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Random notes

In the good old days — half a century ago at least — couture was surrounded by an aura of comfortable and luxurious tradition. Callot, Worth, Paquin, Doucet and Cheruit, among others, created sumptuous gowns for a highly conventional élite. Glancing through the magazines of that bygone era, one finds the fashions of the day a trifle boring. And then suddenly Paul Poiret appeared on the scene, sweeping all before him, like Halley's famous comet which was so much in the news at the time. He took it upon himself to create daring dresses and coats which seemed the height of eccentricity; the cut was new, the colour combinations unexpected to say the least, the shape anarchic since his collections introduced divided skirts and that diabolical invention of his, the infamous hobble skirt. All these innovations created quite a stir. And the press seized upon the new ideas, followed by those satirical entertainers of Paris night-life, the « chansonniers ».

I can well remember all the fuss... I was still a child, and everyone around me was humming a tune only the first words of which were considered suitable for my tender ears (though naturally I knew the rest of the song even so). But even though women's legs were imprisoned so that they could barely walk — like horses that are hobbled to prevent them from running away — it didn't matter. It didn't matter that people joked, complained and swore that these dresses were completely unwearable; women wore them just the same, women being what they are and being pastmistresses, when it comes to fashion, in the art of transforming the ridiculous into a thing of beauty, a delight to the eyes.

But why am I telling you all this? Because this season, I was surprised, amazed, a little shocked even at the sight of young women, parading in the classical salons with their discrete decorative schemes designed to form the ideal foil for the rather dressy dresses usually shown there — at the sight of these young women, I was saying, parading in caps straight out of an apache dance or the pages of Jules Verne, and thigh-high boots like those worn by the sewer-men of Paris or tired statesmen fishing for trout in the Scottish Highlands; others wore thick stockings, decorated with embroideries and rich designs.

I was wrong though to be surprised, I humbly admit it. It is a sign of old age setting in. It is the couturiers who are right in these days of teenage idols, pop-singers and pop-art. Next winter we shall come across one of these booted Dianas on the streets of Paris, London or New York and we shall find her perfectly charming. After all, these modern misses in boots will bear the unmistakable stamp of Dior or St. Laurent.

Another sensational idea — the « have-to-be-seen-to-be-believed » décolletés plunging between twin curves skilfully moulded by bras to give that extra fullness; the idea is not a new one. One has only to visit any art gallery to see that in centuries



NINA RICCI

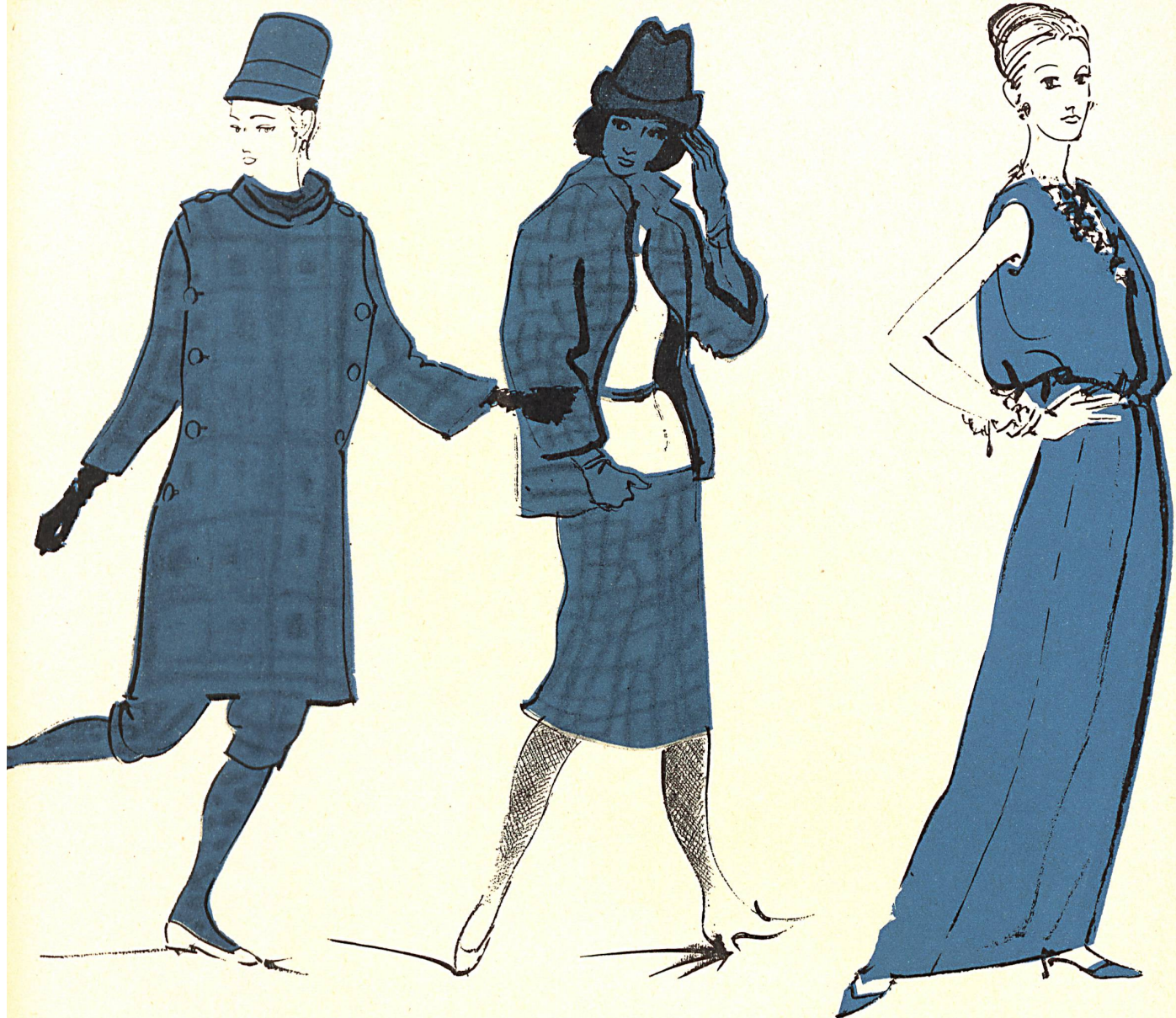


CAPUCCI

past when royal courts set the fashion, corsages were even more revealing than those proposed by Marc Bohan. However, in spite of their great charm, these décolletés will undoubtedly be brought back to demurer proportions for everyday wear.

Well, I've finished with my criticisms; the time has come to be objective. If couture were not so different from ready-to-wear, which has recently made astounding progress and been given the accolade, if couture were not that breeding ground of extraordinary or crazy ideas, it would cease to be the magnet still attracting the rest of the world to Paris — in spite of all the efforts made in different countries to supplant it. And then, between couture and painting, there are many striking similarities. Yesterday, for instance, in the Palais du Louvre, a famous minister and writer made a moving speech before the catafalque of Braque. I can remember the welcome formerly given to the brash paintings of this famous painter, a welcome that was friendly but reserved, so exaggerated seemed his composition and his tricks of colour. It was nothing however to what we have seen since then, and nothing surprises us any more, since everything that at one time appeared excessive now seems remarkably tame compared with the works of today's abstract painters and seekers after originality at all costs (and all prices). And so, and this is my last word on the subject, long live modern misses in boots and plunging necklines...

This being settled, what impression do the latest collections leave on one?



JEANNE LANVIN

YVES SAINT-LAURENT

CHRISTIAN DIOR

The present trend is a sharpening of the tendency noted in previous seasons ; there is no longer that near unanimity that used to prevail, we mean that kind of simultaneous evolution of fashion which led some people to think that the couturiers all put their heads together before hatching the new collections, and which I had so often tried to explain in the columns of this periodical. Just as at an air display, the fighters soar in close formation to burst at the top of their flight, like a rocket at a fireworks display, into a shower of gleaming particles, so the young couturiers, after treading the same path to fame, branch off and start to go their own way. As, during the years of their growth, they have acquired a sense of cut and a concern for form, and their talent has matured, they interpret the fashion each according to *his* fashion. And this is what has given us the amusing kaleidoscope we have today. As in addition — apart from a few exceptions — this young generation has, even in the most traditional of fashion houses, assumed an importance that was formerly reserved for the heads of these establishments, the fashion changes much more quickly than before. Dressmakers are no longer prisoners of a certain style, and one house's style may be entirely different from that of the next, depending entirely on the mutations.

But, even though it is entertaining, even though the eye is pleased, even though one goes from surprise to surprise, one is in difficulties when it comes to describing the creations. In certain cases at any rate ; if there is, for example, a certain continuity of style in the creations of a Chanel, a Balenciaga or a Grès, it is not so evident now among the other great names. At one time one could easily pick out at sight a dress by Jeanne Lanvin, Madeleine Vionnet or Robert Piguet. A new collection was merely the continuation — revised, corrected and improved — of the previous one. For anyone who regularly attended every showing, there were reference marks which made it possible to find one's bearings, to classify the creations by main categories and styles. Finally, throughout any given collection, there was one dominant note. Today, everything is a pretext for diversion, for novelty, for launching a new idea. As a result, the presentations are always unexpected or unusual, always entertaining, and often full of surprises. One only really feels on familiar ground when the evening dresses make their appearance, for here tradition is given full rein, since the idea is to create beauty with sumptuous fabrics, enveloping effects or ethereal veils and embroideries. There is a « new wave » style for the morning, for sport, the week-end, motoring or air travel — but not for the evening ; that would be impossible.



MAGGY ROUFF

So what can I say then? That winter coats are generally big and loose, wrapping up warmly, that shoulders are squarer and collars heavily detailed. That out of these coats emerges a thin head crowned with a toque, a cap or a hood ... that the tailormades are everything but tailormades as we know them and that nowadays every woollen outfit consisting of jacket, skirt and high original collar in the same fabric or fur goes by that name ... that waists are different — high, where Nature put them, or low ... that sleeves are often longer and bare arms are seldom seen with winter dresses ... that dresses at one time dethroned by knitted outfits are on the way back and we are glad of it ... that most fabrics have large designs, tartans or houndstooth checks ... that the dominant colour is black ... that the tailormades for the evening made of brocade and tie silk are all the rage ... that there is not a single couturier who has not used St. Gall embroideries and Zurich silks ... that mink is king, but chinchilla emperor. Since breeders have been able to rear it in captivity, this delightful little animal — at one time in danger of dying out, since barely fifteen years ago it was calculated that there were not sufficient chinchillas left in the world to supply fur for more than five coats — is finding its rightful place again on wealthy women's shoulders.

* * *

I hope that in order to form an idea of the latest fashion, the reader will not be content merely to read these notes that are as random and haphazard as the collections but will look too at the sketches and photographs. Also, as Clara Gazul, alias Merimée, used to say, that he will excuse the author's shortcomings...

GALA