

How to become a fashion reporter

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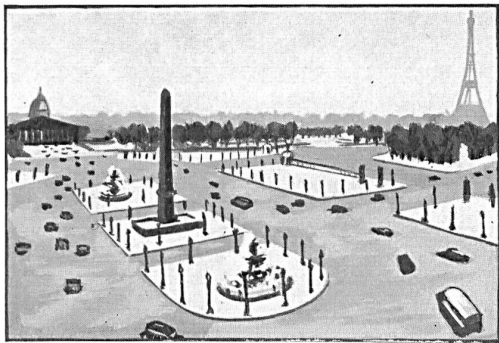
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How to become a fashion reporter

One day early in February, I went to call on my friend Mr. Misery. I found him in his office, sitting at his desk and pulling a long face. On catching sight of me, he impatiently screwed up the newspapers he had been reading and threw them with an expression of disgust into the waste-paper basket.

"You've come just at the right moment," he said, "I needed someone to let off steam to, and you are just the right person as you are mixed up in this fashion business".

"I don't see..." I began...

"...what fashions have to do with it? Well, I'll tell you. I've had enough of not being able to open a newspaper without finding accounts of the latest collections spread over several columns. At one time the press showed more restraint, more discretion: it kept the headlines for politics, economics, literary criticism even, whereas nowadays it seems to delight in revealing what goes on in the law courts or the gilded salons of the fashion houses. It is carrying things too far. What do I care whether Mr. Dior is for the H-line or the A-line?..."

"But all the same, you obviously read these articles, since you seem to remember from one season to the next the different lines and letters of the alphabet..."

"How could I possibly do otherwise? Can you blame anyone who uses the 'métro' every day for remembering *Dubo - Dubon - Dubonnet*? Look here, I can understand their writing

about dresses, but why do they have to use such a ridiculous private jargon that no one else can possibly understand? One reads of nothing but deeply plunging décolletés, scooped-out stand-away necklines, fluid waistlines, the arrow, reed, stalk, sabre, fuchsia or even sylph-like lines, pushed up bosoms... what could be more nonsensical!"

"I must say that for someone who takes no interest in these matters, you have a remarkable memory. But I have to agree with you to a certain extent. However, in order to be fair to both sides, I feel bound to say that it is the couturiers who start these terms when describing their collections on the printed sheets they hand to the press; they want to capture the imagination of the journalists and above all to enable those poor unfortunate women who have seen five hundred dresses in one day to remember the most characteristic features and to give the eager public some suggestive titles. That is what is known as publicity. Where you are wrong is in trying to deny the newspapers and magazines the right to talk about fashions. I am sure that you are one of the first to appreciate the descriptions of women's clothes in the pages of Balzac, because they give a picture of a bygone era and because they are written by Balzac, and you are enchanted when Marcel Proust launches into page-long descriptions of the hats and gowns of the ladies of Guermantes."



Michèle Morgan porte une robe de Hubert de Givenchy en toile brodée. Tissu de Rudolf Brauchbar & Cie, Zurich ; distribué par Montex, Paris. Scène tirée du film « Oasis » en cinémascope, de Yves Allégret, avec Michèle Morgan (à gauche) et Pierre Brasseur (au centre).

"But that's not the same thing at all; these are famous writers you are talking about, I am speaking of plain journalists."

"Then may I remind you that Mallarmé in his day wrote fashion articles, and excellent ones at that. But that's beside the point. No one will deny the supremacy of Paris in the field of feminine attire. And if it is in the news so often, it is because the public wants to hear about it. And not only in France, mind you. You have only to take a look at the foreign press to see for yourself. Our haute couture must be uncommonly interesting for editors everywhere so graciously to reserve space for it that must be worth its weight in gold. And that is not all. Tens of thousands of men and women depend, more or less directly, on fashion shows for their livelihood, from the weaver to the artist who creates the flowers and feathers. And what is more, the industries of other countries work for French couture, and this leads to mutually profitable trade. Then, there is tourism and the precious flow of currency it brings. Don't look so alarmed, old chap, I don't intend to give you a lecture; it would take much too long. I have a better idea. I don't know what you will think about it, but here goes! How about coming with me to a few fashion shows? Then you'll be able to see for yourself..."

It took me more than half an hour to convince him, but in the end I succeeded. And the next day, at 2.45 p.m., we had joined the throng at the foot of the stairs at Christian Dior's, where visitors were being screened for possible gate-crashers. My friend cast glances, at first scornful, then gradually more interested, at the attractive women in mink waiting as we were. In our turn, we were allowed to climb the two flights of stairs and sit in the corridor leading from the mannequins' dressing rooms to the salons. At about 3.15 p.m. the spot-lights were turned on and the first tall slender girl stepped through the curtain. I glanced at my friend out of the corner of my eye. He had a surprised, then a questioning look. Obviously this slender line, these narrow torsos, these little hats and wide skirts, flaring low, were a revelation to him. He had carefully stuffed the explanatory notes into his pocket and was saying nothing. And for an hour and a half he remained silent. After the bridal gown had been greeted with a well-deserved burst of applause, I asked him, as we were going down the stairs, what he thought of it all.

"I know nothing about it, of course," he replied, "but it seems to me to be a real art. There is no denying that your Mr. Dior is above all an architect. He seems to want to get away from the woman's body to create a dream world — and one conjured up by a remarkably cultured dreamer at that. At first I was reminded of the women of ancient Egypt when I saw those small high bosoms, those tightly wrapped bodices like mummy cloths, then the evening dresses made me imagine for a moment that I was in Spain, but on thinking it over I realised that I was quite wrong. It was something quite new — something unmistakably 1955 in style. Obviously I found certain traces of the lines of the 20's, so dear to my adolescent days, but altered and transposed. And what subtlety in those simple colours, those écrus, those off-whites, those yellows!"

"Well really! One would almost think you were writing an article yourself..."

* * *

It is always the first step that counts. After his visit to Dior's there was no stopping my friend, he insisted on seeing everything. And after each showing, he would hold forth for hours discussing all that he had seen. If he had had the newspaper editors for his audience and they had put him in charge of fashion features, he would have taken up at least half the front page. Nothing escaped his notice. Endowed by nature with a critical mind, he remembered movements and details, referred to the papers he had been handed and, in his neophyte's ardour, juggled with the terms that he had formerly condemned. The subtle play of the belts at Dior's, which

emphasised the waist at the height chosen by the whim of the Master for each dress, seemed to him a stroke of genius.

On leaving Fath's, he could speak of nothing but the straw or bell line. Unable to be presented to Geneviève Fath, he had seized Gilberte, the Directrice, by the arm to tell her in glowing terms how youthful and distinctive he found the whole collection. Already he was trying his hand at comparisons, declaring that what he had just seen was the triumph of femininity, that this long austere line was flattering to the figure and that he was enamoured of the countless accessories he had seen, from the encrusted stockings adorning the mannequins' legs to the collars of piqué and pékiné, the ribbons, bows, necklaces and ear-rings.

At Balmain's, in the long salon, which was as packed as the 'métro' on a rainy day, he went into rhapsodies over the slender lines and tight sheaths; he saw nothing to criticize in the term 'Reguindroite' used instead of redingote to denote the long straight coats; he applauded the skilful use of fur, he appreciated the beauty of the mannequins and, when it was all over, I had the greatest difficulty in dragging him away for, in the little private salons, the tall slender girls were beginning to return to show the evening dresses to the clientèle.

Thus for more than a week, I took him everywhere with me, helping him to get to know the house in the Parc Monceau, where Givenchy sets alight his dazzling fireworks display of youthful and sparkling creations, taking him to applaud the creations of Marc Bohan at Patou's, to admire at Lanvin's the self-same turned back collars rolling away from the neck that had irritated him so much when he had read about them in the newspapers but which he now appraised almost with the eye of a connoisseur. He insisted on congratulating Carven on the gaiety of her collection; he seemed surprised not to meet Balenciaga himself in his salons; he had to be dragged out of his armchair at Jean Dessès' where he was so comfortably installed admiring the dresses and also, I suspect, the lovely girls presenting them. In short, I satiated him with couture, taking him from the charming mansion of Lucile Manguin whose delicate colours charmed him, to the house of Jacques Heim, whose « head wind » line took his breath away, from the rue Cambon, where Chanel is still the Chanel of old, to the mansion of La Vaupalière, where Maggy Rouff is as in love with elegance as ever. And this was by no means all...

Our peregrinations over, I went to see him the very next morning. I found him at his desk, writing. With feigned modesty, he handed me a sheet of paper. And this is what he had written:

"At first sight, fashions do not seem to show any revolutionary change in this spring of 1955. Couturiers have settled down to the improved princess line: long bodices, raised bosoms, fullness from the hips, suppression of low bare necklines and emphasized bosoms; torsos are lengthened, but skirt lengths remain the same, even when jackets come down very low; necks are left free, sleeves done away with wherever possible; all types of fabrics are used: tweeds, woollens, cottons, tulles, prints, and the embroidered and re-embroidered silks vie with the Swiss laces that are found in all the collections; neutral shades prevail..."

"I don't want to offend you in any way," I said, "but, all things considered, I think I prefer the style of the fashion writers themselves."

X. X. X.

CHRISTIAN DIOR

Taffetas chiné

de L. Abraham & Cie Soieries S.A., Zurich

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