were opération séduction and commerce (the selling of “seductive” items). These were closely followed by the arts (seduction of the general public), with eighty entries. The love/sex category had a meager thirty-four, tourism twenty-five, fashion fifteen. “Anti-seduction” tied with gastronomy at eleven. The presidents category was quite small, with Barack Obama accounting for ten and Nicolas Sarkozy with just two.

Seduction appeared to be omnipresent in the French consciousness. During a trip to Israel in May 2009, the pope was said to have “seduced the Palestinians” with his call for the creation of a Palestinian state. Museums wanted to “seduce” new visitors. Sarkozy’s political strategy was to “seduce the young.” The milk producers of northern France were not simply on strike; they were on a “seduction mission” to negotiate with milk processors and to explain to consumers why they were blocking trucks and collection points. The interior of the Citroën DS automobile was filled with the “spirit of seduction.” The Iranian presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi “knew how to seduce in using all of the modern techniques” of politics. By far the most “seductive” selling items were computers and phones; when the sales of Dell laptops declined, it was because the company had “a hard time seducing.”

The word is also deployed ironically, sometimes with dead-serious effect. The left-leaning newspaper Libération once ran a two-page article illustrated with a photo of a French soldier in full battle gear and pointing a large automatic weapon under the headline “Afghanistan: The French in Seduction Mode.” I thought nothing would top that headline until another one popped up in the same newspaper about the mass execution of eight thousand Bosnians by Serbs in Srebrenica during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. It read, “Srebrenica: Serbia Offers Its Apologies to Seduce the EU.”

As for opération séduction, it surfaced in the broadest range of topics—from golf to high schools, from

agriculture to doctors, from the environment to business. One newspaper headline read, “Opération séduction pour draguer les sédiments” from polluted harbors. Literally, it means, “Opération séduction to extract sediments.” The article opened with the sentence, “Not sexy, sediments?” It explained that the region was trying to sell its dredging and land treatment plan to the central government. But *draguer* also means “to flirt with,” so the headline could be read as: “Opération séduction to flirt with sediments.”

The word *séduction* no longer surprised. It overwhelmed.

I reached out to French writers and thinkers and quickly found that my new subject had special hazards—like the time I interviewed Pascal Bruckner, the philosopher and essayist who has written extensively about the disorderly state of relations between men and women. We were in the café of a grand Paris hotel, and the closeness of the encounter coupled with the word *séduction* created unexpected intimacy. I put on reading glasses and a serious look, clenched my knees together, rested my hands in my lap, and asked him about his daughter. I wanted to avoid the appearance of flirting. (I shouldn’t have worried. I ran into him months later at a private film screening, and he didn’t even recognize me.)

When I told French women about my investigations of seduction in their culture, they got it right away. And they joined in with complicity and lightness. When I described my project to French men, by contrast, there were two reactions. Some got a deer-in-the-headlights look, as if to say, “Get me away from this pathetic, crazed American woman of a certain age.” Others jumped in with a bit too much enthusiasm.

One morning I uttered the words “seduction” and “France” to a museum curator as we were walking down a curving staircase. He stopped short, grabbed the banister, and leaned over me so excitedly that I had to step back. “Seduction—maybe it’s chance!” he exclaimed. “You can find the man of your life, the woman of your life, in a restaurant, in a café. It starts by an innocent, stupid sentence. ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ ‘Can you pass me the carafe of water?’ And then, a look!”

Early in my research, I was dealt a cruel blow. I was informed that while I could try to play the game, I was destined to lose. The bearer of this grim message was a former president of France, not Chirac this time but one of his predecessors, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

Our meeting at his home on a quiet street in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris was for the most part pleasant. He tried to establish common ground between us. He told me the story of his visit to my hometown of Buffalo, New York, when he was twenty-three. He had met “a nice, very sweet girl” on the Queen Mary crossing the Atlantic. She went to Vassar College and lived in Buffalo. She had become his girlfriend and at one point, he had visited her home. They had toured Niagara Falls. Giscard confessed his love for America. He said little about its inhabitants but professed an attraction to its vast open spaces. He even fantasized about buying a ranch someday in the Southwest.

That gave me the opening I was looking for. I knew I couldn’t be so brazen as to ask a former president to explain France through the prism of seduction. So I took a more indirect route. Suppose he was having dinner on such a ranch with a group of Americans, and one of them posed the question, “Mr. President, could you explain to us how we can understand your country?”

Giscard is now in his eighties, and age has made him ever more certain that he possesses the truth. He resisted the temptation to play the game with me. “My answer is clear—you cannot,” he said. “I have never met an American, never, who has really understood what drives French society.”

France, he said, operates as “an extremely strange system, impenetrable from the outside, rather agreeable to live in, but totally different from anywhere else.”

“The French do not practice hospitality at all,” he went on. “No. They can be generous. They can say, ‘There are Americans here. We have to do something. Let’s invite them over.’ But after one time, it’s over. You’ve done your duty. The idea that an American is going to penetrate the system? No. Ours is an old, extraordinarily fragmented society, with thousands of small strata in which everyone is inferior to someone and superior to someone else. There can be reciprocal acceptance but not the desire to come together. The French want to stay in their cultural and educational milieu and certainly do not want to change.”

I was *déstabilisée*—shaken.

When I later told Charles Bremner, the veteran Paris correspondent for the Times of London, about the conversation, he urged me not to be discouraged. “Maybe the French aren’t as perceptive about themselves as outsiders are,” he said. “Seduction is so much a part of them that maybe they don’t think about it. Like goldfish not knowing what water is like.”

And so, I dared to venture on.

For centuries, the most perceptive experts on seduction in France have been its female courtesans. More important than their youth, beauty, and sexual performance have been their experience and maturity. Therefore, I sought advice from the two women I consider to be France’s icons of the modern world of courtesans (without the sex part): Arielle Dombasle and Inès de la Fressange.

The women have a lot in common. They have Latin roots: La Fressange’s mother is Argentinian; Dombasle lived in Mexico as a child. That has given them the air of outsiders who had to master the rules. Both are past fifty and have been performing for more than three decades. They move with the swiftness and fluidity of cats—Dombasle as an actress, singer, and dancer, La Fressange as the former supermodel for Chanel. Both are impossibly tall and thin, with bodies that long to be stared at. Both are smart businesswomen who understand the need to continue to market their allure and their beauty. They are professionals: aware of their power and how to use it. And they are national treasures: each has been awarded the Legion of Honor.

The main difference between them is the way each has chosen to promote her look. Dombasle seems to have been worked on and is always done up. Her allure comes from her resemblance to a gorgeous alien. La Fressange, a mother of two, often wears jeans and loafers, and she smokes. She has retained the innocent air of a much younger woman.

Over tea one afternoon, Dombasle compared seduction to a battlefield of communication. “Seduction is largely transmitted through words—what you say and when you keep quiet,” she said. “That’s the key. Voilà.”

I had no idea what she meant. I asked her to explain. “You must choose your words carefully as you would in a war,” she said, “The way you seduce depends on whether you want to win or you want to lose.”

It could be a campaign to weaken your opponent by injecting an element of surprise, for example. “You could play against type to throw your adversary off balance,” she said. “Seduction is not a frivolous thing. No. It’s war.”

I was encouraged. “I know war,” I said. “I was a war correspondent. I don’t understand seduction, but I understand war.”

Dombasle and I had found common ground. She explained that this war is nonviolent. The woman warrior

must avoid the sort of traumatic exposure that comes with vulnerability in front of the adversary. Dombasle has not hesitated to bare her breasts for a Paris Match cover or for a revue in front of hundreds of people at the Crazy Horse cabaret. But she insisted that nakedness is a vulnerability that must be used with care. Apparently, on the battlefield of the bed, the rules are different. “Nudity is extremely violent to gaze at,” she said. “I would never walk naked in front of my husband. Never, never, never.”

“So you’re only nude in the shower?” I asked.

“I’m nude when I’m alone, and I’m nude when I’m in his arms, but never in a sort of casually stupid gesture of the morning or whatever. Never.”

“So nudity is not something trivial?”

“Of course not. But we know that.”

How do you know something like that? I wondered.

I told her how different it was in the United States, where many women feel liberated and sexy walking around the bedroom in the nude. I thought that perhaps her insistence on the value of concealment was an affectation of an aging sex symbol struggling to cling to her youth. A young French journalist from my office was with us, so I turned to her and asked, “If you were in a love relationship, and you were getting out of bed to go into the bathroom, you would not be totally nude?”

“No,” she replied. “It’s not only prudishness. It’s just, you know...”

I too should never be nude in front of my husband, Dombasle advised. “You shouldn’t,” she said. “Otherwise, he won’t buy you lunch.”

She had now warmed to the subject. “The relationship to nudity, the relationship to love, the relationship to men, the relationship to women—all this carries great complexity and great danger,” she said. “I have felt my whole life that it is extremely positive to engage in combat and rule over one’s own life.”

Her advice about my work was similar: I should be a modern-day courtesan who makes full use of the weapons of my profession. “You are a serious journalist, truly a journalist who represents strength after the liberation of women,” she said. “You have succeeded with weighty work about politics and diplomacy, with solid things. So now it will be very interesting for you to reveal that there is another woman inside of you, who was born once you came into contact with France.”

But I have never been one of those women who dreams of taking a dizzying carousel ride of passion and learning colloquial French with the help of mysterious Gallic men. I love to read those fictional and real-life romantic confections about leaving a job and a bad relationship behind in the United States and discovering good sex and even better coffee with an experienced, long-waisted, velvet-voiced, poetry-spouting French man. That doesn’t mean I can do it.

Dombasle was simply too sexy for me. So I turned to Inès de la Fressange. I had first met her when she was a fresh-faced yet flirtatious runway model and I was covering the Paris fashion shows for Newsweek. Even then La Fressange was not just any ordinary fashion model. She was the daughter of a French marquis and off-the-charts wealthy.

Thirty years later, in a 2009 Internet poll, she was voted “La Parisienne,” the quintessential Parisian woman. It’s hard not to be attracted to a woman with the long limbs of a runner, the raspy voice of a cabaret singer,

the impish look of a coquette, the sense of humor of a stand-up comic, the smile of Audrey Hepburn.

La Fressange told me my subject was so vast and so serious that I needed firsthand experience. “You have to be conscientious,” she said. “You can’t talk about seduction, fashion, politics, beauty without a French lover. Yes, yes! For the final touch!”

“But I’m in love with my husband and I have kids,” I protested.

“Even better—an American woman in Paris who doesn’t want to get married and have kids and is sure to leave France!” she replied.

I told her I had no need to find a French lover; back in the 1970s, I had briefly had a French boyfriend, whose family owned a château with horses and servants.

That was beside the point, she said. “It’s all about attitude,” she said. “If you decide to be like a nun in Paris, who does American-style journalism with all the information, all the statistics, well, that will be interesting. But there will be no romance.”

To get off to the right start, she said, I needed to invest in a new haircut, new clothes, and a visit to a Turkish bath to “feel some pleasure.” Then she said, “You go to the terrace of a café. You say to yourself, ‘Voilà, something is going to happen.’ And you’ll see. Something will happen.”

I thought about the scene in the film *Clair de femme* when Yves Montand literally bumps into Romy Schneider as he gets out of a taxi, and then they sit together at a café. A bit later, he’s in her bed.

“You have to stroll the streets of Paris at night with your lover, go to Montmartre, walk along the Seine, eat soup in a bistro,” she said. “Then you go to Deauville and walk along the sea and eat shrimps until four a.m. And when your husband calls you, you say, ‘But, no! You’re just imagining you hear the sound of waves in the background.’”

She insisted that all would be fine as long as the affair remained secret. “Tell him absolutely nothing. There’s no reason to make him miserable. You have your foundation as a couple, a history, a marriage. You’ve built something you can be proud of, and this tiny romance in Paris is not going to disrupt it. Write about it in a way that the reader can feel things but not know them.”

Eventually, we compromised: I could take a virtual lover, a French man who would be my soul mate but only playact with me. “It doesn’t have to be torrid and frenetic,” she said.

Then came the coup de grâce. Because of my age, she said, I had no time to waste. “It’s your last chance!” she told me. “Pretty soon, you’ll be thinking only about your cats, your dogs, your knitting, and your garden. Your arthritis will make it hard to take long walks at night.”

The next morning, at breakfast with my husband, Andy, I started making a list of possible candidates: my downstairs neighbor, a white-haired, retired business executive who wears perfectly knotted cashmere scarves and elegant tweed sport coats, even when he rides his bicycle to the supermarket; a writer and radio talk show host who is very smart and safely gay; a famous stage and film actor who I feared might take the role too seriously; a colleague who said he would be happy to help, but alas, he is British; a former diplomat with a passion for nineteenth-century paintings whom I ruled out as dangerous because his wife lives in a foreign country. I asked Andy for his advice. He took a break from his Special K and put on his glasses. “I somehow don’t think you’re supposed to be telling me about this,” he said.

Now that I was concentrating on seduction, I began to see it in places where I had never noticed it before. Making coffee one morning, I looked at the Carte Noire coffee bag and saw that it described itself as “A Coffee Named Desire.”

Andy found nothing surprising in it. “Chock Full o’Nuts called itself ‘the heavenly coffee,’” he said drily.

“Heaven means celestial and pure and virginal,” I replied. “Desire is carnal.”

Seduction was like a neon light that never stopped blinking. On a road from Paris to Compiègne, there was an oblong, one-story prefabricated building with a small sign that read, “Auto Séduction.” I assumed the enterprise was some sort of kinky private club for personal sexual satisfaction. No, it was a garage for car repairs. Its website explained that it had “only one objective: your satisfaction.” I called Sylvain Chidiac, the garage owner, who said he had intended nothing suggestive in choosing the name of his company. He had initially wanted to call it Auto Prestige, but that name was already taken. “Auto Seduction,” he explained, “just imposed itself naturally in my mind.”

Even the French style of conducting elections in two rounds rather than one could be seen as an exercise in seduction. French voters are said to vote their hearts in the first round and their beliefs in the runoff. The final competitors must attract a fraction of the opponents’ voters without losing their own. “Seducing to reduce,” is how the magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* defined the phenomenon.

I found seduction in France’s idea of itself, and the connection is an old one. The characters in Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables*, the seventeenth-century morality tales taught in French schools, often demonstrate the supremacy of cunning over force. The French believe that their country (about the size of Texas) is able to project power around the world not because of brute force or military might or a robust economy but because of its imagined mythical power, its ability to lure others to want to be like France.

France is also a nuclear power with a colonial past and troops deployed in far-off places like Afghanistan and the Ivory Coast. Its philosophy as a colonizer was not manifest destiny but a mission civilisatrice—France’s civilizing mission. Unlike British colonialists, who also talked of “civilizing” far-flung lands but habitually regarded their subjects as “the other,” the French claimed their mission was assimilation. They taught their subjects that by adopting the French language, culture, and value system, they eventually could become perfect—that is, French themselves (as if those factors could truly determine nationality).

In foreign policy, France is a global case study in “soft power,” the ability to influence others through “attraction” rather than “coercion.” The term was coined by an American, Joseph Nye of Harvard University, but the concept is very French. In an interview with Nye that was translated into French, the concept of “attraction” under his soft power formula was rendered as *séduction*.

Jacques Chirac’s *baisemain* became emblematic of what I needed to understand about the French. No French person to whom I told the story thought I should be offended; everyone expressed amusement. The writer Mona Ozouf described it as “a slightly theatrical gesture with a touch of irony.” Sophie-Caroline de Margerie, a jurist on the *Conseil d’État*, the highest administrative court in France, and an author herself, explained that the Polish aristocracy did it much more sensually. She took my hand but only half-showed me. Perhaps the kiss itself would have been too intimate for her.

But not for Maurice Lévy, the chairman of the French advertising giant Publicis. He gave me the definitive lesson in hand kissing.

Lévy is tall and strongly built and gives off an air of calm and nonchalance. He greeted me in his headquarters on the Champs-Élysées, in a reception area bathed in white. I prodded him into speaking a few sentences in English. I had been told that he carefully preserves his strong French accent and then apologizes for it, part of what his aides call his “French touch.” He doesn’t do hard sell. When he wants to make a point, he slowly closes his eyes, parts his lips, and leans back in his chair. But his greeting—a big, hard handshake and a command to get down to business—underscores what others had told me about him. Deep down he is a killer businessman, a cunning predator who built Publicis into the world’s fourth-largest advertising and public relations empire.

He had been well briefed on my book project and my interest in the themes of seduction and sensuality in French life. The intermediary who had arranged the interview must have told him about my fascination with hand kissing, because Lévy suddenly shifted the subject from the globalization of the advertising market to focus on my right hand. “You have evoked the *baisemain*,” he said, even though it was he, not I, who had raised the subject. He told me that a man’s lips should never *effleurer* the hand. *Effleurer* is hard to translate. It means “to skim” or “to brush lightly.” The sound and spelling of the word is similar to the French word for “flower,” *fleur*. That led me to think, the first time Lévy said it, that it might have something to do with the petals of a flower, a sort of delicate act involving a touch of something fragile.

“You must not *effleurer* the hand! You must not!” he said. “When you *effleurez* the hand, you are sending a special message.”

He stood up and ordered me to stand as well.

“The real *baisemain*, it’s like this,” he said, as he bent down from the waist, took my hand, and came within a hair of touching his lips to my skin. There was a barely perceptible squeezing of my hand before he returned it to me. “I must not touch, but you should feel that I am close enough.”

“If I do it this way,” he said, drawing back, “I am too far. I must do it close enough. You must almost feel my breath.”

I was getting nervous that one of his army of assistants would walk in and find us in midkiss.

Then his second kiss came. He pressed his lips gently to my hand. He defined that kiss as *affectif*—with emotion. “There, this is someone I like quite well, with whom I have a good relationship, and she knows it,” he said. “There we go.”

“And the last,” he said, “it’s to *effleurer*. I do it like this.”

So we were going to *effleurer* after all.

His lips opened slightly and moved up and down, teasing my hand. The kiss could not have lasted more than two seconds. I felt the warmth of his breath and a slight tickling, as if I were being touched by a butterfly’s wings. I marveled at the mastery of the simultaneous double movement of opening and closing and up and down. The memory of the gesture lingered like the scent of an exotic perfume.

“In this one, I try to say that you please me,” he explained. “And if I brush my lips lightly, it means—”

I interrupted: “I might have intentions that are more complex and mysterious—”

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” he replied. “It means, ‘Will you sleep with me tonight?’”

“Ah. More direct!” I said.

“No, wait. It’s not more direct,” he said. “It simply means—it’s the final goal.”

I was at a loss for words. How do you respond to the chairman of one of the largest corporations in the world who has just shown you how a French man, without saying a word, can ask a woman to sleep with him?

So I changed the subject to Jacques Chirac. “Okay, but I have a fourth baisemain,” I said. I told Lévy I had been at an event hosted by Chirac that week and saw how he had greeted a dear friend, the former minister Simone Veil. Chirac had stretched out his arms and extended his hands three times as if he were rushing out from the wings onto center stage in a Broadway musical. Then he had grabbed Veil’s hand and smacked it. Loudly.

“And maybe that’s the baisemain Chiraquien?” I asked.

“No,” Lévy replied. “When I see Simone, who is a friend, this is the way I do it. Come—ah—So, here.”

And Lévy planted a big loud kiss on my hand. “Really affectif,” he said.

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Users Review

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