

Jacques Fath

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Jacques Fath

On New Year's Eve, 1940, a number of Parisians had been invited by a mutual friend to spend the last evening of that fateful year together. A long table, decorated with flowers, had been laid with a few appetising dishes — the restrictions were only just beginning to make themselves felt — and enough to drink for the guests to try to forget the present and believe in the future. Seated around the table were some fifteen men and women who lived sustained by hope. Two guests had still to come; we saw them arrive at the end of the room. They made a striking couple, both of them tall and slim. They had the same sunlight in their hair, the same sparkle in their eyes, the same brilliant smile. At the sight of these two it was impossible not to be reminded of two young Greek gods. He was a young fashion designer, only just becoming known; she was his wife, Geneviève. Seated at the end of the table, they immediately became the center of attraction of the evening by virtue of their beauty, their gaiety and their charm. That evening we felt sure that if ever there were to be rosy-fingered dawns again, these two would be there to know them.

Then came the long gloomy years of the occupation. Paris wanted to live, and Frenchwomen, in spite of the restrictions and even threats, took particular delight in taking care of their appearance in order to annoy the men in field grey. Perched on their high cork heels, dressed in substitute materials and wearing eccentric hats, they came and went all over Paris, rode bicycles or hastened to catch the last « métro » — the true

« salon d'élégance » — before the curfew. It was in the carriages of the « métro » that people admired the smartly dressed women, as formerly they had at Cannes, Deauville or Longchamp. And when, by chance, a young actress, known more for her beauty than for her budding talent, was noticed for the cut of her coat or the dash of her full tartan skirt, the name of Jacques Fath was sure to be whispered.

For he was fast making a name for himself. Already he had left the Rue La Boétie to move nearer the Champs Elysées; already society women were flocking to his receptions, already the journalists knew that they had in him a friend always ready to give them an idea for a new article or start a new craze. Lucien Lelong, who was managing the interests of Couture with intelligence, firmness and the same good taste that had made him choose Dior and Balmain as designers, and who was thinking of the eventual replacement of the old hands by younger talents, had facilitated Jacques Fath's rise to fame by granting him a large enough ration of clothing coupons to enable the new couturier to obtain sufficient materials for his creations. Thanks to him, Jacques was able to work and make his name. And the women were not mistaken; instinctively, they adopted the man who knew to perfection how to show them at their best. In four short years, Fath, with his young, bold style, became a couturier known for the youthful charm of his creations. When Paris was liberated, his name was on all lips; but he was still unknown abroad.

His first contact with the world outside France took place in Zurich at the end of June, 1945, under the auspices of the Swiss Office for the Development of Trade, the publishers in fact of this periodical. There were a dozen of us at the Gare de Lyon Station in Paris one evening waiting to catch the train for Zurich. Jacques Fath, who was unable to leave Paris at the time, was represented by his young wife and his mannequins. He came to see Geneviève off at the station and entrusted her to my care during the trip. The next evening the unforgettable fashion show in the Kongress Haus took place. For the first time after five years of being cut off, the creations of Paris were being shown to the world. Alongside names of twenty years' standing, that of Jacques Fath was facing the glare of the limelight. It was a triumph. His evening gowns, as sumptuous as any of Poirer's in the past, made the hall resound with spontaneous applause. The next day, no one could speak of anything but him.

Two months later I was in Rio de Janeiro with the team of mannequins representing France. When it came to choosing the dress that would bring the show to a close, the climax of the evening, we were all unanimous in our choice of Jacques Fath's magnificently exaggerated ball gown, billowing with cascades of tulle petticoats. I can still hear the applause that broke out in the gilded hall of the casino at Copacabana every time it was announced that: «This dress by Jacques Fath is made of eleven petticoats one above the other; it took over a hundred and thirty yards of material to make!»

The rest is known; growing success, Fath rising to the summit of Couture, his travels, his receptions, his chateau, his continual flashes of inspiration, his contract with a big American clothing manufacturer, the creation of hats, perfumes, stockings and a hundred and one accessories each more charming than the other and, quite recently, his association with Jean Prouvost, the wool man of Korrigans, and of «Paris-Match» and «Marie-Claire» fame. Known too is the tragic end of this gifted couturier who, better than anyone, incarnated the joy of living.

This joy in life, in endeavour and work, was the salient feature of his personality. In his studio, surrounded by his collaborators, watched over as a child by the faithful Made-moiselle Renoux (I hope she will forgive me if I misspell her name), he created ceaselessly and without stint. One idea led to ten others. He was a pastmaster of the technique of his profession, as clever with the skilful play of the direction of

the materials he used as with the colours. He liked his mannequins to be very slender and envelopped them, like mummies in their wrappings, in the most precious fabrics, to the point of giving their walk the appearance of a kind of elegant hobble. The day of the showing, his «girls» composed a marvellously trained ballet and gave life to their dresses, which they adored. He had succeeded in inspiring in them a love of what they were entrusted to display and in giving them that very special style that made a Fath mannequin a creature apart. He found and moulded these young women; after having introduced Louise, he discovered Bettina, then Sophie, and Doudou, Simone and Patricia... After the showing, he would give a party and was always the first to open the dance with Geneviève, the last to close the evening with a demonstration of the samba or a waltz; he danced with the same ease and grace that he skied, designed a dress, spoke to journalists, or knelt in his salons at the feet of princesses, actresses or maharanees. Beside him, Geneviève, smiling and beautiful, gave the finishing touch to the picture by her beauty and that of Philippe, the son she had borne him.

And now, Jacques Fath is with us no more. One November morning, the whole of Paris came to follow him to his last resting place. Saint-Pierre de Chaillot, full to overflowing, spilled out onto the pavement; the cars were piled high with flowers; the radio, cinema and television recorded the ceremony of his funeral for those unable to attend. There were many bystanders of course, but also many Parisians who felt deeply the great loss they had suffered. But to my mind, the real loss was elsewhere. On leaving the church, I felt I wanted to pass in front of the house which for the last few years had been his whole life. Everything was shut: the curtains were drawn, the shutters pulled to; everything was white, walls, curtains, awnings, outside shutters. One might have said — and yet it was not intentional — the funeral setting of a very young person, in a symphony of white. And I realised that it was not just a man of forty-two that had been buried there that morning, but a being in the prime of his life, at the height of his fame, whom age had left as untouched as Dorian Gray, and that there was something terribly unjust about it...

Now, however, the curtains are open again; in accordance with Jacques Fath's wishes, his house goes on, the house that he loved so much. His wife Geneviève will continue the glorious tradition, and we must give her our great and very respectful thanks.

J. Gaumont-Lanvin

The death of Jacques Fath is deeply felt in Swiss textile circles. This great couturier appreciated the silks of Zurich and the embroideries and fine cottons of St. Gall, and made use of them to a great or lesser extent in all his collections. We feel sure therefore that we are speaking here on behalf of Swiss manufacturers and exporters in expressing our deep regret at the death of this great designer; the flowers sent to the funeral by the periodical «Textiles Suisses» were but a humble token of our gratitude for the honour conferred on Swiss textiles by the deceased in associating them with his name.

The editors