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Letter from New York

Tiffany, the famous jeweler, is selling 14-carat gold buttons to be worn on blazers. Bill Blass of Maurice Rentner is making a blazer entirely of blue sequins, and several designers show blazers of heavy, reembroidered lace.

Consider that the dictionary defines a blazer as « a brightly colored sports jacket » and you can see what has happened to sports clothes. Or rather, what has happened to formal clothes; they have taken on the lines of sportswear.

That is the strongest trend in New York fashions. Great ladies attend balls in turtleneck gowns. The smartest coat for almost any occasion is a raincoat cut like the trench coat favored by spies in mystery movies, such as the beige raincoat of Swiss silk broadcloth made on classic lines by Main Street, a coat that has seen more sunshine than rain. There is even a masculine, tailored air about a dramatic costume like Ben Reig's sweeping evening coat of black Swiss silk faille lined with saffron silk, for it is cut like the Inverness cape made famous by the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. As for Ben Reig's evening coat of Swiss satin in bright red with small collar and deep sleeves, that is named for another gentleman, Mephistopheles.

Such preoccupation with traditional gentlemen's clothing has produced one curious situation: the moving picture « Cleopatra », which was expected to influence fashion, has done so, but not with the Egyptian drapery of the Queen of the Nile; it is the costume of the Roman legionnaire that is echoed in women's clothes, with jerkins of leather or fur and close-fitting hoods like helmets.

So many sleeves of contrasting color are visible with so many jerkins and waistcoats that designers have adapted that look even to dresses, by sewing in sleeves of a contrasting color. It is a season for color, with white and pale beiges brightening the wintry weather, and a medley of three or four hues is more interesting than colors that match.

The black costume is still chic, but black must add some special note to compete with the flower-garden hues.



FORSTER WILLI & CO., SAINT-GALL

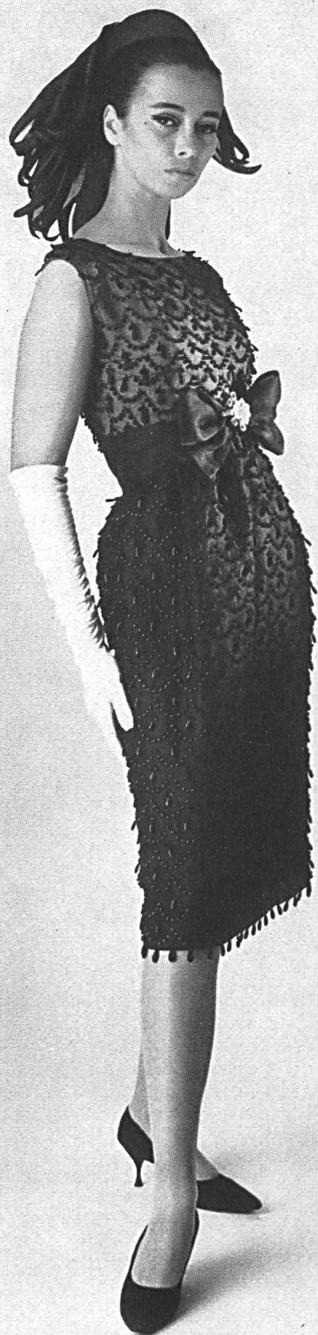
Tissu ciré noir brodé

Black embroidered ciré fabric

Modèle Oscar de la Renta / Elizabeth Arden, New York

Usually this special bit of interest in a black costume is texture, or a bias cut.

Matelassé is the favorite of the textured fabrics, and Vincent Monte-Sano, introducing his winter collection to the fashion press, said a special word of praise for the matelassé from Switzerland, admiring its dull finish and soft hand. He uses this in several black outfits, like a floor-length dress with a jacket whose collar frames the face like the corolla of a lily, and he gilds this lily by embroidering the center of each rosebud in the matelassé's design.



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 Organdi noir avec applications de broderie
 Black organdy with appliqué embroidery
 Modèle Oscar de la Renta / Elizabeth Arden, New York

A short black suit has a jacket shaped to the body in front but falling in the back in gathers from a high bow. « Ideally suited for travel » is the way he describes a black matelassé suit with straight skirt, single-breasted jacket and sleeveless overblouse.

Another textured fabric from Switzerland is a cloqué of silk, acetate and polyester, which Jerry Silverman uses as the black skirt and collarless jacket of a theatre suit, combined with white silk bodice and pink belt.

As for the bias cut, Teal Traina exemplifies that in the black dinner dress of crepe piquante from Switzerland which he describes as « all cut and fabric, » made on the bias with a cowl neckline that turns into a soft bow at the nape. A long bias overblouse by Traina of the same

crepe piquante is cut in back with a deep square. Many black dresses, if they are to be worn after 5 p.m. compensate for their conservatism of color by plunging in the rear to a dramatically low point.

More drama in the evening is fashion news, and this season sees an increase in the numbers of long evening gowns. A few winters ago only the most formal ball demanded a floor-length gown, and many women led gay social lives without owning any outfit longer than street-length. Today at the theatre, at small dinners and receptions, at any social occasion that takes place after sunset, more women appear in gowns that reach the floor. These gowns all fall in a fairly straight line, and many are so narrow that the typically Chinese slit up the side, once considered rather daring, is now commonplace.

All designers are therefore stretching their imaginations with such spectacular gowns as these two of Swiss fabric: Teal Traina's bell-shaped long skirt of gray silk moiré with net bodice embroidered in crystal and gray embroidery, and a high pink sash like a Japanese obi; and John Moore's handsome ballgown of double-faced silk gabardine in pure white, cut on the bias, trimmed only at high throat and at hemline in rows of many-colored teardrops.

While designers are preparing women to go out socially with a greater flourish, they are giving them gayer clothes in which to stay at home. Every collection has its share of « leisure clothes » in which to entertain guests; the tapered pants, once standard hostess attire, are chic now only when covered by a flowing skirt. A new type of feminine trouser has come into being: the hostess pajama that is so full it looks like a long skirt.

Although the overblouse is still so popular that many one-piece dresses are made to resemble two-piece styles with overblouse, the trend is toward a closer fit. This shows up as a medieval influence; even daytime dresses look as if they had been inspired by the « Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry ». A typical medieval look for daytime is Paul Parnes' two-piece dress of sheer Swiss wool in purple plaid, its long sleeves cut in one with the overblouse to give a broader look at shoulders. Monte-Sano gives a medieval air to an amber evening dress in the Swiss matelassé with embroidered rose pattern.

There are softer looks to daytime clothes; for example, two dresses that Herbert Sondheim made of sheer Swiss wool printed in plaids: one has the look of a kerchief tied at the throat; the other has a bloused bodice and that wide-shouldered look of the middle ages.

Lilly Pulitzer, the lady who put chic American women into straight shifts for all informal hours, and who cuts all those shifts by the same pattern although she never repeats on a print, now has changed that pattern. It is no longer straight, but fitted under the bosom. And that is a straw in the wind of fashion.

Rhea Talley Stewart