

The 1954 autumn collections

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The 1954 autumn collections

As you probably know, Christian Dior has scattered confusion among the ranks of women and carried out his minor revolution in the world of fashion. Will women follow the new line dictated by this most powerful of couturiers? That remains to be seen. But even if our womenfolk balk at this throw-back to the twenties, and their husbands protest against this abnegation of their feminine charms, all the same its effects will be felt, something will remain. Proof of this is that one of the big Paris stores placed an order in America at the beginning of August for a large consignment of those bras that support and flatten the natural curves and that the same firm has had a whole series of clothes mass-produced in the French bean style that Dior is trying to impose.

Whether one likes it or not, whether one deploras the whole thing or is enchanted by it, there is definitely a change. It still awaits the sanction of the Parisienne, the models still have to be run in, the angles softened, the exaggerations toned down, but the first impetus has been given.

The idea had been in the air for some time, but it required some one bold enough to lead the way. The exaggerated bosoms jutting out like the prow of a ship, the big busts and narrow waists, the abuse made of these by the most ordinary ready-to-wear collections were bound to make Couture revolt, give a kick to the rudder and veer off in a new direction, but it was not expected to be quite such a startling change. Balmain is proof of this.

Pierre Balmain is, in a way, the successor of a whole dynasty of very gifted designers who were purely Parisian in their inspiration, as for example Molyneux and Piguet, whose constant aim was to clothe the women gracefully. Now although Balmain's collection is delightfully subtle, although his tailor-mades, coats and afternoon dresses are impeccable, his evening dresses masterpieces of richness and good taste, it is none the less true that today he is at the very opposite extreme to his old colleague from Lucien Lelong's.

If one sees Dior's collection before the others, one cannot help thinking that they are all behind the times. Luckily this was not the case with the author of these lines who saw Dior's showing almost last of all and was thus able to see the collections as a whole and appreciate the differences in inspiration between the great couturiers. The dividing line seems to lie somewhere between Fath and Givenchy. We are leaving out the creations of such very individualistic houses as those of Balenciaga or Grès, who care nothing for the contingencies of fashion and have their own very personal style and faithful clientele.

The collections of Fath and Givenchy then seem to combine the spirit of conquest with subtlety. They are as Parisian and amusing as can be. Of course it is not possible to find at Givenchy's the whole gamut, the brilliant display of fireworks we have at Fath's, which his well-established success permits him. But at the former's, we are reminded irresistibly

of the early successes of the latter. Fath's collection is a delight from start to finish, from the display of petticoats, in which Swiss textiles play a large part, to the bride's sailor blouse, as bittersweet as a Colette heroine.

If these brief notes were anything other than a general report, we should have to deal one by one with the twelve big houses that set the pace, but such is not our aim. We shall content ourselves with describing the general trends of the new fashion. Shoulders are narrow, no longer broad and square, no emphasis on the bosom but flattened busts, slim bodices, high sleeves (good-bye to kimono sleeves), waists are in their natural place, but only hinted at and almost always faked by tricks such as belts resting on the hips and details (buckles, bows, etc.) which make them appear lower. The blouse style, pullover or jacket, with its sloppy look, gives a certain looseness to this skimmed figure, a certain softness which compensates for the skeleton-like appearance of the mannequins. Skirts, both narrow and straight or wide, often bell-shaped, are not in the limelight this season; they remain quite simple. Most evening dresses are short with a dipping movement from front to back.

This season's colour is black, followed by every shade of red, speckled gray and marron glacé.

With regard to fabrics, there are many classical tweeds, Shetlands, wool, cotton or silk velvets, or that extraordinary nylon velvet that can with impunity be stained, ironed or generally mishandled; there are also shiny materials and, for the evening, taffetas, satins and lamés. These, enriched with a riot of sumptuous embroideries, make the simplest evening dress an enemy to the feminine purse. And then furs. Never have so many been seen, used with alarming abandon and detachment; everywhere there are linings of mink and broadtail... Small framing hats, or gigantic, hairy ones shaped like mushrooms. On the ears, one sees pearls, at the neck byzantine ornaments of diamonds and precious stones; waists and wrists are adorned with buckles and strass buttons. Such, in short, is this autumn's fashion.

Behind his candid and at the same time courteous mask, shyly lowering his twinkling eyes, Dior must be amusing himself right royally. He is too intelligent not to see the extravagant side of his creations, but he has done with half measures, made a clean sweep and left far behind the ready-to-wear collections and vulgarity.

Marilyn Monroe may protest against this threat to her charms. But you will see; in a short time, without her realising it, she will be appearing in technicolour more discreetly dressed, less aggressive and more mysterious. When a balance has been struck, and our eyes have grown accustomed to the new fashion, we shall understand that all this was but a storm in a tea-cup and that, once again, Parisian Couture has played its part if innovator very well. And this is as it should be. X X X.