

Amazing Fashion History

Haute Couture (*French for "high sewing" or "high dressmaking"*) refers to the creation of custom fitted fashions. One-of-a-kind, expensive clothing made for an individual customer by a fashion designer, dressmaker, tailor or any industry that produces such clothing. As I made the pilgrimage to New York City for Mercedes Benz Fashion Week Spring 2009, I thought this might just be an appropriate time to take a gander into this rarified world. Think about it. When clothing began it was designed to primarily ward off the cold or other climate changes. It continued to evolve region to region, and country to country as cities and societies began to take shape and hierarchies developed.



HAUTE-COUTURE

The first couture clothing might have been tribal wear that only the chief or leader would wear, and then in the centuries to come became symbolic of the class differences in these civilizations. By the 1500s, the busiest garment/ cloak makers found that showing miniature versions of their designs was a great way to attract business and demonstrate their skill. Talk about marketing—this may have been the birth of the modern day fashion show!

European nobility was known for their conspicuous consumption of the latest styles shown on the dolls and were even said to collect them. Queen Elizabeth I is said to have had more than 1,000 gowns. But it was Louis XIV of France, a flamboyant dresser (to say the least), that really established Paris as the epicenter of the fashion world.



In the mid to latter part of the 19th Century, more than 75% of clothing was made by the wearer. Quality was completely dependent on the sewing skills of the person making them. The average gal of that time styled herself to reflect the climate, industry and/or morals of the areas in which they lived. The other 25% of clothes were made by designers/dressmakers for the very wealthy. Availability of luxury fabrics and items were almost non-existent for most people of modest means. So these prairie prima donnas wore garments made of fabric from

the local dry goods merchant and filled in with whatever else was at hand. Transportation, both domestic and foreign, started to improve what goods could be easily shipped around the world. This is when the industrial age, the invention of the sewing machine by Isaac Singer, and the ready to wear industry really converged. The first real fashion design star was an Englishman named Charles Frederick Worth (1826-1895), whose clothing was produced in Paris and sold at fine emporiums and boutiques all over the world.

During the first decades of the 20th Century, the latest women's fashions still came from Paris, and they were copied by homemakers and local dressmakers alike. Ready to wear grew more important as time and invention went on, and really brought affordable fashion to the masses. But there was still a great fascination with the meticulously constructed, hand-sewn garments of the high fashion couturier.

This is where ready to wear steps off. Ready to wear today has blurred the line between "haute couture", "high fashion" and "prêt-à-porter" lines which are produced and marketed by "haute couture" houses, but are pretty pricy. This is what we saw in Bryant Park this fall! According to the Wikipedia: *"much of the haute couture displayed at fashion shows today is rarely sold; it is created to enhance the prestige of the house. Falling revenues have forced a few couture houses to abandon their less profitable couture division and concentrate solely on the less prestigious ready to wear"*.

By any other name, whether it's found at the Goodwill Store & Donation Center, or the mall, it's still fashion—pure and simple. These extraordinary bits of cloth can be inspiring, puzzling, enchanting, irritating, funny, and at times, downright foolish! But don't ever call it boring!

