



Christian Dior's most famous design, 'Bar', from his inaugural collection was not the bestseller, but is an icon of 20th century fashion, as is this photograph taken by Dior's friend, photographer Willy Maywald, in 1955.

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NEW LOOK

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*When Christian Dior's extravagantly feminine **New Look** burst upon the fashion-starved post-World War II scene, not everyone accepted it—French saleswomen literally tore the dresses apart, spawning numerous anti-New Look protests. A glimpse into the rise of—and shock waves caused by—a fashion icon.*

By Alexandra Palmer

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In 1935, at the age of 30,

Dior entered the world of fashion as a freelance designer. Three years later, he landed a job at the couture salon of Robert Piguet, who hired him as a *modéliste*, or designer working under the head of the house. After the war, Dior joined couturier Lucien Lelong, who served as president of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, representing Parisian haute couture during the war years.

Christian Dior had expected to work for Lelong for the rest of his life because he valued his secure job and was worried about the ‘risks of going into business’. Then, unexpectedly, the dream of his own couture house was realized by France’s ‘cotton king’, Marcel Boussac, the richest man in France.¹ Boussac, who had opened his first textile company in 1911, had profited from the First World War and now the Second, making Groupe Boussac the largest French textile manufacturer, with 15,000 employees. In July 1946 he proposed that Dior revitalize one of his businesses, the haute couture house of Philippe et Gaston.² Dior turned down the offer because the idea of battling entrenched hierarchies and extricating an old-fashioned and run-down house from its early twentieth-century roots was exactly what he was tired of at Lelong.

Instead, Dior very clearly articulated a proposal for an entirely new establishment. His ideas were fuelled by his experience at Piguet and Lelong, by Balmain’s success and perhaps too by his close friend, Christian Bérard. In 1946 Bérard was in New York and learned that American dress designers considered Paris ‘washed up’ as a fashion centre. Reportedly, he told Dior to sketch a plan of action, saying: ‘There is no other way. You must be Joan of Arc!’³ Dior had two objectives, artistic and nationalistic. His house would be small and very exclusive, attracting the most elegant women in the world. It would be a temple for upholding and demonstrating the centuries-old French traditions of luxury textiles, beading, embroidery, dress-making techniques and design, and prove that Paris was the most technically superb, luxurious, artistic and dominant source for fashion in the world. By doing this, the city would reassert its cultural importance for fashion and demonstrate that France – and particularly not America – was the source of creative fashion as it had been since the late seventeenth century.

Christian Dior linked the artistic Paris couturier with a professional businessman, quickly becoming a celebrity couturier. His private and public life attracted much interest and from 1947–57 he was constantly photographed.



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By the summer of 1946 word was out that Boussac was backing Christian Dior and ‘the smell of fame was strong’.⁵ The opening of the new house was announced in the US in the winter of 1946 in *Women’s Wear Daily*, and in French *Elle* in January 1947.⁶ Dior had a respected reputation as a *modéliste*, but the news that he was opening his own establishment and was backed by Marcel Boussac generated enormous excitement. Christian Dior did not disappoint.

The house of Christian Dior was installed at 30 Avenue Montaigne. Dior was a perfectionist and wanted decor that would ‘not distract the eye from my clothes, which after all were to be the focal point of the proceedings’... The immaculate, fresh-painted rooms with a patina of French history created by the neo-Louis XVI décor excited buyers, press and public alike. They were fascinated to experience a new mood that could blow away the wartime cobwebs.

On 12 February 1947 Dior unveiled his extravagant first collection in an atmosphere of supreme elegance. Invitations for the opening were coveted and even sold on the black market. Jacques Rouët recalled that an hour before the show ‘a ladder, pinched from a nearby construction site, was placed against the ground floor window and several young people happily climbed up and tried to force themselves inside’.¹¹ Guests were greeted on the stairs by formidable staff dressed in chic black uniforms. The *aboyeuse* or barker called out the name and number of the model entering the room, in English and French. The presentation was dramatic, as one reporter recalled:

The first girl came out, stepping fast, switching with a provocative swinging movement, whirling in the close-packed room, knocking over ashtrays with the strong flare of her pleated skirt, and bringing everyone to the edges of their seats in a desire not to miss a thread of this momentous occasion . . . We were given a polished theatrical performance such as we had never seen in a couture house before. We were witness to a revolution in fashion and to a revolution in showing fashion as well.¹²

The *New York Times* called the collection 'youthful' and 'graceful'. British *Vogue* credited Dior with reviving interest in 'a somewhat uninspired season . . . his ideas were fresh and put over with great authority, his clothes beautifully made, essentially Parisienne, deeply feminine'.¹³ *Album du Figaro* noted that 'for the first time in years there is finally a style!' and published a guide to the hemlines, busts and shoulders. Carmel Snow's detailed and euphoric reports for *Harper's Bazaar* were enormously influential. It was she who dubbed the style the 'New Look', sending American buyers rushing to Paris to see what they had missed, since only 18 had attended the Paris collections. One commented: 'God help the buyers who bought before they saw Dior!' In November, when Pierre Gaxotte of the Académie Française returned to Paris from New York, he announced: 'Do you know that the two most famous Frenchmen in the United States are General de Gaulle and Christian Dior?'¹⁵

But when Christian Dior's New Look burst upon fashion-starved post-war women, his image of femininity, which reigned supreme during the 1950s, did not make them blush. It was a revelation of beauty and luxury, with long, full, fluid skirts, cinched-in waists and soft shoulders – the antithesis of militaristic wartime fashions.

But not everyone accepted the New Look. A few days after the first showings of Dior's collection, while American photographers were shooting the designs in Montmartre, sales ladies from the *Quatre Saisons* 'leapt forward and tore apart the dresses'. This was the first protest, and photographs of women ripping at the model's skirt published in *Paris Match* began the start of organized anti-New Look protests.¹⁹

Christian Dior himself encountered negative reactions to the New Look later in 1947. On his first American trip, he was promptly whisked away from Chicago train station as 'embattled housewives brandishing placards bearing the words: "Down with the New Look," "Burn Monsieur Dior," "Christian Dior Go Home" advanced'. Chicago was not unique. In Louisville, 1,265 women believed that the New Look was not only impractical but also anti-feminist, and signed an anti-Dior petition as members of The Little Below the Knee Club. In Oildale, California, Mrs Louise Horn gave a timely demonstration of the dangers lurking in the New Look. As she alighted from a bus, her new long, full skirt caught in the door. The bus started up and she had to run a block alongside it before she was freed. In Georgia, a group of outraged men formed the League of Broke Husbands, hoping to get '30,000 American husbands to hold that hemline'.

Christian Dior's first presentation astonished in the new smart salon with his mannequins wearing full, long skirts that brushed the audience during the fast-paced theatrical presentation.



Photo: Dior Heritage

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ven in 1948 the style was still controversial. *New Liberty* magazine ran an article entitled ‘What’s Happened to the New Look?’ It stated that ‘In style-conscious Paris only models and wealthy society women could afford to wear it. The average woman preferred to buy food’, and that ‘In Russia, it was

banned as “an example of the deterioration of American capitalism”.’ This was accompanied by photographs showing local reactions to models wearing the New Look on Paris streets, and included a Paris housewife in a vegetable queue giving the New Look ‘a dirty look’, while another told the model wearing a Christian Dior that it was ‘impractical’.²²

Fashion manufacturers in Europe and North America were not ready for Christian Dior’s vision and were left with outdated fashions; they were furious because the New Look was not being replicated quickly. Wartime restrictions were still in place in Europe, and the styles required too much material, new patterns and a reassessment of production and costs. Customers could not readily transform the slim-fitting, knee-length, wartime skirt into a New Look one, though women were resourceful. Some added a yoke to an existing skirt in order to drop it to the hips. One found the required fabric in bed sheets that she dyed black for her ankle-length skirt. But, as another pointed out, the implications went beyond just the amount of textile, and she was shocked at the price of the alterations for her first New Look-style purchase because it took so much time. Even if a woman managed to create the New Look successfully, it was not always recognized as the height of fashion. As one woman recalled, when she was in a department store wearing her home-made version of a long New Look skirt, a gentleman wryly remarked: ‘Excuse me for not wearing my dinner jacket!’²³ Women read articles that answered questions such as ‘What is the New Look? What about shoulder padding?’, or announced that ‘You Can’t be a Last-Year Girl’ because,

Fashion is shaken at the foundation. Visualize yourself as you looked on a beautiful autumn day last year. There’s not much of the picture that survives. Not the hemline, waistline or the shoulderline . . . If you’re not a Last-Year Girl. You’ll like the feel of a longer, fuller skirt flowing around you as you move . . . You’ll enjoy having hips again – without apologies; and the satisfaction of a small, rounded, tapering waist and of having it show in the snug bodice tops. You can have it all.²⁴

While reporters were kept busy explaining how and why women could or would not adopt the New Look, others considered the financial implications. In spring 1948 French *Elle* showed dresses by Dior, Balmain and Balenciaga and compared the price of each in terms of what France could purchase from abroad with their sales: 9,800 bags of wheat, 3,000,000 kilograms of wool and 789,000 kilograms of meat. Haute couture was thus clearly shown as an important financial export, whilst also promoting French culture and an image of national femininity.²⁵ Regardless of controversy, the fact remained that from its inception the New Look dominated post-war fashion design at all prices.

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The New Look firmly secured the name of the house of Christian Dior in the mind of the public, as well as the fashion world. In fact, all Paris collections were measured and revitalized by it. . . . As Carmel Snow so famously quipped: ‘Dior saved Paris as Paris was saved by the Battle of the Marne.’²⁸ ○

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Excerpted from the book Dior: A New Look, a New Enterprise (1945–57) by Alexandra Palmer (V&A Publishing; 2009) available in the ROM’s Museum Store and online.

Footnotes

- ¹ Pochna, *Bonjour, Monsieur Boussac*, pp.17-9; Dior, *Talking about Fashion*, p.27.
- ² Pochna, *Christian Dior*, p.88, emphasizes that it was Dior’s artistic ambitions and frustrations, rather than a quest for fame or interest in business that interested him. Philippe et Gaston was founded in 1925.
- ³ Bébé, *Time* (9 May 1949). The article notes that Bérard’s friends believed he was the real begetter of the ‘New Look’.
- ⁵ Ballard, *In My Fashion*, p.233.
- ⁶ Scrapbook, *Christian Dior Heritage*.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Réthy, *Christian Dior*, p.8.
- ¹² Ballard, *In My Fashion*, p.237.
- ¹³ *New York Times* (15 February 1947), p.8; *British Vogue* (April 1947), p.47.
- ¹⁴ Snow, *The World of Carmel Snow*, p.117.
- ¹⁵ *Time* (4 March 1957), p.34; Réthy, *Christian Dior*, p.8.
- ¹⁹ Réthy, *Christian Dior*, p.8. It has been suggested that this protest was a clever press stunt by the house.
- ²² *New Liberty* (28 February 1948), p. 8.
- ²³ Audience comment at the Textile Endowment Fund lecture by Palmer in 1997 at the Royal Ontario Museum; author’s interview with Clayton Burton (1991) The centerpiece of the autumn 1947 collection ‘Diorama’ had a circumference of 40 metres. Dior, *Christian Dior and I*, p.71.
- ²⁴ *Harper’s Bazaar* (August 1947), p.95.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Weiner, *Les Enfants Terribles*, p. 31.
- ²⁸ Snow, *The World of Carmel Snow*, p.58.

Below: Christian Dior’s visit to Chicago in autumn 1947 galvanized feminists, who demonstrated against the New Look.



Photo: © Bettmann/CORBIS.