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Letter from New York

Fabrics imported from Switzerland: Specialisation and Quality

Whatever the line of the day, it is the fabric that is the very essence of fashion. Nothing equals the importance of the textile fibre, the texture of a material or its colour. The serpentine suppleness of silks is needed to achieve the draping effects that flow over the figure. Light cotton fabrics are needed to give dresses that petal-fresh look. A thousand and one elements go to make a new and ever youthful fashion each season.

As he glances through the piles of samples, the creative imagination of the couturier will suddenly light up at the sight of a new fabric which, in a flash, will give him the idea for the most successful dresses of his next collection. And why will his connoisseur's eye seize upon one particular fabric among so many others that are equally lovely? There are a thousand and one different reasons: perhaps because the new line will demand more emphasised qualities of suppleness or firmness of a drape or gathers, or perhaps there will be a richer effect of a chemical finish beautifying a humble fibre such as cotton used to be, or a progress in the dyer's or finisher's art that will have created a new nuance which will give greater elegance to the printing of a design or the handle of a fabric. It may be the influence of one of those world currents that determine fashion at a particular moment in the most widely separated centres of fashion and elegance... in other words, the whim of fashion. The whim of fashion — or the intangible factors that will make a ready-to-wear manufacturer or wholesaler choose one fabric rather than another — must be predicted by the textile manufacturers and their designers two years before their novelty fabrics are put on the market. But no matter how great the experience of a big manufacturer, it is always difficult for him to know whether a novelty created in the spirit of the day or the morrow will be a passing success lasting for a season or whether the fabric thus launched will become a classic that will be demanded time and time again for several seasons.

An example of prolonged success is that of cotton fabrics whose popularity has lasted and will probably continue to last for an indefinite number of summer and winter seasons, thanks to its variety and the innumerable uses that are found each year for this natural fibre which is finished in a thousand and one new ways by the skill of the chemist and the weaver. In summer and winter, in spring and fall, year after year, cotton fabrics go on being worn and are always in demand. They are wanted for teen-agers in winter and summer, for evening dresses on all occasions and in all climates; cotton is a wonderful travelling companion in all latitudes, especially since this fibre is combined with others that lend it their own properties. Modern processes which are improved each year make cotton fabrics crush-resistant but soft and silky. These fabrics wash more and more easily, their colours, even the most delicate hues, stand up to the action of light, sun, perspiration, sea water and deleterious gases in the air of industrial towns.

What we have said about cotton fabrics with modern finishes also applies to certain silks and woollens, but above all to fabrics composed of mixtures of synthetic and natural fibres — fabrics of which it is no longer possible to tell the vegetable, animal or chemical origin merely by the touch.

One used, for example, to be able to tell right away by the feel the difference between staple fibre, rayon and silk. Who, nowadays, could tell the proportion of nylon, dacron, silk and wool in a light dress tweed? Fabrics, which have now become anonymous, hide behind the incredible perfection of manufacturing and finishing processes. The most varied textile fibres are put together nowadays to create original fabrics; natural and synthetic yarns are camouflaged in a magical manner and put together in a thousand and one different ways for the manufacture of these mixed fabrics advocated above all by American fashions. These mixed fabrics are particularly well suited to the different climates found in America which may be warm, damp or temperate. They are used for making not only women's dresses and suits, but also men's summer suits which wear extremely well and crease less than the classic seersuckers for tropical summers. Seersuckers and simple gingham are replaced by mixed fabrics with resin finishes which are enjoying a phenomenal success, which is only just beginning and may go on for years. There is in fact no limit to the creation of new fabrics, with textile mixtures that can be changed and varied ad infinitum. But it is not always possible to foresee the final result and the wearing and lasting qualities of the finished product. It is to the specialist that success in this field is due. There is no improvisation where fabrics are concerned: exhaustive tests are carried out to make them worthy of an honourable career. This is where the consummate skill of the Swiss weavers and finishers comes in, to ensure the excellence of the new textile novelties. Swiss specialisation is a guarantee of excellence that American ready-to-wear clothing specialists appreciate and recognise. American ready-to-wear manufacturers using Swiss fabrics of cotton, nylon, mixed fibres, silk and rayon are becoming more numerous every year; they also use fabrics in synthetic straw which are so very well suited to the fashion for colourful accessories, bags, hats and skirts with matching sandals or shoes.

The specialities of the weaving mills of St. Gall and Zurich occupy a prominent position in Parisienne couture; they are even more universally used in the reproduction of models and the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothes in America for all forty-eight states and their different climates. Swiss fabrics, embroideries and silks are also used to make afternoon and evening dresses which are suitable for all occasions and can be worn in all climates.

If the weaving mills of St. Gall and Zurich did not possess a powerful tradition of quality and a scientifically tested technique, it would be impossible for them to compete with American production, which is so powerful both from the point of view of quantity and good ordinary quality. In spite of social and financial changes, the value of quality and specialisation remains unaltered, just as gold keeps its value among depreciable paper notes. Swiss textiles, like Swiss watches, remain reliable products that do not let down their users. The fabrics that will soon be seen appearing for the winter resort fashions and at the fashion parade of the Swiss Fabric Group in New York at the beginning of 1955 will give proof of this.

Thérèse de Chambrier