



Dior's New Look

How Christian Dior's extravagant designs put the frill back into post-war fashion

Written by Louise Quick

Say 'Dior' and most people think of luxury, haute couture and leggy models strutting up and down the runway in the latest high-end fashions. But before becoming one of the world's biggest and most recognised fashion brands, it was just one man, Christian Dior, struggling to make his mark in war-torn Europe.

It was 12 February 1947 when the designer's scandalous 'New Look' shocked post-World War II society and revolutionised the fashion industry forever. Taking place just under two years after Victory in Europe Day, Dior stunned the world's fashion elite when he presented his debut collection in Paris. Models swanned past in swathes of rich fabric, long, heavy skirts and dresses synched at the waist. The story goes that one influential onlooker, Carmel Snow, editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, was so shocked that she declared Dior's collection a truly "new look" – and the name stuck.

Dior's designs, made up of two fashion lines named En Huit and Carolle, were all about creating an overtly womanly hourglass silhouette. It was a figure that, for better or worse, set the standard for fashion and femininity for the next decade, reflected in the famous styles of 1950s Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe.

Among the impressive 90 pieces that made up Dior's collection that day, the real headline act was the Bar suit. Still heralded today, it summed up the New Look: a large, dark, corolla skirt, padded at the hips, teamed with a cream blazer that synched in and kicked out from the waist.

Following rave reviews, the designs spread across Europe like wildfire and made their way over the Atlantic to New York City. Many praised Dior with having single-handedly revived Paris' struggling post-war fashion industry. His designs were most popular, of course, among society's glamorous upper class. Hollywood leading ladies Ava Gardner and Rita Hayworth were both said to be fans. However, his most prestigious fanbase actually came from within the British royal family – namely Princess Margaret.



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The utility-style dresses that were all the rage during World War II



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The fashionable young royal was a huge fan – so much so that she chose one of Dior's designs for her 21st birthday. It was immortalised in a famous portrait by photographer Cecil Beaton in 1951. Perched on a sofa, straight-backed and stoic, her small frame sits atop swathes and swathes of luxurious fabric that make up her almost Disney princess-like gown.

While these designs may seem glamorous, they don't necessarily seem shocking or particularly fashion-forward today. To understand the hype, it's important to appreciate the huge effect that the war had had on everyday fashions.

During World War II, the fashion industry was hit not only by rationing and austerity measures but, with the war's hefty demand of fabric and labour, there was a significant reduction in raw materials, skilled workers and factory space. Ultimately, the fashion of the early 1940s was dominated by simple suits and knee-length dresses with boxy, almost militaristic shoulders.

With the introduction of rationing in Britain in 1941, simpler, slimmer outfits became more popular as more coupons were needed for more fabric and skilled handiwork. This was also the year that most silk was commandeered to make parachutes for the Royal Air Force. Adornments such as pleats, ruching, embroidery and even pockets were restricted under austerity measures while additions such as hats and lace – deemed luxury items – were heavily taxed.

After food, clothing was the hardest hit by the demands of the war effort, which explains the series of 'Make-Do And Mend' campaign posters and pamphlets issued by the government.

What you wore became a direct reflection of your contribution to the war effort. A band of London designers even came together to form the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers (IncSoc), to popularise austerity-friendly designs.

In 1942, IncSoc created 32 designs of so-called 'utility styles' – fashionable outfits that used limited resources – that they then presented to the public. Restricted to tight fabric rations, the resulting coats, dresses and suits were said to have no pleats, tucks or frills with no 'unnecessary' buttons. They were intended for all seasons, with paper patterns made available for those wishing to make them at home.

Reactions were mixed. While many of the leading fashion houses and magazines were happy with the surprisingly sleek designs, other fashion-conscious folk were unsure about the cookie-cutter styles. *The Daily Mail* argued, "Mrs 'Jones' is nervous that she will walk out to coffee one morning in a Mayfair-style suit and meet her neighbour in, if not the same colour, the identical cut." On the other hand, another critic thought these Mayfair designs were actually too fashion-oriented and "not sufficiently practicable for the housewife or the woman in the war factory".

Whatever their feelings, these simpler, utility-style designs became the general trend, representing both fashion and the home front's dedication to the war effort. For a large part of society, this was an attitude not only reserved for wartime, but something that carried on, and in some cases intensified, in the years following the conflict. In fact, clothes rationing ended in 1949, and food restrictions lingered until 1954.

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Barbara Goalen
models a 1947
New Look
evening dress



Post-War Fashion

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A wartime poster encouraging people to reuse old clothes

RIGHT

Dior poses with models after a fashion show at the Savoy Hotel, London in 1950



“It was actually the long skirts that seemed to cause the most controversy”



It must have been shocking to see visions of Dior's models enveloped in layers of lavish materials, covered in fine details and accessories. While IncSoc's utility-style dresses were rigorously restricted and made sure to use no more than 1.8 metres of fabric, it is said that Dior's more elaborate offerings often contained over 18 metres each. This unapologetically glamorous and feminine style was a complete rejection of the wartime austerity that had been gripping the entirety of Europe so tightly.

The world's fashionistas, for the most part, approved of the lavish designs and the move away from the stale trends of wartime. "The bulkiness of the coats and capes to go over these tremendous skirts is startling," said one reporter for *The New York Times*. "Wide sunray pleats each backed in taffeta and slashed open to the knee are so manipulated that the swing of the skirt is a gracious thing."

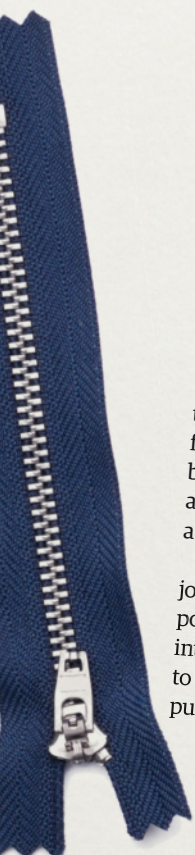
Covering the collection in 1948, another journalist, who was particularly taken by the pockets, wrote, "One felt that these were an integral part of the costume for it added great style to see the manikins thrust their hands into them, pushing them slightly forward in a gesture that

contributed immeasurably to the movement of the full skirts."

Strangely, among the synched waists, exaggerated bosoms and extravagant accessories, it was actually the long skirts that seemed to cause the most controversy. While 1940s fashion had generally seen skirts and dresses stop somewhere around the knee, the New Look wasn't concerned with fabric rationing and so its hems sat around the mid-shin instead. To some, those seemingly inconsequential inches were seen as a snub to the war effort itself.

However, back in the 1940s, Dior and his family had seen their fair share of involvement in the war. Born in Normandy in 1905, his family moved to Paris when he was a child and the family name was best associated with his father's lucrative fertiliser company. As an adult, Dior was always submerged in the capital's creative scene, eventually falling under the guidance of Robert Piguet – the same fashion designer who is said to have trained Hubert de Givenchy. Sadly this was short-lived and, at 35 years old, Dior was called up for military service in 1940.

After his two-year service, he returned to the capital where he was scooped up as a designer by the





Utility clothing versus the New Look

Let's get creative

When resources were low, people used their imaginations. Some used aircrew's outdated escape maps to make blouses, scraps of factory plastic for jewellery, wedding dresses from parachutes, and beetroot juice as lipstick.

Bring a bag

Pockets and buttons were both deemed an unnecessary expense. While never banned outright, coats were limited to three pockets maximum and buttons were restricted to only the necessary in 1942.

The square shoulder

Practicality was key with suits and dresses of wartime Britain. Outfits had to be suitable for everyday use and all seasons. This often resulted in practical, military-style shoulders.

Coat for days

Like skirts and dresses, coats got bigger and more luxurious. Women were taking up as much room as possible in voluminous, often shapeless, coats that used swathes of fabric.

Always more accessories

Elegant hats, belts that synch the waist, glittering jewels, shawls that reach the ground, dainty gloves that reach your elbows, the odd crown. With accessories, one was never enough.

All in the detail

Pleats, ruching, embroidery and lace were all back in fashion. Dresses had plenty of dainty floral designs, elegant ruching and capped sleeves that showed off feminine shoulders.

Plainer the better

Embroidery and lace on clothing were banned under wartime austerity measures, as was fancy details on corsets and ruching on women's underwear. So wartime fashion tended to be plain with few embellishments.

Knee-length skirts

Wartime rationing and a demand on materials for uniforms meant there was less fabric for everyday clothing. So slimmer, shorter skirts and dresses that stopped at the knee became popular.

Something in the air

A drop of perfume was the finishing touch to any glamorous look. Dior allegedly sprinkled Miss Dior in the air before debuting his famous 'New Look' as a finishing touch.

Big, long skirts

The end of austerity meant the end of size considerations. Skirt hems dropped to mid-shin, which was seen as more elegant and extravagant, and were full of hip-accentuating pleating.

prominent couturier Lucien Lelong. It is said that while Dior worked for Lelong, the team, like many fashion houses during the French Occupation, dressed the wives and family members of elite Nazis and French collaborators.

However, when Hitler tried to move Parisian haute couture to Berlin, Lelong travelled to Germany just to argue against it. He won that battle, saving a workforce of roughly 25,000 women, often seamstresses working in specialised fields of embroidery or beading, that was partly made up of Jewish refugees.

Meanwhile, Dior's sister Catherine was a member of the French Resistance. Allegedly part of the Polish intelligence unit based in France, she was eventually arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp in 1944 until its liberation in 1945. Two years later – in the same year that he launched his famous 'New Look' – Dior released his first and most famous fragrance, Miss Dior, named after his sister.

By the time Dior made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1957, he was easily considered one

of the world's most famous Parisians. However, just a few months later – and only one decade after he was first launched into the spotlight with his New Look – the designer died of a heart attack while on holiday in Italy at 52 years of age.

While it was a shock to everyone, Dior had already personally named his successor and the role of artistic director fell on the shoulders of a young assistant by the name of Yves Saint Laurent. However, he only managed to run the company for a few years as he was called back to his home country of Algeria for military service – but he did eventually begin his own self-titled label in 1962.

As a brand, Dior has launched countless perfumes as well as make-up and fashion collections over its 70-year history, each time pushing different trends, styles and silhouettes, including its 1961 'The Slim Look' and its first men's range in the 1970s. Nothing, however, has come close to recreating the social and historical impact of that first controversial New Look from February 1947.



Christian Dior fits one of his dresses to a model