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Worthy of Paris

Before speaking to you of couture, real Couture, I should like to say a few words about ready-to-wear. No, I'm not beginning by wandering from the subject. You'll soon see the relevance of what I have to say. At one time there was a considerable difference between the two, a difference that placed couture on quite another plane. I can remember an enquiry carried out in France shortly after the last war, which showed that while several thousand women (a few thousand, not many mind you) patronized the great couturiers, more than half the remainder had their own little « dress-maker round the corner », while the others were content to buy what they needed off the peg.

Over twenty years have elapsed since then, and the proportions are completely reversed. The little dressmaker still exists — she'll go on for ever — but she has lost the majority of her clientele to the ready-to-wear manufacturers, whilst the select few who have remained faithful to couture have varied but slightly in number, in spite of the standard of living having increased appreciably during this period.

Why am I telling you all this? Because couture is forced to take this evolution into account. From now on, the ready-to-wear industry revolves round it like a satellite. Couture, to take another image, is still the locomotive drawing a string of carriages behind it. But these now form part of a luxury train with communicating doors.

Shall I give you an example? Formerly, the young women accustomed to luxury in the way of clothing — I am thinking of the mannequins — would only wear the models of the couture houses for which they worked, waiting until they could buy them in the sales or manage to obtain them at a special price. During the last few years however, I have questioned a number of mannequins on different occasions and nearly every one has told me that she buys her clothes from the ready-to-wear shops or the couturiers' boutiques, which comes to the same thing. This means that the quality and standing of such dresses must have risen considerably for these discerning young women no longer to see any reason not to wear them. The mass-produced model has progressed by leaps and bounds; not only is it completely in fashion, but the cut, the range of sizes, the choice and quality of the fabrics have climbed to a very high level.

This means that couture is obliged to outdo itself in order to meet the new situation. It might have been logical to expect that the advent of a higher standard of living should have increased the number of its clients; the number seems to have remained constant however. You will tell me that couture has a good many other outlets: the sale of its canvases, accessories, boutiques, perfumes. I agree. But in order to keep the world leadership that allows it to indulge in this profitable dispersion of its activities, couture has to continue to offer, twice a year, models that are quite outstanding in spirit, novelty, cut or glamour. Nowadays, when all nations are caught up in the economic struggle, when international competition has become razor keen in all fields, Parisian couture — competed against beyond its frontiers, besieged on its own home-ground — in order to remain what it has been for the last hundred years, the first in the world, has to renew itself continually.

* * *

Did it pull it off again, this season? Naturally! Once again we witnessed a magnificent spectacle. Admittedly the creations reproduced in the press and glossy magazines often appear eccentric and difficult to wear; few women will be able to go out next winter wearing slacks with fur turn-ups, few will dare to sport cashmere stockings below their « pant-skirts », but this is the mark of the inventive mind, this is the spice that adds zest to the best prepared

dishes, this is the seal of talent and a fertile imagination. The main thing is that these thousands of models that were shown at the end of July all give an impression of youth and renewal.

The woman that couture has created for next winter is slim, that goes almost without saying. She has left her tall superstructure of wavy hair at the hairdresser's to adopt a tight, neat hairstyle, over which she wears a severe little bonnet-type hat, making her head look quite small. This bonnet is made of the most varied materials, and very often in fur. On this point, talents as unlike as those of Cardin, Dior, Chanel, Lanvin and Jacques Heim are unanimous.

While we are on the subject of fur, we might as well say right away that the skins of animals have never been in such prominence. It seems that the range is inexhaustible, thanks to the skill of breeders, furriers and all those connected with fur. A new lease of life has been given to breeds that were in danger of dying out, like chinchilla, and for the others, furriers and breeders have succeeded in producing a sensational selection of shades and appearances.

This winter's woman will continue to wear short skirts, knee-high on the average. Skirts will be classical or billowing like Dior's or Castillo's. Above the waist, it is impossible to say with any precision exactly how she will be, it all depends on the temperament of the couturier, but the general line, the trend of the moment, is the small bust.

When she goes out into the cold, if she does not wear furs, she will dress in a straight coat with high raglan sleeves or a « redingote ».

For the evening, if she is staying at home, she will have a choice between the sumptuous pants of Chanel or a hostess gown like Lanvin's in sheer muslin over flesh-coloured tights.

But if, in the evening, she is going out to a reception, to the theatre, a big party, then she will have a choice as varied at it is glamorous. Like her grandmother or her mother, she will wear an evening gown. This season they are more beautiful than ever. For a couturier the evening dresses in his collection are a sheer joy and delight. However much he has sweated and toiled to create — by far his most difficult task — the little models with a cut that looks so simple but is in actual fact painstakingly studied, in his creations for the evening he can really let himself go, giving free rein to his talent and working joyfully with rich materials that are the pride and glory of the textile makers. Evening dresses represent the *pièce de résistance*; they are gay, they are flattering and it is they that bring the house down with applause.

If one had to put the couturiers into groups this winter, one could say that there is the prudent group, like Balmain, Guy Laroche and Saint-Laurent, whose main concern it to adorn the fair sex. And the more eccentric group, composed of Cardin — whose whole collection is said to be dedicated to Jeanne Moreau — Jean Pomarède, the designer at Heim's, and youngsters like Courrèges, Simonetta and Fabiani, to mention but a few...

At any rate the show is a magnificent one; it is worthy of couture. This season's fashion, which is vaguely inspired by the 20's, is alive, youthful and gay. It is worthy of Paris.

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