

The
New Look



“IT’S QUITE A REVOLUTION, DEAR CHRISTIAN!”

In 1946, Christian Dior was approached by the extremely wealthy textile magnate Marcel Boussac, who was impressed by Dior’s work and wanted a designer to resurrect an old fashion house named Philippe et Gaston.

The offer was tempting. However, Dior refused to work under another’s name, insisting that the new house be eponymous. Boussac agreed to back him, and on 16 December 1946, the house of Christian Dior opened its doors at 30 Avenue Montaigne. The designer’s eagerly anticipated first collection – the last haute couture show of the Spring/Summer season – was unveiled on 12 February 1947 to a room packed with the upper echelons of Parisian society, alongside the most stylish of the fashion crowd. As the models began to parade the 90 debut looks around the elegant grey-hued salon, the atmosphere was “electric”, American *Vogue* editor Bettina Ballard later wrote.

OPPOSITE This iconic image of the New Look has a woman posing elegantly, wearing Dior’s peplum “Bar” jacket with its sloped shoulders and tiny waist that flares over the hips to meet a full black skirt – topped with a woven hat.



OPPOSITE Dior's collections, as seen here in 1950, were shown in the elegant, grey-painted salon of his atelier at 30 Avenue Montaigne and always attracted a full house.

Journalists around the world were suitably impressed with Dior's debut collection, which quickly graced the cover of American *Vogue*, but it was Carmel Snow, the editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*, whose words immortalized this daring style: "It's quite a revolution, dear Christian! Your dresses have such a new look!" And so the term "New Look" was coined – and with it, a whole new way of dressing was born.

Dior's tailoring has often been described as having an architectural quality, and his love of beautifully structured garments in the finest cloth is often recognized as his trademark. The expertise of his dressmakers is readily apparent from the meticulous attention paid to the clothes. However, it is important to understand just how revolutionary the New Look was. World War II had ended less than two years previously, and France was still recovering from German occupation. Similarly, in Britain – where Dior was popular, particularly among the upper classes – clothes rationing lasted until 1949. When the New Look first burst onto the scene, it was the exact opposite of the fashion that had come before it, in which shoulders had been squared off, hats had been adorned with flowers and fruit, and shoes had heavy platforms. In contrast, Dior's collection was breathtaking in its pared-back silhouette. The neatly rounded shoulders, curved waist and flared, elegant skirts were fluid yet structured, exquisitely tailored yet flattering and easy to wear. Footwear and millinery were integral to Dior's overall style, and he accessorized his looks with neat heels and sharply drawn hats. The designs that Dior created, although beautiful, were viewed by some as shockingly extravagant. But there were plenty of women for whom the end of wartime austerity could not come soon enough, and buying a New Look suit was one way to signal the start of a new era in fashion.



LEFT Christian Dior was a talented artist who created beautiful sketches of his revolutionary 1947 New Look dresses.



LEFT A haute couture collection typically showed over 200 designs carefully selected by Dior himself, to be made up by his team of talented atelier artisans.

Christian Dior's first collection presented two distinct silhouettes: the "Corolle", which Dior described in the press notes as "dance-like, very full-skirted, moulded bust and slim waist", and the "En Huit" or "8" line, characterized by the designer as "clean and rounded, the chest is underlined, hollowed-out waist, accented hips". What is obvious in these descriptions is Dior's love of the female form. His clothes were designed to accentuate the curves that were there, and give the illusion of an hourglass figure to those who weren't naturally built that way.

Take, for example, the iconic and monochromatic "Bar" suit that immediately springs to mind when one thinks of the New Look: it has a beautifully tailored ivory silk jacket with a tiny waist flaring over rounded hips and an almost gratuitously full pleated skirt, made from four metres of black wool, that falls to mid-calf. Other suits and dresses from the collection were tailored in the same way. This style, paired with Dior's use of a subdued colour palette, including shades he described as "navy, grey, griegie and black", rendered the collection at once modern and nostalgic. The accentuated curves revealed the influence of both Edwardian-era corsetry and the exaggerated, wide skirts of the nineteenth century, yet the look was softened by modern colours and shape – and instantly recognizable as a fashion classic.

Dior's second collection, for Autumn/Winter 1947, was hotly anticipated by the fashion world; would the designer be able to deliver another collection as perfectly curated and innovative as his debut performance? The answer was yes, and the New Look of Autumn/Winter 1947 was pushed to even greater extremes, as American *Vogue* confirmed: "His second collection proves that he is not just occasionally good." The new silhouette continued to exaggerate the



female form, drawing in waists even more tightly, rounding and softening the shoulder to contrast more drastically to the sharp, wide shoulders that had been so popular just a year previously and, if possible, skirts were even fuller. *Vogue* reported “immensely wide, immensely long skirts” and Dior, in his autobiography, recalled using “a fantastic yardage of material [that] ... this time went right down to the ankles”.

OPPOSITE In 1947, many Parisiennes were outraged by the amount of fabric being used in Dior's New Look dresses after wartime fabric rationing, and in protest tried to rip the dresses from the models.

RIGHT This model reclining in Dior's salon – full of elegant furniture and fresh flowers – and wearing a New Look mid-calf dress, offset with a fur-trimmed coat, veiled hat and gloves, epitomizes Dior glamour.



Dior again used a flower analogy as he described how he inserted pleated “petal panels” into long, flared skirts. When an outfit presented a straighter, tubular skirt, the designer paired it with a jacket that had a padded peplum jacket, so the look still gave the illusion of exaggeratedly round hips and focused the eye on the woman's curves. For this cool-weather collection, Dior chose sumptuous, heavy fabrics

including velvet and brocade, and yet the models moved fluidly in their clothes. Dior spoke of an emotional lightness in this collection too, revelling as it did in liberation from war. He called this era a second “golden age”, and believed “when hearts were light, mere fabrics could not weigh the body down.”

Always a designer to consider the finished look of his outfit, Dior increasingly placed more importance on accessories. His second New Look collection introduced his signature side-hat, worn jauntily on one side of the head, an elegant twist of hair on the other. Within a few years, it

RIGHT This stunning hussar-style velvet and wool couture suit shows how Dior structured his outfits, juxtaposing a tight waist with full skirt and sleeves. The green accents in the hat, scarf and belt and the textural contrast of black leather gloves and fox-fur muff pull the look together.



RIGHT This silhouette is typical of Dior's New Look, with its nipped-in waist, padded hips and full, flared skirt. The matching hat, gloves and shoes complete the look.



had become essential to the 1950s look. Jewellery, too, was crucial: the designer complemented his evening dresses with brilliantly sparkling statement necklaces.

Over the next few seasons, in the final years of the 1940s, Dior remained true to his groundbreaking silhouette, but there were subtle tweaks that made each new collection as well received as the last. For example, take his 1948 “Zig Zag” and “Envol” lines, the first described by the designer as giving the wearer “the animated look of a drawing”; the second line, translated as “Fly Away”, distributed the fullness of the skirt unevenly, a difficult design to pull off but one that allowed an increased sense of movement through the exaggerated rise and fall of the skirt.

Dior
Without Dior

MARIA GRAZIA CHIURI 2016–PRESENT

In July 2016, for the first time, Dior appointed a female creative director, Italian Maria Grazia Chiuri, who had previously worked for Fendi and Valentino. The appointment was a natural one for a fashion house steeped in femininity. From the beginning, the Dior look was all about womanliness, accentuating female curves and creating romantic silhouettes. Dior himself had many formative female influences in his life and Chiuri similarly grew up surrounded and inspired by strong women: her five sisters, grandmother and, most importantly, her mother, a seamstress, who gave her daughter an early love of fashion and appreciation of the craft of creating clothes.

As a woman, Chiuri provides a particular angle on fashion design. She is a working mother and self-proclaimed feminist who appreciates that clothes need to answer many needs – practical, aesthetic and even political. Before her first show, she stated: “I strive to be attentive and to be open to the world and to create fashion that resembles the women of today.” In an interview with American *Vogue*, in speaking about women’s changing attitudes to fashion in the 1960s, she stressed the importance of how Marc Bohan’s designs responded to his client’s needs by making dresses shorter and simpler, explaining: “It was not the designer who changed the line, but the woman changed, and the designer understood that the woman was different”.

Chiuri’s first collection for Dior was ready-to-wear rather than haute couture. In it, she reflected the reality of fashion for all women, not just an elite few. As a result, a wide variety of styles were shown, including sportswear, streetwear, evening wear and casual wear. This melting pot of design included radical pairings such as an intricately beaded skirt



RIGHT In July 2016, Italian Maria Grazia Chiuri became the first female creative director of Dior.

worn with a T-shirt bearing the slogan “We Should All Be Feminists”, taken from the title of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2014 essay. Similarly, Chiuri put the title of Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” on another T-shirt.

Like all new designers to Dior, Chiuri researched the label’s archives. But rather than just giving her take on the New Look, she took inspiration from all her predecessors –

RIGHT As a steadfast feminist, Chiuri sent models down the catwalk for her first ready-to-wear collection in T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "We Should All Be Feminists", the title of the groundbreaking 2014 essay by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

OPPOSITE Chiuri mixed up the transitions of Dior, putting romantic dresses with branded street-style accessories, as worn here by actress Jennifer Lawrence.



reinterpreting their reinterpretations, so to speak. She has variously referenced Yves Saint Laurent, John Galliano and Raf Simons, as well as Hedi Slimane, who headed up Dior Homme from 2012 to 2016. Chiuri likes to play with traditional masculine and feminine roles with a degree of ambiguity and androgyny in many of her designs. Among





ABOVE For her 2020 Cruise collection, Chiuri honoured Dior's love of beautiful fabrics by using lace handmade by highly skilled artisans for these romantic dresses.

OPPOSITE The designer uses Eastern influences mixed with a fierce feminism to create modern, wearable designs.

all this modernism, however, she still finds influence in historical fashions, which are always an integral part of the Dior brand.

For Chiuri, focusing on wearability is essential to a modern Dior collection; the needs of the client are paramount, with modern tailoring a key element in her designs. But the romanticism that is at the heart of the Dior label is not lost, and she continues to create beautiful evening wear with all the trademark florals and embroidery that embody the Dior fantasy. Her 2019 foray into costume design, for the ballet *Nuit Blanche* at the Teatro Dell'Opera in Rome, is a case in point. For that production, she created ethereal dresses featuring tulle skirts juxtaposed with sportswear-inspired tops printed with Dior's haute couture flowers. Chiuri has reinvented Dior, taking the label from feminine to feminist. The woman who wears the clothes has the power – the designer is simply her translator.

