



2.25 'Soirée de décembre', evening dress by Yves Saint Laurent for Christian Dior, modelled by Dovima. Spring/Summer 1955. Photograph by Richard Avedon. V&A: PH.26-1985

'If the colossus of Dior had crumbled, it would have shaken French fashion to its foundations.'

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designs seem old-fashioned; one such was Pierre Cardin, head of Dior's *tailleur* atelier in 1947, who founded his own house in 1950 and began his haute couture and ready-to-wear collections in 1953. Chanel relaunched in 1954 after an absence of 15 years, showing suits, easy skirts and pleated day dresses 'for women over 30'. Despite hostility from the French press her casual elegance began to gain momentum.⁶⁷ Bettina Ballard, who defended Chanel and took her designs to the US, pinpointed her underlying threat to the very fabric of couture. 'As a dress designer, she was virtually nihilistic, for behind her clothes was an implied but unexpressed philosophy: the clothes do not really matter at all, it is the way you look that counts.'⁶⁸ Balenciaga began to enter his most abstract and distinctive phase; his restrained aesthetic, echoed by his disciples Ungaro, Courrèges and Givenchy, anticipated a fashion that finally found resonance with movements in contemporary design in an aesthetic shift from nostalgic to avant-garde.

The wartime conditions that preceded Dior's launch threw his utopian vision and desire to bring back 'the neglected art of pleasing' into sharp relief.⁶⁹ For a decade his collections gave clear direction to journalists, clients and trade buyers, a clarity of vision matched only by the efficient business model he created. Although many of the older fashion houses did not survive the harsh post-war climate, for Dior and his contemporaries in both Paris and London the decade was indeed a 'Golden Age' in terms of prosperity and creativity. This is reflected in the beauty of those sumptuous gowns and sharply tailored suits that are preserved in museums and private collections all over the world. When Dior first went to the US in 1947, he expressed a desire 'to plant one foot in America, while keeping the other in the Old World'.⁷⁰ Despite the tensions between singular design and the demands of the mass market, Parisian haute couture inspired and co-existed with a new global trade in fashion. It established a blueprint that moved fashion from the couture house of Dior's early days, with its 'heavy velvets and brocades',⁷¹ to the boutique with its versatile, youthful designs, setting in place a process whereby fashion could reflect and adapt to the defining changes of the second half of the twentieth century.

corner, in the middle ground an embroidered or brocaded silk hung seductively across the back of a chair, and artificial flowers lay in boxes on the floor (pl.5.3). Centre stage, the couturier was in the process of draping his model Sylvie in a luxurious, stiff, dove-grey satin, presumably to ascertain how effective that silk would be if cut into one of his highly constructed gowns. The composition captures the sumptuous and expensive veneer of haute couture at this time. Jacques Fath's notion of draping the fabric over himself while his wife Geneviève watched, offered an alternative, youthful, twist to this classic pose, and also favoured a textile of a very different type – a flowing, printed silk with a bold design (pl.5.2).

The plain textiles pictured behind Dior are indicative of the textile staples that couturiers used and thus kept in stock, and suggest the couturier's delight in such quality textiles after years of deprivation during the Second World War. The hand-embroidered fabric and the hand-made artificial flowers are also typical of the traditional luxury embellishments added after the construction of the dress (see p.136). Such surface decoration evolved from season to season in both its textural effects and its motifs, bringing extra novelty to new styles. Machine embroidered and printed patterns were an alternative, screen-printing having freed designers to create painterly surfaces which – after a spell out of fashion – returned as much-valued assets in the couturiers' repertoire from the early 1950s. During this decade, in fact, a huge variety of materials was used for couture garments. This essay reflects on their journey from manufacture to atelier, into the collections and on to the backs of the models, introducing the textiles produced for French haute couture, the relationship the manufacturers had with the Parisian couturiers, and the wider context in which manufacturers and couturiers worked.

Little has been published on these textiles, as fashion historians have tended to concentrate on the cut and style of dress without giving due consideration to its material components. The weight of the most accessible firsthand evidence has perhaps hindered them, for, while couturiers of the 1950s were anxious to publish their memoirs, textile manufacturers were less forthcoming. Moreover, until relatively recently, few museum collections have had strong holdings of mid-twentieth century couture garments or the textiles made for couture. Without accounts from both couturiers and textile manufacturers or documentation of firsthand examination of the textiles and how they functioned in the garments, it is difficult to assess how – or whether – couturiers achieved 'perfect harmony' in the marriage of their design with manufacturers' materials. Fortunately, recent interviews



5.3 Christian Dior with model Sylvie. Christian Dior Archive

have brought to the fore the perspective of the manufacturers and the ways in which they worked with and for couturiers. Research in various museum collections and in company and textile archives is beginning to offer some perspective on the textiles themselves.⁴

An exploration of the role of textiles in couture, embracing their makers as well as their users, merits attention in a book on couture for several reasons. First, the nature of the materials demanded that couture houses cultivate different skills for cutting and manipulation. Two different types of workshop housed those skills – the tailoring (*tailleur*) and dressmaking (*fleur*) workshops, the first for the cutting and moulding of stiff and heavy fabrics, the second for the draping and sewing of supple fabrics (see Chapter 3). Secondly, the quantities of material used in each couture garment were large, partly because fashionable styles at this time were voluminous, partly because couture garments were generally lined and interlined, with generous hems and seams. Moreover, if the pattern comprised checks or stripes, or the fabric had pile, extra allowance was necessary to make sure that the checks matched at the seams or that the direction of the nap was consistent. British journalist Alison Settle, writing in 1948, noted the opportunities that the French couturiers gave their textile industry:

The 'New Look' was launched last year to sell dresses employing up to 30 or even 40 metres of fabric disposed in swirling, swinging skirts, the width pointed up by tightly-corsetted bodies... the 'New Look' spring fashions of 1948... have turned the swirling skirts into skirts which flute. In place of the 30-metre hemlines of last year no more than ten metres are now used. But these ten, of the finest textured materials, are mounted over a stiffening of light tailoring canvas. Backing the stiffening is an equivalent ten metres of satin or taffeta lining: beneath goes at least an equivalent amount of fabric in the shape of a rustling, flounced petticoat. In all, the amount of material used is no less than in the swirl-line skirt. The French textile industry has been given the task of speedily and greatly increasing its exports.⁵

The red evening ensemble 'Zemire', from Dior's Autumn/Winter collection of 1954, confirms this extravagance: its skirt has a circumference of 35 metres, a length of 85 centimetres; below the outer layer of crimson cellulose acetate, layered and gathered tulle adds width on each hip, while the skirts are held out by two underskirts, one comprising no less than five layers of tulle, the second comprising silk organza and nylon net panels (see pl.1.9).⁶

As both Alison Settle's description and this garment suggest, the materials that fed demand ensured that this was an intriguing decade, because advances in the production of different qualities and combinations of natural and man-made fibres (cellulose and synthetic) blossomed. The long-lived staples of couture – fine silks and woollens – faced



3.8 Evening dress by Cristóbal Balenciaga (detail). Silk, 1955. Given by Miss Caroline Coombe, V&A: T.427–1967

3.9 The charts at Dior clearly show the organization of the couture house. Each design is listed in the order shown in the collection and the notes detail the model for the dress, the sources for textiles and trims, and who made the garment. Details for 'Ecarlate', Autumn/Winter 1955–6 (see pl.6.11) are shown in the centre. Christian Dior Archive



worked long hours before a collection was launched, an experience Dior described as ‘an endurance test’ since the girls were on their feet from 10am till evening.²⁷ Each member of the couture team, from the *arpette* to the *première* and the model, became attached to the designs they worked on.²⁸ While the *premières* were intent on the nuances of adjusting a dress, the models became an inanimate form – for the *premières* were ‘not dressing a girl; they are simply allowing a body to be put inside *their* dress’.²⁹ The famous model Bettina described the tension at the house of Jacques Fath:

The foreman (*première*) would crouch on the ground with her eyes glued to the hem and make me revolve, very slowly, inch by inch, on my heels. . . . she would cry if she thought she had muffed a dress, the mannequins would weep when a dress that was destined for them was given to another girl, and the second-in-command would arrive in floods of tears because a dress had a mark on it.³⁰