

# Couture firstnights

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1954)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **08.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798821>

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**A**ND now, the show is over. In the grey dawning of the month of February, the couturiers showed their latest creations to members of the fashion press. In this period of extreme cold, the setting was the same: at Dior's, the grey silk sofas reserved for important guests, at Fath's, the armchairs placed before the fireplace. Out of the corner of their eyes, the representatives of *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *L'Officiel* and *Femina* — and my list is far from complete — were measuring their importance by the position of the seats that had been set aside for them. Not to mention the Gordon-Lazareff team (*Elle*), and the reporters of the daily press, or the old familiar faces of the regulars who have no special reason to be invited beyond the fact that their names happen to be Besteguy or Louise de Vilmorin or Georges Auric. Not forgetting the representatives of the French press in general, those of the foreign press and the textile world, and of course the inevitable gate-crashers, who find their way in here as elsewhere. Outside it was a good twenty-seven degrees below freezing point causing the windows to steam up. Inside, it was so warm that the make-up was melting. Simone Baron was looking out of the corner of her eye at Lucien François, who was casting sidelong glances at Brunhoff who, in her turn, was keeping a good watch on Carmel Snow. Once again, one could almost imagine oneself in the theatre at a rehearsal. Everybody was avidly studying the programmes, without which fashion writers and reporters would be lost when it came to writing up their articles (how else could they be expected to remember the 500 odd models they see every day!). Amid the hum of conversation, the bursts of applause,



## Couture

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PIERRE BALMAIN  
Zürich Silk

the criticism, the scandal, the spreading of rumours, and under the jaundiced eyes of the copyists, the 1954 spring fashions were making their bow. Everyone knows that they are determined by a few leaders, the others embroidering on a general theme, succeeding sometimes as well — sometimes even better — but being less subject to scrutiny and less in the public eye since, by definition, they are outside the select group of leaders acclaimed by the press and sanctioned by their clients, the women of fashion. Not always, however, since on several occasions we have seen the journalists break out into pæans of praise, and the financial failure of their heroes follow close behind to prove that those who judge and those who buy may have very different opinions.

In short, it was a question this year, as always, of finding out exactly how matters stood. Had Christian Dior's offensive in favour of shorter skirts stormed the bastions of conservatism? Should we see short skirts and long waists? Or should we continue to witness a happy compromise? Even though it may be rather pedantic to recall one's own words, the author may be forgiven for referring his faithful readers to his last account of the winter collections, in which he said that in all likelihood the Dior campaign would be only partly successful. Let us be modest about our prophecy. To be sure there is a slight shortening of skirts, but only very slight. On the other hand, there is a wonderful return to real couture.

What is real couture, you will ask? It is one that creates beauty for a chosen few. I remember an interview with Paul Poiret, round about the year 1945. This couturier of genius — the word is not too strong — speaking of couture, his past, his present and his future, said: «There is one man who nearly put an end to couture. He was exceptionally intelligent, but very nearly succeeded in cutting the neck of the goose that lays the golden eggs; he was the most elegant of the 1925 couturiers, the man who popularised dresses and understood America too well. Couture, added Paul Poiret, is luxury right from the word go. Whether it is copied immediately afterwards, whether its ideas are used for the masses, no matter; but it must always maintain its unreal character, its fairy-tale atmosphere.»

Now, by a paradox which would seem inexplicable to those who are ill-acquainted with the problem, but is quite rational to anyone who stops to reflect a little, today it is the couturiers that have given most thought during recent years to the mass-production of couture, who feel the greatest need to get their feet off the ground and shake themselves free of the crowd.

There is no collection more specifically «couture» than that of Jacques Fath, the man who crosses the Atlantic twice a year to launch a ready-to-wear collection. No collection more «couture» than those of Christian Dior or Balmain, who, as everyone knows, are both familiar with the same problems. And there is no point in quoting back



CHRISTIAN DIOR  
Zürich Silk



MAUD & NANO  
 Wohlen Straw Braid  
 Photo Guy Arsac

at me the examples of Balenciaga and Grès. They are the exceptions that prove the rule. This talented pair has always been on the side of the chosen few and luxury.

\* \* \*

Coming away from Jacques Fath's the other evening, we ran over in our minds all the dazzling models of his latest collection, those close-fitting suits and dresses, stiffened with whalebone and made for wonderfully slim, lithe and elegant women; and we thought how difficult it would be for the ready-to-wear collections to try to copy them. And that is the criterion. One law for the rich, and one for the poor: a creation full of genius, impossible to copy, and a large-scale production using the same ideas but putting them within the reach of the masses.

As for Dior, there was something to suit all tastes — all of it excellent — in this showing which lasted two and a half hours by the clock. He is a consummate artist. I defy any woman of taste not to find, among this immense variety of creations, just the model she is looking for, the one that suits her perfectly. And Balmain! And Givenchy! And Balenciaga and Grès, both already mentioned! And Patou, where Raymond Barbas has the invaluable collaboration of Marc Bohan

in the creation of his collection, and Castillo at Lanvin's, Jean Dessès, and Carven!

We have never seen so many simple little dresses and almost severe outfits bare of all trimmings. True, but never has so much skill been shown in the cut. One would have to go back to the time of Madeleine Vionnet and Augusta Bernard to find again the same desire for technical perfection.

At one time there was a school that treated couture as the old masters composed their paintings. A Jeanne Lanvin, for example, paid very little attention to the tricks of the draping, the darts, or the right and the wrong way of the fabric, but made her dresses in the regal manner.

Today, the apparent simplicity is a more effective defense against being copied. Sleeves mounted low, corseted bodices, dresses with embroidered fullness, rows of darts, which are as much the domain of sculpture as of couture, defy slavish imitation. It is new, and it is different.

On that soft, adaptable but imperious substance, the body of a woman, the designers cut and cut again, mould and shape their dresses. Those familiar with the laws governing ready-



to-wear collections, also know how to outstrip them and leave them way behind. And that is just how it should be.

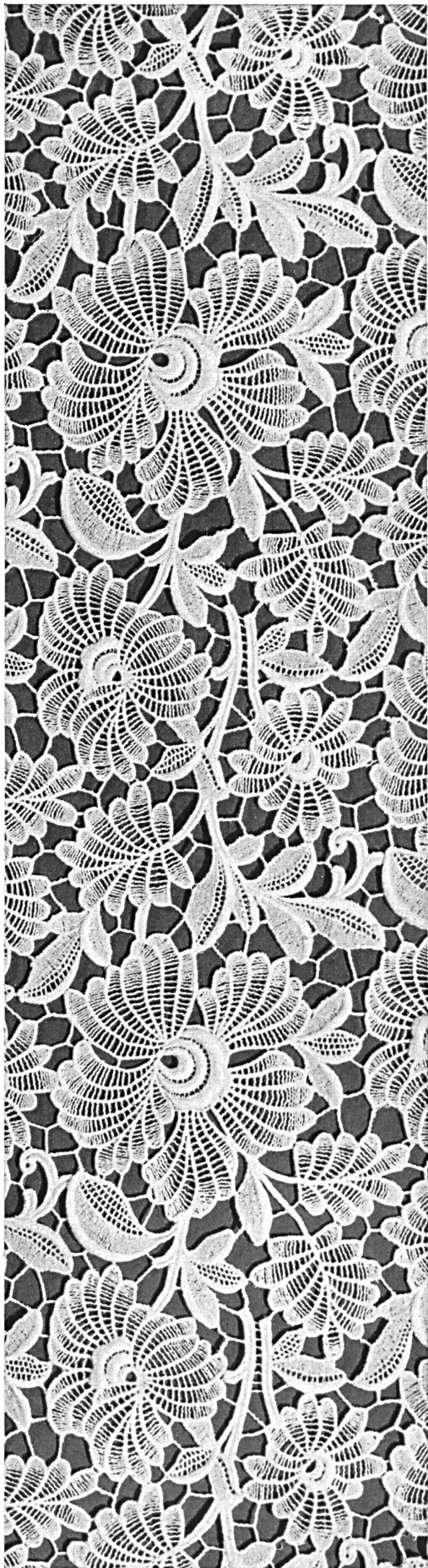
Shall I speak to you of the 1954 line as interpreted by the principal designers? Our colleague, Jean de Harambure, who has served couture faithfully for twenty years, has been kind enough to compose for our readers the typical silhouette of the coming spring. It is all there: the big funnel-shaped hat, the boat-neck with its white peek-a-boo, the very narrow belt, almost non-existent, with a flat bow to fasten it, the bell-shaped petticoat skirt and above all that very characteristic youthful look. This spring's Parisienne will be youthful, confident, sprightly,

SIMONE CANGE  
Wohlen Straw Jersey



and smartly but simply dressed. What does it matter about the variations, the uses of fabrics, the colours? Obviously you already know that all collections lay the greatest emphasis on blue. This is a result of the efforts of the textile industry, which has succeeded in creating new shades in the original contexts. It is also a result of the general feeling, the desire for blue, recorded by the receptive minds of the couturiers, sensitive as Geiger counters.

The photographs and sketches accompanying this article will also show you all that has been done with the creations of the Swiss textile industry, the laces and guipures, the insertions, cottons, silks, ribbons and the braids of Wohlen, which shows that in the field allowed it, the Swiss textile industry is proving once more to be one of the mainstays of French couture. Shall I add that the boat-neck and sailor collar are sharing the limelight? That skirts are,



St. Gall embroidery and lace

on the average, 14<sup>1/2</sup>" from the ground, that the beltless princess line is counterbalanced by the classical line, that the basques of suits are very short often buttoning all the way down, that bows are everywhere, at the neck, the waist, on the skirt, on the lapels, that there are still many tweeds — and a great number of the ever practical cocktail dresses swaying some 5" from the ground, and that there is evidence everywhere of great ingenuity, particularly in the details, and finally that the print reigns supreme with its richly flowered motifs.

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One last word: the readers of *Textiles Suisses* would not forgive me if I failed to mention the reopening of Chanel's salon.

Coco Chanel, who at one time reached the peaks of fame, has not it would seem entirely fulfilled the hopes placed in her. Couture is an art, and also a profession, from which it is dangerous to stray for too long. But those who knew her instinctive good taste and keen intelligence, have confidence in her. At any rate, the announcement of her return to the arena has obliged the couturiers to redouble their efforts. This is one more service she has rendered her profession. And we feel sure that it is by no means the last.

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