

Fashion's soul is still in Paris

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

“There’s an intangible something here,” sighed Mrs. Janet Walsh last month in Paris. Mrs. Walsh, buyer for the “28 Shop” at Marshall Field, Chicago, was referring to something as illusive as the shadow of a fold yet powerful enough, she said, “to determine the dress of most every American woman.”

It might be a silhouette which would be translated in America into the curve of a collar or sweep of a skirt. Whatever form it took, it still was French—and important. Most of the nearly 400 buyers, fashion editors and manufacturers who took in this year’s spring collections would agree that the body of Dame Fashion had been moved to New York. But her soul still dwelt in Paris.

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



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

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the Big 11, used to do Italian translations and started making her own clothes because she couldn't afford others.

Man from Missouri. Schiaparelli is not the only "foreigner" among them. Bill Underwood, who designed the whole spring Rochas collection this year, is a recent import from Belle, Mo. Bill, 32, started sewing for his sister when he was 13, and left college after flunking French. He is the only American in the group. Other non-Frenchmen are Castillo, Lanvin's designer, and Balenciaga, both superstitious Spaniards. Balenciaga, for example, personally sews stitch for stitch one dress in each collection.

The designer with a capital D, however, is an authentic Frenchman: 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 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 leave-ho by a special corps of male and female detectives. Dior personally ousted one pirate, a local dress-maker, last year.

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.



Pathfinder

"Lashes Glasses." A flutter of fantasy shown in Paris by Schiaparelli.

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.



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

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

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Pathfinder

Winged victory. Another Schiaparelli triumph, in black satin.

Pierre Balmain was full of tricks, too. A conservative dresser himself—except for a pair of red suspenders he 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.

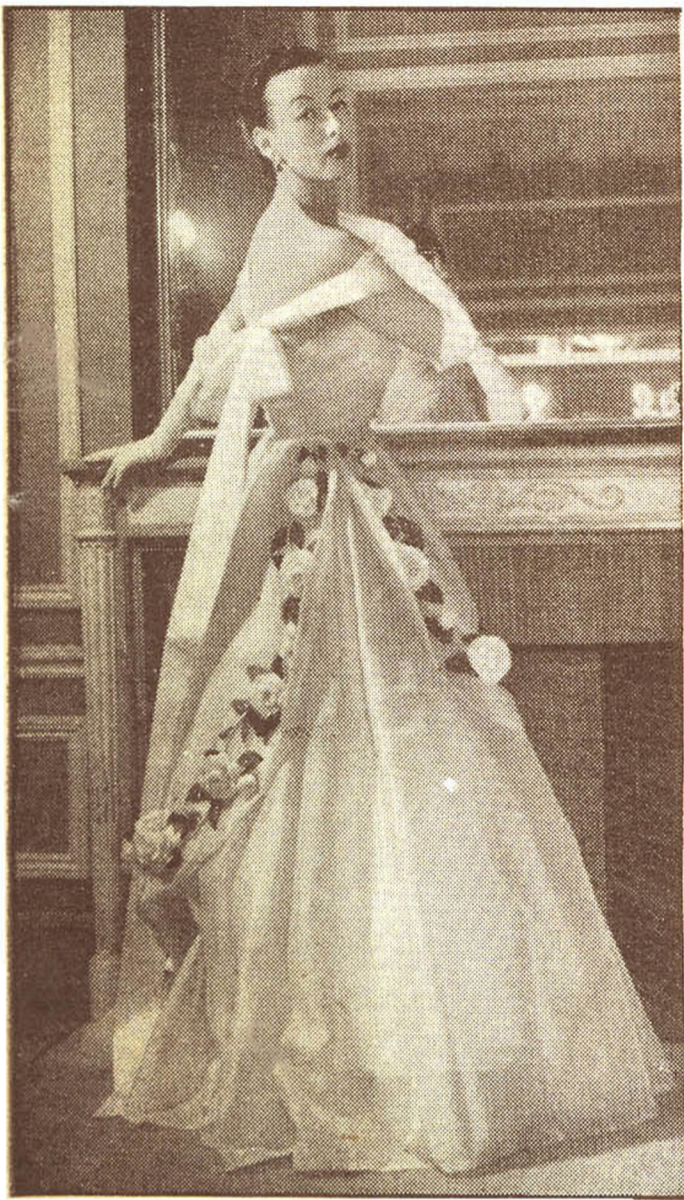
Barnyard Motif. According to the Master, the motif this spring was the "Oval Look." His line emphasized feminine curves. He had borrowed ideas from the barnyard for his "leg o' chicken" sleeves and the egg-shaped ovals in necklines and hiplines. At one point in the show, six models "flew" into the salon, each wearing Dior's new *Papillon* (butterfly) print tinted in red, blue, periwinkle, yellow, rose and cinnamon.

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his best clients celebrities like Marlene Dietrich, Claudette Colbert and Alice Toklas. The latter's normally white poodle, "Basket," stole the show opening day when he minced through the salon with a mannequin. Basket was dyed a delicate lavender to match the mannequin's costume.



Pathfinder

At Balmain's. *White gown aproned with roses; navy suit with navy-and-white fox.*

Luncheon in Chicago. By mid-February the furor was over, the buyers' orders were in and production was under way. By last week, the new designs had reached America. Mrs. Walsh at Marshall Field was proudly showing the three

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dozen pieces—dresses, suits and coats—which she had bought abroad, mostly in Paris but a few in London. The imports were shown only once in public, and then to a select luncheon group.

Though hardly any American women will ever touch any of these Paris creations, they, in time, will touch her—most directly, Mrs. Walsh thinks, through the movies. Most of the stars, she pointed out, wear Paris gowns.

“A star,” one Parisian designer has said, “can’t afford to wear the same thing more than once in public. She must keep up a front.”