

Paris : come with me to the openings...

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PARIS

Come with me to the Openings...

Because, in the year 1855, a young Englishman happened to fall in love, because he took it into his head to design dresses for his wife, because he had a spirit of commercial adventure, and also because he was very talented, in three years from now we shall be celebrating — or should be — the centenary of the first fashion show. A hundred years already! A hundred years since Charles Frederick Worth formed a group of mannequins — «demoiselles de magasin», as they were called in those days — and paraded them before duchesses and the wealthy bourgeoisie. This revolutionary created a tradition. Since then, Paris has seen many changes. The Empire fell, the Republic changed its number, the Germans occupied the capital twice, barouches were replaced by electric cabs, followed by Rolls Royces, Delahayes and Cadillacs, but one essentially Parisian ceremony has always taken place, in spite of everything. Each time it is the same ritual and the same crush. There is no theatrical first-night so popular as the presentations of the great collections. Perhaps you who read these lines have never been to one of these openings. Follow me, I will take you there.

You have received your invitation, and here you are outside the couturier's door. You wait quite a long time, a very long time if he is one of the «Big Six» of the profession and if you are not among the few

journalists who can make eloquent signs over the heads of other visitors and receive permission to make their way through the crowd. Behind the make-shift barriers — tables placed haphazardly and half-open doors, there are young ladies checking the visitors and ticking off lists. At last you pass these obstacles and are shown to your seat. Do not be surprised if it is already occupied by someone who will be particularly loath to part with it. It is very warm, and long past the hour marked on the card. You while away the time by studying the faces of those you already know by sight: the ladies from *Vogue*, waiting for instructions from their chief Brunhoff. The team from *Harper's Bazaar* presided over by Carmel Snow, that of the *Officiel de la Couture* clustering round Madame Castanié, and those from *Femina*, *Album du Figaro*, *la Femme chic*, *l'Art et la Mode*, *Silhouette* and *Women's Wear*; all these journalists have been placed in widely different positions with a regard for precedence that I shall not reveal here. There are also the young women from *Elle*, led by Hélène Gordon Lazareff, broadcasting represented by Lise Elina, television, the many foreign periodicals, magazines and dailies, the cinema, and the photographers; there is the irrepressible Lucien François, and finally the few personalities from *le Tout Paris* who have managed to wangle themselves a seat. More and more chairs are brought in, until one wonders how the mannequins will be able to pass. For lack of ashtrays, cigarettes are furtively stubbed out on the carpets; notebooks and pens are pulled out of bags and pockets. And then — everything happens — the first dress is announced, the parade begins.

Each couturier gives his mannequins a rhythm all his own. At Christian Dior's, Alla or Sylvie pass briskly, brushing their dresses against the knees of the onlookers, threading their way through the spectators who overflow from the too small salons; at Jacques Fath's this year, Simone or Sophie bear down on the public, stop short, like skaters in an ice-show, then start off again with quick short little steps; at Jean Dessès, Olga and Geneviève or Ariane go from one mirror to another, without a smile, like high priestesses; at Carven's, Fabienne sways voluptuously past while Choucha, draped in her multicoloured fabrics advances like a statue come to life... One can tell a really outstanding mannequin by the way in which she places her feet. Formerly, at Worth's, Michèle put out her ankle like a circus thoroughbred doing the Spanish trot. She must have set the fashion, for ever since the movement has been adopted successively by all, as well as the little hesitation walse step just before turning.

And dresses are followed by more dresses. The seventy-five models allowed by the great names of couture during the occupation have long been exceeded; more than two hundred suits, coats, ensembles, dresses for the morning, afternoon, cocktails and the evening are now paraded before you. I would not go so far as to say that one does not find it a little tiring. There comes a time when the same idea, interpreted ten times in different fabrics and colours, becomes a trifle exhausting. But the couturiers give no heed to that. It seems as if they want to give irrefutable proof of their virtuosity, unless it is perhaps that they want to outdo their colleagues...

You are entitled to a glass of champagne which, once emptied, you have put under your chair while waiting for the butler to condescend to come and relieve you of it.

You have joined in the clapping, listened to the cries of admiration uttered by the more enthusiastic supporters, you have applauded the wedding gown which brings the show to an end, and now the creator is weaving his way through the guests who have suddenly sprung to their feet and who rush, as to the sacristy, to murmur words of ecstasy to the couturier or couturière, blushing for joy.

And then you leave. What will you remember about this show? A variegated, many-faceted vision. Your friends will ask the inevitable question «What is being worn this season?» You will find it difficult to reply other than by general phrases because, to tell the truth, there were so many suggestions that to make a synthesis of them would be impossible. Doubtless you have been handed a paper on which, in some cryptic style — let us say right away an impossible jargon — the couturier explains the theme of his collection. These notes are intended for the use of the journalists, to save them the trouble of having to think (they do not have the time, they see too many dresses in a week).

But if you have a visual memory, which I do not doubt for one moment, you will be struck this season by the slight lengthening of skirts, by the persistence of sloping, wide and rounded shoulders, by the play of convertible dresses, combined three-piece outfits and by high, covered necklines. You will have seen the same fabrics — or almost the same — at all the couturiers'.

You will have been delighted by the crisp shimmering fabrics ranging from grosgrain in to alpaca, you will have noted the blended hues from natural to shell with a predominance of beige and grey. In fact, it seems that navy blue and white, formerly «musts» in spring collections, are on the decline. You will have seen a wild profusion of organdies, simple or brocaded, of piqués, uncrushable mousselines, guipures, permanent finish cloqués, more and more of which are to be seen; you will have raved about the prints with blended tones; you will have been astounded by the skill of Dior, the ingenuity of Fath, the grace of Balmain, the virtuosity of Dessès, the sumptuousness of Balenciaga and the youthfulness of Carven; you will have loudly applauded Givenchy who has conceived a new formula, a trifle American but treated in the French manner; you will have seen again the evening dresses of Maggy Rouff, the lovely gowns of Paquin, the charm of Jeanne Lafaurie, the severe suits of Madeleine de Rauch (I have left out many, and among them some excellent ones).

As for hats, you will have seen light ones, with many straw from Wohlen and ribbons from Basle.

But perhaps, once the curtain has descended, you who read my words will have realised the anxieties and worries of the couturiers and milliners who have called on Swiss fabrics, in hundreds of different patterns, which certain regulations of the French government threatened to cut off from one day to the next — all those delicately worked fabrics which adorn the dresses and hats of Paris. And doubtless you will have thought, like the author of these lines, «What a pity that would be!»

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