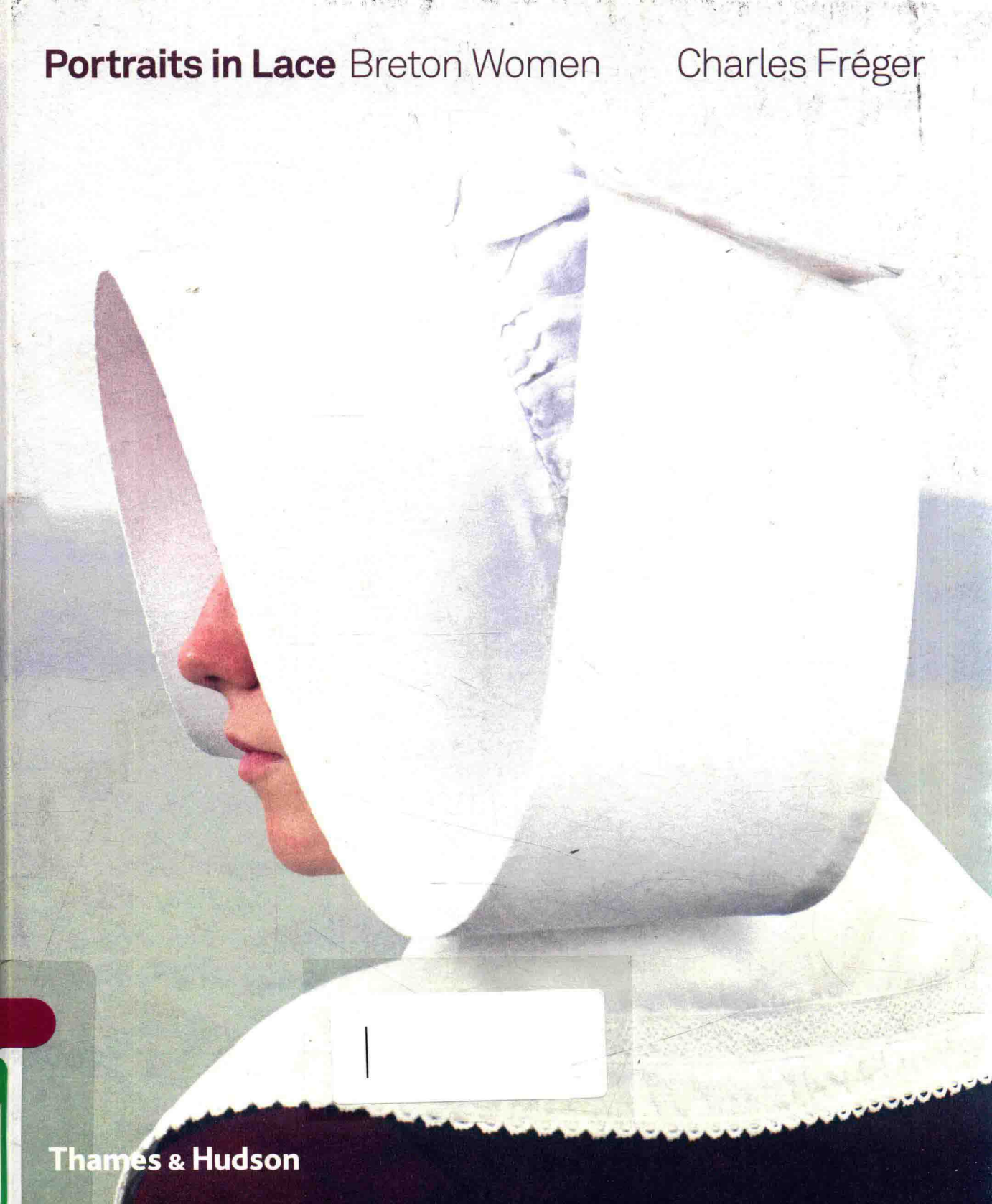
Portraits in Lace Breton Women

Charles Fréger



Thames & Hudson

Charles Fréger

Portraits in Lace

Breton Women

Foreword by Marie Darrieussecq

Text by Yann Guesdon

Thames & Hudson

Charles Fréger is founder of the Piece of Cake project.
He lives in Rouen.

Marie Darrieussecq is a novelist and winner of the Prix Médicis.

Yann Guesdon is a specialist in Breton costume.

This book was conceived during a stay in Brittany undertaken with the support of the Centre d'Art GwinZegal.

The project has been supported by the European Union's LEADER/ Pays de Guingamp programme.

GwinZegal receives support from the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles de Bretagne, La Région Bretagne, Le Conseil Général des Côtes d'Armor and the town of Guingamp.

The Fondation d'Entreprise Hermès is a partner to the Centre d'Art GwinZegal in its development activities.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by
Thames & Hudson Ltd,
181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

Map on page 252 adapted from an original by Sylvie Le Parc for 'Femmes de Bretagne', first published in 2005
Translated from the French by Jill Phythian
Designed by Léo Favier
Charles Fréger is a member of Piece of Cake,
European Network for the Contemporary Image
www.pocproject.com

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-51799-4

Printed and bound in China by Toppan Leefung Printing Limited

To find out about all our publications, please visit **www.thamesandhudson.com**. There you can subscribe to our e-newsletter, browse or download our current catalogue, and buy any titles that are in print.

Portraits in Lace

Charles Fréger

Portraits in Lace

Breton Women

Foreword by Marie Darrieussecq

Text by Yann Guesdon

Thames & Hudson

Aux femmes de tête

We Others

Marie Darrieussecq

We stood tall upon the ground. Some said it was against the wind. Some said it was against the sea. We were all vividly aware of standing vertical. But we did not always turn our gaze towards the open sea, especially the youngest among us. We called each other on the phone. From one group to another, we had things to talk about. We avoided doing it in costume. We didn't do it in the presence of the older women. And we were rarely alone. Solitude was only permitted at particular times. Sometimes weeks passed by with no solitude at all.

We wore the costumes for several hours each day. At times we wore them from the moment we woke up. The only men around were our dressers. Three grown men and two boys. The two boys had arrived with the girl from Tréguier and the girl from Pont-Aven. The three men were from Guingamp. They prepared the coiffes, each in its own box, each marked with one of our names. We took off our nightdresses to put on the *haut-de-corps*, the *dingue*, the *crépule*, the *jupon* and the *contre-jupon*. For the *chemise*, we needed help to tie the laces at the back. We also needed help to fasten the sixty buttons of the overdress, which were called *galets*. Since the very beginning, our costumes had been designed this way; the fact that we could not get dressed alone was a pledge of our lives together.

When not wearing a costume, we didn't go naked of course (the very idea made us laugh). We wore other clothes, clothes from the modern world. Usually cheap, they included jeans, shorts, leggings, tops, T-shirts, sweaters, velcro sneakers, flip-flops, hairbands and bandanas. They were made in Bangladesh, in China, in Pakistan, in Morocco, in Tunisia, in Mexico. We put on zipper jackets if it rained, puffa jackets when it was cold. The colours didn't matter. Some girls liked glitter and sequins. There were no rules about the colours and styles of these modern clothes, and nothing was forbidden. The only limit was the length of time we were allowed to wear them.

We slept in white nightdresses embroidered with our initials in red. The linen fabric was heavy and starched, as were our sheets. It was pleasant to sleep in well-ironed bedlinen. We took off our coiffes without undoing our chignons and braids, and we wore the lightweight caps that some called the *calot*, and others the *sous-coiffe*, or the *coiffette*, or the *maturon*, *antoine*, *limure* or *pailleron*.

We spoke our own languages, from roots to derivatives, and other names were given, with other sounds. Our language learning was determined by our forenames, according to complex rules. We conversed in groups of three or four, then regrouped for the commonest languages. With great organization, we were able both to preserve words and to acquire new ones. A young ethnographer, a specialist in isolated languages, came from England to study the idiolect of one of our groups. We agreed to this and three of us willingly gave him information. He came back to finish his thesis and we refined the data. This first group passed the baton to younger comrades, who kept the game going for another few years. We fashioned an irregular language, one that declined, contracted and agglutinated until it bore no relation to anything else, and this joke remained one of our favourites: the invention of a language for itself alone, just for ourselves. That man disappeared too and never came back.

It was said that the men, with the exception of our five dressers, had all gone to sea. The sense of being left behind was codified in the tradition of the Waiting. This consisted of our group climbing up onto the sea wall, all standing with our backs to the land, all gazing out to sea. Once a month, at high tide, we carried this out and then we climbed back down again. The Waiting was longer at equinoxes and solstices. The average height of our group, calculated exactly, was one metre and sixty-four centimetres. Added to the height of the sea wall (nine metres twenty) and projected out towards the horizon, compensating for the speed of light and the curvature of the earth, we calculated that our gaze travelled around five nautical miles out to sea. Some girls argued: the distance should be calculated not from the tops of our heads but from our eye level, by subtracting the height of our foreheads. We came to an agreement that we could see four and a half miles out to sea. If the men returned, we would see them a good hour in advance. The Old Ones said that we would never see further than the tips of our own noses, but that was a joke. Another joke was those who said that if we could walk on water, we would be able to skate out to the horizon, as calm as Dutchwomen.

Then we had to bring the Waiting to a close and turn away from the sea, because a whole day of the sea would lead to madness. '*Like all dreamy races, who wear themselves out in pursuit of the ideal, the Bretons of this region, when not driven by a powerful will, sink only too readily into a condition halfway between intoxication and folly, which is often caused by an unsatisfied heart.*' One of the Old Ones would read to us from the writings of Ernest Renan, born in Tréguier like herself, in 1823. In hot weather (which sometimes managed to reach our shores) we would see mirages. They would form like droplets beneath the sun. Each droplet would detach itself from the sea and rise into the sky. They took different shapes, denser and more

stable than clouds. We saw castles and columns, cities and hanging gardens. We saw ships sailing towards us that never reached the shore. We saw forests, crosses, armies. We saw the bodies of men. We knew, thanks to the Old Ones, that these were visions.

As a precaution, we lived in rooms looking onto the courtyard or the garden. For costumed celebrations, we gathered together in village halls, churches, bathhouses, kitchen gardens, stone circles and beneath megaliths. The Grandmother, who was from Saint-Brieuc, told us to sing at certain times: silent songs, songs of the heart. We would stand up high and the sky easily took the place of the sea. The metallic grey of the sky surrounded us with its solidity, and made our costumes more beautiful. Our costumes were clearly visible against the grey screen of the known sky. We sang our silent songs together. Our costumes suited the songs even though no one could hear them. It was one of those things that are both inexplicable and sure. If all our finery was in place, if each fold was pleated in the right way on each coiffe named with the right name, the world was in order and we had a purpose.

We liked to classify things. Names and classifications ensured our future, but only if they evolved could the classifications remain alive. The *camail*, the *capuce*, the *sparl*, the *tentament*, the *téon*, the *épaisseur* or *doublé*, the *kuklos*, the *frole*, the *strad*, the *genosse*, the *ribl*, the *cornettes*, the *supellinen*, the *visachen* that was at least a *palevarz* wide, the simple halo of the *huit-de-chiffre*, its elaborate folds much simplified. We named and we counted. Our armoury held flails, maces, scythes, halberds, various hastae, pikes, partisans, ox-tongue spears, guisarmes, bardiches, spontoons and several ranseurs. It also contained Manurhin revolvers and Benelli shotguns and, for each of us, a double-barrelled hunting rifle. Once a year, the Waiting became an armed vigil. We were ready. Our training passed through us in our breathing too. We were porous and pliant. Nothing in the world could surprise us. We repeated: 'Yes.' And we sang powerful songs.

The Grandmother taught us prayers. Prayer should be a celebration, an expropriation of the self. Prayer is listening. Prayer is answering. This is how the Grandmother spoke. Some of the girls would swoon.

We have visitors. They come to learn our crafts. They come to photograph our coiffes. Books are devoted to us, and websites. Men visit us too. We agree to speak to them.

On the nearest shore, there is a flat slab of stone. It makes a sound at high tide. Women who are desperate for a child lie down on the slab. They say that, despite its weight, the slab sways. Its motions make us fertile. Then we put our hands to our bellies and we smile. We know the dates of our births and we celebrate our birthdays.

And we imagine a future of rocket ships and emigration. We long for an untouched land. We will dress with the greatest of care and create new coiffes for this day. We will board the ship. We will sit on benches like in our canteen, and we will wait until we are freed from gravity, we will wait for weightlessness. Beyond the earth's atmosphere, we will see the sea from high up and far away, and the ships will come sailing towards us.

The *sous-coiffe* of Cancale
Simple costume for young women,
Paramé, 1900–10