

HE WARS AGAINST THE FASHION PIRATES

BY RENE LECLER

A FRENCH FASHION EXPERT visited a dress shop in Pittsburgh, thumbed through racks holding the new season's coats and dresses, then called for the owner of the store. After introducing himself, he said: "Did you know that your store is full of stolen goods?" The Frenchman ended up on the sidewalk minus his hat and his dignity.

Yet, according to the laws of his country, he was speaking the truth. He was also voicing the collective indignation of famous couturiers like Dior and Balmain against the wholesale copying of their creations. In Paris, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, French fashion's trade association, considers that every year Paris designers suffer a loss of \$13,000,000 to \$15,000,000 at the hands of people who copy their designs and don't pay for them. It further estimates that every season 600 designs end up in the U.S. to inspire at least one out of every two dresses bought by the average American woman.

I went to see Commissaire (Inspector) Jacques Besson, who is in charge of the "Service for the Protection of Artistic Property" in his office at the Police Judiciaire headquarters on the Boulevard Gouvion St.-Cyr in Paris.

Besson's main trouble stems from the fact that U.S. law does not recognize the idea of a dress as a commercial property. Anyone who can see it can copy it. France, on the contrary, protects her fashion creators and so what is good business in New York is grand larceny in Paris.

This curious discrepancy between national laws has given birth to countless new businesses: copyists who attend the Paris dress shows and draw what they see; members of international chains who pass the designs from country to





country; and “hirers” of Paris dresses who, without ever coming within handcuffs’ reach of Besson’s squads, do a roaring trade.

Besson tells the typical case of a U. S. garment maker who bought the pattern of one particular dress. He made 2,000 copies for each of his shops, a total of nearly 200,000 copies of the dress, of which the Paris originator had sold only 25 to private customers.

He plays a cat-and-mouse game with the world’s cleverest crooks—those who steal French fashions for million-dollar stakes

Besson watches impotently while the cream of Paris fashion crosses the Atlantic without benefit to its creators. But he can crack down on those who come to Paris for the pickings. For eight years he has played a cat-and-mouse game with them and, like a true policeman, he enjoys it. “The spies who exploit Dior’s or Balmain’s ideas,” he says with a smile, “never confess.” Occasionally, he enjoys the exception.

Shortly after last year’s autumn collections, an informer told him that a well-known society woman living near the Champs Elysées was a member of a gang smuggling dress sketches out of France. Besson drove to her apartment, left a man to watch the back door and rang the bell. The maid said, “Madame is out. She should be back shortly.” Besson searched the apartment—uncovered beds, looked behind draperies, lifted



up rugs and opened jars of face cream. He found nothing. An hour later, the handsome, well-dressed woman returned, carrying a shopping bag. Besson told her who he was and the reason for his visit.

“Monsieur, I don’t know what you are talking about,” she replied. “But please, search the place.”

“We have already done so. Now I would like to question you.”

“Please do,” replied the chic Parisienne, “but allow me to put my groceries away. It’s hot and the food will go bad. . . .” Besson saw her place the bag in the refrigerator.

“I have always had a soft spot for refrigerators,” he says. “I once discovered microfilmed evidence in somebody’s ice cube tray. Now I remembered that we hadn’t searched this one.” He searched the refrigerator and found nothing. Then he began taking the vegetables and the cold meats out of the bag. Under a pound of frankfurters he found a small package covered with grease-proof paper. Inside were 40 drawings of the latest Paris fashions.

“That woman was cool,” says Besson. “She watched me go through her shopping bag without twitching a muscle. When I showed her the drawings, she shrugged her beautiful shoulders and said simply: ‘Monsieur le Commissaire, I have had it.’ As it was her first offence, she got off with a heavy fine.”

Twice a year, in February and August, Besson goes on the prowl. These are the times when a score of fashion houses like Dior, Balmain, Givenchy and Nina Ricci produce coats, dresses and ball gowns guaranteed to send women diving into their handbags for checkbooks. To their showings are invited wealthy



private customers, manufacturers, journalists and photographers.

The unwelcome guests are those whose portraits adorn the pages of Besson's private rogues' gallery. They come equipped with notebook, pencil and a phenomenal memory. Their job is to gather ideas, copy a line, the curve of a sleeve, the color of a brocade. The better their drawings are and the quicker they can get them out of France, the more money they make. One New York newspaper recently estimated that Americans spent \$6,000,000 at last February's shows. Without the copyists they might have spent twice that amount in France.

Not long ago, a U. S. customer told the House of Dior that one of his competitors got Dior dresses at half the price he had had to pay. "How do you explain that?" he asked angrily. Besson's men traced a visiting Italian artist to a small hotel room in Paris. The man had attended the Dior shows, drawn models from memory and cut out paper patterns by the dozen. Tempted by his prices, several American garment makers had bought the patterns. Besson's squad nabbed the Italian, confiscated his money and his passport, then released him on bail.

Within a day, the Italian borrowed money and stole away to Modane, a small town on the Franco-Italian border. There someone lent him a knapsack and a cane. After 28 hours of grueling marching over the Alps, the Italian artist got home—on foot. "Of course, we've never seen him again," Besson says ruefully. "Extradition doesn't work for larceny or fraud. So, once



detected, many foreign operators never return.”

BESSON'S JOB is to stop such people. At 36, he is one of France's youngest Commissaires, stocky, handsome, with a thoughtful face and searching blue eyes. His voice is quiet, his manner like a lawyer's. Chain-smoking black, pungent French cigarettes, he talks almost with affection of the international copyists he has shadowed for years. "Intelligent crooks nowadays don't rob banks or the mails," he says. "They appropriate ideas."

Besson prides himself on his knowledge of human nature, especially women, who make up 80 percent of his suspects. "They are hard to question," he says. "A woman will argue against logic. On the other hand she is emotional and often gives herself away."

Recently, when Besson and his men raided a woman suspect's home in the center of Paris, his three companions spent nearly three hours searching the apartment. Besson, smoking, sat by the door watching the woman. He realized that she appeared anxious or jittery when his men searched near the living room window. He moved to the window. In front of it stood a green plant in a pot. The plant looked healthy but the earth was dry and seemed to have come off the edges of the pot. He lifted the plant from the pot. Under the earth was a thin package wrapped in cellophane, containing over 60 drawings from Dior, Balmain and Balenciaga.

When working on a raid, Besson normally leads four or five men who, as soon as a door is opened, fan out into every room simultaneously. Bursting into a secret hideout not



long ago, he heard one of the inner doors being hurriedly locked. He hammered on the door, calling out, "Police, police, open up!"

Inside the room he could hear someone frantically tearing up pieces of paper. He was about to break the door down when the key turned and a rather sweet, agitated old lady greeted him.

"Monsieur, you frightened me," she said. "I thought it was burglars and I locked myself in. . . ."

Besson began searching the room. The window was open. He went to the window and looked out, down five stories into an inner courtyard below. It was littered with hundreds of bits of paper. He and his men scampered down the stairs and, putting the shreds of paper together, were able to reconstruct enough evidence to convict the woman.

After years of activity, Besson thinks that he has a fairly complete register of the places where people might hide evidence. "It is not easy," he says. "After all, what we are looking for might be just a letter or a tiny notebook or a roll of microfilm one-third of an inch across." He has discovered evidence behind bathtubs, in ventilation ducts and even inside electrical fittings.

Besson's most frequent target is the middle link in the chain of those who live off the couture houses, the courier. To his sorrow, he rarely lays hands on the two ends of the chain—the man or woman responsible for visually stealing the idea of a dress or the man at the other end who pays the money and masterminds the whole operation.

The most interesting link in the fashion spy chain is the "visual," the



man or woman who, in a split second, can memorize an idea which took the couturier months to evolve. Most "visuals" use their photographic memory and start drawing only when they leave the premises. They often work in pairs. One memorizes the front of a dress and the other the back. Afterwards they meet and reconstruct the dress.

Besson's greatest weapon in the pursuit of fashion pirates is the fact that their occupation is almost habit-forming. "These people are like drug addicts," he says. One of his favorites is an old Egyptian lady with spectacular hats and arms loaded with costly jewelry. Besson has now arrested her five times and she has had two spells in uncomfortable French jails. Once he found her in an hotel room lovingly finishing a handsome Dior sketch. Another time he nabbed her in the departure lounge at Orly Airport and found the essential details of the season's best dress in her handbag.

Besson often finds himself loaded with an embarrassment of evidence. Two years ago, exhibits gathered from one forger's premises filled three squad cars. Besson dumped the dresses, patterns and sketches in a special room at his headquarters and issued an open invitation to fashion houses to come and pick up what was theirs. "This," he told me, "led to an amusing situation with 20 beautiful girls from the fashion houses searching through a mountain of stuff while all the time arguing with the suspects lined up against the wall. The language was strictly unrepeatable. . . ."

Because many of his suspects are not legal residents of France, Bes-



son is often in the center of international complications. Two years ago, having gathered evidence that an American visitor to the shows was preparing to leave France with clandestine sketches in his luggage, he rushed to the man's hotel. The latter had already left for Orly Airport. The Commissaire followed him there, arriving just as the suspect's aircraft was taking off. He rushed to the control tower and asked the traffic officer to alert the pilot to the situation.

For a quarter of an hour the plane circled aimlessly over the field while Besson talked to his superiors. "In the end," he recalls, "we decided to let the man go. We were putting bona fide tourists to a lot of trouble and besides, the man was a regular. We knew he'd be back." He was. Last summer Besson caught him as he was handing a batch of sketches to an accomplice. The man was arrested, tried, fined \$3,000 and warned off French territory. For Jacques Besson, his return was one more convincing bit of proof that the subtle creations of Paris still rule the world of fashion.

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