

London letter

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss textiles [English edition]**

Band (Jahr): **- (1953)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **23.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-799218>

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London Letter

In fog, gale and every other wintry excess of the elements, we have sat through the Spring Collections, looking at cotton beach clothes for faraway summer holidays (the demand for every kind of cotton frock and play-suit as well as for jewel-studded cotton evening dresses has never been so great) and at the ravishing ball dresses designed for the high summer of Coronation year.

Once again, the London designers have been content to deviate only slightly from existing lines (a rush of fulness to the front, a rather longer skirt) and to concentrate on colour, on fabric interest, and on the traditional splendour of the *grande tenue* in which Englishwomen are said to appear at their best. Since the grander evening dresses are designed in the first place to be a foil to the family jewels, which will glitter again beneath the chandeliers of great ballrooms, bodices are often simple with the jewelled and sequined embroidery which is the great feature of these collections concentrated on the skirts.

Brocade, usually white and gold, is a favourite evening fabric ; so is pure silk organza, in rosy pink, cloud grey or sweetpea colours. A particularly lovely floating dress is Victor Stiebel's in thunder-grey Swiss organza with a billowing skirt and a bodice of petals sparkling with diamanté.

The white and gold idea is carried farthest by Norman Hartnell, who shows, at the end of his collection, a whole

series of evening dresses, royal and beautiful as arum lilies, some slim, some bouffant, and including two exquisitely draped, tapering dresses of gold fabric. This is one of the houses (Peter Russell's is another), where Coronation robes are shown : some old style, as made by him in 1937, of crimson silk velvet with train and kirtle of ermine ; others new style, for a less expansive age, of velveteen trimmed with coney. One of the most interesting innovations this year has been exquisitely worked new silk and rayon (again, usually brocade or organza) in motifs specially designed by such famous artists as Oliver Messel, who makes great play with symbolic Prince of Wales feathers, roses and acorns.

We are happy to report that there have been no more whimsical fancy-dress revivals from the age of the Tudors ; and that the day clothes and informal dresses we have seen are eminently practical, wearable and contemporary in spirit. Lachasse provides more news than any other house, with his tango line — dressy suits, low necked and sleeveless, with skirt fulness cascading down the front ; and his Jersey Lily, a stately beauty, with a scooped-out neckline, champagne-bottle shoulders, and, wound about them, a long boa of ruffled organza. Sherard is another designer who showed a tulle boa. Textures of silks for daytime tend to be rougher ; those of wools, smoother : Sherard has a rose-printed wool taffeta which



A window display of « Creperl » organzie from Reichenbach & Co., St-Gall, at « Liberty's » in London.

Photo : Photo Arts



REMBRANDT/PIERRE BALMAIN

Two-piece dress in Swiss « soie sauvage ».

Photo John French

looks like silk ; Paterson shows a springy silk and mohair in a vibrant raspberry colour. And lace still holds its own, both for evening dresses and for tailored Ascot suits : for a suit and coat in which no seams are visible, John Cavanagh uses heavy « encrusted » guipure.

More and more of our high fashion houses are now making less expensive boutique clothes, shown sometimes at their own houses, sometimes — ready-to-wear — at specially chosen stores. The latest recruit is Michael Sherard, whose boutique models are to be found at Liberty's, and at the Kayton Boutique. He has chosen a number of Liberty's Swiss materials for his dresses : one we particularly admired was a crisp white organdy with a flock pattern of early summer flowers.

Liberty has a particularly fine selection of summer fabrics imported from Switzerland : more of the flock-printed organdy, in pastel shades, charming organdy cloqués from Stoffel of St. Gall, Plastoprint — a patent leathery lattice pattern — from the same firm, white waffle piqué interwoven with metallic gold threads, muslins for children embroidered with bees, flowers,

butterflies and babies, and very fine needle corduroy in an excellent range of colours. Our photograph shows one of Liberty's recent window displays of Swiss merchandise.

We must admit that this spring designers have tended to use less imported fabrics than usual. Rembrandt however is one of the wholesale houses which nearly always has something Swiss to show ; this time, the two-piece dress in soie sauvage made to Pierre Balmain's design (see illustration).

However there is no lack of Swiss fashions in the shops : Fortnum & Mason had two handsome Duffle coats, one green and one red, in waterproof gaberdine decorated with white frogging and lined with fleecy lambswool. And at Harvey Nichols we saw a charming collection of dresses from Switzerland : a charcoal grey shantung embroidered with appliqué raffia flowers, a silk organza, pale grey overchecked with charcoal grey and scarlet, and a flock organza stamped with immense spots on a white or navy blue ground.

Ann DUVEEN.