

Christian Dior and the Aesthetics of Femininity

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IT IS MOST FITTING THAT THE DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART hosted a retrospective on the House of Christian Dior in the summer of 2019 (Figure 1). This is because Dallas was the site of the most notorious of the protests that erupted upon Christian Dior's first visit to the United States. For though it may be hard to fathom now, the complex style "revolution" that was occasioned by the opening of Dior's *couture* house in 1947 was not without controversy; it cut to the heart of shifting ideas about women and femininity in the wake of World War II. Christian Dior unwittingly prompted a transcontinental reappraisal of the relationships of femininity and culture: were women to be muses, icons, agents, or all three?

To begin to answer this question, it is important to understand the circumstances surrounding Dior's ascent. After a brief career as a gallerist, Dior worked at several major *haute couture* fashion houses in Paris, most famously that of Lucien Lelong. While *couture* production slowed greatly during World War II, with most producers closing, Lelong's house remained open, and Dior was employed there between 1941 and 1946. Working as one of the designers—for Lelong himself did not produce the designs—Dior came to the notice of a cross-section of elite Parisian women.

The reputation that Dior accrued during his time at Lelong was indispensable in drawing attention to the launch of his own label and design house in February 1946. The house was packed for the

showing of his first collections; archival photographs show the space so jammed that patrons were obliged to sit on the stairs. Among those in attendance was Carmel Snow, the Editor-in-Chief of the US edition of *Harper's Bazaar*, who is said to have exclaimed that the designs on show constituted a “new look”—and New Look became the universal shorthand for Dior's style.

In reality, what Dior showed at his debut were two dress collections—named *Corolle* and *Envol*—that were much more complex than the words New Look ever belied. The silhouettes featured in these lines drew on earlier models of fashionable femininity, and were unmistakably, though imprecisely, historical. Though Dior has been called—and intermittently presented himself as—a “revolutionary,” which implies a will to the new, his designs derived their revolutionary force from their reclaiming of the past. This was work that *turned away* from the present.

Considering the post-World War II context of Dior's emergence, this revolutionary turn toward the past is not surprising. Dior's debut took place a mere eighteen months after the liberation of Paris, which triggered the end of the Nazi occupation of France. In this immediate post-Occupation period, the country was still in the grip of the war's trauma. Dior's work is symptomatic of this national mood. As he wrote in his autobiography, “[i]n December 1946, as a result of the war and uniforms, women still looked and dressed like Amazons. But I designed clothes for flower-like women...”¹ The silhouettes he introduced were characterized by extremely small waists, very full skirts, and long hemlines that fell almost to the ankle, making them radically different from the spare, practical, relatively short-skirted fashions of wartime (Figure 2).

In effect, Dior materialized a longing for a nebulous pre-war (even pre-World War I) past through his designs. Alexandra Palmer has written, “Dior's exaggerated feminine perfection appealed because it helped to eradicate the memory and actions of all men and women during the war.”² His work can thus be understood as classically nostalgic. Nostalgia is a hybrid orientation to the world: rather than representing a pure past, it is a turn to the past occasioned by the circumstances of the present. It is a clash of times.³ Dior's work uniquely indexed the character of French national nostalgia in the postwar years, installing an aesthetic of femininity that recalled the years of apparent French glory from the eighteenth century to the eve

1 Christian Dior, *Dior by Dior*, trans. Antonia Fraser (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 22-3.

2 Alexandra Palmer, *Dior* (London: V&A Publications, 2009), 32.

3 On the complexity of nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); and Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, “Modalities of Nostalgia,” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (2006): 919-41.



Figure 1 "Dior: From Paris to the World." Dallas Museum of Art, May 19 to Sept. 1, 2019.

Photo courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.



Figure 2 The Chérie dinner dress from the first collection, Spring/Summer 1947, was part of the Dallas Museum of Art exhibition. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

of World War I.⁴ In France, this might be seen as a variation on the long tradition of explicitly expressing the French nation through the body of a woman, Marianne.⁵ Dior's designs were strongly linked to a nationalism that glorified French aesthetic exceptionalism and sophistication.

To achieve this sophisticated look required a significant armature, and Dior's designs necessitated a reintroduction of body-shaping undergarments; achieving the silhouette was contingent on body modification. The New Look was thus quite candidly built on feminine artifice—Dior may have wanted women to look like flowers, but he was a highly ornamental “gardener,” not content to let them grow wild. In rejecting the looks of the war years, he was reacting against not only the aesthetics of stripped-down efficiency that predominated in the wartime metropole, but he was also turning away from the Nazi-influenced models of femininity as “pure” and “natural” that had been promoted by the collaborationist Vichy regime.⁶ Dior's designs employed conscious seduction as a tool of femininity. They effectively tied artifice, sexuality, and chic to the national character.

For all its charm, Dior's vision of feminine style relied on a certain calculated hauteur. But the relationship that he shared with the many women in his life was characterized by an unusual closeness. Dior's entourage, the people who effectively made the couture house run, was overwhelmingly composed of women, and his memoirs and other autobiographical representations distinguish him from most *couturiers* through his willingness to admit the collaborative nature of these working relationships. While the myth of the solitary genius still prevails in popular fantasies about elite designers, Dior professed his devotion to the women he worked with, and was open about the extent to which his success relied on them. Some of them—notably Raymonde Zehnacker and Marguerite Carré—were described as extensions of himself, in a blurring of gender boundaries that was all the more unusual for a fashion designer, a figure whose masculinity was under scrutiny because of his close ties to the feminized culture of fashion, especially in Dior's era.⁷

4 As Alexandra Palmer writes, “Dior designed a contrived and reproducible vision of a new elite French woman that drew on hybrid aristocratic European roots. The Dior woman recalled the nobility of eighteenth-century France, the Second Empire and the Belle Époque.” Palmer, *Dior*, 32.

5 To be sure, France is not alone in this linking of the nation to the woman's body, but its use of the figure of Marianne since the French Revolution is uniquely institutionalized, as it has been adopted by the French state itself.

6 See Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine: A Contribution to the Political Sociology of Gender*, trans. Kathleen A. Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

7 See *Dior by Dior*, 12-13.

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Dior's relationship with his models was similarly close. "Fortunately," he wrote in 1957, "the *couturier* has access to the best lawyers in the world: his models. Each time he prepares to give them the floor...he hopes that their elegance will win him the leniency of the jury."⁸ This was a striking concession of power to women who were typically seen as objects, not subjects. Notwithstanding Dior's warm feeling toward his models, their figuration in his shows and promotional photography was notably static and distant. In modeling for Dior, they became absent. An early and rare academic commentary on Dior by a critic named Rémy Saisselin in 1959 suggested that Dior's work was based on the extreme aestheticization of the dressed woman's body, so that "woman has become style."⁹ Saisselin further wrote, "[w]oman has become an abstract creature made for the contemplation of the intellect."¹⁰ Set against the empathic and relational tone of Dior's descriptions of his work with collaborators and models, such an approach is striking, and suggests that the overwhelmingly visual culture of fashion ultimately trumped the complex and dynamic relationships behind the scenes. In this sense, Dior crystallized a wider tension in modern fashion, whereby much of the richness—material, relational, textual—surrounding fashion is stripped away in its visual mediation.

Indeed, we could argue that it was precisely because this richness was lost in mediations of fashion that protesters reacted against the New Look and Dior, as they famously did in Dallas. Though the New Look was popular, there is plenty of evidence that not all women were swayed by it, especially in North America. Many thought that the new styles would be hard on the budgets and comfort of women. An article in the *Globe and Mail* one year after the New Look's debut suggested that women with strong sewing skills would be able to acquire the style inexpensively.¹¹ And a piece in *Time Magazine* in the wake of the US protests said there was an American "counter-Revolution" going on in the studios of US designer Sophie Gimbel, who

8 Christian Dior, 'Texte de 1957,' *Conférences écrites par Christian Dior* (Paris: Institut français de la mode/Éditions du regard, 2003), 33-4. My translation.

9 Rémy G. Saisselin, "From Baudelaire to Christian Dior: The Poetics of Fashion," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 18, no. 1 (1959): 114.

10 *Ibid.*, 115.

11 "If You're Nimble With a Thimble the New Look Should Be Easy," *Globe and Mail*, February 3, 1948.

said, “I’ve never been so uncomfortable in my life,” as when she tried on one of the new corsets meant to create the Dior silhouette.¹² The *Time* article suggested that Gimbel was designing New Look-inspired clothes that were less expensive, more comfortable, and better suited to the demands of everyday life.

There is also some strong evidence of the public’s own voices in these debates. “Dissident ladies” were quoted as saying that Dior was “deliberately creating a new style so we have to throw out all our old clothes and buy new ones.”¹³ And a woman in Dallas said, “I think the designers and dress industry are trying to get away with murder. The new styles render even your coats obsolete and with half the world begging for material to cover its naked back I can’t see that there’s any justification for these new drastic fashions.”¹⁴ Here was a real attention to the lived realities of actual women’s lives just two years after the end of the war. The recognition that much of the world was still struggling with immense poverty led some to characterize the fashion industry as out of step with the times—even, implicitly, irrational. The fashion industry tended to characterize women’s connection to fashion as irrational, but here, it was *women* who refused what they saw as the *industry’s* irrationality.

The suggestion that the New Look was merely a recycling of older styles is intriguing as well. The protest in Dallas used creative means to make this point. As the *New York Times* reported, “[w]ith a band playing old-time songs and half its members dressed in grandmother’s clothes, members of the Little Below the Knee Club stopped downtown traffic here today with a parade proclaiming long skirts old-fashioned and impractical.”¹⁵ An image from that event shows a protester in historical pastiche—the dress is in the style of the early 1920s, and the bonnet evokes the mid-nineteenth century. These women were wary of being symbolically thrown back into a period before the war. The war, after all, was a time in the US and other countries that saw unprecedented labour force participation for white women of the working and middle classes, and the freedoms that came with it. These included sexual freedoms, and this may have been on the mind of some of the women protesting. We see some evidence of this in a photograph of a California protest against Dior’s longer hemlines, where protesters wore bathing suits as they picketed. The sign in the foreground, asking “Do We Need Padding?” referenced the padded skirts that were a key feature of the New Look. Taking a stand in response to being encased in clothes, these women saw the new mode as a retrenchment of prewar sexual mores.

12 “Counter-Revolution,” *Time*, September 15, 1947.

13 “The Nation,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1947.

14 “Texas Women Set to Bar Long Skirts,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1947.

15 “Women in Dallas Deride Long Skirts,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1947.

Just as we can see Dior's fashion intervention as a reflection of postwar trauma, we can read responses to the new styles as symptoms of a postwar reckoning. In North America, this may not have been as viscerally traumatic a time as it was in Europe. Yet the historical record does show a period of reconsolidation after World War II, when the genuine social changes wrought by the war were under pressure, with white women being urged to step back out of the labour force. The protests against the New Look crystallized some of that ferment. Clothing was seen as a literal index of the changes in women's status that had occurred during the war.

What we find, in the case of Dior, is that women did important cultural work in relation to the upheaval of the years immediately after World War II. For Dior himself, they functioned as concrete vectors of longing for something other than the difficult present. Clearly, many members of the fashion-attuned public were grateful for this treasure trove of new/old images of women, who could stand as emblems of lost elegance. But for others, the symbolism of Dior's women was frightening, not reassuring. Altogether, Dior and responses to him show that, far from being trivial, fashion taps deeply into social moods and impulses, hopes and anxieties. ♪