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THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF HAUTE COUTURE, 1858 TO NOW

CLAIRE WILCOX

'I mean to take her to Paris. I mean to get her clothing.'

Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Parisian haute couture fascinated, inspired, and on occasion troubled nineteenth-century observers, who witnessed its evolution from a specialist form of dressmaking specific to that city into an international business sensation.¹ Couture's rise was unstoppable following the astounding success of its originator, Englishman Charles Frederick Worth (1825–95), and that of the grand couturiers – both men and women – who followed in his footsteps, drawn to the 'capital' of fashion with its network of skilled artisans and material luxury. The House of Worth, like many that followed, was named after its founder and had its own distinctive sensibility, although all operated under a similar business model whereby unique seasonal designs would be created by the head of the house, or *auteur*, and made to order for clients by in-house

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¹ The term 'haute couture' was first used in 1908 and legally registered in 1945. For simplicity 'couture' will be used throughout this chapter. Charles Dickens expressed distaste for Worth, the 'man-milliner' in his 1863 article 'Dress in Paris' published in *All the Year Round*. See Abigail Joseph, "'A Wizard of Silks and Tulle': Charles Worth and the Queer Origins of Couture", *Victorian Studies*, 56/2 (2014), 251–79.

ateliers. By the late nineteenth century, couture houses had begun to expand their reach, opening proto-boutiques in French resorts such as Deauville, Biarritz, and Cannes. Many went further afield; the pioneering couturière Jeanne Paquin (1869–1936), for example, gained international renown with branches in London in 1896, Buenos Aires in 1912, New York (for furs) in the same year, and Madrid in 1914.² The creation of bona fide outlets complete with in-house ateliers perpetuated couture's aesthetic abroad and maintained the high levels of craftsmanship expected of this industry. However, France remained the home of couture, with a 'Made in Paris' label an evocative signifier of the city of style.

The quality of French textile design was, like the couture industry with which it became embedded, a matter of national pride. Centred in Lyon, where deluxe silks had been designed and handwoven for generations, the *Grande Fabrique* (silk industry) was characterized by its inventiveness and high quality, with a reputation, as Lesley Ellis Miller explains, that 'had grown as the result of the state sponsorship of luxury trades since the late seventeenth century, and the formal establishment of haute couture from 1868'.³ Where Napoleon III (1808–73) had encouraged the imperial court to patronize Lyonnaise silks and velvets, so Worth followed suit, ordering vast quantities of plain silk which was fashionable in the 1860s and, as his taste became more ornate, buying up old stock in line with his historicist tendencies as well as commissioning elaborate designs, with some woven to shape. So dense were some of the custom weaves that the designer often left the selvedge exposed; too stiff to be turned, he incorporated it into the garment's decorative composition.⁴ This did not go unnoticed by the novelist Émile Zola (1840–1902), for whom no observational detail was too small not to borrow: 'People won't talk about anything else, the blue and silver selvedge [sic] will be

² The House of Worth was taken over by Paquin in 1954 but continued to operate under the name of Worth. Both firms closed their doors for the last time on 1 July 1956.

³ Lesley Ellis Miller, 'Perfect Harmony: Textile Manufacturers and Haute Couture 1947–57', in Claire Wilcox (ed.), *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London, 1947–57* (London: V&A Publishing, 2007), 118.

⁴ Jan G. Reeder, *High Style: Masterworks from the Brooklyn Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010), 40.

known from one end of France to the other',⁵ he wrote of the 'Paris-Paradise' silk faille, woven specially for his fictional department store *The Ladies' Paradise*. A parable of commodity culture and desire, the novel is infused with the erotic charge of fabric and the transformative power of fashion. 'What I want to do,' Zola stated, 'is write the poem of modern activity'.⁶

Inspired by the commercial and creative success of couture, department stores in major cities began to make up Parisian designs to measure for their local clientele, whether in New York, Toronto, or Argentina, using couture approved textiles shipped from France: 'As a wider clientele became able to acquire fashionable dress, the industry adapted – and by the mid-nineteenth century was very aware that the department stores were one of their key markets.'⁷ The availability of ready-to-wear versions of couture styles made being *à la mode* an increasingly achievable aim for the middle classes, setting in motion a system of supply and demand that was renewed each season by the latest news from Paris. *The New York Times* (founded in 1851), for example, regularly covered French fashion, well before the formalizing of bi-annual collections became part of couture's economic and aesthetic structure.⁸ Aware that some French fashion was too adventurous for American markets, couture houses also began to create 'Fords', after the mass-produced Ford Model T automobile – a term first applied by American *Vogue* in October 1926 to Gabrielle Chanel's (1883–1971) revolutionary 'little black dress' (the comparison was not liked by Chanel) – that were easily adaptable for replication via paper pattern and fabric toile. As Victoria

⁵ Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames/The Ladies' Paradise* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1883; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

⁶ Cited in Brian Nelson, introduction to Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, ix.

⁷ Lesley Ellis Miller, email correspondence 20 June 2021. See also Caroline R. Milbank, *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style* (New York: Abrams, 1989); Alexandra Palmer (ed.), *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); J. P. Daughton, 'When Argentina Was "French": Rethinking Cultural Politics and European Imperialism in Belle-Époque Buenos Aires', *Journal of Modern History*, 80/4 (2008), 831–64.

⁸ Each couture house was required to show 100 high-quality designs in order to conform to the requirements of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, established in 1911.

and Albert Museum curator James Laver explained, a 'designer' toile was 'supplied with full directions for making it up, and although the original dress may have cost a hundred thousand francs, it was now possible to sell a simplified version for as little as fifty dollars'.⁹

The complexity and multi-layered nature of couture demanded quantities of high-quality and specialist fabrics, much of it created especially for, and in collaboration with, the couture industry – exquisite, handwoven silks from Lyon, embroidered cottons and lace from Switzerland, and later Italy, quality woollens from the mills of Britain, and other materials from further afield, including India – while surface trimmings from fabric flowers to feather work, and buttons to embroidery were supplied by the flotilla of specialist workshops that populated Paris, many with their roots in the eighteenth-century luxury trade.¹⁰ Finally, the composition would be 'signed' with an identifying cloth label stitched on as the very last act in a gown's creation. In Worth's case, this constituted a facsimile of his own autograph 'C. Worth', 'thereby introducing the hand of the master, albeit in woven form' (Figure 37.1).¹¹ So potent was this sartorial signifier – 'My signature to their gown

⁹ James Laver, *A Concise History of Costume* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1969), 246. Elizabeth Anne Coleman in *The Opulent Era: Fashions of Worth, Doucet and Pingat* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 42, suggests toiles of Worth gowns could be bought in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁰ With thanks to Lesley Ellis Miller, who notes that the number of handlooms was at its height in 1860–70 with more than 100,000 in operation. Variety became key: 'Already by 1874, the brocaded fabrics were a very small proportion of what was being made and the increase in the range of mixed fabrics was the major development; crepe and gauze production commanded a much greater share than previously.' Email correspondence 20 June 2021. Lesley E. Miller, 'Paris-Lyon-Paris: Dialogue in the Design and Distribution of Patterned Silks in the Eighteenth Century', in Robert Fox and Anthony Turner (eds.), *Luxury Trades and Consumerism in Ancien Régime Paris: Studies in the History of the Skilled Workforce* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 139–67.

¹¹ Diana de Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1980), 135. With thanks to Edwina Ehrman who notes that Worth may have drawn on an existing practice in mainstream fashion: 'with a few exceptions, labels for garments and accessories started with items which were produced in quantity, especially in fields where there were competing manufacturers, first as printed paper labels, for example for shoes and hats, and then as fabric labels, which were certainly attached to some men's tailored outerwear by the late 1840s'. Email correspondence 17 May 2021.



Figure 37.1 Charles Frederick Worth, detail of label in dress made for the imperial Russian court, silk, silver lamé, crystals, sequins, Paris, c. 1888. Sepia Times / Universal Images group via Getty Images.

suffices!', Worth declared – that by the late twentieth century the word 'brand' had become interchangeable with 'label' as a form of shorthand for high-status fashion. These labels constitute a roll call for the generations of *auteurs* that have directed the course of Western fashion and sustained this rarefied discipline's survival through a century and a half of global change.

From the intricacy of its making to its financial weight, creative connections to photography and film and, more recently, its place in queer and black history, couture's many complexities (and seductive qualities) have been the subject of extensive scholarship, numerous monographs, and a plethora of exhibitions worldwide, while its importance to museum collections and monetary value on the open market continues to rise.¹² The creation of high-level

¹² Judith Clark and Amy de la Haye with Jeffrey Horsley (eds.), *Exhibiting Fashion: Before and After 1971* (London: V&A Publishing, 2014). The book usefully includes what the authors describe as 'An Incomplete Inventory of Fashion Exhibitions since 1971', 170–245. Two of the most well attended exhibitions of recent times were created in collaboration with the fashion

fashion has many potential narratives, for its story is inevitably interwoven with political and social history, technology and digitization, and, in recent years, the emergence of Chinese and Asian markets.

De Marly recounts that during Worth's early years working as a draper in London 'his greatest pleasure lay in helping to empty the packing cases of gowns, mantles and hats that would arrive from Paris'.¹³ This, perhaps, was an experience not dissimilar to that of museum staff receiving a cargo for a fashion exhibition. In keeping with the compelling properties of haute couture and the sublimity of its craft, this chapter will re-address couture in France, England, and North America through the history of the House of Worth, but also through the lens of the curator. Paying close attention to the unique power of the object and the archive, it will consider how his paradigm for couture provided an adaptable model that was as flexible as any of the fabrics that dressed the modern age.

PARIS AND THE BIRTH OF THE AUTEUR

My invention is the secret of my success. I don't want people to invent for themselves; if they did, I should lose half my trade.¹⁴

The House of Worth spanned the lavish heights of France's Second Empire (1852–70) to the 1960s when couture was in decline, challenged by the rise of the global ready-to-wear industry and a new youth culture emanating from London and also France. Worth's story – from Lincolnshire-born draper to favoured designer of Empress Eugénie (1826–1920) and from textile connoisseur to marketing genius – built on the late eighteenth-century precedent of Paris as a hotbed of talent which, to its incomparable enrichment, attracted – and continues to attract – designers from all over the

house itself: *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* was first presented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2011 before being staged by the V&A in 2015 where it received 493,043 visitors; *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* was first presented by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, in 2017 before its 2019 iteration at the V&A where it received 595,000 visitors.

¹³ De Marly, *Worth: Father of Couture*, 16. ¹⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, 135.

world.¹⁵ Worth arrived in Paris in 1845, became head salesman at Gagelin-Opigez, Chazelle & Cie, vendor of luxury textiles, mantles, and shawls, and by 1858 had set up, first as *Worth et Bobergh Maison Spéciale, Robes et Manteaux, Confectionnés, Soieries, Haute Nouveautés* then independently as Worth, on 7 rue de la Paix, an aristocratic residential street, which became a fashionable shopping district known for its jewellers (Figure 37.2).¹⁶ By the 1870s, the designer's fame was so great that he was satirized by Zola in his 1872 novel *La Curée* as 'the illustrious Worms, the couturier of genius to whom the great ladies of the Second Empire bowed down'.¹⁷ Worth survived the exile of his greatest client, Empress Eugénie, and the 1871 Commune of Paris (a socialist insurrection following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War), going on to dictate French fashion for the rest of the century.¹⁸ By the time of his death in 1895 the house employed 1,200 seamstresses, scores of cutters, tailors, and vendeuses according to De Marly and, under the stewardship of his sons Jean-Philippe and Gaston-Lucien had a five million franc per annum turnover, producing thousands of garments a year for international royalty, famous actresses and singers, and an international, moneyed clientele that stretched from Europe to Russia and from North America to Japan.¹⁹

¹⁵ Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (1988; repr., London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Coleman, *Opulent Era*; De Marly, *Worth: Father of Couture*; Amy de la Haye and Valerie Mendes (eds.), *The House of Worth: Portrait of an Archive, 1890-1914* (London: V&A Publishing, 2014); Chantal Trubert-Tollu, Françoise Tétart-Vittu, and Jean-Marie Martin-Hattemberg, *The House of Worth, 1858-1954: The Birth of Haute Couture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017).

¹⁶ Cartier opened on the rue de la Paix in 1898. Worth's niece later married into the Cartier family.

¹⁷ Émile Zola, *La Curée*, trans. Brian Nelson (1871; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 90.

¹⁸ Eugénie was introduced to Worth by the socialite Pauline de Metternich. See *Souvenirs de la Princesse Pauline de Metternich (1859-1871)*, trans. Abigail Joseph (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1922).

¹⁹ De Marly, *Worth: Father of Couture*, 101; Christopher Breward, 'Worth, Charles Frederick (1825-1895)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29988>.



Figure 37.2 Jean Béraud, *Workers Leaving the House of Paquin, rue de la Paix, Paris, c. 1900*. Collection of Musée Carnavalet, Paris. Fine Art Images / Heritage Images via Getty Images.

The beguiling backdrop to Worth's domination of fashion from the mid-nineteenth century was provided by Baron Haussmann's (1809–91) transformation of Paris.²⁰ In a process that lasted seventeen years from 1854, the old city was swept away to be replaced with grand boulevards, landscaped gardens, an ornate opera house, and glassed arcades.²¹ The stage was set for a new operation of style. As couturiers began to take over the private mansions that lined the premier streets of the city, so the ground level became a glamorous threshold to the upper salons of the couture house, offering a sophisticated alternative to the traditional practice of female dressmakers visiting clients in their own homes. One-time residential floors 'over the shop' were converted into showrooms,

²⁰ See Joan De Jean, *How Paris Became Paris: The Invention of the Modern City* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²¹ The Bois de Boulogne was based on Hyde Park, for Louis Napoléon had lived in exile in London and was taken with the city's wide roads and green spaces. The opulent Palais Garnier opera house was completed in 1875.

storerooms, and offices, while the *frou* (dressmaking) and *tailleur* (tailoring) workshops where hundreds of seamstresses were employed were sited on the top floor to take advantage of the natural light, as is still the practice today. Worth, swiftly followed by fellow couturiers such as Emile Pingat (1820–1901) – known for luxurious outerwear – and Jacques Doucet (1853–1929) – known for the delicacy of his confections – became part of a fraternity of extravagantly elite establishments, joining Hermès (founded in 1837), Cartier (founded in 1847), and Louis Vuitton (founded in 1854) with whom Worth collaborated when the company moved to the rue de la Paix. Paris, like a jewel box itself, offered everything required for the consumer of style.²²

The birth of couture came in a century of scientific discovery – ‘a period of vast transformations and possibilities in terms of a fashion-scape for men and women’ – that inspired innovative textile production, facilitated an expansion in global export markets through new modes of transport, and saw the rise of magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar* (founded in New York in 1867), and *La Mode Illustrée* (1860–1937) which had an extensive readership in America and Europe.²³ Like its British equivalent *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* (1852–81) it included colour fashion plates of Parisian styles – many by Worth – as well as tissue-paper dress patterns, thus encouraging what Christopher Beward described as ‘an engagement with a luxurious fantasy which bore no obvious connection to the material reality of the

²² See Chapter 41 by Julia Petrov in this volume. Louis Vuitton’s trunk exhibit was shown in the ‘Leather Palace’ at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. An expensive investment, trunks were an essential means of transporting and protecting expensive new wardrobes and became associated with the peripatetic life of the wealthy. Poiret and other designers’ road shows were known as ‘trunk tours’ because of the quantity of garments that needed to be carried. Oriole Cullen notes that British couturiers often designed gowns around valuable family jewellery. ‘David Sassoon and various others had stories of being asked to design dresses around family jewellery ... sometimes the designers were sent off to Garrards to see the pieces in storage.’ Email correspondence with Oriole Cullen, 27 July 2021.

²³ Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello, ‘Between Luxury and Leisure: The Nineteenth Century’, in Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil (eds.), *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 267.

majority of readers, beyond responding to their desires and drawing them into a language of consumption'.²⁴

Consumer behaviours were themselves undergoing change. The increased availability of luxury goods coupled with the rise from the early nineteenth century of an affluent and aspirational upper middle class rendered shopping an important leisure pursuit. Moreover, the opening of department stores – such as the *Bon Marché* (the model for Zola's 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*: 'flights of lace, quivering muslin, triumphal wreaths of silk') and the *Magasin du Louvre*, both established in Paris by the 1870s – coincided with the expansion of window-shopping or *faire du lèche-vitrine* ('to lick the shop window') as a form of performative leisure activity.²⁵ Shopping in public entailed seeing and being seen, and open displays became part of urban life in cities across the world, while mirrored and glassed walkways and arcades allowed strollers to review their reflected selves in motion.

EXCLUSIVITY, INTIMACY, AND THE 'MAN-MILLINER'

While glass shopfronts revealed the merchandise of the department store for all to see, the couture house dissociated itself from retail: more resembling a private residence, with its machinations hidden from the outside world, entering a couture house entailed a unique aesthetic and sartorial experience: at Worth's there were swagged curtains, rolls of silk spilling over furniture, cushioned divans, screens, hothouse flower arrangements, and *objects d'art* all of which formed an aesthetic aura where women of wealth and taste mingled, united by their loyalty to the *auteur*. It was also theatrical; clients journeyed through a series of ever more intimate

²⁴ *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* was the first English serial to make dress patterns and the latest fashions available to a mass audience. Published by Samuel Beeton, it included contributions from Isabella Beeton, resulting in her *Book of Household Management* (1861). Paper patterns were popularized in America by James McCall and Ebenezer Butterick from the 1860s. Christopher Breward, 'Femininity and Consumption: The Problem of the Late Nineteenth-Century Fashion Journal', *Journal of Design History*, 7/2 (1994), 89.

²⁵ Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, 90, 250.

antechambers to the final salon which had closed shutters and gas jet lighting, allowing them to view themselves in evening attire:

Enormous mirrors rose from floor to ceiling; the softest and most splendid carpets covered the floors; tremendously tall Mercuries in grand liveries and powdered wigs, were sprinkled through the rooms; an exquisite and luxurious budoir [sic] offered the attractions of a standing lunch composed of "every delicacy," to the fair patronesses of the new house, while waiting their turn to be ushered into the sanctum of the great "artist."²⁶

So observed *The New York Times* in 1864, also noting the presence of Madame Worth, who presided over the space 'with a mixture of haughtiness and blandishment that seems to have done its work on all who entered it'. Here, in a setting that emulated and perhaps surpassed the domestic interiors of Worth's rich clients, the designer reimagined fashion as a series of seasonal collections for which he determined style, materials, trimmings and accessories and, as has been customary ever since, paraded the forthcoming season's ideas on mannequins, beginning with his wife, Marie Worth, as the first living model.

To its critics, one of couture's affronts was a shift in power. Where once a seamstress would attend a client at home and make up garments to their instruction and choice of material, now obeisance went in the opposite direction. A potential customer was obliged to visit the couturier's house, submitting to the authority of the *auteur* in hitherto prohibited ways. While some male designers, including Worth and, later, the Spanish-born couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895–1972), had occasion to touch their clients during fittings as a consequence of their desire to model directly onto the body, others, such as Jacques Doucet and Christian Dior (1905–57) – 'Although I very rarely go into the fitting room, I have all its echoes sedulously reported to me' – preferred to conduct proceedings during the design stage by pointing at parts of the unfinished garment with a baton.²⁷ The dynamic of a couture house with its focus on the figure, clothed or

²⁶ *The New York Times*, Thursday, 3 March 1864.

²⁷ Christian Dior, *Dior by Dior: The Autobiography of Christian Dior*, trans. Antonia Fraser (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1957), 65.

unclothed, was echoed by the intimacy – albeit mediated by cloth – that was necessary between *auteur* and client to produce fashionable perfection. Granted the liberty of ‘creasing gauze over the bosoms of princesses, placing ribbons and flowers on the bodices of duchesses’, the *auteur* was also afforded unprecedented proximity to those above him in station.²⁸

Another of the hedonic privileges of being dressed by Worth and subsequent couturiers was that their creations were, through a combination of stylistic nuances and quality of design, recognizable to those in the know (and when Worth was at his most famous and other couturiers fewer, even those *not* in the know). Given money (and an introduction) was all that was required to enter into the world of couture, many actresses and singers such as Sarah Bernhardt, Eleanora Duse, Gabrielle Réjane, and Lillie Langtry (whom Worth dressed for her debut appearance in the comedy *She Stoops to Conquer* on the London stage in 1881) became favoured clients. Dressing actresses for the stage as well as in their private lives was an effective way of publicizing a house’s designs, for their every appearance was reported by the press. While this provided a rich source of income for couturiers – as did the vogue for costumes for fancy-dress balls and masquerades – it led to disquiet about fashion’s ability to dissemble.²⁹ ‘Reading’ fashion therefore became a means to quantify social status in an era of social ambiguity and what Caroline Evans calls the ‘slippage’ between celebrities, mannequins, and respectable women of fashion.³⁰ It also constituted a flattering form of attention whether in the form of mutual admiration by those of equal privilege or via the gaze of the disadvantaged spectator, thus giving couture a currency that went beyond value; or rather, a ‘valuation’ not factored on mere materials and labour but

²⁸ Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire*, 417, cited in Joseph, ‘“A Wizard of Silks and Tulle”’, 256–7.

²⁹ Private fêtes and extravagant balls remained popular with high society up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

³⁰ Caroline Evans, ‘The Ontology of the Fashion Model’, *AA Files*, 63, available at www.readingdesign.org/fashion-model. See also Caroline Evans, *The Mechanical Smile: Modernism and the First Fashion Shows in France and America, 1900–1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

constituting an unquantifiable significance.³¹ Many complied, but many complained: 'What an absurdity ... eighty thousand francs for a few dresses! How is it possible that any woman could wear, in a couple of years, eighty thousand francs' worth of gowns?' said Worth's early champion, the Princess Metternich (1836–1921).³²

With his retail roots, Worth was more than aware of profit and loss, but as begetter of a new profession, he had the confidence to seek validation in art establishment terms, and charge comparable prices – given his own self-importance, the historicism of his designs, and the regular appearances of his dresses in society portraits by 'couturier-painters' such as Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805–73), John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), Giovanni Boldini (1842–1931), and Jacques Joseph ('James') Tissot (1836–1902).³³ Like other creative individuals working in a field without academy status, such as photography (the artist-photographer Nadar attempted to challenge this by wearing an artist's tunic and boldly signing his photographs), Worth – as depicted in Nadar's photographic portrait – adopted artistic dress, donning a loose gown, beret, and soft cravat for, unlike the *couturière*, he could not be his own model. Poiret, who would work for the company after Worth's death, emulated this aspirational stance by extrovert dressing (boldly striped suits, loud waistcoats, and spats) and even more overtly comparing his fashion – Dior likened its 'bold, curving lines' to a Boldini picture – to portraiture: 'Visit the great

³¹ Worth's charges were calculated essentially by doubling the costs of materials and trebling the cost of labour. Trubert-Tollu et al., *The House of Worth*, 157.

³² Princess Metternich, who 'made' Worth by introducing him to the Empress Eugénie, quoted in *The New York Times*, Thursday, 3 March 1864.

³³ 'Where is the modern life in all these paintings which a couturier like Charles Worth could have painted, if he'd had the temperament of a painter?' Joris-Karl Husymans, *Modern Art*, trans. Brendan King (Cambridge: Dedalus, 1883), 55. Paul Poiret noted that 'all the trends of fashion were revealed' at private view days of painting exhibitions. Paul Poiret, *King of Fashion: The Autobiography of Paul Poiret*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931; repr. London: V&A Publishing, 2009), 15. Other sites of display included the racetrack, the Bois de Boulogne and the Champs-Élysées where couturiers often sent mannequins to mingle amidst the crowds, dressed in the latest – and often provocative – fashions, causing a tension notably captured by photographers such as the Seeberger Brothers and Jacques-Henri Lartigue.

dressmakers, and you will not feel that you are in a shop, but in the studio of an artist, who intends to make of your dresses a portrait and a likeness of yourself.³⁴ In a natural extension to this vindication of couture's artistry (and a move to distinguish bespoke from ready-to-wear), some couturiers including Poiret, the London designer Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon, 1863–1935), and later Christian Dior insisted on the uniqueness of each gown by titling them, so imparting an added level of mystery and intrigue. Imaginative titles also implied a wider narrative – a tendency perhaps originally inspired by the craze for theatrical tableaux and fancy-dress balls in the nineteenth century, all of which provided custom for couturiers. The trend was taken further when the Italian-born *couturière* Elsa Schiaparelli (1890–1973) – as much artist as designer – named her thematic, Surrealist inspired collections: *Stop Look and Listen* (1935), *Music* and *Paris* (1937), *Zodiac*, *Pagan*, and *Circus* (1938), and *Commedia dell'arte* (1939), so creating a precedent which saw fruition in the descriptively titled collections of theatrical, narrative driven designers of the late twentieth century such as John Galliano (b. 1960) and Alexander McQueen (1969–2010).

VALUE AND DIVERSIFICATION

The complex status of the couturier was dependent on their detachment from trade. Couture garments were not priced until completed and therefore, unlike ready-to-wear, could not be discounted (in *Vogue* fashion shoots they are still 'POA'). However, diversification was necessary for a house to survive, whether through beauty products, accessories, or replication of design ideas. For once, the House of Worth was behind the game with perfume, with its first fragrance *Dans la Nuit* and bestseller *Je Reviens* not introduced until 1924 and 1932 respectively. While Poiret's foundational *Perfumes de Rosine* launched in 1911 – complete with hand-painted bottles and poetic captions by Paul Verlaine – did not save the house from closure following its

³⁴ Dior, *Dior by Dior*, 16; Paul Poiret, *My First Fifty Years*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931; repr. London: V&A Publishing, 2019), 178.

auteur's bankruptcy, *Chanel No. 5*, launched in 1921 with its blend of synthetic and natural elements, pharmaceutical bottle, and monochrome simplicity, spoke, like Chanel's designs themselves, to a new modernist aesthetic that re-proposed luxury as the absence of ostentation. Chanel's perfume making operation provided an income for the designer throughout her lifetime and has augmented the company's couture collections ever since. Similarly, the success of Lanvin's perfumes, in particular *Arpège* created in 1924 with its black and gold glass bottle and image of Jeanne Lanvin with her daughter (designed by Paul Iribe), supported the company during leaner years, ensuring that France's longest standing fashion house still survives today in its original location on the Faubourg Saint-Honoré.³⁵ Perfume sales flourished in the 1930s, filling the pages of fashion magazines such as *Vogue* with promise, so it was not surprising that, ever-shrewd, Christian Dior launched *Miss Dior* almost in the same breath as his first 'New Look' collection in 1947. Funded by Marcel Boussac, the 'cotton king' of France, Dior's empire was built on the nexus of fabric, fashion, and fragrance, inextricably linking the marketing of couture as an immersive discipline, appealing to all the senses.³⁶

As an easily exportable and transportable commodity, fragrance had worldwide impact and, with seductive advertising campaigns (houses were loath to advertise couture itself), appealed both to those who could not afford couture clothing and those who could. Unlike fashion, perfume – despite its ineffable quality – offered constancy and inspired loyalty, resulting in repeat purchases triggered by a sense of personal identification and 'ownership' of what was in fact a mass-produced, if reassuringly expensive, commodity. While new perfumes have proliferated, the appeal of fragrances invented, in some cases, nearly a century ago remains.³⁷ Fragrance and beauty products have also ensured the survival of less substantial couture houses as the communities of wealthy

³⁵ In 2018 Chanel published their annual turnover, of \$10 billion, for the first time since the company's foundation in 1910. In 2020 it revealed the impact of the global pandemic. 'Chanel Forecasts "Difficult" Two Years for Luxury amid Covid-19', *Financial Times* (ft.com), 18 June 2020.

³⁶ Dior, *Dior by Dior*, 18–20.

³⁷ A personal note here: my working-class grandmother always wore *Chanel No. 5*.

women that Worth and his peers dressed gradually diminished. Today, although the couture collections are as spectacular as ever, the number of committed couture clients number hundreds rather than the thousands of the past, so rendering the sale of the 'name' in other, more reliable iterations, essential.

GLOBAL PROMOTION AND TRANSATLANTIC TRADE

As the time-consuming changes of dress demanded of women throughout the day lessened in the late nineteenth century, so new leisure pursuits and opportunities for employment increased, reflected in practical, ankle-length walking suits which played to London's tailoring strengths, offering real competition to Parisian houses (they were a particular speciality of the London and Paris-based firms of Redfern and Creed). The *costume trotteur* – 'Sometimes Princesses take the omnibus, and go on foot in the streets' – promised freedom, and found its mechanical equivalent in *le trottoir roulant* (moving walkway), one of the novelties of the 1900 Paris Exposition.³⁸ The walkway ran in a 3.5 km circle, and had two articulated wooden platforms, one moving at 8 km per hour, the other at half speed, while the new Paris Metro rumbled below as it connected key points in the city just as the exposition, in common with other world fairs, connected, fetishized, and kaleidoscoped world cultures.

Nearby, at the Palais du Costume in a final gathering of *fin de siècle* fashion, P. Barroin, Boué Soeurs, Callot Soeurs, Doucet, Félix, Paquin, Raudnitz et Cie, Redfern, Rouff, Worth, and others curated a spectacular display which included over fifty lifelike wax mannequins set in domestic tableaux and lit with electric lights. As well as admiring the latest fashions, visitors could see recreations of historical styles, thus rooting the production of couture in history. An expensively produced souvenir folio of hand-painted prints of the outfits could even be purchased, *Les Toilettes de la Collectivité de la Couture, Les Chefs d'Oeuvre à l'Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1900*, thus foreshadowing the

³⁸ Gaston Worth cited in Poiret, *My First Fifty Years*, 38; Anna Jackson, *EXPO International Expositions, 1851–2010* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), 25.

enduring popularity of the fashion exhibition and attendant catalogue.³⁹ As ever, the couturier's creations were valuable currency. In October 1900, the New York dressmaker's magazine *The Pictorial Review* contained 'exact reproductions, from photographs on the spot, of 48 costumes by the leading dressmakers of Paris' from the exhibition. A pattern was available for each for just one dollar.⁴⁰

How was couture to survive in an era of mass production and social change? One of the contributing factors to its success had been the increase in transatlantic trade, brought about by the development of luxury ocean liners that could cross the Atlantic in a matter of days rather than weeks. Opportunistically, couturiers staged fashion shows to a captive audience and paid mannequins to mingle among the passengers who could place orders that would be telegraphed ahead and delivered on arrival. Worth also cannily placed promotional brochures in the first-class cabins printed in English, French, and Spanish (a practice that was to continue with the birth of air travel) as well as employing British saleswomen in his house to service the American, British, and Russian communities that over-wintered in France. Mail order was also an option, as Worth's son Jean-Philippe (1856–1926) explained: 'People write to us from all over America. We often send photographs of some of our newest creations to all parts of the world.'⁴¹ With the great fortunes that had been made by the

³⁹ Exhibitions of historical fashions had previously taken place in Paris, staged in museums and galleries by costume collectors. Artists such as Talbot Hughes collected clothing to dress the models for his genre scenes. Theatres built large collections of historical dress which was often altered to fit modern body shapes. The collection of the V&A has numerous examples of altered garments, often identifiable by a theatrical stamp, paper label, or number printed onto the lining.

⁴⁰ Christina Johnson, "'The Art of Dressing Has Never Been Manifested with So Much Brilliancy': Fashion and the Paris Exposition of 1900", FIDM Museum, <https://fidmmuseum.org/2011/02/the-art-of-dressing-has-never-been-manifested-with-so-much-brilliancy-fashion-and-the-paris-expositi.html>.

⁴¹ Poiret recalled leafing 'through the albums which told of the exuberances of good Father Worth the couturier of the Tuileries. They were full of samples and water-colour sketches' when he worked for Worth in the late 1890s. Poiret, *The King of Fashion*, 38–9. See also de la Haye and Mendes (eds.), *The House of Worth*. The Worth-Paquin archive held in the collection of the V&A includes 187 files of house records, fashion plates, engravings,

building of new railway networks, leading to urban expansion and industry, cultural grand tours around Europe became part of the sentimental education of American heiresses, with many – such as Jennie Jerome Churchill – marrying into European aristocracy. In his 1881 novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, the story of ‘a certain young woman affronting her destiny’, Henry James recounts the psychological and social impact of the meeting of the new monied, commercial classes of America and the old aristocratic, titled families of Europe, and the particular influence Paris had on cultural energies.⁴² Here, his protagonist Isabel Archer is told ‘Why Paris leads everywhere. You can’t go anywhere unless you come here first. Everyone that comes to Europe has got to pass through.’⁴³ Many ‘dollar Princesses’ did pass through, commissioning entire wardrobes – ‘I mean to take her to Paris. I mean to get her clothing’ – and often their wedding dresses too.⁴⁴ The collection of the V&A holds one such, a pearl-encrusted and lace-embellished gown made by Worth for a daughter of Isaac Merritt Singer, the American sewing machine magnate, for her London marriage in the early 1880s (Figure 37.3).⁴⁵ Worth remarked rather candidly: ‘I like to dress them, for, as I say occasionally, “they have faith, figures and francs” – faith to believe in me, figures that I can put into shape, francs to pay my bills. Yes, I like to dress Americans.’⁴⁶

The American markets were not all about wealth, for its supremacy in mass-manufacture constituted a tangible threat to the profitable offshoots of couture that were entangled with its artistic production from the outset. Despite Worth’s deflation of the

drawings, and photographs, along with documents relating to court dress regulations, dating from 1825 to 1952.

⁴² Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin, [1881 ed.] 1973), x–xi.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 214–15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41. The romance of American money passed into popular culture with the musical play *The Dollar Princess* (London and New York, 1909). Lily Elsie played the part of Alice Conder on the London stage with dresses by Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon).

⁴⁵ V&A museum number: T.63/4&A-1976. See also Edwina Ehrman, *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashions* (London: V&A Publishing, 2011).

⁴⁶ De Marly, *Worth: Father of Couture*, 135. Worth noted the extravagance of Russian and Chilean clients but observed that French, English, and German women had more restraint.



Figure 37.3 Charles Frederick Worth, Wedding Dress, embroidered satin and velvet, Paris and London, 1879–80. Jacques Boyer / Roger Viollet via Getty Images.

crinoline in the 1870s in favour of the bustle and train – achieved by the use of internal ties which gathered the skirts to form an accumulation of drapery at the rear – and introduction of the svelte, tailored princess line (after Alexandra, Princess of Wales 1844–1925) in the 1870s, the slow pace of change of silhouette in the nineteenth century had benefited couturiers embarking on ready-to-wear, for variables could be achieved through surface modifications rather than dramatic structural shifts, offering a tiered price structure based on the number of trimmings and quality of fabric. As Worth explained in an 1871 interview, a client with aspirations to be *à la mode* could just as easily spend £400 as £4,000 a year, for

he developed a means of producing quantities of garments using standardized parts such as sleeves, bodices, and skirts. These could be translated into toiles or paper patterns and quickly assembled using a sewing machine, with customized beadwork, bows, and suchlike added by hand, thus still giving the impression that it was a 'Worth', for an outfit's quintessential value lay in being a creation identifiably from his house.⁴⁷ However, As Nancy Troy observed, one consequence was that 'success in defining and circulating a distinctive style, whether in art or in clothing, assured its vulnerability to copying and pastiche'.⁴⁸

One of Parisian couture's unique characteristics is that it has long been a regulated collective, established in the full knowledge that strength to fight 'knock-offs' lay in numbers and in legislation. One of Worth's most significant contributions was his involvement in the foundation of couture's trade union in 1868. First known as the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture, des Confectionneurs et des Tailleurs pour Dame*, in 1911 it became the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, thus distinguishing the most elite houses from other dressmaking and tailoring trades. The Chambre was also committed to investment in couture's thousands of workers. Established in 1929, the Paris dressmaking schools, *Les Écoles de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, were created to train a skilled workforce of *petites-mains* (seamstresses) for France's vast fashion industry which, by the late 1930s, had an export value of approximately 2,000 million francs.⁴⁹ After the shock of the German occupation of Paris during the Second World War, and the potential demise of couture, the term 'haute couture' was trade-marked and the association renamed the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* as it still remains today.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ De Marly, *Worth: Father of Couture*, 100. See also Chapter 35 by Véronique Pouillard in this volume.

⁴⁸ Nancy Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 7.

⁴⁹ Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 19.

⁵⁰ Worth's descendants continued to serve on various official French fashion bodies up to the 1950s when the house closed. For an excellent analysis of the

IMAGERY AND IMITATION

With the twentieth century came an increased connectivity. *Japonisme* had already had a profound influence on dress culture in Europe and North America, introducing asymmetry, a tendency unfamiliar in fashion before then, and influencing both textile design and form, as obi-like sashes, wrapover bodices, and kimono sleeves became part of the couturier's lexicon, a new fluidity foundational on the swells of the body rather than the intractability of the corset. The focus on the rear of the dress that the bustle and train of the 1870s invited had encouraged the frequent depiction by painters of women of fashion coquettishly glancing backwards, a pose first seen in the Japanese prints that had begun to circulate in Paris. In Tissot's painting *The Ball* (1878) the same sinuous pose suggests the drama of arrival. However, amidst the crush of a social event, it is the yellow cascades of fabric of the subject's bustle and train that take centre stage, its textile restlessness emphasized by the pattern of Japanese carp that circle the skirt's hem (Figure 37.4).⁵¹

Writing of Worth's 'painterly approach to pattern design (*ebamoyo* in Japanese)', Akiko Fukai describes how 'the entire surface of the garment is treated as a single design field of canvas, a mode of decoration common in Japanese kimono'.⁵² This approach was made manifest in a ball gown of 1898, now in the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection, by Jean-Philippe Worth made from sky blue silk satin patterned with rhinestone glittered butterflies. The fabric was woven specifically for the ensemble for, as they ascend, they become smaller as if flying away, thus giving the impression of fluttering movement which would have been enhanced as the wearer walked. Fashion's enduring recourse to nature as design inspiration found a particular synergy with

creative, financial, and emotional cost of the Occupation see Lou Taylor and Marie McLoughlin (eds.), *Paris Fashion and World War Two: Global Diffusion and Nazi Control* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

⁵¹ In the collection of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

⁵² Akiko Fukai, 'Japonism in Fashion', in *Japonism in Fashion: Tokyo* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Kurieishon Fesutibaru Jikkō Iinkai, 1996), 6, www.kci.or.jp/en/research/dresstudy/pdf/e_Fukai_Japonism_in_Fashion.pdf (accessed 10 July 2021).



Figure 37.4 James Tissot, *The Ball*, oil on canvas, 1878. 90 cm × 50 cm. Collection of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Art Media / Print Collector / via Getty Images.

Japonisme's emphasis on the symbolic and seasonal beauty of the natural world:

Beginning in 1890, Lyon textiles emphasized typically Japanese motifs, such as chrysanthemums, flowing water, flowers and birds, swallows and waves, and various grasses. These represented a clear shift in point of view, in style and subject matter, from previous Lyon silks. Chrysanthemums, a frequently featured theme, came to be favored by Westerners in part through Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* or as a symbol of Japan's imperial family, whose images appeared in French fashion magazines. Thereafter, and until the 1920s, the blossoms appeared over and over in fashion as an emblem of Japan.⁵³

⁵³ Ibid.

Chrysanthemums indeed feature in another evening dress (also in the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection) which because of its historicism is perhaps one of Charles Frederick Worth's last creations. While its red velvet sleeves have Tudor overtones, the fabric is startlingly contemporary in its decorative abstraction. Showered with gold chrysanthemum petals falling on an iridescent blue satin ground, the composition seems to allude to life's (and fashion's) transience, a recurring theme in Japanese literature which, like its arts, also became popularized in Europe in the nineteenth century as translations of classical poems became increasingly available (Figure 37.5). *Poèmes de la Libellule* (Poems of the Dragonfly), an anthology of Japanese classical poems, published in 1885 by the French poet and Chinese and Japanese scholar Judith Gautier (1845–1917) had particular impact because of the beauty of its design, with each poem over-printed onto illustrations by the Paris-based artist Yamamoto Hôsui.⁵⁴

How impatiently I planted and longed to see:
 You chrysanthemum
 Did I ever imagine
 We would meet in fading autumn

FIN DE SIÈCLE

All fashion must eventually also fade. In *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913) Marcel Proust's character the painter Elstir, in answer to Albertine's 'Tell me, do you think women's fashions for motor-ing pretty?' replies 'No, but that will come in time. You see, there are very few good couturiers at present, one or two only, Callot [Soeurs] – although they go in rather too freely for lace – Doucet,

⁵⁴ Reeder, *High Style*, 42–4. Museum numbers: 2009.300.622a–c; 2009.300.1324a, b. Gautier translated 88 poems for *Poèmes de la Libellule* sourced from early anthologies of Japanese poems compiled between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, including *Kokin Wakashū* [Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times]. I am grateful to Masami Yamada for introducing me to this poetry and for translating this poem by Ōe no Chisato (active 883–903). See also <https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/gallery0309.pdf> (accessed 12 July 2021).



Figure 37.5 House of Worth, *Evening Dress*, silk, velvet, lace and metallic passementerie, Paris, 1893. Heritage Art / Heritage Images group via Getty Images.

Chéruit, Paquin sometimes. The others are all ghastly.⁵⁵ The family firm of Doucet, based near Worth on the rue de la Paix, had specialized in fine lace and lingerie but from the 1860s became a significant player in couture under Jacques Doucet. While Worth's designs sublimated the body with their bold textile juxtapositions and formal structure, Doucet's flowing robes and sinuous tea gowns evoked the intimacy of the house's origins. In this, they offered a seductive mélange of textures that anticipated the semi-deshabillé aesthetic of London couturier Lucile, as fashion began to

⁵⁵ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 2: Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, D. J. Enright, and Terence Kilmartin (1913; repr. London: Vintage Classics, 1996), 555.

shed its many layers. Established in 1893, Lucile followed her compatriots Redfern and Kate Reily in achieving international success, founding her London house in 1895 and opening branches in New York in 1910, Paris in 1911, and Chicago in 1915.⁵⁶ In opposition to the brightness of Poiret's artist's palette, Lucile offered washes of colour like a watercolour, achieved by the layering of translucent fabrics over a neutral foundation and the creation of 'underclothes as delicate as cobwebs and as beautifully tinted as flowers'.⁵⁷ Like Worth, Lucile also showed her 'gowns of emotion' (each christened with a risqué title) on live mannequins and took this further. Having already designed costumes for the theatre she wrote: 'Slowly the idea of a mannequin parade, which would be entertaining to watch as a play, took shape in my mind. I would have glorious, goddess-like girls who would walk to and fro dressed in my models, displaying them to the best advantage to an admiring audience of women.'

It was not surprising that successful London designers should seek approbation in Paris. Ever since Worth's patron the Empress Eugenie suggested the London firm of Creed (established in the 1840s) relocate to Paris where it became known for its impeccable tailoring and perfumery, connections between Paris and London remained strong. This was partly because of proximity; international clients could travel between the two cities with ease, placing orders which would be shipped across the world oceans following their sartorial grand tours. British-born Edward Molyneux (1891–1974), Lucile's protégé, however, launched his house in Paris on the rue Royale in 1919 first, before opening a branch in London in 1933, where the discreet ambience and pearl-grey décor of his French-infused salon contributed to his mystique and success. Although many London showrooms made a living by selling copies of French designs – as a large collection of drawings

⁵⁶ London designer Kate Reily had established an international business by 1894 preceded by Redfern in the 1880s. See Jenny Lister, 'Heather Firbank and London's Couture Industry', in Cassie Davies-Strodder, Jenny Lister, and Lou Taylor (eds.), *London Society Fashion: 1905–1925* (London: V&A Publishing, 2015), 114–15.

⁵⁷ Cited in Amy de la Haye, 'Court Dressmaking in Mayfair from the 1890s to the 1920s', in Amy de la Haye and Edwina Ehrman (eds.), *London Couture 1923–1975: British Luxury* (London: V&A Publishing, 2015), 17.

in the collection of the V&A by London firm Handley-Seymour from the 1920s and 1930s shows – it was mainly after the Second World War with the establishment in 1942 of INCSOC (the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers) and Norman Hartnell's profile as royal dressmaker that London began to venture beyond tailored costumes and debutantes' gowns.⁵⁸ The number of London houses remained small but of high quality, and many British clients remained loyal despite the temptation of the Parisian houses that opened branches in London, expanding their clientele to British high society. Moreover they also captured passing international trade, for many ocean liners docked at Liverpool where wealthy passengers would travel to London before embarking on their tour of Europe. Despite London's best attempts, Paris had far more couture houses and the edge for inventiveness, alongside the inherent and historical support structures needed to adapt to change while still delivering couture at the highest level.⁵⁹ Britain, despite its proficiency in tailoring and an innovative textile industry (The West Cumberland Silk Mills, for example, was created to manufacture high quality silks and rayons for the fashion trade in 1938, including Parisian couturiers such as Christian Dior) did not threaten couture until the 1960s.⁶⁰

PERFORMATIVITY

Nor did international art movements have the same impact on London's couturiers, embedded as most of them were in the sartorial traditions and codes of the British social season. The abrupt and colourful shift in fashion brought about by Paul Poiret in the 1910s,

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Handley-Seymour was a court dressmaker best known for designing the Duchess of York's wedding gown and coronation gown when she became Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. Like many high-end London designers she also sold reproductions of Paris fashions, including Poiret, Molyneux, and Chanel for which she would have paid a fee. There are 4,863 sketches in the collection of the V&A in 48 bound volumes.

⁵⁹ Twelve in London as opposed to forty-seven in Paris 1943, a significant drop from the seventy operational in Paris just before the Second World War. Claire Wilcox, 'Introduction', in Wilcox (ed.), *The Golden Age of Couture*, 14–16.

⁶⁰ Christopher Breward and Claire Wilcox (eds.), *The Ambassador Magazine: Promoting Post-War British Fashion* (London: V&A Publishing, 2012).

however, owed a debt to successive waves of *Japonisme* and a general fervour for oriental motifs, infused with the dynamism of the Ballet Russes which revolutionized early twentieth-century art and culture. A wider sense of the interrelationship between fashion, performance, and the avant-garde became manifest in his couture house which opened in 1903 and was realized in his limited edition art albums *Les Robes de Paul Poiret racontées par Paul Iribe* (1908) – Iribe also designed Poiret's label – and *Les Choses de Paul Poiret vues par Georges Lepape* (1911), for the *pochoir* with its bright, flat colours and linearity captured the essence of Poiret's designs in a way that black and white photography could not.⁶¹ Poiret's domestic and artistic life coalesced, reflecting his vision of an integrated lifestyle encompassing fragrance, toiletries, cosmetics, and daring interior decoration. He named his perfume company *Les Parfums de Rosine* (est. 1911) after his eldest daughter and *Les Ateliers de Martine*, which produced textiles and decorative arts, launched following a visit to Vienna in 1910 where he bought Wiener Werkstätte textiles for dresses, after his youngest. Never publicity shy, he published unusually intimate lifestyle photographs of himself and his wife Denise 'at home' amidst his modern art collection – which included works by Brancusi and Man Ray – and even in bed, antedating today's celebrity culture.⁶² Poiret's designs ranged from the sublimely intuitive – simple, high-waisted chemise dresses, for which Denise, as unlaced and unpetticoated muse, provided the perfect foil – to others such as the lampshade shaped 'Sorbet' worn with harem trousers which blurred the line between fashion and costume and was inspired by the couple's infamous fancy-dress parties and promoted in Poiret's designs for Jacques Richepin's play *Le Minaret*, which premiered in Paris in 1913 (Figure 37.6). One of the first designers to take his caravanserai abroad, Poiret's promotional trips to Europe and America

⁶¹ Poiret also used Raoul Dufy's textile designs for 'La Perse' coat, 'La Rose d'Iribe' dress, and the 'Bois de Boulogne' dress.

⁶² This recalls a scene described by Valérie Feuillet in *Quelques Années de ma Vie* (1894), cited in Joseph, "A Wizard of Silks and Tulle", 263–6, of being received by Worth in the marital bedroom for an urgent consultation about a dress while his wife Marie, in a lace and ribbon nightgown, was still abed.



Figure 37.6 Paul Poiret, theatre costume for Jacques Richepin's *The Minaret*, Paris, 1913. Roger Viollet via Getty Images.

accompanied by nine house models (in matching outfits) bestowed on him the title 'The King of Fashion' setting a precedent for couturiers to embark on international travel rather than expect the world to come to Paris.⁶³ Poiret's confidence – 'A few refused to dress to my taste, and retired; others, better advised, accepted the dress I imposed on them' – also emboldened others, for he cut the sartorial ties between the *fin de siècle* world of Doucet and

⁶³ Poiret's mannequin tour of Europe included Frankfurt, Berlin, Potsdam, Warsaw, Moscow, St Petersburg, Petrograd, Budapest, Vienna, and Munich. His American tour took place in 1913. Poiret, *The King of Fashion*, 71–6 and 152. Jeanne Paquin embarked on an ambitious tour to America the year after, complete with mannequins, stage set, and stage and lighting hands. See Evans, *The Mechanical Smile*, 70.

Worth, with whom he had gained his wings, in favour of a dynamic dialogue between fashion and the avant-garde.⁶⁴ This was furthered in the interchange between Surrealism and fashion in the 1930s in the form of the ebullient, oft-photographed and surprisingly commercially successful work of Elsa Schiaparelli, as couture embraced the modern age.⁶⁵

COMME DES GARÇONS

Whereas Poiret was audacious – fashion had needed his conviction that it could not dissolve in a pool of chiffon – and used art as a leverage to propel it forward, Gabrielle Chanel (1883–1971) eschewed any such fantasies about its status. Instead, scissors in hand, she concentrated on creating the fundamentals of the modern woman's wardrobe, adapting the language and palette of menswear, so bringing equality in terms of comfort and freedom of movement one step closer for women. Her dresses were waistless, cardigan jackets pliable, and blouses front opening (unlike the awkward back fastenings of the previous decade that required the help of a ladies' maid). Her androgynous designs also encouraged a different bearing; a hand unencumbered by accessories could rest on hip or be thrust into a pocket; short skirts led to a greater length of stride; feet that were comfortably shod in golf shoes could be seen insouciantly crossed at the ankle (Figure 37.7). These radical possibilities were performed by Chanel herself; for the first time a designer was her own best model. Her lineage was her own, built around her persona for unlike other couturiers, she never worked for another house – 'I have been a couturière, by chance. I have made perfumes, by chance' – preferring to cut her cloth to her own taste and philosophy.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Poiret, *The King of Fashion*, 112. Said in reference to guests who refused to change into 'Persian' costume at Poiret's 'Thousand-and-Second Night' fête in 1911 but equally applicable to the designer's dictatorial attitude towards clients.

⁶⁵ Schiaparelli was one of the first to create a perfume boutique within her premises. It took the form of a giant birdcage and was designed by the fashionable interior decorator Jean-Michel Frank (1895–1941). She also opened a branch in London.

⁶⁶ Justine Picardie, *Coco Chanel: The Legend and the Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2010, repr. 2017), 283.



Figure 37.7 Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, modelling one of her suits on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris, 30 May 1929. Collection of the Hulton Archive. Sasha / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

Along with Chanel's new wardrobe came a flexibility that went beyond the suppleness of the jersey she repurposed from sportswear. Her clothes could be put on quickly, folded flat like the kimono, for they had no boning, and packed in an instant for weekends on the coast. Arms and legs were freed; where once pallor had been an indicator of class, now a tan was *de rigueur*; hair was short – more convenient for swimming in the sea – and regional accessories became yacht wear – straw hats, espadrilles, and Breton t-shirts, which Chanel, who advocated costume jewellery for evening, teamed with multiple strings of real pearls in a startling inversion of convention.

It was not surprising therefore that Chanel was commissioned to create the clothing for Diaghilev's ballet *Le Train Bleu* (1924)

named after the night train that carried wealthy holidaymakers from Calais to the French Riviera where she had opened branches in Deauville in 1913 and Biarritz in 1915, offering a new category of fashion –resort wear. Here, casuals and sporting ensembles – bathing outfits, shorts, cap-sleeved tops and cardigans could be bought off the peg; imbued (and labelled) with the designer's spirit, they bridged the gap between haute couture and ready-to-wear while remaining exclusive through the high prices the fashionable set paid to be *à la mode*, even when at leisure.

GLIMMER

An alternative vision of couture flourished in the 1930s, endorsed by the burgeoning film industry which, building on fashion newsreels and mannequin films that Poiret and others had developed for publicity purposes, became reliant on its seductive and dramatic possibilities. '[E]veryone was a star. There was a strong whiff of celluloid everywhere. Everything was Hollywood. Glamour', proclaimed Diana Vreeland (1901–89) editor-in-chief of *American Vogue*.⁶⁷ Cinema offered a collective experience to a vast demographic invested in fantasy at a dark time in America following the Great Depression, and a sense of foreboding in Europe as war threatened. Many costume designers trained in Paris before turning to film; American Howard Greer (1896–1974) the first 'costume-couturier', worked with Lucile before opening his own house in Los Angeles in 1928, attracting clients such as Greta Garbo, and going on to design Katherine Hepburn's Surrealist-touched wardrobe in *Bringing up Baby* (1938) where her rapid shifts from gamine to seductress to tomboy evoked the protean qualities of a fashion show.⁶⁸

The allure of chiaroscuro influenced the types of material employed by couturiers. Lustrous fabrics such as shimmering silks and satins, cut on the cross to achieve a seductive cling and

⁶⁷ Instead of taking his models to America, Poiret took a colour film of them modelling in his garden. Diana Vreeland, 'People Are Talking About: Photographers in Vogue: Horst – The Aura of Glamour', *American Vogue*, 1 October 1984, 702.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 26 by Stella Bruzzi in this volume.

offset by the addition of sparkling diamanté buckles and clips were married with new synthetic materials from fish-scale sequins made from cellulose to gold lamé and 'glass' fabric – fragile and transparent and employed by innovative designers such as Schiaparelli – which complemented the luminescence of the 'movies'. The animation of fabric through movement was nowhere more evident than in the dancing of Fred Astaire – in suits that seemed glued to his body apart from the whiplash of his flying tails – and the liquid properties of satin, ostrich feathers, and tulle in the extravagant evening gowns of his partner, Ginger Rogers.⁶⁹

In return for this transatlantic exchange, American designers brought new aesthetic considerations to Paris, and a certain hard glamour. Chicago-born Mainbocher (Main Rousseau Bocher, 1890–1976), one-time fashion editor of French *Vogue*, was one of the first American designers to gain entrée into the unique world of Parisian couture in the early 1930s, offering a svelte, restrained aesthetic and notably dressing the Duchess of Windsor (Mrs Wallis Simpson), one of the most photographed couture clients of the time. Mindful of the need for instant impact (as is still the case with royal clothing today), geometry and restraint prevailed and were immensely photogenic. Long gone were the complexities of Worth's festooned compositions which read like a different dress from side, back, and front. Instead, the rationality of modernist fashion invited the viewer to understand the couturier's concept in one glance and assume it to be consistent from every angle. I offer a simply cut but technically sophisticated sequinned jacket with a pattern of bold blue and white diagonal stripes by Mainbocher in the collection of the V&A as an exemplar. It is similar to, if not the same as, the one worn by the Duchess for a series of portraits taken by Cecil Beaton (1904–80) in 1937 for *Vogue* magazine (Figure 37.8). It was also Beaton who acquired the jacket for the museum as part of his accretion of hundreds of

⁶⁹ Fred Astaire ordered his suits from Anderson & Sheppard on Savile Row. He danced in their showroom in order to ensure the cut allowed him freedom of movement. This was achieved by additional seams that allowed the fabric to stretch. The skill of the tailor meant that when at rest, the suit returned to 'normality' thus never resembling costume. One of Astaire's suits from *Shall We Dance* (1937) is held in the collection of the V&A. Museum number: S.206:1,2-2015.



Figure 37.8 Cecil Beaton, ‘The Duchess of Windsor in a sequined evening jacket by Mainbocher’, *British Vogue*, 9 June 1937. Bettmann via Getty Images.

examples of couture for his ground-breaking 1971 exhibition *Fashion: An Anthology*, an event which irrevocably changed the landscape of the museum and its relationship to fashion.⁷⁰

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ARCHIVE

Stepping into the museum’s archive, I look not for garments but for numbers, those ending in ‘1974’ to be precise. This is the date that Beaton’s vast collection was catalogued, three years after his show opened – it took that long. Here is where many of the couturiers that this chapter has not had time or words to reflect on rest, arranged alphabetically in their metal storage racks. Strange pairings can be found – Pierre Cardin and Callot Soeurs, Mariano Fortuny and Jacques Fath, Hubert de Givenchy and Madame

⁷⁰ The jacket was featured in *American Vogue*, 1 June 1937, 52–7 and *British Vogue*, 9 June 1937, 54–6. V&A Museum number: T. 306–1974.



Figure 37.9 Cristóbal Balenciaga, evening dress and cape, Paris, 1967. Victoria & Albert Museum: Given by Mrs Loel Guinness T.39&A-1974. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Grès – that seem to embody the interconnectedness of fashion and the echoes and revisitings that haunt it. Three garments have a place in this conclusion: firstly, an austere sculptural black evening dress and cape made of silk gazar (a crisp woven fabric that holds its shape) made by the ‘master’ of twentieth-century haute couture, Cristóbal Balenciaga from 1967. High-necked and sleeveless, the dress flares from the shoulders to the knee at the front and then sweeps to the ground at the back. In a marvel of engineering, the dress is cut with a single seam. The cape is shorter and semi-circular, with a similar asymmetrical curve (Figure 37.9).⁷¹ One hundred years on from Worth, the Spanish-born, Paris-based designer’s work had reached its apotheosis after

⁷¹ V&A Museum number: T.37&A-1974.

a long career, his vision crystallized by a stripping back of excess, a renouncement of fastenings, zips, and buttons that reduced form to its essence, and in the case of this ensemble, to a textile form as bewildering (and difficult to copy) as a double helix. *Vogue* spoke of his 'informed cutting, the superb construction inside and out' and Chanel said: 'Balenciaga alone is a couturier in the truest sense of the word. Only he is capable of cutting material, assembling a creation and sewing it by hand. The others are simply fashion designers.'⁷² This was said, perhaps, with an instinctive understanding that Balenciaga's craft – and that of other great *auteurs* – both *expressed* the idea and *was* the idea, for despite his aesthetic distance from Worth, Balenciaga's authorial insistence over material and what could be sculpted from it was never a collective one, but his vision alone.

But visions take different forms. Christian Dior, not a hands-on-material creator, line-sketched his ideas, quickly determining a collection and its themes and then refining the 'line' as each model was worked up. 'Have I expressed you correctly?' his *directrice technique* and "'dressmaking" self' Madame Marguerite used to say, when presenting him with a *toile*, as if her hands were avatars for his.⁷³ And in Dior we find Worth again, in the plain silks, fabric bows, great skirts, and tight bodices of the 'New Look', with its echoes of *fin de siècle* Paris, and in photographs of his designs by Cecil Beaton infused with the spirit of the paintings of Winterhalter. Dior's profligate use of materials after the deprivations of the Second World War seemed an affront to reason but kick-started an industry that had been worn as thin as the ersatz fabrics it had recourse to during the Occupation of Paris. Despite – or perhaps because of – competition from America and the emergence of Italy's *alta moda*, couture sailed into its 'golden age', buoyed by global publicity; Dior featured on the front cover of *Time* magazine and was rewarded with enormous international success, as were his compatriots – Pierre Balmain, Jacques Fath, Lanvin-Castillo among the many. In the archive, to study 'Bar', his most enduring design – a tightly fitting, corseted and tailored

⁷² *Vogue*, 15 April 1963, 54. Cited in Lesley Ellis Miller, *Cristóbal Balenciaga* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1993), 14.

⁷³ Dior, *Dior by Dior*, 71, 14.



Figure 37.10 Christian Dior, 'Bar' suit 'La Ligne Corolle', Paris 1947 (designed), 1955 (made). These were shown together at a fashion show for mothers and daughters at Dior's London boutique in 1967. WATFORD / Mirrorpix via Getty Images.

cream jacket with wasp-waist and padded hips and a long, full black wool skirt that astonishes with its bulk and weight – is to be reminded of Dior's statement 'The first essential in couture: the feeling for materials' (Figure 37.10).⁷⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, the house has chosen to revisit the ghost of 'Bar' in every catwalk show since Dior's death in 1957.

Finally, a dress by Madeleine Vionnet (1876–1975) who was described by British *Vogue* in 1925 as 'perhaps the greatest

⁷⁴ 'Bar': Museum number: V&A T.377-1969. Christian Dior cited in Célia Bertin, *Paris a la Mode* (London: Gollancz, 1956), 195.

geometrician of all the French couturiers'.⁷⁵ Bell-sleeved and cowl-necked, the monasticism of her 1935 creation 'Coq du Roche' is only belied by the burnt orange hue of the bias-cut crêpe Romaine which falls in heavy folds and pools at the bottom of its Tyvek shroud, just as it would once have pooled around the feet of its wearer, Baroness Robert de Rothschild.⁷⁶ It is clear that unlike the carapaces of Worth and Dior, this gown only comes to life on the body: 'I was the first to do the bias cut ... [it] was fluid, easy, promising'. Like a sculptor, Vionnet's technique was led by a profound understanding of the body's skeletal armature and musculature and the way gravity helped shape the fall of fabric, an effect exquisitely captured by photographers such as Edward Steichen: 'You don't take the potentialities of a material into consideration when you're only dealing with drawings. To do this you must work on a lay figure, and that is what I always did' (Figure 37.11).⁷⁷ Writing in his diary in 1974 Cecil Beaton lamented: 'There are no silk flowers, there are no artists capable of cutting fabrics like Vionnet. This was part of a Proustian world, of which the present generation knows nothing.'⁷⁸ Beaton's fears can perhaps be allayed though, for this generation does care and knows a lot more about the world of couture and all the other global iterations of this fascinating industry, thanks to the commitment common to all the researchers, historians, and curators who have made publications such as this possible. Beaton also need not have feared that couture would collapse. Though still a small and elite part of the fashion industry its significance cannot be ignored as source of inspiration, experimentation, and a theatre for ideas that, as Worth showed, both publicizes and inspires the commercial and more accessible outputs of couture that drive the industry ever forward. Haute couture (to revert to its full title) still can only be produced in Paris today, where it is represented by a handful of designers – fourteen officially, by invitation only, including the old houses of Chanel, Schiaparelli, Dior, and

⁷⁵ *British Vogue*, 20 November 1925, 74. ⁷⁶ V&A: T.445-1974.

⁷⁷ Cited in Pamela Golbin (ed.), *Madeleine Vionnet* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 16.

⁷⁸ Hugo Vickers, *The Unexpurgated Beaton: The Cecil Beaton Diaries as They Were Written* (London: Phoenix, 2003), 438.



Figure 37.11 Madeleine Vionnet, evening dress 'Coq de Roche', Paris, 1935. Roger Viollet via Getty Images.

Maurizio Galante along with relative newcomers such as Stéphane Rollande, Alexandre Vauthier, and Maison Margiela – and presented twice a year, in January and July.

The global appeal of Parisian couture has found new audiences among Middle Eastern and Chinese clients in recent years, although still rare are those able to afford and appreciate a beaded and sequined silk tulle sheath by Chanel that took four seamstresses 800 hours to craft in 2018, or a Giambattista Valli couture gown that took over 200 hours and 6,000 metres of fabric to create in 2020.⁷⁹ Perhaps through the example of museum collections and

⁷⁹ 'Corresponding' and 'guest' members such as Iris van Herpen and Fendi Couture can swell the ranks. Divya Bala, 'Everything You Need to Know About the Inner Workings of Haute Couture', *Vogue*, 6 July 2020, www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/article/behind-the-scenes-at-haute-couture; 'It Took 800

fashion exhibitions, long a source of inspiration for fashion designers, major houses increasingly value and professionally care for their own archives, just as Worth valued and kept his albums of designs. This has also led to an increased appreciation of the artisanal army that keeps couture going; Karl Lagerfeld's haute couture show for Chanel in 2016 was staged as if inside an atelier with the designer taking a bow with some of his seamstresses at the end, while over the last few decades, the company has bought up many of the last surviving specialist workshops in order to ensure their survival, including the embroidery house of Lesage. All now operate with freedom under the umbrella organization *Paraffection* ('for the love of').⁸⁰

Couture, like mainstream fashion, also increasingly sources expertise globally, with new centres of embroidery in India and China that have become part of couture's wider family. However, this was always a hidden part of the couture system, for the House of Worth's swan song perhaps lies in one of its most outrageous and colossally expensive commissions, the 'Peacock Dress', made for American-born Mary Curzon (1870–1906), Vicereine of India, for the Delhi Durbar Ball. This was held on 6 January 1903 to mark the coronation of King Edward VII (1841–1910) as Emperor of India at the height of British colonial rule over India, and at a time of French hegemony and patrimony as it expanded its African and Asian territories. The fabric of gold and silver Zardozi embroidery with green beetle wings and peacock motifs (a tribute to the Peacock throne) was hand-stitched in India by unnamed artisans before being shipped to Paris to be made up by Worth, the most famous 'name' in fashion, its spectacular allure dependent on the objectification and fetishization of objects and people from colonized nations.⁸¹

Hours to Make this Chanel Dress', *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/t-magazine/chanel-couture-dress-how-its-made.html.

⁸⁰ These include Guillet (est. 1869, fabric flowers); Barrie (est. 1870s, Scottish knitwear); Lemarié (est. 1880, plumes and camellias); Desrués (est. 1887, costume jewellery and buttons); Causse (est. 1892, gloves); Lesage (est. 1924, embroidery); Maison Michel (est. 1936, millinery); Montex (est. 1939, embroidery); Lognon (est. 1945, pleating); Massaro (est. 1947, shoes); Lanel (est. 1949, embroidery); and Goossens (est. 1950s, gold and silversmithing).

⁸¹ See Nicola J. Thomas, 'Embodying Imperial Spectacle: Dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899–1905', *Cultural Geographies*, 14/3 (2007), 369–400. The Peacock dress is in the collection of Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire (National Trust collection number: NT107881).



Figure 37.12 Christian Dior, Haute couture show Autumn/Winter 2021/2022, Paris, 5 July 2021. Peter White via Getty Images.

In the wake of a global pandemic which has impacted on every creative industry regardless of site or city, Christian Dior's AW 2021 haute couture collection contributed towards a redressing of past wrongs, by showing the collection against a vast panorama of hand embroidery that had been made in India and carefully shipped, like the Peacock dress fabric, to Paris (Figure 37.12). But here it was with full acknowledgement of its source and makers for, as Maria Chiuri Grazia, the first woman *auteur* of the venerable house, observed, 'It's a metaphorical thing, to say that we are all connected.'⁸²

⁸² Christian Dior Fall 2021 Couture Collection, *Vogue*, www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/fall-2021-couture/christian-dior (accessed 10 August 2021).

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