

Why Americans pay \$1,000 to look at a new dress



King of fashion. Christian Dior, the highest star in the haute couture.

If the fashion houses of Paris are counted as closely as the seamstresses count their stitches, they total 105. But only 40 are "name" houses, and of these 11 actually determine the seasonal whims. They are Christian Dior, Balenciaga, Schiaparelli, Jeanne Lanvin, Jacques Fath, Pierre Balmain, Marcel Rochas, Desses, Piguet, Paquin and Jacques Griffe.

In a land which encourages bizarre originality, it is not surprising that all of the 11 broke in as amateurs. Fath, who locks himself up for a month to create a collection and uses his own body at times for draping fabrics, was once a financier on the French equivalent of Wall Street. Schiaparelli, the only woman member of the Big 11, used to do Italian translations and started making her own clothes because she couldn't afford others.

The one designer with a capital D is Christian Dior. Son of a well-to-do family, he was raised to be a diplomat. He found political science uninspiring, however, and turned to costume-designing for friends. Before the war he was a Paris art dealer; during the war an infantry soldier. In 1946, with the backing of France's textile magnate, Marcel Bousac, he opened his first house.

In February, 1947, he opened eyes and mouths all over the world—by showing almost-ankle-length daytime dresses. In the United States this length was christened the New Look. And Dior had won, by inches, the title, King of Fashion. His title is still secure. Dior designs accounted for an estimated 60% of total *haute couture* exports last year. They are worn by loyal subjects in 83 countries.

At this spring's showing, he was the only designer who could count on enough trade to hold separate showings for European and American buyers. In all, he gave four shows—two for buyers, one each for press and private clientele. The best of the other designers gave no more than three.

High-Priced Bargains. Dior also collects the highest prices and entrance fees. His dresses start at \$240, go as high

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as \$1,000. To see them, a buyer pays \$500; a manufacturer, \$1,000. Both fees are applied on dresses bought or ideas borrowed for reproduction.

As top man, Dior can afford to be strict with his customers. A visitor seen leaving before the end of the two-hour show is never invited back. And anyone caught sketching the styles (and hence assumed to be plagiarizing) can expect an abrupt heave-ho by a special corps of male and female detectives. Dior personally ousted one pirate, a local dress-maker, last year.



Pathfinder

In the Dior salon. Black and white, the fashion for evening.

When he prepares for a show, Dior retires three months in advance to the Negresco Hotel, fashion center of the Riviera, or to his country home, a converted mill near Fontainebleau. Two weeks later he returns with 600 sketches, of which 400 eventually are burned. Mme. Marguerite, his assistant, deals the rest out to 14 *premieres* (fitters) in the 14 *ateliers* (sewing rooms). Each workroom houses 50 women and only two sewing machines. At that, Dior apologizes for the Machine Age display. "Who ever heard of mass-produced art?" he scoffs.

The Big Shows. The pace quickens as D-Day approaches, becomes positively breathless, both backstage and out front, when curtain time arrives. At the Feb. 7 opening "Monsieur Dior *himself*," as one awe-struck salesgirl put it, was backstage making last-second adjustments on his dresses.

One by one, the 14 mannequins pulled up their faces to their haughtiest heights and strode out. "They either sway like Caribbean natives with baskets on their heads," whispered one American buyer, "or like Victorian ladies with nothing on their minds." They dragged their coats disdainfully across the floors (mink coats, however, were quickly rescued by a young boy appearing from the wings). Salesgirls yelled the numbers and names of dresses in French and English.

Tension mounted higher and higher until the air was so thick that the swish of a mannequin's skirt made a breeze. The only calm ones were the waiters, who sat back in high-ceilinged cloak rooms playing poker. Later they would serve cakes and champagne.

(This article is an excerpt from "Fashion's Soul is Still in Paris")

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