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FASHION REMINISCENCES, EVOQUED BY THE NEW COLLECTIONS

Capes are all the rage this winter ...

Working on the principle that this periodical comes out after the press and fashion magazines have already given detailed reports of the collections and that, moreover, our readers do not expect these pages to serve as a guide for the use of clients of fashion houses, we should like merely to try to point out certain general fashion trends, and in so doing we shall be speaking of those for the coming winter.

* * *

To anyone who has spent a large part of his life in the rarefied atmosphere of haute couture, the profession must seem to have undergone sweeping changes. There is nothing in common between the couture of the years before and after 1914, and very little between that of before and after 1939.

In the pre-1914 period, the couturier had to create, for a very wealthy few, dresses that were almost completely exclusive, or at any rate with very few copies. From Worth (1857) to Poiret of the fabulous years (1911-1914), the couturier created clothes suited exclusively to the personal style of each of his clients. Furthermore these dresses were only imaginable on women who were driven from place to place in very roomy (at least with regard to height) chauffeur-driven vehicles. The couturier's client was not expected to walk through the streets or even to take the wheel herself. She was not at all sporting and shunned the sun and crowds. She was a sort of exotic plant, cultivated at great cost in a luxury hot-house atmosphere. So much so in fact that the typical example of the elegant woman of the day was not to be found among the rich middle class but rather, I am afraid, among the small band of demi-mondaines of the day, the Queens of Fashion.

Between Cora Pearl and Lantelme, forty years passed without bringing any appreciable change.

Then came the Great War. Women, left without men, had to go out and about, to walk and to drive. And when the curtain rose on the armistice to the sound of cheering and trumpets, the world had changed.

Haute Couture, always hypersensitive to change, caught on at once. It shortened skirts, made dresses easier to wear, more standardised. What it did not realise at the time was that it was moving towards mass-production, but it was soon to become aware of the fact.

The 20's were gilded, glamorous years — casinos, the races, cabarets, the charleston, a life of ease... and Jean Patou and Chanel were its champions. They showed a deep understanding of their time. Simple, well-cut little dresses were sold by the hundred to buyers from all over the world. A genuine simplicity, in keeping with the sky of Paris and the loveliness of the Ile-de-

A droite en haut : tailleur de Balmain en velours, gros col et manchon de lynx.

A gauche en bas : manteau cape en drap, de Dior.

France. These were carefree years until Wall Street, tottering on its reinforced concrete foundations caused the economy of the world to tremble dangerously. The couturiers, before the final gong heralding the financial crash, realised that they were on the wrong track, not with regard to the present but as far as the future was concerned and they switched rapidly to complicated effects of embroidery and sumptuous fabrics and, a little later with Vionnet and his followers, to great subtleties of cut. Then couture settled down to a less showy, more rational existence until 1939.

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Here, a short digression. Paul Poiret, although still living, was no longer in the running. After having made couture a sort of permanent music hall turn, a real show, this undisputed ruler of the Faubourg St-Honoré and the Pavillon de Vauresson, this king of couturiers who was extravagant on principle, who cut his dresses out of the most glorious fabrics and threw away the remains, had been obliged to admit that even an artistic profession cannot get completely away from sordid financial considerations. Poiret, whose ideas are found again to a certain extent in the present collections, was already finished as a designer. He had invented or adapted everything, the big travelling shows, the extravagant receptions, the eccentricity, the drum-beating, the luxury perfumes, the original fabrics, the decor... His women, adorned, encased and bejewelled like heathen idols, represented the height of luxury. One wonders how the woman of 1957 can be expected to live like her predecessor whom Poiret knew and served. Hence the anachronism of certain revivals. But let it pass.

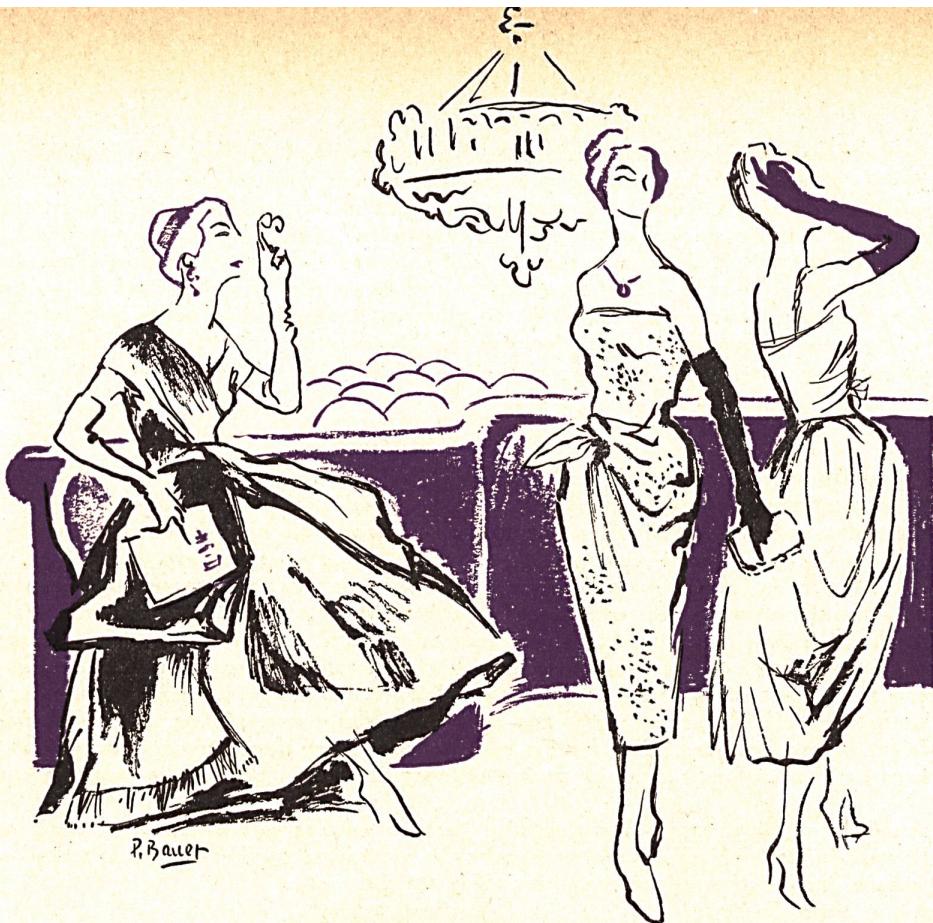
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1939 : a world collapsed, but Paris was determined to go on living in spite of the occupation. Dresses, hats and shoes were made of poor materials and the ingenuity of the couturiers was stretched to the limit. Then



De gauche à droite : robe en lainage tabac, de Patou ; robe de drap noir, modestie de vison blanc, de Lanvin-Castillo ; robe de drap, effet de corselet, de Lanvin-Castillo ; ensemble de Balmain en velours noir, robe et veste à galon rebrodé.

came 1944. Thanks to Lucien Lelong, couture had survived. It held all the trump cards in its hand, all except one — its clientele had disappeared. Those who had made their money too easily during the war disappeared one by one. The foreign buyers were keeping their distance. They had learned to do without Paris — or so they thought. They were to come back, but on different terms. It was then that a host of new names appeared — Balenciaga, Dior, Balmain and Fath who immediately sized up the situation. They widened their scope. The buyers were slow in coming back. All right ; they would go themselves and fetch them. But in doing so they had to take into consideration the wishes of the masses and come to terms with the ready-to-wear clothing industry, which was making considerable and steady progress. Thanks to their perspicacity, they succeeded in keeping their fashion houses going by selling the simplest, that is to say the most easily adapted ideas to the mass-producing ready-to-wear clothing industry. They created a new type of woman, very looselimbbed, youthful, slim and hardly feminine. And this is the point we have reached now. The fact of working with a view to reproduction obliges them to bring their ideas out into the open. There are no longer — or at least



De gauche à droite: robe du soir drapée, de Dior, grand noeud en ottoman; robe du soir étroite, drapée, en satin rebrodé, de Catherine Sauve; Dior: mousseline drapée.

very few — watertight compartments between fashion houses. Less than ever today is it possible to recognise the designer of a woman's dress at a glance. I am not saying that this is a bad thing, simply that it is different.

* * *

But these new conditions give rise in the minds of couturiers to a certain nostalgia for periods gone by. They fetch down from the topmost shelves in their bookcases the reviews of yesteryear, and especially the inspired bon ton started by Lucien Vogel. And they give us the fashions of 1925 or 1913, rehashed and adapted to suit 1956. Only, as women's bodies, tamed and remodelled by thirty or forty years of effort, are no longer the same, they are obliged to resort to all the artifices of the corset-makers to give their wiry mannequins a silhouette in keeping with their fanciful creations.

* * *

These are some of the thoughts that passed through our mind as we watched this summer's showings. In the greyish light of the salons we watched the young women strutting up and down, their flesh hardly covering their bones but cleverly filled out in all the right places (in the style so dear to the late lamented Peter Cheyney!). Whether at Dior's or Castillo's, Balmain's, Fath's or Griffe's, there would seem to be a contradiction between the women who present the dresses and those destined to buy them. The really smart thing was that the couturiers realised just how strongly each client would like to imagine herself as she sees the mannequin...

* * *

Consequently there is much to reminisce over in the winter collections. Of Paul Poiret they have resurrected the flowered capes and the drapes narrowing at the ankles, which give a woman the look of a sacred scarab. Lamés are to the fore as well as big re-embroidered flowers which conjure up the conventional idea of the orient.

Through the effect of skilful cutting, on a body cleverly moulded by means of whalebones, one has the impression that dresses are no longer fitted to the body but follow its curves at a distance.

This is a fashion that has need of drapes. Fabrics intertwine, set one another off, lose themselves in harmonious and terribly complicated whirls. Paradoxically, the fashion is a very feminine one on almost sexless mannequins. In addition gorgeous furs are everywhere. 60 furs in Dior's collection, 30 of them mink coats. What do you think of that? There is strictly speaking no one fashion — just a general riot of fabrics and frills. To be sure, one might say that Dior is always and above all an architect, that Balmain, like Geneviève Fath, wants to show off women to their best advantage, that Balenciaga remains the only example of a strictly personal technique, that Castillo at Lanvin's is a pastmaster in the art of slashes and colours, that Patou shows

an attractive modern classicism, that Grès is unique with his neo-Greek drapes, that Madeleine de Rauch has once again given proof of her talent for dressing young active women, that Jacques Heim is daring, Maggy Rouff outstanding in her dressy dresses, Carven bold and gay in youthful outfits, Lucile Manguin delicately classical, Jean Dessès the height of sophistication, Jacques Griffe ingenious. And Chanel? you will ask, for you know that her comeback was not quite what she expected. Well, at the moment there is a certain reaction in her favour. In view of the subtlety of the skilful creations of certain couturiers, a few women — of a certain rather elite smart set — are beginning to wonder whether the moment has not come to try to find something of the lost simplicity of a controlled casualness. We give you this impression for what it is worth; in any case it is a purely subjective one.

* * *

To sum up:

First of all, let us not dwell on Dior's and Jacques Heim's flights of fancy with ankle-length dresses. We shall see what will come of them. At any rate they are of the realm of pure fantasy.

Here are the main points: above all a profusion of drapes, an abundance of fur trimmings, fullness in coats, the revival of capes, reminiscent of the shards of armoured insects, fullness in skirts for dresses, very short tailormades, almost completely without basques, the reappearance of muslins, the use of all types of velvet, the generally very low set of sleeves brought forward to swell the back and slenderise the bust, the hats resembling Russian caps, encasing the head; and always and everywhere a riot of fabrics: intertwined collars, belts which fit loosely or tie and hang loose. Waists are fluid; it would be impossible to say whether they are high or low since they are anywhere between the hips and the bust. There are narrow belts, wide and draped belts, or no belts at all. There are stiff and severe necklines reminiscent of 1914 officer-type collars, and others reminiscent of the Lacoste collars for the men or resembling the rolled collars of polo neck sweaters; but most of all there are fur collars. And the main tendency is to pad out at the top and tighten below — the scarab style.

It is a very varied fashion, so much so in fact that fashion editors fail to agree in their conclusions. We have before us two well-known periodicals. One thanks the couturiers for having dared to put a stop to eccentricity, the other admits itself rather disconcerted by their daring.

Where does the truth lie?

As always, between the two extremes.

There is a new Paris fashion. Whether one likes it or criticises it, it will be adopted. It has perhaps no more unity than these haphazard ramblings of mine. But it has the advantage over them of being attractive to look at and charming, and of bearing witness to a talent and a spirit of inventiveness that are quite unique.

Gala



Détails-chocs, de gauche à droite : le deux-pièces à jupe hollandaise en gros lainage froncé, de Dior ; le chapeau « haut-de-forme » ou « aimant », de Dior ; la demi-longueur « qu'en dira-t-on », de Dior ; le bonnet « à l'égyptienne », de Patou, en fourrure ou mélusine claire ; la « cape-coquille », de Dior, doublée de castor.