

A watercolor illustration of a woman with her hair styled up, wearing a large, ornate red dress with a prominent bow at the waist. She is wearing a large, multi-colored floral earring. The background is a soft, light wash of colors.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF COUTURE

Paris and London 1947–57

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V&A

The New Look

'In December 1946, as a result of the war and uniforms, women still looked and dressed like Amazons. I designed clothes for flower-like women, with rounded shoulders, full feminine busts, and hand-span waists above enormous spreading skirts.'²³ CHRISTIAN DIOR

French *Vogue* announced the launch of Christian Dior's new fashion house with a modest paragraph in its social pages on 'La Vie de Paris'. In the same edition, sketches of the prevailing fashions explained that Dior's designs were based on two organic forms, the 'Corolle' – the whorls of petals of a flower – and the loops of the 'figure 8'. The caption explained '*La taille doit être très, très mince*'²⁴ – the waist must be very, very small. Although *Vogue* led with Dior's designs, the magazine gave no suggestion of the fervour with which his first collection had been received – of which Bettina Ballard, American *Vogue*'s fashion editor, wrote: 'I was conscious of an electric tension I had never before felt in couture... We were witnesses to a revolution in fashion.'²⁵ Previously, Dior had had a life of peaceful anonymity working first for Robert Piguet, then for Lucien Lelong for 10 years. However, in 1946 he negotiated a partnership with the Boussac Group (textile magnate Marcel Boussac was head of the Comptoir de l'Industrie Cotonnière, or CIC) who provided \$500,000 and administrative support to create an entirely new house.²⁶ The relationship between textile producer and fashion designer was an intimate one, but rarely had a house been directly supported in this way, and it gave Dior's launch both credibility and assurance. Although suggestions have been made that the 'Cotton King' encouraged the generous use of fabric in order to revive textile sales, Dior explained in his autobiography *Dior by Dior* (1957) that he had simply picked up on the Zeitgeist, propelled by the fashionable world's distaste for any style reminiscent of uniforms. 'We were just emerging from a poverty-stricken, parsimonious era, obsessed with ration books and clothes-coupons: it was only natural that my creations should take the form of a reaction against this dearth of imagination.'²⁷ Notably, Dior chose models who were not too tall, to emphasize their well-fed, fertile shapeliness, in contrast with the lean wartime silhouette. Mme Marguerite, Dior's *directrice technique* (head of workrooms) described altering a dressmaker's dummy to fit Dior's vision, saying, 'I even rounded the abdomen, as on Greek statues, and there at last was a voluptuous figure to pin the muslin shape to, and ready to express the New Look.'²⁸ London-based couturier John Cavanagh described the new styles as 'a total glorification of the female form'.²⁹

Dior was born in 1905, into an affluent family, and his historicist sense of fashion was informed by childhood memories: 'I thank heaven that I lived in Paris during the last years of the Belle Epoque – nothing will ever be able to equal the sweet memory of those days.'³⁰ Dior nurtured a predilection for nineteenth-century touches, using fabric knots, fringed bows and artificial flowers as finishing touches on garments of stiff taffeta, duchesse satin and wool, which were as firmly structured as those of Worth, the founder of haute couture. Dior wrote that 'an ethereal appearance is only achieved by elaborate workmanship: I wanted to employ quite a different technique in fashioning my clothes,

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CHRISTIAN DIOR

2.7 New Look suit by Christian Dior, modelled by house model Renée. Place de la Concorde, Paris, 1947. Photograph by Richard Avedon. V&A: PH:74-1985

from the methods then in use – I wanted them to be constructed like buildings. Thus I moulded my dresses to the curves of the female body, so that they called attention to its shape. I emphasised the width of the hips, and gave the bust its true prominence; and in order to give my models more “presence” I lined nearly all of them with cambric or taffeta, thus reverting to an old tradition.’³¹

Although quite out of step with developments in contemporary art and design, Dior’s nostalgia paid dividends. Far from creating clothes that competed with those of American designers such as Claire McCardell, who devised a uniform of simple, interchangeable components for the modern age, he revived a specifically Parisian form of dress with layers of underpinnings and ‘wasp waists – achieved by seaming, by corsets (both separate and built-in)’ (pls 2.8 and 2.9).³² Edna Woolman Chase recalls: ‘His look was one of unforced femininity – a polished continuation of the rounded line, which had been seen in Paris since the first post-war collections, but with the fabric so worked, the silhouette so gently handled that there was no look of heaviness or stricture.’³³ Dior’s idealized vision of femininity was loved by the public but vehemently criticized by some other designers. Chanel, who reopened in 1954 after an absence of many years, said ‘elegance in clothes means freedom to move freely’.³⁴ The complexity of Dior’s clothes, with their elaborate fastenings, was questioned by Balenciaga for whom simplicity of form was a vocation. The minute snap-fasteners, buttons and zips on Dior’s gowns meant that a woman required assistance to dress; Lady Gladwyn (wife of the British Ambassador to France between 1954 and 1960) wrote in her diary in 1947 that Lady Hulton, wife of publishing magnate Sir Edward Hulton, ‘was late appearing for her own dinner because she was having difficulty getting into her new Paris dress – a tremendous creation the effectiveness of which depended on her wearing a real old-fashioned corset to tighten her waist.’³⁵

One of the key aspects of Dior’s look was that its doll-like shape was unmistakable in silhouette, with its lavish ballerina skirts, smooth fitted bodices and moulded jackets. Despite the complexity of the original designs the look was copiable and, significantly, commercial. ‘Bar’, one of the most important designs of Dior’s first collection, combined tailoring and corsetry to create an armature upon which a silk jacket with padded hips and pleated wool skirt floated despite its heavy (8lb) weight (see p.60). Although Dior employed traditional corsetry techniques for the underpinnings, developments in new synthetics made corset-dependent fashions possible for all women (although as Settle noted, while rationing was still in place, corsets were forbidden in the UK except on doctor’s orders), while full bell-like skirts could be cheaply achieved with nylon petticoats rather than Dior’s multiple layers of taffeta and net. The blatant defiance of austerity regulations required by such dresses was controversial, and the British Government tried to prevent the New Look from catching on. Settle recalled: ‘We were forbidden by the Board of Trade to mention his styles in case they engendered a desire for more fabrics, pretty styles, some trace of elegance. Dior’s “New Look” was supposed to be



2.8 Waspie by Robert Piguet. *Vogue* (French edition), January 1947

2.9 Corsetted underdress, 1950s. Photograph by John French. V&A: AAD

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BETTINA BALLARD

completely unknown in Britain.³⁶ However, the New Look proved unstoppable – despite shortages of fabric, which precluded even wealthy British clients from commissioning new clothes, skirts were lengthened with strips of fabric, shoulder pads removed and jackets taken in. In April 1947 Lady Gladwyn wrote: 'the dressmaker came and altered the jacket of my very ancient coat and skirt, nipping it in at the waist in the approved new fashion, and thereby, I hope, enabling me to wear it this season.'³⁷

Dior's overnight success was most evident in his reception by the American press. Carmel Snow, editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar* in New York, called the collection 'the New Look'. In his autobiography Dior refers to the fortuitous publicity coup of being photographed by the American weekly magazine *Life* as he prepared his first collection. However, he also consciously targeted the American market early on, employing Yvonne Minassian as head of export sales. She recalled: 'I was wearing a Legroux hat and in my pocket was my ticket with the dollar currencies for my trip. We got on from the word go, and at the end of the interview I had signed a contract. Dior offered to make me three dresses for my visit and I went off on a troop-carrier (all there was available in 1946) to announce the opening of the Maison Dior to the New York fashion world.' She wrote to Dior 'I'm not at all sure they [the buyers] will come.'³⁸ Although by the time of his launch early in the following year many Americans had already placed their season's orders and left Paris, after reading Carmel Snow's reports they returned, to be followed in subsequent seasons by European, South American, Australian and eventually even Japanese buyers.

The emergence of Christian Dior's fashion house dispelled any hopes entertained by critics in the US, who had felt that American designers could compete with a weakened Paris. Dior was awarded a Neiman Marcus Oscar by the renowned department store for his 1947 collection, becoming the first French couturier to be so honoured, and went in person to Dallas, Texas, to collect it (Norman Hartnell also received an Oscar on the same occasion). He then toured the US in the midst of protests about excessive skirt lengths, all of which gave added publicity to the New Look. By 1948 he had obtained premises on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue and signed up a team of American assistants to produce a line of dresses that would be a digest of the Paris collections, to wholesale 'at \$59.75 and up' under the name of 'Christian Dior New

2.10 'Green', day dress by Christian Dior. Green and white silk, Spring/Summer 1947. *Vogue* (French edition), Spring 1947. See V&A:T.115-1974

