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The Golden Age of Couture (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 22 September 2007 to 6 January 2008)

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This article was written initially to enlighten fashion design students about the recent exhibition entitled 'The Golden Age of Couture' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It demonstrates an obvious enthusiasm for fashion during the period 1947–57 and illustrates the social and cultural background to this period of fashion history. Most importantly it emphasises the importance and relevance of visiting exhibitions to the fashion professional, and how they can be used to inspire and inform contemporary fashion design.

The Exhibition

The recent Fashion Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, *The Golden Age of Couture*, essentially celebrated the era of Christian Dior's great career in the period 1947–57 (although Dior died in 1957, the business continues). It investigated fashion in Paris and London and focused on the work of several of the period's important designers including Dior, Balenciaga, Hartnell, Balmain, Hardy Amies, Jacques Fath and others. The period was launched with Dior's New Look Collection in 1947 (Figures 1–3). The New Look or Corolle Line was a great moment in fashion history in that it helped to end wartime austerity and relaunch fashion onto the world's stage. Its impact and influence are still in evidence in fashion today.



Figures 1 and 2 The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947–1957 Installation Shot © V&A Images





Figure 3 The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947–1957 Installation Shot © V&A Images

Haute couture fashion is pitched at the luxury end of the industry. A couture collection is a range of fashion garments produced by a designer. The clothes are not mass produced, ready to wear in standard industry sizes and instead the collection is shown to a range of private clients who then place orders for items, which are made up and fitted to the client's exact measurements. The couture collection is always made from the most expensive and luxurious fabrics, trims and embroideries, is often extravagant, and in its design attempts to push forward the boundaries of fashion. Today it is typically the flagship from which to sell the designer's perfumes and accessories. The couture industry up until the mid 1960s was the mainstay of the fashion industry, from which the mass market looked to copy and interpret as well as present the latest in fashion trends. This changed with the ready-to-wear concept, introduced by Yves Saint Laurent in the 1960s.

I was extremely excited about seeing this exhibition for several reasons. Firstly the New Look represented the beginning of a tremendous cultural shift, predominantly because it reinvented fashion after the Second World War. To me the New Look becomes more interesting when one begins to deconstruct and unravel it. Firstly the whole thing was a huge confidence trick! It was a major conspiracy between the main players in French textiles to kick start the industry after the destruction of the industry in war. Essentially fashion stopped in 1940: the production and consumption of such a non-essential product ceased. Clothing was produced but it was functional; however clothing isn't fashion. The cycle of fashion, that is the showing of seasonal collections to major global store buyers or clients who place orders, ceased altogether. In fact the Nazi party made an abortive attempt to re-establish Paris fashion in Berlin, eager to pilfer Paris's prestige and influence. It failed.

Women after the war were clearly desperate for glamour and femininity. In 1946 the French textile magnate Marcel Boussac offered to finance the opening of jobbing designer Christian Dior's Couture House, with the proviso that the collection reset Paris on the world's fashion stage. How did he do it? He used controversy. Inspired by his mother's clothes worn at the Deauville races at the turn of the century, he contrived to reinvent the feminine silhouette. From the boxy masculine shapes of wartime fashion he reintroduced wasp waists, padded hips, gently curved shoulders and ankle length skirts using immense lengths fabric.

'Mr Dior, we abhor skirts to the floor,' screamed the placards outside a Dallas department store as outraged activists campaigned about the morality and extravagance of a fashion that used such an abundance of fabric at a time of strict rationing and deprivation [1]. The

controversy paid off and the glamour captured the imagination of the world, its reverberation in fashion felt for the next ten years.

The V&A exhibition itself has had mixed reactions from different people I have spoken to (these include fashion lecturers, fashion designers and students). It was also interesting to listen to the different reactions of the visitors around me in the exhibition. Some loved the glamour, some were horrified at the heaviness and dowdiness of the clothes, but then 1950s clothes were heavy. Modern fabric developments and manufacture today reproduce 1950s looks in a much lighter, modern way. Clothes at this period were also heavily embellished or garishly printed. There was a great emphasis on how the physical body was transformed to conform to the fashionable ideal. One video showed a model preparing herself to fit into the clothes. Firstly she wore a girdle, then a waspie corset to reduce her waist, she then wore velcroed pads on her hips and shoulders and a conical shaped bra; this emphasised the discomfort endured to achieve the desired glamour.

Essentially 1950s clothes did not emancipate women and in many ways were a regressive step. Chanel was famous for her reaction to 1950s designers. She had invented the concept of modern sportswear in the 1920s, emancipating women from the constraints of boning and corsetry by designing luxurious and easy-to-wear clothes in jersey, previously a fabric used solely for men's underwear. She felt disgust with clothes that constrained women and put them back into corsetry, padding and the newly invented girdle [2]. 'They can barely walk,' she sneered. She called designers such as Dior and Balenciaga 'Fifties Horrors' for creating fashion that put women back into corsetry, padding and the newly invented girdle. Her other reaction was to reopen her fashion business in 1954, reintroducing her famous jersey and easy-fitting two-piece suits of the 1920s. These were derided on introduction but were then quickly acclaimed as New York buyers placed orders in droves. Such is the fickle nature of fashion!

Another reason the exhibition was of such a personal interest to me was my own passion for 1950s fashion. As a student my design projects always seemed to interconnect with the 1950, although more recently this enthusiasm has dwindled somewhat. At one time I was constantly poring over the compilations of 1950s *Vogues* in the college library, scribbling down design details and attempting to reinterpret them in a modern way. I loved the overly austere and haughty poses of the models, particularly Barbara Goalen and Dovima: the impossibly restrained silhouettes (the clothes always looked as light as air in the photography), the fabulous grooming and flawless makeup.

I was also addicted to the film *Funny Face*, where Audrey Hepburn was elevated from dowdy librarian to the *haut-est* of 1950s chic. My dream was also to work in couture and the dream came true as my first job was as the assistant designer at Norman Hartnell. Norman Hartnell was probably the most famous British couturier, and short of running away to Paris to pick up pins at Dior or Pierre Balmain, the job was as good as it gets. Hartnell was fabulous; it exuded an other worldly, rarefied and slightly faded 1950s glamour. On Bruton Street in Mayfair, you entered and climbed a mirrored staircase to greet the French *vendeuse* Madame Francine. If you had arrived for a fitting she would lead you gracefully through the small gilt and white showroom to the series of eight elegant fitting rooms, and the head fitter and seamstress, Miss Margaret (all the seamstresses were christened 'Miss').

This was 1988, Hartnell had been dead for 10 years and the house had been purchased by businessman Manny Silverman. The designer Murray Arbeid had been employed to revitalise the house and produce a younger collection. The other designer, Monsieur Brines, had been employed to design the 'older or more established collection' for such as aristocratic dowagers. The experience provided me with an unbelievable opportunity to learn couture garment making, techniques and skills: how to fit, how to hand finish, how to tailor. It really

developed my deep love of all the activities involved in making clothes, which I believe are the underpinnings of great design.

Why are such exhibitions relevant to today, what do we get from them?

I think there are some tremendous and profound things about costume collections and costume exhibitions in general for the student, the scholar and the designer/professional. They tell us about fashion in an evocative and celebratory way. It's also an ideal way to acquire primary research:

- They help to instil a sense of period, historicism and fashion history, and an awareness of how fashion has changed and evolved
- They are a source of inspiration to develop or subvert fashion ideas
- They can give an overall sense of how fashion relates to social change, politics, culture, etc.
- Observing fashion garments is a great way to develop or inspire garment cut and construction.

Many designers have consulted the collections at the V&A, using them as an aid to reinterpret their research in a modern way. Examples include Jasper Conran's version of the classic New Look collection, in non-padded organza fabrics, and John Galiano's reinterpretation of the crinoline made with telephone wire, rendering it lighter and edgier. Susan North, V&A curator of eighteenth century dress, commenting on Vivienne Westwood's work, feels that it is 'a perfect example of historicism transformed into modern garments' [3]. Important costume exhibitions also heavily influence fashion trends and direction at all levels of the market place. The exhibition has also proved to be a great form of primary research for all fashion students; it has inspired design projects and dissertation students have been able to use it a case study to investigate various theories. For example, subjects examined have included ideas such as 'Is there anything new in fashion' and 'Body distortion: an investigation into why fashion demands body distortion to achieve a fashionable shape'.

In fashion we are constantly looking forward. However, the fashion industry always needs to pause, look back and celebrate the rich cornucopia of fabulous, evocative historical clothing research available in museums and archives. I think tutors need to work harder today to make fashion students understand how to appreciate the cut, make and craft of clothes, as skills in this area are becoming weaker. Amazing fashion exhibitions such as this can help to redress this balance and encourage them away from the Internet in order to embrace a far wider and fascinating culture. To quote Vivienne Westwood, a designer who weaves historicism into her clothes through endless archival research, 'I take something from the past which has a sort of vitality that has never been exploited – like the crinoline – and get very intense... you get so involved with it that in the end you do something original because you overlay your own ideas... Things are never quite as they were, so even if you tried to copy a traditional garment exactly you couldn't because you'd have to use a modern way of making it' [3].

References

1. <http://www.historyofashion.com/historyofashion/dior.html> (14 March 2008).
2. J Wallach, Chanel: *Her Style and Her Life* (London: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1998).
3. C Wilcox, *Vivienne Westwood* (London: V&A Publications, 2004).