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This Week in History: Darling Dior

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In the wake of the devastation in post-war Europe, countries and people were searching to return to some kind of normalcy. Liberated France was still recovering two years after World War II, and Paris was looking to reclaim its sophisticated image through fashion. This week in history, on Feb. 12, 1947, Christian Dior revolutionized couture fashion with the debut of his collection “The New Look,” bringing the world’s dresses into the present. Wartime rations and scarcity changed fashion in the 1940s. Gone were the days of corseted opulence during the Victorian

and Edwardian era, along with the luxurious silk bias gowns of the 1930s. All of these styles required large amounts of fabric and skill to manufacture. Instead, sleeker styles became popular; they were often boxier and had shorter hemlines just below the knee, reducing yardage and providing convenience as women entered the workforce.

However, when the war was over, Parisian fashion houses had difficulty breaking out of this austere style — that is, until Dior’s show. The new line was designed to embrace femininity, featuring rounded silhouettes and pleats. In the Vogue article, “Everything You Need to Know About Christian Dior’s New Look Silhouette” by Laird Borrelli-Persson, Dior’s writing from his autobiography is quoted describing his line at the time: “As a result of the war and uniforms, women still looked and dressed like Amazons. But I designed clothes for flower-like women, with rounded shoulders, full feminine busts, and hand-span waists above enormous spreading skirts.”

And “flower-like” they had become. The show was a hit that caused elation and controversy, but most importantly, it reinstated the Parisian Haute-Couture. These pieces were opulent, with skirts of beautiful knife pleats that fell just above the ankle, requiring 25 to 40 yards of fabric. Some women protested these styles, creating signs with sayings such as, “Mr. Dior. We abhor dresses to the floor,” calling for a return to the shorter war-time styles. Much of this had to do with the practicality of the skirts and reflected the return of women to the home that would come during the 1950s.

Even so, the “New Look” carried lasting effects in today’s world. In fact, Dior’s movement of hyper-feminization is a large reason why women’s clothing often

doesn’t have pockets; and when they do, they are too small to fit anything. From the 17th to the 20th centuries, women’s pockets were large enough to fit a bottle of champagne (it’s actually insane; I love my 18th-century pocket panniers).

Dior was the director of his fashion house from 1947 to 1957, and his style remains timeless. When I saw the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion” exhibit, there were quite a few of his designs that I was practically drooling over.

All this, however, is to say that fashion is important. Fashion history especially is vital to understanding cultural values and events; it actually allows you to walk in another person’s shoes, which is why it can be frustrating that the subject is so frequently dismissed as unimportant.

The Met Costume Institute runs the Met Gala because it does not receive federal funding for its operations. Perhaps this is connected to the fact that the textile arts have historically been dominated by women. Much of the fine embroidery that requires skill and artistry has been done by unnamed artists, as it is something that isn’t traditionally signed.

Clothing is a status symbol; it’s a form of self-expression that reflects how people live, in an unapologetic and honest way that can’t always be retained from other kinds of primary sources. There’s a reason why England banned tartan fabrics and why nobility took the time to put sumptuary laws in place: to suppress rebellion and maintain social hierarchies.

Fashion is so much more than the fabric in your closet. It’s art, it’s messy and it can be immensely beautiful. So next time you get ready for another day of classes or work, think about how one day your style or clothing will help define an era.



The “Venus” and “Rose Rouge” dresses from House of Dior, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Sleeping Beauties: Reawakening Fashion.” House of Dior was founded by Christian Dior, who had a big impact on Parisian women’s fashion post-World War II.

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