



The golden age of couture

The era of Christian Dior's great career in the period 1947-57 was celebrated in a Fashion Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. It analysed the features of fashion in Paris and London and focused on the work of some important designers of the period including Dior, Balenciaga, Balmain, Hardy Amies, Jacques Fath, and others. This stage began with the launch of Dior's *New Look* Collection in 1947. The *New Look* or *Corolle Line* was a great moment in fashion history as it contributed to the change from wartime austerity to the rebirth of fashion onto the world's stage. Its impact and influence are still in evidence in fashion today.

The exhibition highlighted some important factors. First of all, the *New Look* represented the beginning of a great cultural shift, predominantly because it reinvented fashion after World War II. French manufacturers and textile dealers were involved in this attempt to restart the industry after its destruction during the war. Fashion had stopped in 1940: because of the war and due to Nazi's pressure to establish Berlin's rule in fashion, the production and consumption of such a non-essential product ceased. Garments were produced but they were just meant to be functional. All the cycle of fashion, that is the showing of seasonal collections to major global store buyers or clients who place orders, ceased altogether. Women after the war were definitely looking for glamour and femininity. In 1946, Marcel Boussac, a French textile magnate, offered to finance the opening of designer Christian Dior's Couture House, on condition that the collection re-

established Paris on the world's fashion stage. Inspired by his mother's clothes worn at the Deauville races at the turn of the century, he tried to reinvent the feminine silhouette, therefore he reintroduced wasp waists, padded hips, gently curved shoulders, and ankle length skirts using a lot of fabric. And this was not without reactions: some people argued that 1950s clothes did not emancipate women and represented a regressive step in some ways. The same Victoria and Albert exhibition of the 21st century had mixed reactions from different people: some visitors loved the glamour, others were horrified at the heaviness and bulkiness of the clothes. Yet 1950s clothes were very heavy: there was a great emphasis on how the physical body was transformed to conform to the fashionable ideal. These garments were characterised by discomfort and enhanced a silhouette that went back to the past. In the same period, Coco Chanel reacted against these constraints and emancipated women from corsets and boning by designing luxurious and easy-to-wear clothes in jersey, a fabric which had been used only for men's underwear before that. She disliked clothes that enclosed the female body into corsetry, padding, and girdles. Her reaction was to reopen her fashion business and reintroduce her famous jersey and two-piece suits of the 1920s, which were criticised at first but then acclaimed and completely sold out. This is how weird fashion can be!

(Adapted from *The Golden Age of Couture*,
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ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What was the golden age of couture?
- 2 Which event started the era?
- 3 Why was Dior's Corolle Line very important?
- 4 Why had fashion design stopped before the 1940s?
- 5 What was people's reaction to Dior's collection?
- 6 What kind of silhouette did he promote?
- 7 What did Chanel think of it?
- 8 What was Chanel's reaction to Dior's designs?

2 Find other words for the following items.

- 1 Corolle Line
- 2 Phase
- 3 Exhibition
- 4 Relaunch
- 5 Mixed
- 6 Heaviness
- 7 Constrained

3 What do you think of Dior's and Chanel's styles and choices? Who do you agree with? For more information visit the site www.vam.ac.uk.