



Dresses for princesses

Christian Dior's New Look seemed to symbolise the arrival of a brave new fashion world when it hit the catwalk in 1947. But as the V&A's new blockbuster reveals, couture's post-war golden age marked the last blast of an old aristocratic order before the fashion revolution of the 1960s. **Suzy Menkes** reports



Left: Pierre Balmain, early 1950s, white silk organza, feathers and rhinestones. Right: Cristobal Balenciaga, c.1955, scarlet silk and silk taffeta. Both © V&A Images

Right: Christian Dior with his house model Renee, c.1957, photographed by Henry Clarke
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Below: Zémire modelled by Renee, Paris, 1954, photographed by Regina Relang
 © V&A Images. **Facing page: coats by Molyneux and Hardy Amies, worn by Barbara Goalen and Wenda Parkinson (née Rogerson), 1948**
 © Norman Parkinson Archive, London



The dress is Red Riding Hood scarlet, its gleaming satin skirt spreading under an elongated jacket. It speaks of glamour and dash, of history and haute elegance. And who could have believed that this Christian Dior gown was made while Paris was still licking the wounds of war? Or that the magisterial ensemble had been fished out of a damp cellar seeping with water from the River Seine?

Zémire, the V&A's historic Dior find from 1954, is the star of 'The Golden Age of Couture'. But the new exhibition has a subtext: 'Paris and London 1947-1957'. In its sober tweed suits, its twirling, wasp-waist dresses and its substantial, sculpted undergarments, it is designed to get under the skin of those clothes whose firm silhouettes identified the post-war period – on both sides of the channel.

The title suggests a wistful nostalgia for a distant past. It seems like a mirror image of the 'Silver Screen' years, when Hollywood possessed an impossible glamour that scintillated for movie stars far removed from "real" people. Yet it is only half a century since 1957, when the death of Christian Dior brought to an end not just the decade ruled by the Parisian couturier, but couture itself, as it was understood and used by a wealthy clientele to create a personally-fitted wardrobe.

Few of the London designers such as John Cavanagh or Lachasse have names with any resonance today. And although Paris couture is still just alive, it is now focused on branding and image management, rather than dressing a specific social circle. Both Hollywood and high fashion grew out of war and depression. But whereas movies were the great leap forward in entertainment and cultural artistry, couture was built on nostalgia. Dior himself was inspired by the dove grey elegance of his Edwardian mother, and the women of the New World who turned to Paris were aiming to create, as wives of





Above: Dior Bar suit, 1947, photographed by Willy Maywald
© Association Willy Maywald/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007. **Right: Miss Virginia Lachasse doll, with fully accessorised 1954 winter couture wardrobe, designed by Owen at Lachesse**
© Museum of Costume, Bath/V&A Images



America's new rich, the social clout of an old aristocratic world.

The exhibition that Claire Wilcox has put together – mostly from the V&A's own archive – covers the last gasp of social order in Great Britain before stylistic mayhem broke loose during the swinging London of the 1960s. The British clothes are decorous, sensible, designed to dress upper-crust ladies for the “season” – that round of social entertainment that lasted from April to July and was heavy on horsey events such as Royal Ascot and the Derby. A Digby Morton stern tweed suit of 1954, photographed with a riding crop as optional accessory, was never going to frighten the horses or hint at fashion frivolity. Although Miss Virginia Lachasse, a couture doll used in a 1954 touring exhibition to raise money for the blind, showed a more spiffy side. Her miniature wardrobe included a tweed travelling suit, a mini mink coat and an assortment of gloves, girdles and the coveted nylon stockings.

“Clothes which have social confidence... but lack superb drama,” said editor Alison Settle to define the difference between the sensible approach of British designers and the great romantic sweeps of Dior or Cristobal Balenciaga's architectural rigour. We can see with hindsight that the self-same politeness and convention of a class-ridden society stoked the pressure cooker that created the explosion of ready-to-wear fashion in the 1960s. Women of the 1950s had been given a heady taste of freedom in the war years, but they had grown up with the adage that “the English woman is so refined – she has no bosom and no behind”. It was, therefore, the following generation which blew off the lid, challenged society, embraced sexual allure and kicked against the predominance of Paris. By contrast, the more political youth quake in Paris in 1968 never swept away haute couture – even if Balenciaga closed his house saying “it's a dog's life” and Coco Chanel retreated to the stairs of her couture mansion, a bent twig of an old woman in her flat hat and thick tweeds.

Parisian haute couture adapted to the new prêt-à-porter fashion regime, with ready-to-wear stars such as Karl Lagerfeld and ultimately Jean Paul Gaultier prepared to embrace the arcane art that still fascinates British-trained John Galiano as he works at Dior today. The difference between London and Paris was evident in those post-war years. When Princess Margaret, then a royal fashion icon, chose a Dior dress with a tiny waist and spreading skirt, it was because she yearned for the transforming power of fashion – a dress which encompassed the hopes and dreams of a young girl on the cusp of womanhood.

Cecil Beaton, court photographer and social commentator, called Dior the “Watteau of fashion”. And Edna Woodman Chase, editor of American *Vogue* from 1941 to 1952, said of the French designer: “His clothes gave women the feeling of being charmingly costumed; there was a faintly romantic flavour about them.” Dior himself said of his ground-breaking 1947 New Look with its long, full swathes of skirt: “Girls could safely feel that they had all the trapping of a fairy-tale princess... a golden age seemed to have come again.”

British designer Norman Hartnell took the same hearts-and-flowers approach, yet his gowns for the young Queen Elizabeth, Margaret's older sister, were weighed down with symbolism that he described lyrically in his 1955 biography *Silver and Gold*. For a Gallic royal visit, Hartnell created a dress

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How the V&A's conservators turned a ragged Dior classic into the belle of the ball. By Kate Jazwinski

Our Cinderella dress

In the summer of 2006, on a research trip to a Paris auction house, Claire Wilcox, curator of “The Golden Age of Couture”, stumbled upon a ragged, faded red jacket and dress, hanging forlornly on a mannequin.

After years in a cellar under the River Seine, the piece was a crumpled and dirty mess. But Claire recognised it as an early 1950s Christian Dior dress called Zémire. It was an astonishing discovery: “I knew it was a lost masterpiece and would be a tremendously important acquisition and exhibit”. And it marked the start of an extraordinary journey by V&A curators and conservators. They spent more than twelve months piecing together its history and transforming it from a pile of rags into a showstopper.



Vital clues about Zémire's identity and history were found on a handwritten label. The name Sekers indicated that the dress was made for leading British textile manufacturer Miki Sekers. For Wilcox, this connection gave the garment even more significance and was an explicit link between the fashion worlds of Paris and London: “The Zémire brought together the leading French designer of the decade, Dior, with one of the UK's most innovative textile manufacturers.”

National press coverage of the V&A's acquisition attracted the attention of the Sekers family, who confirmed that Zémire had been commissioned by Lady Sekers and produced a 1953 Sekers brochure. This contained a star sample of an innovative new fabric called cellulose acetate, in the same bright red as the textile used for Zémire. The family also revealed that Lady Sekers detested couture fittings and often abandoned commissions, which may account for the dress's presence in a Paris auction house cellar.

The dress arrives at the V&A Frances Hartog, V&A textile conservator, couldn't believe the state of the Zémire when it arrived at the museum. “It was a mess. The skirt and jacket were heavily creased, there was brown water staining and it all had the consistency of cardboard.” She and her colleagues are responsible for the dress's incredible transformation. The process required forensic skills. There were no other examples of this costume and no pattern could be sourced, which meant conjecture and deduction were required to re-create the original Dior design.

The Zémire story...

The origin of the dress

The Zémire was the highlight of Christian Dior's 1954 autumn/winter collection. It is one of his most consciously historical designs – the riding jacket has a distinctly eighteenth-century flavour. The V&A's version is the only known copy of the original, in grey silk with fur trim cuffs, which was one of a selection presented to Princess Margaret in 1954 at Blenheim Palace (above). All conservation photographs © V&A Images

Couture: conservation

Cleaning

The first dilemma was how to clean a dress that needed a good scrubbing. Tiny samples of material were tested to see how the aged cellulose acetate and other fabrics would react to different washing solutions. The costume contains five different types of material (including an interlining made of linen and hair), which provided a complex challenge. Cleaning in water can cause colours to run and fabrics to distort or shrink, and can weaken aged fibres, all resulting in permanent damage.



The jacket is hand-washed and quickly dried – although there is colour run, as the tests had predicted, the pink retains its vibrancy.



Because cellulose acetate is a semi-synthetic, the fabric had to be carefully steamed to remove the creases.

Conservation

Conservators don't usually take a costume apart, but the waist of the skirt had been drastically altered. Re-creating Dior's vision required painstaking reconstruction, using archive fashion photographs. The only other clues were cryptic chalk marks on the inside of the skirt. Frances made a copy of the skirt in calico and reconstructed it four times to crack the code of the original pleatwork.



Chalk marks which Frances believes indicated Dior's original pleats.



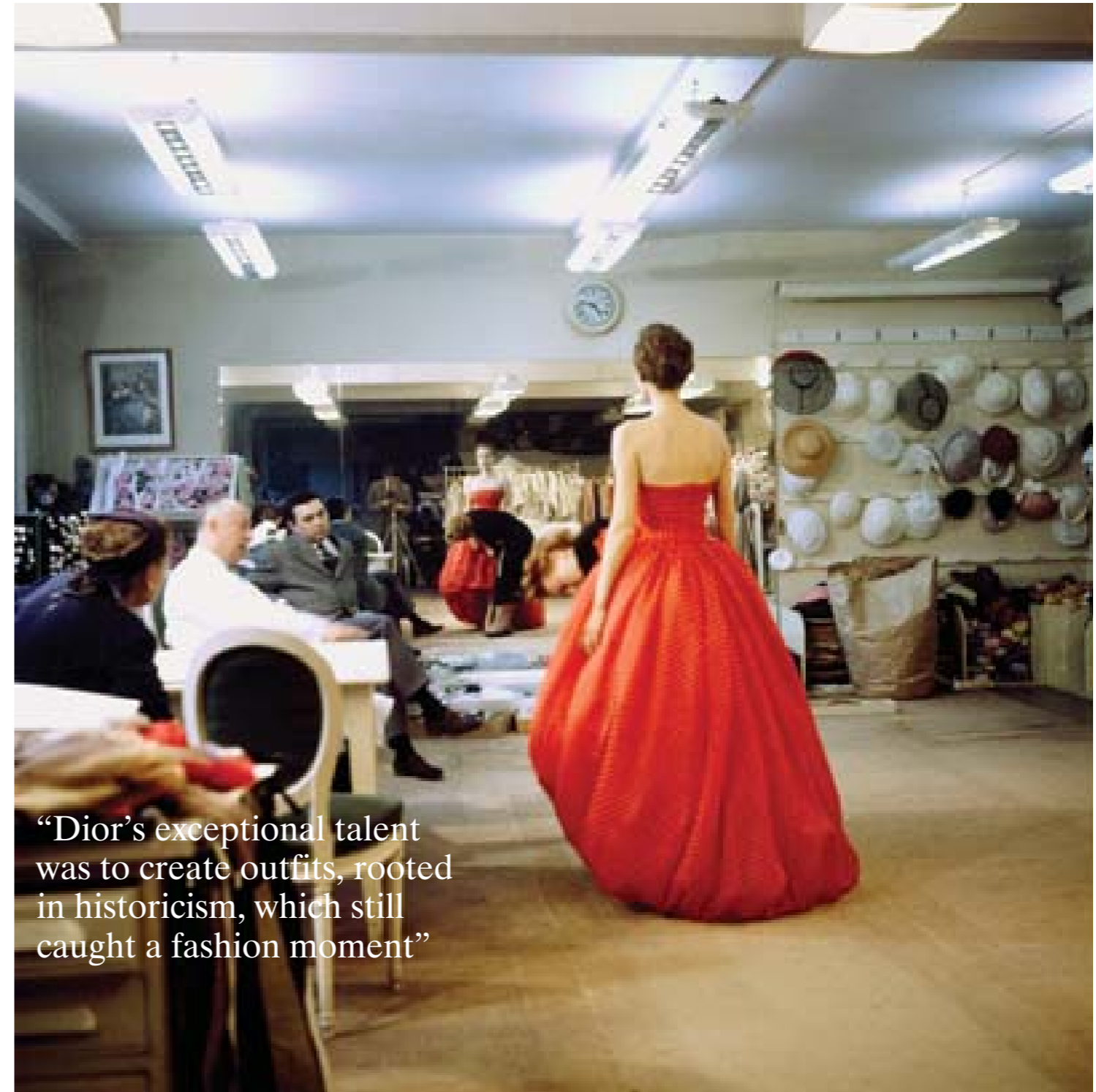
After many attempts, the 5.11m of fabric were gathered into the 69cm waist, re-creating the original distinctive full shape.

The finished piece

Zémire is a symbol of the entire 'Golden Age' show, epitomising the art and craftsmanship of the era.



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“Dior’s exceptional talent was to create outfits, rooted in historicism, which still caught a fashion moment”

Above: Christian Dior (in white) commenting on a gown prior to its first showing. Photo: Loomis Dean/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images



Couture

called Flowers of the Fields of France with embroidery of poppies, wheat stalks, fleur-de-lys and symbolic Napoleonic bees. One wonders what the sophisticated and fashion-aware French thought of this hefty gown compared with the approval they gave to the Queen Mother's pre-war Paris wardrobe, presented through the lens of Beaton.

It is thanks to the stylish photographer that the V&A has so many marvellous gowns. For his 1971 exhibition 'Fashion: An Anthology', Beaton coerced society ladies to part with couture creations. His establishment reach drew donations from Lady Astor, Evangeline Bruce, wife of the then American ambassador, the Countess of Drogheda and the Queen herself. The show of 450 pieces drew 80,000 visitors. Mark Jones, director of the V&A, says that those clothes, preserved for posterity, "provide a unique window on to post-war Paris and London couture". Beaton is just one of the photographers who created vivid images of post-war fashion. His indelible 1941 vision of a model in a Digby Morton suit surveying the rubble of bombed London suggested the solidity of fashion in a changed world. Other compelling images include Richard Avedon's exotic 1955 view of model Dovima stroking elephants in an elegant dress by Yves Saint Laurent for Dior. While Willy Maywald captured on a Paris street Dior's New Look masterpiece: the 1955 Bar waisted jacket and full skirt.

Was it inevitable that almost forgotten British names should mark a particular era, while so many Paris houses continue to be public currency? After all, many of those London-based designers were trained in Paris. (Assistant curator Eleri Lynn has produced for the exhibition a fascinating "fashion family tree".) Hardy Amies, whose precise tailoring is the backbone of British couture, managed to creep into the international limelight. Hartnell would probably have been more successful had he not been so blinded by the romance of royalty. In his loyalty to the duchess class, his early architectural clothes melted into a meringue sweetness. But the truth is that many Paris houses have also faded into near oblivion, in spite of all the money investors have poured in – not least with the current wave of private equity. Hedge fund managers are interested in high-profit ancillary products such as fragrance, bags and other accessories that dominate the couture house windows – even at Dior.

It is a rare designer who can create the aura which translates into a distinctive image, and few British designers have had the soaring imagination that turns fashion into art – and into a buck. Claire Wilcox recognises this and gives the Parisian designers – especially Dior and Balenciaga – their due as market leaders. By vigorously exploring the inside workmanship, couture can be seen as a craft as well as an art.

Dior's exceptional talent was to create outfits, rooted in historicism, which still caught a fashion moment. That Zémire outfit has become a beacon of style – not least because of the dedicated work in the V&A restoration department. But even with tatters and stains, its bravura and dash would light haute couture's eternal flame.

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'The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947-1957', V&A, London SW7 (020 7942 2000, www.vam.ac.uk), until 6 January



"Few British designers have had the soaring imagination that turns fashion into art – and into a buck"



Facing page: *Dovima with Elephants, Evening Dress by Dior, Cirque d'Hiver, Paris, France* by Richard Avedon, 1955. © The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Left: *Fashion is Indestructible* by Cecil Beaton © Cecil Beaton Archive, Sotheby's. Below: model Barbara Goalen photographed by John French © V&A Images