

The Crowd: Assouline, an oasis of art and culture

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Co-chairs Nikkisa Abdollahi and Mariam Khosravani pose... (Ryan Miller, Capture...)

In a time when vulgar expressions of excess eclipse what once represented a standard of artistic achievement, there exists a most special refuge from the insanity of an electronic world.

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It is, oddly enough, a bookstore. And its name is Assouline, located at South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa.

Perhaps you remember what a bookstore does? Not a mega-store like Barnes & Noble, but a boutique that specializes in a genre of publishing, a store in which one may develop a close personal relationship with treasured volumes, a place to visit regularly and spend hours immersing oneself in a book.

Assouline, a boutique devoted to chronicling the evolution of contemporary human culture via subjects — including art and architecture, fashion, food, travel and viticulture — earlier this week welcomed **Angella Nazarian**. She is the author of "Pioneers of the Possible: Celebrating Visionary Women of the World," a volume about 20 women, each of whom has changed our world in her own way. Nazarian came to sign copies of her book.

The namesake of this unique store, Moroccan-born **Prosper Assouline**, and his wife and partner, **Martine**, have expanded their passion for publishing from Paris to New York, Las Vegas, Southern California and, most recently, Istanbul. He was front and center at the salon evening.

As the son of a hair stylist, Assouline would first set the stage for an artistic life as an apprentice to Pierre Balmain in Paris. He dreamed of one day becoming a grand couturier.

Life has a way of opening different doors while we follow our dreams, and Assouline would detour into advertising, marketing and publishing, creating an agency called Triologie with his brother and sister, Michael and Yaffa.

Relationships with major French concerns including Madame, L'express and Air France would lead Assouline and his wife to create the Assouline brand and launch their publishing and retail business in 1995.

On Wednesday evening, some 100 citizens who refuse to submit to a life without the texture of paper, the vibrant visual production of photographs and the smell of woven binding crowded into Prosper Assouline's elegant little store.

With its persimmon red lacquer-painted walls and shining polished ecrú shelves displaying a collection of volumes one cannot find easily just about anywhere else, the store is a reminder of how grand life on an artistic plane can be. For Assouline, in the world of publishing, you publish the best or you publish nothing.

As Nazarian chatted with admirers and signed copies of her volume, Assouline remained unobtrusive in a corner, sharing a moment with guests. They included **Elizabeth Segerstrom, Susan Belknapp, Benjamin Epstein, Parisima Hassani, Moira Kamgar, David Klein, Neda Movahed, Susan Paek, Ellie Razmjoo, Melinda Serra, Ann Smyth and Reginald Rhodes**.

Also in the crowd were **Taylor Lanfried, Marc Pakbaz, Kat Wen and Paria Tavalli**.

THE CROWD runs Thursdays and Saturdays. B.W. Cook is editor of the Bay Window, the official publication of the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach.