

remembrance of things past
and waists lost – from Paris to
Melbourne (Bendigo)

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AT THE SAME TIME we were all training cross-country in searing heat through dry-grassed paddocks to a Greco-Gold Rush temple in Bendigo, Parisiens were stamping their feet on icy pavements waiting to be admitted to the Grand Palais to Christie's 'sale of the century' to pore over Yves Saint Laurent's art and furniture auction.

Disavowing Roland Barthes, Pierre Berge protested too much when he said: 'Fashion has no connection with art – the entire idea of discourse between art and fashion has been invented.' We did not believe him; there had been a *Golden Age of Couture*. Cecil Beaton was right to gather up so many of these rare, priceless dresses from their owners in 1971 for his exhibition, *Fashion: An Anthology*, to convince then director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) John Pope Hennessy that fashion was art and worthy of collecting. It was, and we were on a pilgrimage.

Midweek the train is packed, mostly women, mostly middle-aged plus a smattering of young fashionistas all intent, like Evita, to be Christian Dior-ed. During the three months it was on, over 80,000 people came to see it. Some came in search of what I heard one woman call 'Celebrity DNA', or 'who'd worn what where'. A subset of royal watchers testily observed the Duchess of Windsor's gown was displayed next to Princess Margaret's dress, committing a monstrous, ghastly faux pas; such proximity would never have happened in life. The rest of us came for the frocks themselves.

The lux light levels were so low it was like being in a crypt amongst holy relics, though it lacked the requisite silence and awe that affected those who were permitted back then to cross the threshold and enter the salon, with its gilt mirrors, soft pinkish lighting, urns overflowing with fresh flowers, pale grey moiré walls, gilded cherubs holding swags of curtains aside amidst the perfumed air, moved attendant *vendueuses*, house models, Madame la *directrice* and you, the fortunate supplicant. If only you had been there; instead you were here and the glass showcases looked armour-plated and would not have been out of place in a Nuremberg courthouse.

The first salon as you entered presented some of the outfits in the open, protected by a high plinth which was an effective display mode; tragically the rest were interred in those clumpy glass caskets like poor Sleeping Beauty. Where was the chic, the panache, the flair, the élan, the éclat and the elegance? Something was missing: *je ne sais quoi*. American *Vogue* fashion editor Bettina Ballard's remark that 'the charm that photographers ... try to capture by bringing as much of Paris as possible into their pictures ... is lost on the couturiers, who feel that too much atmosphere takes away from the blueprint showing of the dress', might easily apply except that neither the atmosphere nor the blueprint were present.



1/ Christian Dior, 'Zemire' evening dress, 1954, synthetic satin. © V&A Images. Victoria and Albert Museum.

2/ Christian Dior 'Zemire' evening dress modelled by Renee Photograph by Regina Relang.

I understand about the fragility of the material world but there was no good reason for showing black dresses on black mannequins in the dark. How can you see anything; let alone the perfectly positioned dart, that cunningly concealed pleat, the brilliant bias, or appreciate the fall of the faille? To begin to unravel the sumptuous subtlety of Dior's *Cygne Noir* (Black Swan) with its plump pannier wings of inky black silk velvet and swathes of heavy black faille asymmetrically clustered in panels, you must rely on the photograph in the catalogue. Just as frustrating were the white mannequins with the white dresses, or that divine *red* cocktail dress, *Ecarlate*, in silk grosgrain prominently displayed at the entrance against a *red* wall.

If only the mannequins could have incorporated some of the linear wit of the tiny wire maquettes reminiscent of Alexander Calder sculptures, that displayed the quarter-sized scale models of French fashion, *Theatre de la Mode*, with their poseable, articulated hands for gloves and handbags, feet for shoes, and moulded heads to display hairstyles and hats. In 1946, 200 such dolls were made and exquisitely dressed in miniature fashions by French couturiers for a touring exhibition to revive and promote the French fashion industry. One of them was dressed by Christian Dior, then chief assistant to Lucien Lelong, president of the *Chambre Syndicale*. The following year Dior would open his own fashion house and his first collection in February 1947 would be called *Le Corolle* (the flower), but it would be immediately dubbed 'The New Look'.

This year the Melbourne Fashion Festival opened with a parade of models in dresses designed by contemporary Australian couturiers *a la mode d'ancien*, and Alex Perry's tribute to Dior, 'a strapless black crinoline', came as Janice Breen Burns noted in *The Age*, 'with skirts wide as a four-man tent!' The New Look was truly revolutionary. Nancy Mitford, a woman not easily scandalised, was shocked by what she saw and my mother remembers how suddenly, overnight, you found yourself so obviously 'out'. The skirts were so long and required so much material, there was no way to trick up what you had been wearing before they appeared; as Dior said, like 'a brilliant armada, all sails flying'. These were dresses that required scandalous yards and metres of fabric, and were built on such an armature of corsetry they could stand up by themselves. The wearer often needed a dresser just to do up the dozens of tiny, awkwardly placed hooks and eyes of the undergarments.

There is a marvellous irony that The New Look was based on very old ideas – crinoline skirts from the 19th century and padded stomachers and corsetry that went back to the middle ages. It was a new look in contrast to the wartime austerity and utility measures which had limited the amount of fabric and numbers of buttons used; disallowed corsetry, zips, press studs and other metal fasteners because the materials were needed for more urgent manufacture and left women in knee-length straight skirts of inferior fabric and boxy, masculine coats with broad, padded shoulders. The New Look combined the disparate skills of the dressmaker, or *fleur*, who worked with fine, soft, silky fabrics, ruching and swathing and fixing with fairy stitches; and the tailor, or *tailleur*, who assembled heavy wools, worsted stuff and thick flannels on a base of padding and interlining. Dior employed both techniques in often paradoxical ways. 'I wanted my dresses to be constructed like buildings, moulded to the curves of the female form.' The feat was to hide the engineering, and to make a gown that was actually heavy (because of the substructure of corsetry, petticoats and padding beneath and the sheer mass of fabric used) look light and effortless like a meringue or a perfectly scrunched sheet of tissue.

Dior could not sew or draw. He draped fabric on the model, the ideal young female body, which he pinched in here and plumped out there to accentuate the silhouette with an array of waist whittlers and padded pieces. 'I designed clothes for flower-like women, with rounded shoulders, full feminine busts and hand-span waists above enormous spreading skirts.' His models were often dancers and Dior created a particular way of moving for them; tilting the shoulders back and pushing the stomach and hips forward. Just look at the photograph by Richard Avedon of the New Look Dior suit modelled by Renee in Place de la Concorde in 1947. Her gored skirt made of bias cut panels swirls in perfect Fibonacci geometry, making a whirlpool that turns the heads of the men walking by.

Consider the quintessential New Look silhouette of 1947: the *Bar* dress. It is a succession of stacking bell shapes beginning with the long, black fine wool crepe, full teacup skirt; its fullness derived and controlled by pleats that widen as they go out. Above the skirt sits the cream silk shantung jacket, cut in tightly at the waist so that



1/ Christian Dior, 'Cygne Noir' (Black Swan) evening dress, 1949, silk satin and velvet. Given by Baroness Antoinette de Ginsbourg. © V&A Images, Victoria and Albert Museum.

2/ Evening dress by Cristobal Balenciaga, 1953-4, silk taffeta. Given by Miss C. Coombe. © V&A Images, Victoria and Albert Museum.

3/ Hardy Amies, Suit, 1947, worsted wool. Given by Mrs Benita Armstrong. © V&A Images, Victoria and Albert Museum.

it flares over the hips, almost a peplum but more geometric; above a tailored neckline with lapels with rounded, unpadded shoulders, five self-covered buttons detail the midline, and at the summit, the third bell, the woman-in-a-lampshade flattened straw coolie hat. The final accent: long black gloves which disappear under the contrasting cream, bracelet-length sleeves of the jacket.

Before Dior, in Paris there was Christobal Balenciaga who was Spanish but adopted Paris as it adopted him, and believed his clients should be as dedicated as followers of religion. He outfitted the Countess Mona Bismarck in both evening gowns and gardening shorts! Balenciaga had trained in England as a tailor. His skill was in the cutting and the fitting; he used lining but no padding. He made clothes for women of all ages and had made an empathetic study of the decline of the female body over time, so he could compensate for drooping chests, dropped waists and sloping backs, and maintain an effortlessly structured shape through clever tilting of the whole frame. Balenciaga is renowned for the precise fitting of his sleeves; in order to be flattering a sleeve should be as short in the armhole as possible, and above all it must be able to move easily without any pull or puckering of the seams. I wanted to see that Balenciaga sleeve; it was not there. It is perfectly evident in the photograph from *French Vogue* in 1951, seams drawn by a surgeon with a scalpel, defining and delineating shape; so architectural it could be a maquette for a stainless steel building by Frank Gehry rather than a woollen jacket. Postwar French fashion has a clear lineage. After Dior's premature death in 1957, a twenty-one-year old boy from Algiers, Yves St Laurent, took over but he would leave to establish his own label. Balenciaga's legacy of sculptural design was taken to geometric extremes by his former assistants André Courrèges and Emanuel Ungaro.

The Golden Age of Couture was curated from the V&A collection so it made sense to locate French fashion and its effect on the development of British designers and textile manufacturers, and it fits well with the deployment of royalty, in particular Princesses Margaret and Elizabeth, as models for Norman Hartnell, and ambassadors for the burgeoning British fashion industry. The focus could just as easily have been on the American context and Dior's embrace of the mass market and ready-to-wear. It was a missed opportunity that it did not locate itself in the Australian context. The connections were all there: the Myers department store empire began in Bendigo and they were the principal sponsors. Myers in Melbourne and Anthony Hordern's in Sydney were the sites of the French fashion parades staged between 1946 and 1949 by *The Australian Women's Weekly*; organised by Mary Hordern, its fashion editor, and assisted by Madame Caroline Chambrelet, *directrice* of the House of Worth and a posse of impossibly soigné French models. Unveiled in February, by

September 1946 *The New Look* was on the cover of *The Australian Women's Weekly*.

Melbourne's own Athol Shmith was the official photographer for the parades so it is no surprise that there are correspondences between the *New Look* in Paris and in Melbourne. In postwar Melbourne, the top end of Collins Street was *the Paris end*, as it was memorably named by Lillian Wightman, founder of the Francophile altar to high fashion, *Le Louvre*. Athol Shmith had studios at the top of Collins Street and nearby were other stylish boutiques, *La Petite* and the studio of Hall Ludlow where Australia's only true couturier made his exquisitely structured Balenciaga and Givenchy inspired gowns. Georges was down the hill. Athol Shmith's second wife and the muse of *The New Look* in Melbourne was the musician Patricia Tuckwell, known as the model Bambi Shmith, who is featured in Shmith's photographs in some of the Dior dresses (or local versions commissioned by Myer) in 1949 looking just like Lisa Fonssagrives in an Irving Penn photograph for *French Vogue*. By 1957 Melbourne is doing it on its own as another shot of Bambi Shmith shows, in a suit by Hall Ludlow of herringbone tweed with a tabard jacket clasped by black velvet bows and a matching velvet scholar's cap. She is photographed by Bruno Benini posed in front of the modernist architecture at Melbourne University; it could be a direct take of the Balenciaga slub tweed suit pictured in *French Vogue* in 1954.

Lil Wightman was from Ballarat, another Gold Rush city, but she knew the Paris end of Collins Street when she saw it. Her vision was recognised by Parisian refugees Georges and Mirka Mora, and later when photographer Helmut Newton, who began in Melbourne with Shmith, made his name in Europe, it became credible. In Australia, after the avalanche of Dior and all things French, we eventually found our own new look, and in the case of Colette Dinnigan and Martin Grant took it to Paris, because as Wightman said: 'Everything beautiful is made in Paris and every woman wants it.'

The Golden Age of Couture, Paris and London 1947 - 1957 was a Victoria & Albert Museum exhibition which was shown at Bendigo Art Gallery, 7 December 2008 to 22 March 2009.

Suzanne Spinner usually writes about Indigenous art but when very young she dreamt of becoming Christian Dior's understudy, little realising that by then, in 1958, he was dead and Yves St Laurent had got the guernsey. She later wrote a play about mothers and daughters and sewing, *Running up a dress*. In 1999, she wrote 'The thrall of the dress: blame it on Dior' for *Art Monthly* (AMA #118, April 1999).

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