

Diversity : the highlight of the collections

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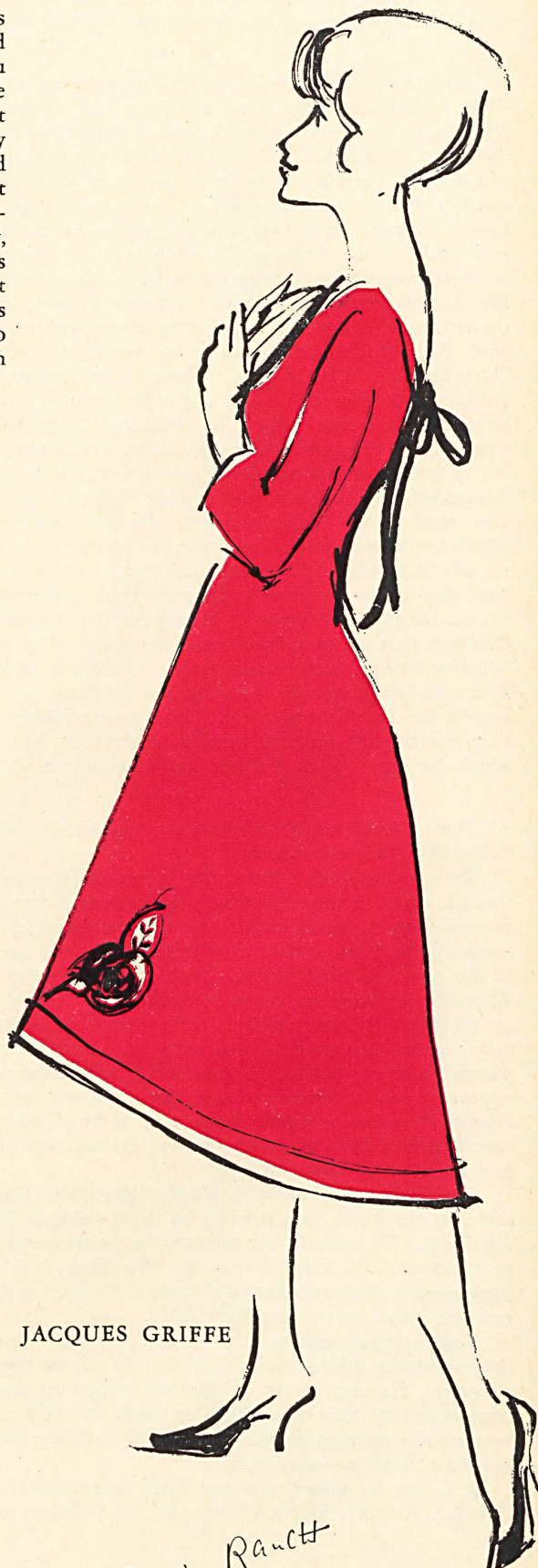
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Diversity, the highlight of the collections

How wonderful it is to be able to wait a whole month before having to comment on the collections. It gives one time to digest this almost too lavish visual feast and, perhaps, to pick out a few general ideas!

I have always felt that the life of a fashion writer for the daily press during the hectic week of the big showings is the nearest thing to hard labour outside Devil's Island. Watch these reporters for a moment, if you happen to be one of the privileged few who attend the opening days of the Paris showings (privileged is one way of putting it, for in actual fact, apart from the feverish, almost hysterical atmosphere, it is the worst possible day for seeing the collection properly). The modern "galley slaves" chained to their fountain pens — perched sideways on their chairs, squeezed as tight as the proverbial sardines in a tin, notebooks on knees, pens poised, cigarettes dangling from lips, necks twisted in an attempt to get a better view, writing constantly, eyes swivelling back and forth like those of spectators at a tennis match, from time to time flicking off the ash that falls on skirt or jacket — must keep a perpetual eye on the salon, describe the models they are not allowed to sketch, jot down sufficient notes to be able to visualize in the evening the dress they have so summarily catalogued, explain



JACQUES GRIFFE

Caroline Raecht

it, compare it with the others and bring out the main ideas of this super-production with its five hundred tableaux. All this calls for a natural talent and sound training. Admittedly, the literature handed out by the couturiers explaining their collections is a great help, but in order to avoid being unoriginal it is best to steer clear of it. Consequently the fashion columnists of the daily press all have one idea — to wangle anticipated holidays from reluctant editors in preparation for the fireworks of January and July...

The glossy magazine writer on the other hand has all the time in the world to reflect, to chew over in his mind and try to analyse what he has seen, in order to sum up his impressions in a few well chosen lines.

After this preamble, it is high time to get down to the collections themselves... Just a moment however, if you will permit... There are still a few things that the inveterate chatterbox responsible for this column would like to get off his chest. During the last few years I have been struck more and more by the big change in the structure of the couture houses. Formerly it was the name alone of a fashion house that counted. One mentioned "Worth", and there was no need to say more. No mention was ever made of the designers. It took incidents made notorious by their subsequent revelation in print for the name of a designer to be mentioned. For example, the day a Worth of the great dynasty decided to do without the services of the young Paul Poiret, whose sketches had ceased to please him. This incident only came to be known later when revealed by Paul Poiret himself. M. de la Pena, at Doucet's, was known to the outside world, but he was an exception. One had to be a member of the couture clan or be let into its secrets to know, in 1945, that Lucien Lelong's two designers were Pierre Balmain and Christian Dior. A designer became famous the day he opened up his own house, like Poiret, Patou, Chanel or Piguet. In this connection, I will always remember Piguet telling me of his first interview with Jeanne Lanvin, to whom he had gone to show some of his sketches, which failed to meet with her approval. "Do you know what she said to me that day?" recounted Piguet, laughing. "She said: 'Young man, you would do better to choose another profession, you are just not cut out for Haute Couture...'" Nearer our day, we saw Guy Laroche leave Dessès to start his own house, and succeed. But that was true to tradition. Whereas we have seen Castillo associate his name with that of Lanvin; at Dior's we have witnessed the successive creations of Yves Mathieu Saint-Laurent and Marc Bohan, and at Ricci's those of Cahay. This is the change I am referring to; the firm remains the same, but as a sort of backdrop on which the name of the designer appears as one of the *dramatis personae*.

These digressions — for which we apologize — being over, let us turn to the 61-62 winter collections.

There is no break in style, but a sort of refinement on some of last season's ideas. It seems as though the couturiers have concentrated mainly on attending to details rather than on introducing a new line. It is an essentially youthful fashion. And it is here that one can gauge the influence of the cinema and the theatre, which are the preserve of the young today. Extraordinary when one comes to think of it. Nowadays the leading roles are all played by young girls in their teens, new faces coming to the fore each year at an unprecedented rate. As a result, mannequins are much younger than ever before. At one time it was thought that a certain maturity was needed to present a dress. Soon however we shall be seeing mannequins of fifteen or sixteen showing, with the stilted precision of the very young, outfits that can no longer have the softness and suppleness previously admired in dress and gait.

The result is a plethora of simple, light little tailormades, short skirts revealing the knees, hats perched on those stubborn little heads with hair piled high. To make clearer the remarks we are about to make, let us take an antithesis. On Fifth Avenue in New York, it is nothing unusual to come across a vastly overdressed woman, at 9 o'clock in the morning, wearing furs and jewels over a very fussy outfit.

Today's Paris fashions are just the opposite. They have a youthful, happy-go-lucky, relaxed look. But don't be misled, they are extraordinarily elaborate. As soon as you deliberately forego the sensational effect of a completely new line (e. g. the New Look in 1947), as soon as you have recourse to a seeming simplicity, a feigned austerity, tricks of cut and detail become of supreme importance.

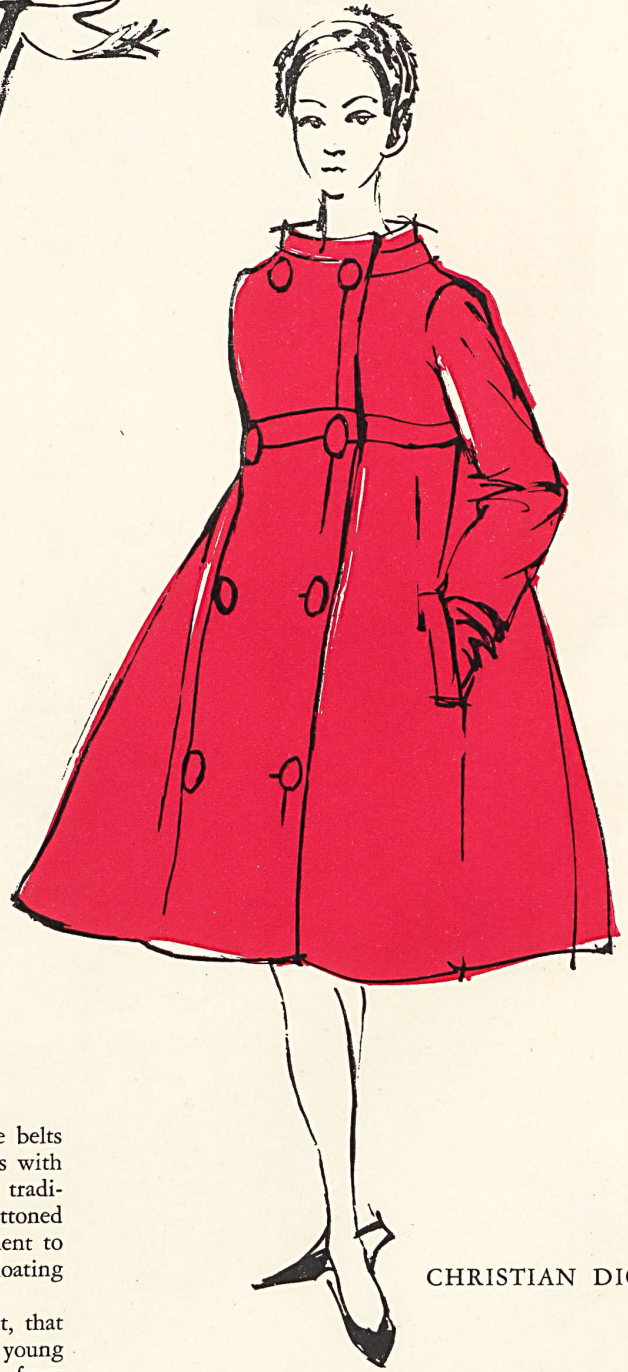
It is not by chance that one finds asymmetrical or spiral effects at Laroche's, Cardin's, Ricci's, Griffe's, Lanvin's, Goma's and Jacques Heim's;



PIERRE BALMAIN



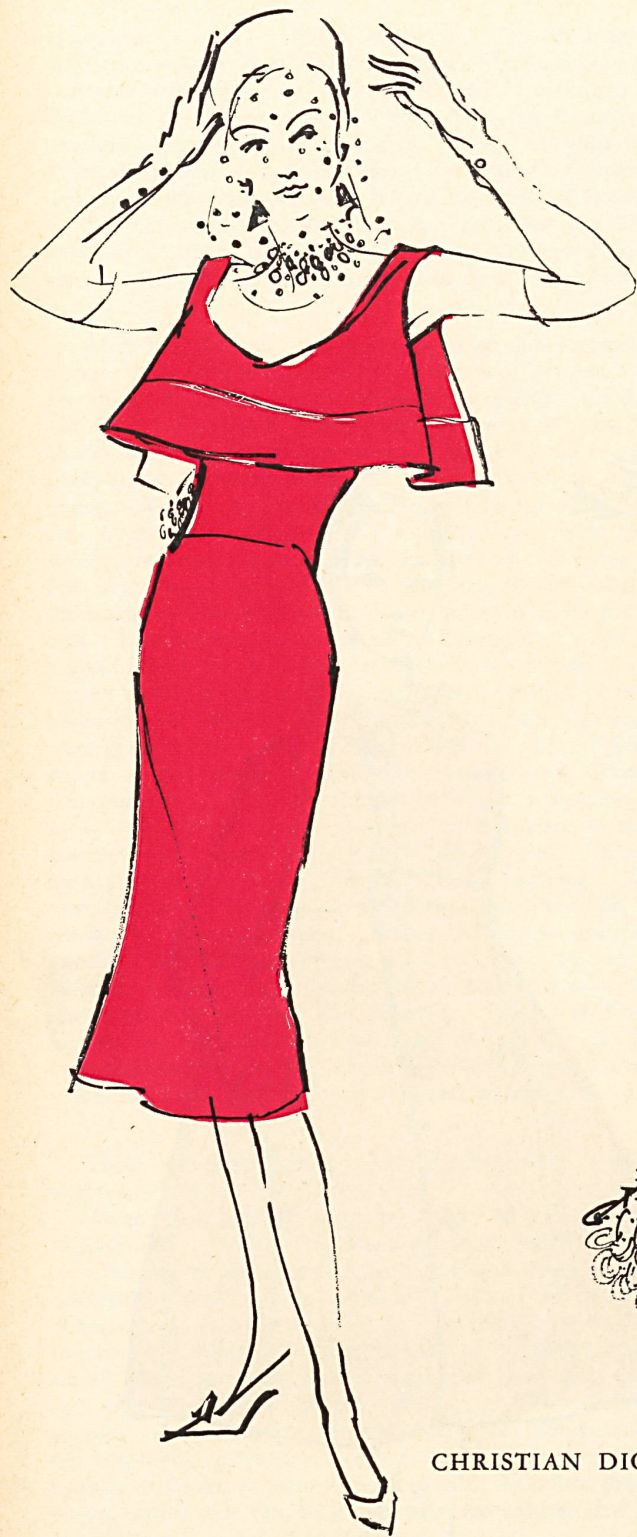
LANVIN CASTILLO



CHRISTIAN DIOR

that all the changes are rung with buttons, that one sees snake-like belts entwining certain waists (Laroche); it is no mere whim that effects with scarves and collars are more diverse than ever, that furs leave their traditional role to become intricate trimmings, that coat skirts are buttoned back as on dress uniforms; it is certainly to add spice and excitement to the simplicity of a number of classical sheaths or stiff suits that floating capes or hoods are used to top jackets.

It is also because the fashion is youthfull, very youthfull in fact, that one sees so many flaring or gored skirts, which of course only the young will want to wear, because they are less suitable for their elders — from the middle twenties on — who will want to settle for the less extreme styles.



CHRISTIAN DIOR

Buttons will be worn in front, on the side, up the back; they will be sewn askew or diagonally. We shall see collarless coats flaring like the frustum of a cone. Oh, by the way, I was forgetting an important point: the waist is once again back where Nature put it.

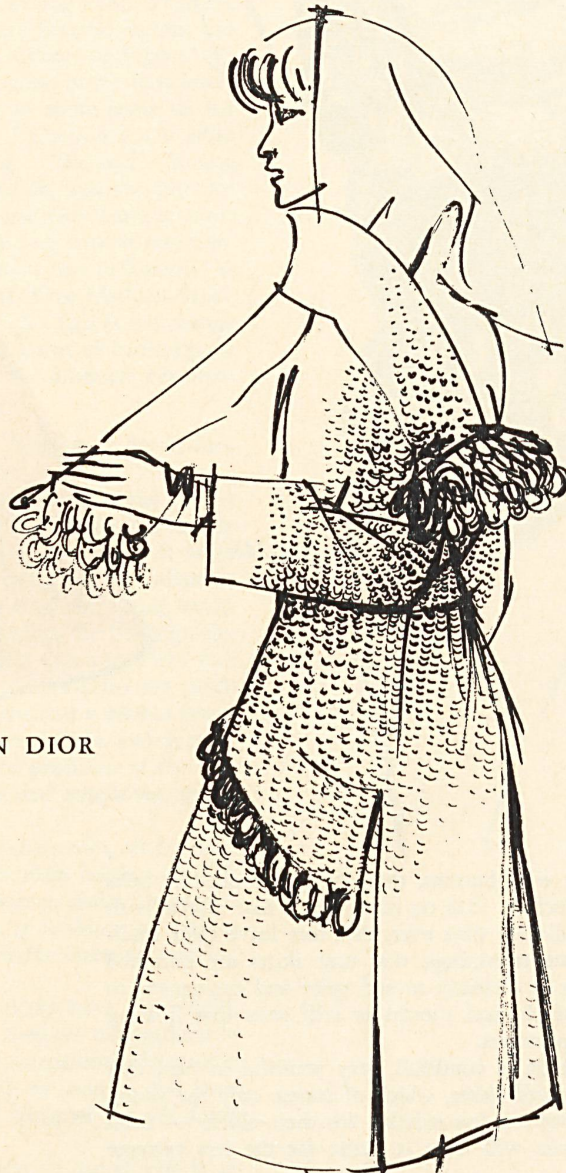
Apart from that, there is a little of everything and I defy anyone, even the most analytical mind, to summarize the whole in a few succinct phrases, because the great attraction of these collections is their diversity. The couturiers have taken great delight in the amusing touch, the little trick. Naturally this goes hand in hand with the use of the most sumptuous fabrics, the softest woollens, the lightest silks, the daintiest embroideries.

To repeat myself, it all boils down to this: that the fashion is youthful, skirts are short, suits simple, necklines unfussed, often with matching scarves, waists are complicated, that black seems to be the prevailing colour, that you, Madam, will be dressed more or less like your daughter, and that you will be delighted with the idea (she, a little less, perhaps).

In short, this fashion was born under the sign of moderation, but it reminds me of Raoul Dufy's method of painting trees, by slapping small splashes of colour onto the canvas and then tracing the branches and leaves with a very fine brush.

I hope we will have a nice cold, dry winter that will allow free play to the long leggy look of today's young women perched spiritedly on their spindly heels.

GALA



CARVEN