

Christian

# Dior

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



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Richard Martin and Harold Koda

Photographs by Karin L. Willis

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# Sponsor's Statement

It is with great pleasure that Christian Dior supports The Metropolitan Museum of Art on the occasion of The Costume Institute's exhibition "Christian Dior," a tribute to the timeless fashion masterpieces from the decade when Monsieur Dior designed for the House.

Christian Dior's creation of the "New Look" in 1947 revolutionized fashion, reestablished Paris as the focal point of the fashion world, and secured Dior as a name symbolic of elegance, impeccable quality, and continuous modernity. As we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the House of Dior, we are proud to celebrate the legacy of that success and bring this creative spirit into a new century.

Bernard Arnault





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# Foreword

At the waning of this century, we take the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Christian Dior's "New Look" to review the magnificent work he created in a little more than one decade at the century's heart. Few occasions in fashion history are as precise, and few are as worthy of consideration and celebration.

It is difficult to analyze Dior today: the intervening four decades have irrevocably distanced us from his circumstances and his world. The Museum has consciously chosen to present neither a biography nor a retrospective. Without intruding ourselves too much into this history, we seek to see Dior as a genial creator. His idealized conceptualization of woman must be understood as a campaign of hope and optimism in which, in fact, most women of his time participated willingly. This exhibition also underscores the ever young character of the work: the Dior *jeune fille* is always as fresh as his beloved flowers.

The exhibition and book have arisen from the unrivaled collection of Dior's work in The Costume Institute. Every garment in the book comes from the Museum. They were assembled chiefly from the collections of stylish and beneficent New Yorkers and generous donations from Christian Dior himself. Our Diors represent but one great strength of The Costume Institute. No other clothing archive in the world equals ours in the depth and breadth of its holdings.

Pride of possession and pride in the New Yorkers and other benefactors who made our collection possible are only part of the reason for this project. We also accept a responsibility for critical evaluation, interpretation, and exhibition. We have chosen an expository, artifact-based consideration of Dior that directs us to the objects. The photographic details and precise accounts of those garments in the pages of this book shed light on the absolute mastery of a craft put at the service of a brilliantly creative imagination. For sponsorship of the exhibition and catalogue, we are most grateful for the generous support of Christian Dior and LVMH/Moët Hennessey Louis Vuitton.

For some viewers in 1996-97, Christian Dior's work is a cherished memory. Others, many younger, may be seeing these masterpieces for the first time. For both, this analytical study from our collection promises revelations and delivers what Dior always produced, extraordinary beauty.

Philippe de Montebello  
Director  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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# Introduction

“...fashion comes from a dream...”  
Christian Dior

Implying the absolute dignity befitting its creator and referring to the flower, also appropriate to its creator's interests. Christian Dior's first collection was titled “Corolle,” denoting its flowerlike silhouettes. History, seizing on the enthusiastic location coined by *Harper's Bazaar* editor Carmel Snow, eagerly called it “The New Look.” Never before and never since has fashion so definitively and so aptly described a time.

Precise in its historical function, Dior's New Look has become the rubric by which we identify not only that first collection but also the full span of Dior's work from 1947 through 1957. It is difficult to distinguish Dior's earlier couture work for Lucien Lelong from that of Pierre Balmain and other designers active in that atelier. Hence, we have only a decade of work attributed with certainty to Dior. To view it as generic of The New Look is both illuminating and misleading. After all, the designer exerted great effort to distinguish each collection by name and by nuance, or even by notable differentiation. Yet there are characteristics that we see that are indicative of the entire decade's work. It is very like describing Picasso's adventure through Analytical Cubism, which, though achieved with shifts and variations, ultimately is always describing the one and only Picasso. There is a constancy in Dior's work, despite the marketable change within its continuity. There is a nucleus in his creation around which all change revolves or, at most, evolves. The designer's insistence on a separate name for each collection is not a falsehood, nor is it merely a service to marketing. But finally, these collections are the benchmarks of a single journey, divisible parts of a single philosophical whole.

This eleven-year corpus, then, defines a life's work. Many have described and recounted that life, a relatively privileged and aesthetic one, and even Dior himself gave considerable credit to his life circumstances as the conditions for his art.

But Dior's work, perceived paramountly through the garments themselves, encompasses more than its creator. It speaks so eloquently and powerfully on its fiftieth anniversary not because of the life of its maker but because of its essential place in the life and history of the twentieth century. Dior was an optimist of sorts. His writings breathe with a hopeful aestheticism; he believed in beauty and offered beauty, however uncertainly

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defined, as a force in the world. His collections convey a will to believe, a sure confidence in the unsure world of the 1940s and 1950s. No garments have ever expressed hope as unquestionably as Dior's.

In the wake of war and holocaust, Dior offered not merely a new look but also a new faith. His first collection and those of the succeeding decade purveyed fashion in denotation of the feminine and the opulent. His surety in each overall silhouette and in collection silhouettes was the postwar antidote to the loss of fashion incurred during the war. Moreover, Dior's assertion of a strong silhouette came at a time and place of utmost fragility. Paris reclaimed its stature as an international capital of fashion after World War II largely through the triumphant success of Dior, even as the School of Paris had decamped and French letters seemed in hibernation. In 1947, the unequivocal certainty that Dior posed came as a relief to those who saw style in disarray, as uniforms of military and civilian service for women were only gradually being replaced by the clothing of dreams. The fashion fantasy Dior propagated was an old one, but one that was especially welcome in a war-weary world. Art historian Rémy Saisselin argued in 1959, on Dior's posing, that "a dress by Dior, like a poem by Valéry, is a feast of the intellect." Dior promoted a conception of fashion as a consummate and ultimate art, equivalent to the other products of French civilization before and after World War II.

This book presents a suite of garments by Dior from 1947 through 1957. Inevitably, we acknowledge the chiefly American collectors and wearers who, in most cases, gave them to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. For some, these designs were the attire of daily life or of party occasions, not a self-conscious art. For others, such as Saisselin, they constitute poetry. For still others, these dresses were the signs that the life-incubating hemorrhages of war and evil had been stanchied.

We count the years, collections, and garments of Dior knowing that they comprise a mighty force of convictions about beauty and civilization. To say of any or all in our inventory that they endow life with beauty, poetry, or hope is a prodigious claim for pieces of cloth. Yet, in Dior's case, they do.



# 1947

*“Chérie” dinner dress, detail, spring-summer 1947. Sapphire-blue changeant silk taffeta. Gift of Christian Dior, 1948 (CI-45.13 a,b). See also page 15.*

This virtuoso achievement in dressmaking was reached by the compression of vast volume into an adjoining sculptural reduction. “Chérie” contains over thirteen-and-one-half yards of fabric that are pleated into the wasp waist. The accomplishment of grand to minor is possible only because of the *couture*’s expert manipulation of cloth. Dior prided himself on the handwork in his creations, especially when the craft generates formal possibility. Here, the stitches that anchor each pleat can actually be seen. Signs of artistry, they are not obsessively hidden.

was the year of invention. It was sure and unequivocal. Dior invented the postwar disposition for amplitude of textile, creating a silhouette that, at its inception, applied drapery with the fullness of the Baroque to a preconceived and idealized armature of the human body. Dior’s long life in the arts during the 1930s and 1940s had perhaps prepared him best for his exquisite proposition in fashion. He was offering a new aesthetic. Reflecting later, Dior himself would insist upon the political substance of his innovation, recalling that “The New Look . . . was a success only because it reflected the mood of the time—a mood that sought refuge from the mechanical and impersonal in a return to tradition and enduring values. . . . In an era as serious as ours, where national luxury means artillery and jet aircraft, we must defend every inch of our own personal luxury. . . . Our civilization is a luxury, and we are defending it.” Luxury, manifest in opulent materials and, especially in 1947, in the privileged return of copious textile, permeates every Dior garment of that year.

Significantly, Dior made the bounty of material evident using the obvious contradiction between disciplined shaping and profligate drapery. He was creating a molded upper body tapering down to a caricaturelike corseted waist. Dresses and suits flare directly from the waist, enhancing its fabled thinness. With its dramatic burst of abundance, the engorged skirt sets off the narrow shoulders, the shaped and lifted bust, and the conelike tapering to the

diminutive midriff. Dior demonstrated his mastery of pleats in the first collection: it was essential to be able to move subtly from the controlled use of fabric to the fullness that he favored in skirts, peplums, and in some cases even at the shoulder. Box pleats, knife pleats, and a virtuosic repertoire of dressmaking and pleating techniques allowed the compressed junctures of fabric to flow in wide release.

That first year, Dior immediately made fashion sensational again. War's necessary restrictions and a prevailing ethos of utilitarian clothing—there was even a classification in Great Britain called “utility” dress—had purposefully repudiated glamor. Dior wholeheartedly embraced the glamor and refinement of clothing down to the smallest details. Many suits and dresses in the 1947 collections, for example, buttoned at the back. Believing in the fashion of the past, Dior was thinking of a time of ladies’ maids and the artistic ritual of dressing as much as he was of the finesse of displacing a function to a contrived place. Noting this predilection in the spring collection, *Harper’s Bazaar* (May 1947) illustrated many garments front and back or, using what was to become a special strategy for witnessing the Dior silhouette, the side view, thus making it appear razor thin with extravagant extensions. Whether in front or in back, the buttons served as both a reminder of fashion’s past and a means of showing the new structure. Hats added to the deliberate overall composition that Dior was formulating. Of

“Chérie” dinner dress, spring-summer 1947. Sapphire-blue change-of-silk tulle. G.D. of Christian Dior, 1948 (CI 43.13.03).

“Chérie” exemplifies “The New Look” in all its salient elements: sloped shoulder, raised bustline, narrowed waist, and a monumental volume of skirt falling away from a padded hipline to below the calf. The New Look arrived uncompromised and complete, not as a tentative suggestion or stage in evolution. Here, the skirt is made of the full width of the fabric, selvedge to selvedge, disposed horizontally. Consequently, at the waist the necessary folding under of the pleated fullness means a compressed, hip-ens-and-sare-half yard seam allowance, the substantial bulk of which pads the hips.







"Aladin" dinner dress, belted and unbelted, fall-winter 1947. Champagne silk-satin. Gift of Barina Ballard, 1958 (CI 55.50.1, left).

Dior loved the paradoxical juxtaposition of the ordinary and extraordinary. No garment more concisely and consummately represents his use of such contradiction than this one, which *Harper's Bazaar* immediately dubbed a "Mother Hubbard" dress in acknowledgment of its tentlike shape when unbelted. As Dior intended that it be worn belted, the essential Dior dialectic between the fullness of drapery

and hair shaping in the body functions chiefly as a before-and-after phenomenon. Even when worn behind, where it comes into slugs on the body, the dress sets off the appearance of the broadest, unadorned construction. The designer's cognizance of fashion history may have afforded an eighteenth-century model, the merit, for this combination of ample engery secured to the body scaterically and capable of being released. Further, in another *de bustine* coach, Dior introduces a coquettish aspect in the plunging décolletage.



the “Bar” suit (see page 21), *Harper’s Bazaar* noted, “Balance for the silhouette—the wide, bowed hat-line.” Dior’s hats customarily frame the face but from the outset, they served chiefly to fulfill the silhouette, acting like large brims complementing the wide base of the long and full skirt. Other instances of accessories accent the richness of contour that Dior preferred; *Harper’s Bazaar* described of a natural linen coat, “Again he stresses the large-scale hat, and a big muff of leopard skin, effective against the pure monotone of linen.”

While the American clients, except for evening, shied away from excessive décolletage, Dior, practicing his sculptural technique, was already carving away the upper chest even as he added structure at bust and waist. The 1947 “Aladin” dress (see pages 16 and 17) anticipated a variety of Dior shapes, including the deepest décolletage that seems to expose a portion of the breast. In fact, the achievement of The New Look and its implications for the next decade arrived in many ways born full-blown from the head of Christian Dior in 1947. Not only was the silhouette wholly reasoned, the means of achieving it were realized as well.



**"Aladin" dinner dress, detail, fall-winter 1947.** Champagne - la soie. Gift of Donna Ballard, 1958 (CI 50.50.1 a,b). See also pages 16 and 17.

Although Dior's primary aesthetic reference for this dress is the eighteenth century, the fitted back bodice that cleaves to the body and the pattern pieces that create all the

foldases in the bodice free any allusions to the construction of 1880s-1890s at-home gowns. This detail suggests that, within the overall volume, there is the exact and rational dressmaking at which Dior excelled. Yet the effect is entirely one of leglessness; Dior reinterpreted a woman's form by disposing shape within the formless grandeur of massive drapery.

**"Bar" suit, jacket, spring-summer 1947.**  
*De ge* silk shantung. Gift of Mrs. John  
 Chambers Hughes, 1956 (CI 56.34.30)  
**Day skirt, executed in 1969 from a**  
**1947 design.** Black wool. Gift of  
 Christian Dior, 1969 (CI 69.10)

The relationship between designer and client is dynamic in the course, often allowing for modified versions of the original design. Some of these are ultimately more or less sanctioned; others are sanitized and not publicly acknowledged by the House. Documents in the Dior archives demonstrate that the original

version of the "Bar" suit employed a notched collar. This variation with a shawl collar, perhaps the result of a client's demand, was officially photographed by Dior at the time of its creation, indicating the imprimatur of the House of Dior.

Although Dior created many notched collars, he was a fervent advocate of shawl collars and curved necklines. Arguably, the shawl collar plays effectively with the curvaceous forms Dior articulated at the shoulders and hips. The notched lapel is more often found in the work of Auriant and other suit makers of the 1940s who stressed angular geometries.





**"Mystère" day coat and center-front detail, fall-winter 1947, Black wool with moss-green silk taffeta trim. Gift of Irene Stone, in memory of her daughter, Mrs. Ethel S. Green, 1959 (CI 59.36.2).**

Is the mystery in the black coat that of a shadowy seduction? Is the mystery in the revelation of an apparent material, selectively revealed? Is the mystery in the shaping of an armature referential to and hyperbolic of the body that is clearly not armature itself? Dior knew the poetry of restraint, but he also knew the narrative possible in a garment.

One of the most typical ploys of Dior's design is the juxtaposition of modest and luxurious materials, which balances the tactility of both. This detail is an example: a voluminous fan of green taffeta is inserted at the center-front, skirt; layers of green taffeta are also visible at the neckline. Any observer would assume that there is a green dress within. The unseen element that resolves the mystery is that the coat is green and black, and whatever is worn within remains to be seen.





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