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Paris



Thoughts on the 1950 Spring collections

by J. Gaumont-Lanvin

President of the „Chambre syndicale de la Couture parisienne“

Now that the fever of the Paris openings has died down and the couturiers are preparing to reap the fruits of their labour, it is possible to obtain a general picture of the new fashions and the atmosphere in which they were conceived, created and presented.

It is not an atmosphere of ease or of calm.

There is a crisis in Europe and a crisis in France, and naturally enough the first to be touched by this crisis are the artistic and creative trades, those which were formerly called the luxury trades, in the days when people still dared to call a thing by its proper name. Quotas, restrictions on imports and exports, obstacles in the way of the free circulation of currency and individuals, the impoverishment of their clientèle, the crushing burden of social and fiscal charges, all conspire to render precarious the existence of the luxury trades.

And yet when the problem is examined objectively, it is evident that upon the existence of these trades depends that of many others.

First of all, what would PARIS be without her Haute Couture and everything that revolves around it, making our capital such a centre of attraction? Next, what would become of the professions of which Haute Couture is the publicity agent as well as the banner? What, for example, would become of the textile industries without Haute Couture, that is to say without the stimulus of a continual artistic endeavour which compels manufacturers of fabrics to get away from dull routine and to be ever striving after what is new, original and best? It would be outside the scope of this article to go any further into these problems, which I am content merely to mention here in passing. But let no one have any illusions as to their gravity. There are a certain number of trades in the world which benefit and receive their impetus direct from Paris. And I can imagine the disorder that would result in the marvellous industry of Saint-Gall for example, if to-morrow Parisian Haute Couture were to be unable to launch its creations on the world.

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What could be more thrilling for a couturier in the two months preceding the appearance of his collection, than to gaze on the piles of fabrics laid before him? New yarns, new fibres, new weaves, new shades, everything enchants him. He sees in them the transposition and continuation of his past efforts. As a matter of fact, future creations are born of the daily contact with members of the textile industries. When one is in the business, one knows in advance the kinds of fabrics and the colours that are going to appear, for fashion is logical and not just a succession of chances; bright colours must give way to softer shades, crisp fabrics to soft and supple materials. Add to this a keen sense of opportuneness, an extremely subtle power of discernment, and you will find that everything is consistent, and that without Haute Couture the textile industry would no longer be inspired by the same perpetual creative urge.

This year we have witnessed the complete triumph of crisp and shining fabrics, cottons and vaporous textiles. There is a reason for this too.

First of all it is a spring collection, where gaiety and lightness must come first. And then, the principal concern of all is to keep creations both youthful and feminine. It is no longer surprising then that suits have abandoned the classic styles to become as light as dresses, that they have been brightened by charming touches of

piqué, guipure, stiff and gleaming percales, bows and embroidery. It is understandable that these dresses with their measured fullness, worn in the mornings and early afternoons, must be light and airy both in fabric and design. I have seen some sleeveless décolleté afternoon frocks, over which a loose bolero edged with gay colours can be worn. How could we not readily accept the idea of a cocktail dress, a little longer than a day dress but still short, made of organdies and other shimmering fabrics, which could be worn in the evening? As for the evening gown, whether it is a sheath or whether it contains over thirty yards of material, whether it is made of heavy satin, of taffeta with radiant folds or of layers of spangled or embroidered tulle, whether it is decorated with guipure or with motifs of light strawlace, it remains the Queen of the collections, which the crowds of guests so eagerly await and which gives them that indescribable thrill of delight that can only be experienced at the sight of a perfect work of art.

It had been said that the 1950 spring collections would be largely reminiscent of 1925: the shortening of skirts, a certain change in the feminine silhouette, the new hairstyle, everything seemed to point towards this conclusion. As it happened, this did not turn out to be so. The «emancipated» style remains a thing of the past. It is true that skirts are shorter — 15 1/2 in. from the ground on an average — waists are lower, very slightly, wasp-waist corsets are being abandoned as well as all tight lacing to allow for more suppleness to the body, but even so it is a style which is essentially 1950.

I think that suppleness is the key word here. Everything is supple, from the plunging décolleté to the well-defined but not pinched-in waistline. «Chemise» dresses are seen again, flat pleats, plain or embroidered panels, but the line of the body is always followed. In this, the new fashion is rational as well as seductive.

The whims of the couturiers even go so far as to make them try to hide their virtuosity. The more complicated the cut, the simpler it seems.

Haute Couture is just that; consisting as it does in appearing very simple yet being in reality so complex. I have been struck by this desire on the part of the couturiers in all of the different collections that I have seen. Take Christian Dior for example. At first sight, his dresses give an impression of restraint and classicism. Both the stiffness and the stiffening have disappeared. From a distance it might be thought that they are quite plain little dresses which have been perfectly put together. On closer inspection, one cannot help admiring the mastery of the conception and execution, which makes real masterpieces of them, because the artifices in the cutting are so skilfully concealed. I could mention many other collections where this same modesty and simplicity prevail.

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To see this new fashion is refreshing. Whatever the difficulties of the day, one cannot help thinking that so much talent, so much skill and ingenuity, so much taste, simply cannot disappear. From the weaver to the seamstress, by way of the hundred or so intermediaries who contribute either closely or remotely towards this result, there is an understanding and a community of endeavour and aspiration, which correspond to a necessity — that of beauty. And beauty is immortal.

J. Gaumont-Lanvin