

Zeitschrift: Swiss textiles [English edition]
Herausgeber: Swiss office for the development of trade
Band: - (1953)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Behind the scenes
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-799212>

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Behind the scenes

Perhaps it will be remembered that in the last number of « Textiles Suisses », the author of this feature took his readers on a tour behind the scenes of a great Parisian Fashion House. On their way round, he introduced them to some of the typical characters to be met with there, the porter, the workroom staff, the storekeepers and, finally, the assistant saleswomen. Today he invites readers to complete this visit, and the first person we come across is the Vendeuse.

* * *

The ideal age for the vendeuse seems to be about fifty. She has experience and authority. She knows the tastes of *her* clientele, and when she attends the first fashion parade of the season's collection, she can pick out at a glance the models she will suggest to such and such a client. She carries this knowledge to the point where she feels that those she dresses are her personal friends ; her excuse is that she undresses them too, and the fact of seeing royalty and the stars



the designer's workroom finds her desirable, appreciates the shape of her shoulders, the tractability of her waist and hips, the mannequin will be able to do no wrong. She is tall and slender, and walks about dressed in a white smock or delicate coloured one on which her name is embroidered. Under her smock, she wears a bra and panties and nothing else — unless her hips make the designer frown, in which case she will be entitled to wear a tight-fitting girdle. The colour of her hair? Whatever the latest fashion requires, as also its length, and cut. The mannequin is wonderfully made-up; she knows all the little beauty tricks — for three-quarters of her time she has nothing else to do but beautify herself. The mannequins live together, in rooms with walls covered with mirrors. About half past ten in the morning, they arrive, don their smocks and begin to put on

with next to nothing on gives her the same assurance as that possessed by a batman used to seeing generals stripped of all their finery and in a state where all men are equal. The vendeuse then is an authority on international high society. In fact, she is only a little less well informed than the hairdresser, a favourite confidant, but only just a very little. The vendeuse has to be pleasant, but, like the god Janus, she has two faces and the one she reserves for behind the scenes is not always so pleasing. The reason is that she receives her remuneration on a commission basis and the clients who might be inclined to change their vendeuse run the risk of seeing themselves called to order, unless they are reduced to changing their couturier rather than face the wrath of a woman scorned. The couturier's opinion of the vendeuse is that she is a necessary evil, trying to push a sale, whatever the circumstances, capable of concocting hybrid outfits that are an insult to the taste of the house, only provided that they are in fact sold; as for the opinion of the second saleswoman, who is at the mercy of all the whims of her superior, it does not bear mentioning.

There is only one person in the house able to hold her own against not only the vendeuses but also the administrative offices and even the designer himself, and that is the mannequin. As long as

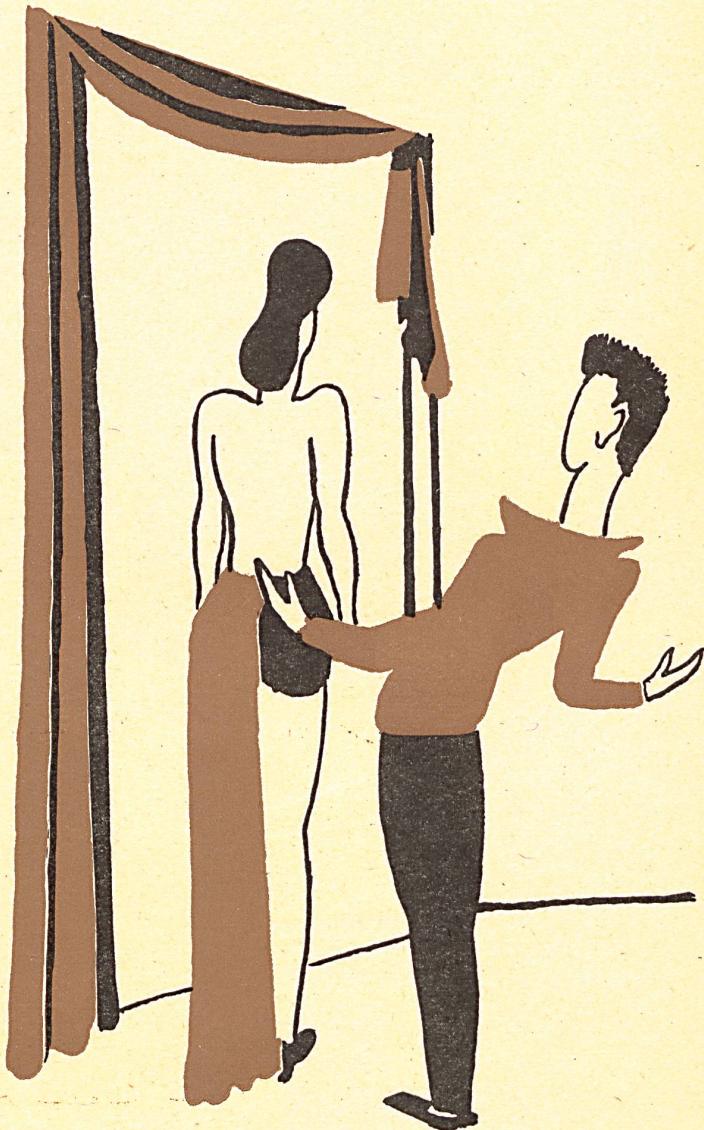
their make-up — which takes them a good hour — during which time they tell each other the latest stories, preferably about their most recent conquests. The room in which they live, the fitting room as it is called, is a hive of activity ; people are always coming in to fetch dresses to be ironed or to be altered or to show to clients. People also come to hear the latest gossip ; everyone knows that the mannequins are invited out a lot and are very well up on the best restaurants and night clubs. For — let us mention it in passing — mannequins very seldom follow a diet ; when dining out, they do not stint themselves and yet their figures never seem to suffer for it in spite of Mr. Gayelord Hauser and the dietitians. One of the particularities of the sisterhood of mannequins is that they do not put on weight easily ; anyway if this is not the case, it would be better to look for a different kind of work.

From time to time, the phone rings and Fabienne, Simone or Lucky is summoned to the designer's studio or a workroom ; and now the mannequin is away for long hours of posing, standing without moving : « Don't keep fidgetting, I can't see anything when you move » ; her legs are getting cramp, her feet are on fire (if only she could take off her shoes, but that spoils the effect of the model and puts the length of the skirt out !).

And then comes the day when she who was treated like a queen, whose figure was liked because it showed off the dresses to such advantage, suddenly can do nothing right any more. One cannot explain why, she simply pleases no longer. Then the goddess steps down from her pedestal, and leaves to find a place in a rival house where she will be liked until the day...

Also in the mannequins' fitting rooms are the dressers whose job it is to help on with the dresses, do up and undo the buttons and zip-fasteners, pick up the clothes that the mannequin steps out of as a snake slides out of its skin ; they are there to deck the idol, run errands for her, answer the phone, take messages, make dates and break them, and to receive the occasional small gift too ; they are the worker bees swarming devotedly round the queen of the hive.

There are many other departments in a fashion house than those we have visited here ; there are the forwarding or packing departments which differ from those of other trades only in knowing better ways of laying in a bed of tissue



paper the most fragile of dresses — those that wilt at a mere look like certain gardenias — so that the lady's maid who takes them out of their box will have nothing else to do but hang them up, immaculate and intact. There are the accounting departments, which are like all others except that they work in an atmosphere of unusual instability and feverishness and are continually obliged to wage war with a staff not easily touched by such prosaic matters as the necessity of trying to balance receipts and expenditure. The head book-keeper also has to cope with the suggestions of the designer himself who has ideas on what he considers necessary expenses and advertising that would make an ordinary book-keeper's hair stand on end. There is the delivery staff, the driver of the small, shiny black van on which is very discretely traced the couturier's signature ; there is doubtless too, the man in charge of the heating, who lives surrounded by coal and fuel-oil and who could not care less about the dresses — just as the stoker on an ocean liner knows nothing of life in the first class — but he is definitely no part of a fashion house...

Six o'clock, half past six, seven o'clock ; the workroom staff are the first to leave, then go the office workers followed by the mannequins and then the vendeuses. The designer in his turn leaves, and the porter locks up for the night. In the wardrobes the dresses are all alone, able to rest at last ; they have been tried on so many times, have been stitched, sewn and ironed, so many women have tried to force them on over too generous curves, that they are in need of rest, and, very quickly, as soon as the chandeliers and the spotlights have been put out, they fall asleep.

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