

FASHIONED FROM FLEECE: AUSTRALIAN WOOL AND FRENCH HAUTE COUTURE

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From wine and wool to food and fashion, the French have always had a thing or two to teach Australians about the art of combining business and pleasure. Australia had supplied the French fashion industry with wool for nearly a century when interest in French fashion increased dramatically, peaking after the Second World War. As the decade between 1947 and 1957 saw the recovery of war torn France, Australia became an eager member of a global audience participating in the international marketing of French style which, in turn, stimulated the nascent Australian fashion industry. With worldwide public attention focused on the luxury of French fashion, the House of Dior rapidly eclipsed all others in the post-war style stakes, due largely to Christian Dior's ability to adapt the traditional haute couture business model to suit a global marketplace. But few would have guessed that from his 1946 debut collection onwards, this entrepreneurial couturier had his sights fixed firmly on the Australian market. In July 1948, Australian audiences were treated to the first collection of Christian Dior's revolutionary 'New Look' fashions paraded outside Paris. This article, focussing on the Sydney scene, will explore some of the enduring, and often surprising, French-Australian connections that led to this defining moment.¹

The Australian Wool Industry

By the middle of the nineteenth century Australian wool was gaining pre-eminence for its fine, long staples and soft lustre, qualities which made it desirable for use in the type of dress cloths required for the lucrative women's wear market. At this time, almost all the wool grown in the Australian colonies was shipped to London for sale but textile manufacturers in the United Kingdom were not producing large quantities of high quality woollen dress fabrics. These were mostly made in France and Germany, and European textile manufacturers were soon competing with Great Britain for their share of the Australian wool clip.

Anxious to cut out the British middle men, from 1852 French and Belgian textile companies began negotiating direct sales of wool from Australian suppliers. When the Australian wool trade took off in the second half of the century, France became Australia's largest customer after Britain. French dress goods relied almost exclusively on Australian merino wool for their manufacture. With their reputation for quality that no other country could imitate, the French looms became avid consumers of Australian wool.

Before the Boer War, England had bought 64% of the New South Wales wool clip, with non-British sales making up the remaining 36%, but by 1908 the balance of trade had shifted and sales to the United Kingdom dropped to 28% against 71% to other overseas buyers. At the French National Day in Sydney on 14 July 1909, the New South Wales State Treasurer, Thomas Waddell, announced that £AUS eight million worth of Australian wool had been sent to France that year and, on 24 December 1909, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that nearly all the Sydney wool went overseas, with France being the largest customer followed by England, Germany, Belgium, America and Japan.²



**Wool Sales, Sydney, c.1900,
panel photograph.
(SPF: Sydney: Salerooms, 1900)**

Between the two wars French textile manufacturers looked to their African territories to free them from their dependency on Australian wool and American cotton. After the Second World War, as early as April 1945, it was reported that French and Belgian textile mills, damaged extensively by war, were being readied to absorb the world wool surplus. Once local restrictions on the use of wool were lifted, much of the Australian clip was diverted to foreign relief. From 1946, with the increased availability of wool from Australia, Africa and South America, the European looms swung back into production and fabric shortages began to ease in France. But few people outside the wool-buying world fully realised the importance of France to the Australian wool market.

French Connections in New South Wales

The buying and selling of high-quality Australian wool was one of the prime reasons for some of the earliest French connections in New South Wales. By the 1870s, the Australian wool trade was thoroughly localised, with large numbers of buyers flocking to our shores from overseas. By 1900 each Australian state had its own wool sales with the Sydney sales being the largest.³

It is hard to overestimate the influence of the wool-buyers and their coterie on Australian attitudes to French culture at this time. By the early twentieth century several French and Belgian wool broking firms had set up offices in Australia and many of the wool-buyers were stationed here permanently with their wives and families. Residing alongside employees of the shipping and banking firms servicing French trading interests, as well as members of the French consular corps, they brought with them a taste for Parisian luxuries and the sophistication of European city life. This small and elegant subset of Sydney society (the *tout-Sydney français*) ensured the growth of French prestige and influence: the pursuit and achievement of Parisian elegance rose to an art form and a French fixation thrived.

The allure of French clothes, food and wine and the lingering trend in Australia towards a European-based education saw trips ‘back home’ as a right of passage for members of Sydney society—invariably including a detour through France to remove all traces of provincialism from both the Australian wardrobe and accent. Fostered by local and imported magazines, which

routinely highlighted the importance of Paris as the centre of style, French fashion was held in the highest esteem in Australia.

In an era when elegant women changed their outfits four times a day, the lifestyle of *haute couture* clients required clothes for travelling, lunching and visiting, going to the races, cocktails, dinner and balls. For Australian women who could afford it, French fashions could be purchased directly from haute couture houses in Paris, provided one had the right introductions, the time to undertake several fittings and to wait a month for the garments to be completed. However, the opportunity of experiencing the rarefied atmosphere of these exclusive establishments was limited to a small group of exceedingly wealthy European and American women and an even smaller group of Australian customers.

Haute Couture and the French Fashion Industry

A Paris gown is not really made of cloth, it is made with the streets [...], it is gleaned from life. [...] It is no more than a gown, yet the whole country had made this gown.

Lucien Lelong, President (1937-1947),
Chambre syndicale de la haute couture parisienne

Founded in 1868, the *Chambre syndicale de la haute couture parisienne* is the professional union of the haute couture houses of Paris. The term *haute couture* refers to high fashion as produced in Paris, long considered to be the centre of fashion innovation, and imitated in other fashion capitals around the world. To be considered a *grand couturier*, a designer must oversee the creation of hand-finished, made-to-order clothing in an *atelier* that employs a minimum of twenty workers. The couturier must present at least twenty-five ensembles, in twice-yearly collections, and construct a garment directly on the body of the client, or a customised dress form, over the course of several fittings.

The haute couture collections were shown in the couture houses each February and July by the girls of the *cabine* (house mannequins) on whom the designs had been fitted. Up to 150 *passages* (looks) were shown, with each mannequin carrying a number and walking—without music—in a parade which could last for nearly two hours. Only the top tier fashion press attended these showings, plus the occasional important client. The audience sat on tiny

gilt chairs, just metres away from the clothes, but there were no photographers. There was no advertising for haute couture, only word-of-mouth, plus beautiful magazine pictures commissioned by major fashion journals to accompany their editorials.

Perched at the top of the hierarchy in the haute couture house was the *directrice* (manageress), who decided which customers were accepted and when/if they might see the latest collections. After the official opening, prospective private and commercial clients could visit the couture salons, strictly by referral, and each allocated to a specific *vendeuse* (sales assistant), to view the new season's designs which were shown at 3 pm each day for about five months, again by the mannequins of the *cabine*. Up until 1914, sales of the Chambre syndicale relied primarily on international private clients. As the corporate customer began to assume greater importance after the First World War, haute couture sales depended increasingly on professional buyers from department stores and small speciality shops who came to Paris from all over the world.

From the late 1920s until the 1970s, to stem losses incurred by the widespread practice of copying, French haute couture houses instituted a system of *toiles* (calico facsimiles) and *patrons papier* (patterns), whereby buyers representing foreign manufacturers and the department stores could pay an exorbitant admission fee to attend haute couture shows. The cost of any *toiles*/patterns or finished samples of the actual *models* (as the original designs were known) subsequently purchased was deducted from this fee. As late as the mid-1960s, 60% of the annual turnover of Paris couture houses came from the sale of these reproduction rights.

Manufacturers were also supplied with a *fiche de référence*, a list detailing the cost of producing the original garment and giving the exact quantities of materials with their source, style names and dye lots, including the linings, as well as the buttons and trims used. Manufacturers could import the original materials to make high quality copies, or seek alternative, local equivalents to produce well-priced reproductions retaining the essential features of the Paris original but without the couture trims.

Haute Couture in Australia: Sydney's French Fashion Salons

Back home, Australian women could access French fashion through several up-market couture salons established here during the interwar period. Bearing French names and cashing in on the prestige of Paris fashion and all things French, these businesses were often run by French expatriates who modelled their operations on French workrooms. Local couturiers like Madame Paulette Pellier, Germaine Rocher (Mrs Vera Fels), and milliner Henriette Lamotte (the Countess d'Espinay) numbered among their clientele the wives and daughters



**Couturier Germaine Rocher with
Henriette Lamotte's poodle 'Lillibelle',
c. 1956, photoprint, Daily Mirror Feature
Service. (Ref: PXE 760/30)**

of prominent French and Australian businessmen, as well as leading Sydney socialites and the female members of important Australian families.

Madame Pellier set up her exclusive establishment in the newly constructed St James Building in the early 1930s, and dominated the Sydney couture scene until her retirement in 1955. First listed in the Sydney trade directories in 1918, by 1923 Pellier was taking her Parisian fashions on the road with trunk shows staged at Lennon's Hotel, Brisbane, and travelling as far as Toowoomba. Pellier Pty Ltd (1934-1955) was registered as importers and manufacturers of model frocks, coats and millinery in August 1934, with P.J. and Paulette Pellier listed as

directors. At Pellier's Autumn 1939 parade the presence of male members of Sydney's foreign community and the consular corps was cause for comment by the local fashion press, noting that 'more than one husband offered sartorial advice with a twinkle in his eye', and that these men 'could not be accused of failing to notice their wives' new hats'.⁴

Vera Fels arrived in Sydney in February 1934, accompanied by her husband and two 'premier modelists' previously employed at the House of Lelong, with the express intention of relaunching her Paris salon in the antipodes. In an interview appearing in the press the next day, Mrs Fels stated that, having heard of the beauty of Australian women and their flair for dress from Australians visiting the French capital, she had come to the other side of the world to substantiate the reports for herself.⁵

Trading as Germaine Rocher (1935-1971), Vera Fels' fashion empire soon took up the entire 5th floor of the Trust Building in King Street. Considered the epitome of elegance, her salon was decorated in grey with gilded chairs, a marble corridor, mirrored walls and deep carpets, replicating the extravagances of Parisian haute couture right down to the imported French pins. Travelling regularly to the Paris shows to buy model



**Henriette Lamotte hat salon,
Rowe Street, Sydney, c. 1950,
photograph by Kerry Dundas. (Ref:
SV/128)**

gowns, patterns, fabrics and trims, she then paraded these French originals alongside her own designs as part of her twice-yearly collections. Tasteful and elegant, Rocher garments were sewn on treadle machines to maintain high standards of finish and control, with care taken in all aspects of construction, from fabric selection to cutting, sewing, mounting, pressing, hemming and invisible stitching. As an air of informality began to take hold in Australian fashion and society during the 1970s, Mrs Fels closed the doors of her salon and retired to France, as Madame Pellier had some twenty years before.

Like Germaine Rocher, Melbourne's Le Louvre was another exclusive establishment modelled on the grand couture houses of Paris. From the 1930s to the 1960s, owner and chief designer Lillian Wightman sold day and eveningwear produced in the shop's own workrooms, alongside hand-selected imports from leading overseas couturiers.

Henriette Lamotte (c.1900-1979) was born in Brittany and began her career as a hat girl in a Paris shop before studying with a milliner in the Faubourg St Honoré. After her marriage to the Count Jean d'Espinay, the couple immigrated to Australia in 1938, where 'Yani' operated her first millinery business from the couple's flat in Edgecliff, Sydney. Soon establishing herself



**Spring fashion display, David Jones, Sydney, 1956,
photograph. (Ref: APA 02198)**

as one of Australia's leading milliners, Lamotte imported hats from France as well as creating her own designs. Her tiny salon at 27 Rowe Street (1950-1956), where it was necessary to make an appointment just to try on a hat, became THE shopping destination for any woman seeking that 'special occasion' *chapeau*.

None of these salons was large. Society leaders had to be early to get one of only fifty chairs at Lamotte's Rowe Street showings, and it was 'not unusual to see well-known women perched on the window-sills at Germaine Rocher's or crowded around the door at Pellier's.'⁶ Though, as the Countess quipped, 'it doesn't matter if it rains because my customers always take cars'.⁷

Lamotte took over Pellier's premises in the St James building in the mid 1950s. Moving her salon to Double Bay in 1969, she continued to design hats for her own high class clientele and to accompany Germaine Rocher's couture collections, also imported Parisian ready-to-wear fashion which she presented in twice-yearly parades. Lamotte retired in 1974 and died in Sydney on the 12th March, 1979.

In addition to these local couture salons, Australian women could buy French fashion through the better Sydney department stores, such as Mark Foys and David Jones. Professional buyers purchased French couture to elevate the status of their emporiums, which also offered made-to-measure copies through their in-store workrooms. David Jones, in particular, was noted for its French Salon where the local socialites could select from an array of Paris originals and ready-made gowns.

Haute Couture and the War

The outbreak of the Second World War saw all non-essential business and leisure travel suspended, and fashion industries the world over were severely disrupted for the duration. Europe was forced to discontinue its fashion exports, while rationing and government regulations restricted the availability of fabric in most countries. The shortage of material for dressmaking meant that most women spent the war attired in the 'austerity suit'—a short, straight skirt, and a jacket with no more than two pockets and four buttons.

From a peak of two hundred houses before the war, the *Chambre syndicale* (under the leadership of Lucien Lelong) managed to keep sixty fashion houses open throughout the Nazi occupation, ensuring employment for

over 12,000 workers in Paris, as well as protecting the livelihoods of 300,000 people in 70,000 business enterprises dependant on the couture industry scattered across France.

After the war, fired by the renewed patronage of royals, Hollywood stars and the international jet set, as well as the industry's more traditional clients, French fashion studios multiplied and flourished along with the myriad ateliers of highly specialised craftsmen and women—couture's *petites mains*— who supplied the trade each season with hundreds of examples of its most exclusive embellishments in the form of embroidery, feather work, buttons and laces.

The House of Lelong was one of the largest haute couture houses in Paris and represented the best of modern French business practice. With over 1,200 staff producing more than 1,000 models annually, and operating under scientific management principles to ensure maximum efficiency and improve working conditions, the House of Lelong was also a fertile incubator for post-war design luminaries such as Pierre Balmain, Hubert de Givenchy and Christian Dior.

French Fashion Parades in Australia: 1946

By the end of the Second World War, following years of making uniforms, there was very little happening in the Australian garment industry, which had always looked to outside sources for design direction. The troops came home to their families and, with the return to peacetime prosperity, women longed for romance and feminine clothes but, due to lack of materials and skilled labour, there was a very real shortage of wearing apparel available in the stores.

In an attempt to inspire the local rag trade and revitalise production, several leading businessmen teamed up to bring an exhibition of French haute couture fashions out to Australia. Department store owners Norman Myer (Myer, Melbourne and Adelaide) and Charles Lloyd Jones (David Jones, Sydney) were keen to whet the fashion-starved appetites of their customers and encourage consumer spending. The drop in output by the European fashion industry and local austerity measures also led to a drastic reduction in advertising in Australia. Frank Packer, owner of Australian Consolidated Press and the *Australian Women's Weekly*, was anxious to woo the David Jones advertising account away from the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald*.

In 1946 Mary Hordern, fashion editor of the *Weekly* and Packer's sister-in-law, was sent to Paris to choose a collection of French haute couture fashions to be paraded in department stores around the country. A powerful local authority on fashion in Australia, Hordern was an attractive woman, with a statuesque figure well-suited to wearing the clothes she wrote about. It was her idea that, for the first time, Australian audiences would see a collection of real French haute couture as worn by real *Parisiennes*. To this end she recruited six exquisite French mannequins for the parades so Australian women would see how to wear these garments and understand what stylish clothes could do for each and every one of them.

With Pamela Myer along as a trainee, over a three month period the two women viewed some 50 collections comprising some 5,000 garments in total, before selecting 120 ensembles. Each outfit was fully styled and accessorised and chosen to represent the essence of French fashion, yet suited to Australian life. The garments ranged from simple clothes for spectator sports and the beach to the most lavish of formal evening gowns. Successive issues of the *Weekly* reported every aspect of Hordern's experience in Paris. With each instalment avidly consumed by its loyal readers, the magazine declared that 'fabrics—even pre-war fabrics—have never been lovelier'. Noting that all the 'woollens were woven from Australian wool', readers were also reminded that the French appreciated the quality of our fine fleece over the embellishments added by their designers.⁸

Under the supervision of Madame Chambrelent, *directrice* of the House of Worth, the French mannequins—Pacquerette Naudi, Carole Jacquet, Monique Stewart, Nellie Daverton, Colette St Léger and Nicole de Quorlec—made the gruelling six-day flight from Paris by flying boat, arriving in August to begin their three month tour. An Englishwoman by birth and a Parisian by marriage, Caroline Chambrelent had worked her way up in the fashion business over a decade, from mannequin to *vendeuse* and, finally, to manageress. She was described as slim, blue-grey eyed and fair haired, with tiny feet and expressive hands—plus considerable chic—'typifying the fashion world of which she has made herself part'.⁹ Wearing a trim royal blue wool suit on arrival, she was reported to have come with a travel wardrobe of three evening gowns, an afternoon dress and a red satin two-piece swimsuit. Reflecting the aura of glamour and prestige French femininity had in post-war Australia,

Chambrelet and her sextet of French models were treated like celebrities and quickly became the toast of the town.

Staged with all the glamour of a Rue de la Paix salon, the French fashion parades opened in the Grand Ballroom of David Jones' Elizabeth Street store on 16 September 1946. Sydney women flocked to the twice-daily showings just as eager to catch a glimpse of the stunning mannequins, with their perfect coiffures, impossibly perfect figures and beautifully made-up faces, as to see the garments themselves. The tour continued on to Myer in Melbourne and Adelaide, and Finney Isles in Brisbane. Though few could have afforded to purchase the gorgeous gowns which, in any case, were not available for sale, the parades became famous, boosting sales of the *Weekly* (circulation 700,000 in 1946) and encouraging the magazine to stage three more French fashion extravaganzas in 1947, 1948, 1949.

Christian Dior and the New Look: 1947

Backed by textile magnate Marcel Boussac, the wealthiest man in France, Christian Dior founded his own couture house in 1946. Showing his first collection on 12 February 1947, Dior had the advantage of being able to lavish twenty yards of fabric on one dress, which came as a shock after wartime shortages. With their sweeping skirts, nipped-in waists and extravagant use of materials, Dior's fashions were perfectly timed to satisfy a world starved of luxury, beauty and glamour.

Dubbed the 'New Look', Dior's revolutionary designs put French fashion on the front pages of newspapers all over the world, rendering all existing styles *démodé* overnight. The elegant woman's wardrobe immediately became unfashionable, and stores all over the world were left with millions of dollars worth of unsalable high fashion stock. This sparked off a powerful new interest in clothes. Fashionable women everywhere felt they must go shopping and buy new clothes, which got the garment industry moving again after years of stagnation.

Credited with the rebirth of French couture and, in turn, the French economy, Christian Dior knew the importance of the press in disseminating his 'New Look', and understood that 'the picture of a dress in a magazine can inspire a woman to buy it but, whatever the skill and accuracy of a drawing or a photograph, nothing can compare with the model itself'. In Australia, Mary

Hordern took this idea one step further, stating that ‘neither the most brilliantly clever sketches nor the actual garments themselves can give the same perfect idea of dress and fashion as [...] the sight of [...] elegant girls displaying them’.¹⁰

The *Weekly*’s French Fashion Parades: 1947-1949

The 1946 French Fashion parades had brought thousands of customers into the department stores, firmly cementing their place at the centre of Australian fashion retailing, but the failure to secure local manufacturing licences was perceived, by David Jones in particular, as a lost merchandising opportunity—a mistake which Australian retailers were determined to rectify.

For its 1947 French fashion parades, the *Weekly* forged a new partnership with Sydney department store Mark Foys, while the 1948 and 1949 parades



**Finale, French cotton fashion parade, Princes Restaurant,
Sydney, 1956, photograph by Jack Hickson.
(Ref: APA 01445) Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South Wales**

were staged at the Trocadero Ballroom in George Street, before travelling on to the other states. Opening nights were staged at Princes in Martin Place, the city's leading French restaurant, where 'ladies who lunched' were regularly photographed for the society pages, wearing fashions by local couturiers and millinery by Henriette Lamotte. On 4 August 1947, the restaurant was decorated with boughs of trees trimmed with brightly-hued native birds. White camellias were placed on every table and the fragrance of white stock wafted across the room. One hundred model gowns were paraded, including several key designs from Christian Dior's first 'New Look' collection.

Two local mannequins, Judy Barraclough and Diane Gregory, appeared alongside four new French mannequins—elegant, dark haired Maggy Sarragne, petite ash blonde Lydia Leplat, blonde beach girl Suzanne Combe and twenty-two year old red head Janine Lequière. This time some of the original gowns were available for sale, priced upwards from £AUS 100, while Sydney manufacturers Adelyn were granted the rights to make replicas from patterns of six of the French frocks which sold from as little as £AUS 3/10. Halfords, a local millinery business with premises at 63 Market Street, had the licence to copy ten hat styles at prices ranging from one guinea to six guineas. The 1947 *Australian Women's Weekly* tour also extended to Australia's southernmost state, visiting Hobart in September under the auspices of local newspaper *The Mercury* and Tasmanian-owned department store chain G.P. Fitzgerald & Co. Pty Ltd.¹¹

David Jones Paris Fashions for All: 1947

From 1947 David Jones held its own French fashion parades, launching its *Paris Fashions for All* policy with the express intention of securing licences to reproduce Australian adaptations of French model garments in the store's own Surry Hills (Sydney) workrooms. This ambitious initiative was designed to give every Australian woman the opportunity to dress as smartly as the women of Paris and New York, wearing the same designs and enjoying the luxury and glamour of French high fashion priced to suit all pockets and available at their local department store.

At the 1947 Spring Paris openings, Australia was the biggest buyer overall, with David Jones becoming the first Australian retailer to purchase a complete collection of model frocks and suits from a range of current haute

couture showings.¹² With David Jones seeking ascendancy over its local rivals, the House of Dior and the Sydney department store were a perfect match. Soon after the ‘New Look’ debuted in Paris, David Jones secured a franchise with Dior.

The concept behind David Jones’ 1947 *Paris Fashion for All* parade was that the model garments would be shown, side-by-side, with a set of Australian adaptations, allowing the David Jones customer to see for herself how the locally-made styles compared with the French originals. In May, sixty model garments by various French designers were flown out to Sydney. Ranging from tomboy shorts, diaper swimsuits and casual clothes to afternoon frocks, cocktail dresses and glamorous beaded evening dresses, all the accessories, bags, gloves, shoes, belts, umbrellas and jewellery had been selected to harmonise with the costumes to ensure that the ‘ensemble’ would be perfectly styled when paraded on the Australian catwalks.¹³

The *Sydney Morning Herald* announced the progress of the parade preparations in weekly bulletins. On 3 May 1947, it stated that the garments had been photographed in Paris, including a Dior suit and frock, and that these pictures would be seen in Australia before the April issue of *Vogue*—traditionally the first source of images from the new season’s showings—had landed.¹⁴ On 17 July 1947, the paper reported that Fox Movietone had filmed the unpacking of the collection in the David Jones workroom and at parade rehearsals, and that the newsreel would be screened in cinemas around the country.

The Gala opening, on 18 July, was sold out months in advance. By 8 pm, 800 people had packed the ‘Bois de Rose’ salon, specially created to ensure that the collection would be seen in an authentically Parisian setting and taking over the entire 4th floor of the Elizabeth Street store. The next day, the *Herald* ran the headline, ‘Paris has come to Sydney’, quoting an assurance by the Minister for France that parade audiences would ‘admire the simplicity of the copies made by David Jones, and their moderate price tags would allow a large proportion of Australian women to enjoy their share of French elegance’.¹⁵

The benefit of David Jones’ *Paris Fashions for All* policy was threefold: for the first time the average Australian consumer had access to current season French fashion and modified versions of these designs adapted to the Australian climate and lifestyle; Australian workers were trained in Parisian haute couture

methods of cutting, construction and finishing; and Australian mannequins gained valuable career experience in parading high fashion garments.

Later that year, in September 1947 and at the invitation of David Jones, Pierre Balmain became the first Paris designer to visit Australia. On a three week stop-over en route to the United States, Balmain travelled extensively around the country, managing to ‘enthral the women of Sydney with his fashion advice’ in three cocktail hour talks held at David Jones’ Blaxland Galleries, before designing a collection of twenty-five frocks suited to Australian conditions. Balmain also supervised the cutting and construction of his designs by David Jones’ fitters, seamstresses and tailors, taking the time to ensure that the skills of the department store’s workroom met the exacting standards of French couture houses.¹⁶ On his return to Paris, Balmain sent out a further collection of *toiles*/patterns inspired by his Australian visit, which formed part of David Jones’ 1948 Spring collection.

David Jones Secures a Dior-only Collection for Australia:1948

In the space of a year, Christian Dior re-established Paris as the heart of fashion innovation and quality, and the designer’s Spring 1948 collection was the most-anticipated and watched spectacle of the fashion world. Negotiating directly with Dior himself, David Jones’ buyers staged a world fashion coup in securing ‘the first Dior-only collection to be shown outside Paris’ for their Spring 1948 parades, whereby original models from Dior’s third ‘New Look’ collection would be shown in Australia before being seen anywhere else in the world, with local adaptations available for sale.

The 1948 Australian census had revealed that women in Australia spent more money on fashion, in relation to their income, than women in any other country in the world.¹⁷ Christian Dior had also identified Australia as the third most important market for French fashion after Paris and New York.¹⁸ The designer was well aware of the costs entailed in launching a new couture house. He knew that his backer expected him to take up every opportunity to commercialise his emerging brand in the competitive couture marketplace, and that he needed to extend a warm welcome to buyers all over the world in order to sell his collections.

Dior’s decision to collaborate with David Jones in presenting his first show outside Paris was also an acknowledgment of the enthusiasm of

Australian audiences for his extravagant designs which had attracted criticism in Europe and America, some perceiving their lavishness as wasteful and unpatriotic when wartime austerity measures and rationing were still in operation. Knowing that few Australians had the opportunity to visit Paris for themselves, the couturier commented further that, 'living in the sunshine of a comparatively new country, unscathed by war, the Australians have a cleaner brighter outlook and are more receptive to new ideas than the tired people of Europe'.¹⁹ David Jones' initiative would ensure that 'Australian women will be able to decide for themselves whether to adopt the style designed by the man who successfully achieved a revolution in women's dress'.²⁰

Ten packing crates were despatched to Australia containing the original model garments selected by David Jones' fashion buyer, Miss Alice Condon, from Dior's *Envol* (Flight) and *Zig Zag* lines, along with Dior-designed hats and accessories. Arriving on 25 June 1948, the garments were carefully unpacked and minutely examined in the David Jones workrooms. A smaller collection of Australian adaptations was then designed and manufactured, faithfully reproducing the superb workmanship of the Paris haute couture.

On opening night in July, the parade was compered by the charmingly French-accented Florence Vincent (later Lady Packer), wearing a Jean Dessès evening gown trimmed with white orchids. The social set was far outnumbered by members of the Sydney fashion trade armed with paper and pencils to sketch the styles and coiffures.²¹ Alongside the fifty Dior originals and thirty-four Australian adaptations, the David Jones 1948 Spring collection included a selection of twenty-five current season originals sourced from the houses of Paquin, Carven, Grès, Lelong, Piguet and Jacques Fath, as well as twenty models specially designed by Pierre Balmain for the Australian market. The ensembles were paraded by twelve leading Australian mannequins whose figures matched the exact measurements and colouring of the Dior's house models on whom the original garments had been created. The tiny 19-inch waist of local model Narelle Findlay, in particular, caused quite a stir.

The parades ran twice-daily, from 2 to 13 August, with afternoon tea or supper included in the admission price of seven shillings and sixpence. All the departments in David Jones' Elizabeth Street store took on the Paris look, with its store windows designed to give the impression of shopping on the Paris boulevards, using special 'Dior girl' window models made to the originator's exact specifications.

Australian Manufacturers and Dior: 1949-1957

By the early 1950s, Christian Dior had created his own exportable brand of Parisian femininity with his cleverly coordinated 'New Look' collections. Conjuring up an idealised vision of the modern French woman—free from any financial constraint and enjoying a demanding social life—it was an image to which many Australian women would aspire in the post-war period.

Genuinely interested in women and their lives, and how they lived within their own environments, Dior soon set about commercialising the 'New Look' to suit women all over the world and priced for the middle class consumer. In his ambition to clad his customers from head to toe, the designer devised a system of world-wide licensing which saw his exclusive ready-to-wear collections created for specific international markets, including Australia.

In May 1949, it was reported that Melbourne manufacturer Douglas Cox had been granted a licence 'for the exclusive right to produce Dior frocks in Australia'.²² Twice-yearly collections specially adapted for Australian conditions by Dior himself, using fabrics (including Australian woollens) personally selected by the designer for each garment, were to be manufactured in Cox's workrooms at prices Australian women could afford. The first collection of sixty models—made with 27-inch waists (the average Australian size) rather than the 22 inches of the French originals—was shown on 27 May at the Hotel Australia, Sydney, and at Cox's Flinders Lane showroom from 9 to 24 June.

On 3 May 1949, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Dior would visit Australia in March 1950, to study 'the fashion needs of the Australian woman' in order to design his first Australian collection for release in autumn 1951, and ensure that 'the style range he has selected is suitable for Australia'. The designer also planned to arrange for the Australian manufacture of Dior-designed millinery, handbags and gloves, and visit leading Australian wool mills to place orders for materials to use in his Paris collections. Unfortunately, this visit did not eventuate and Christian Dior Pty Ltd later brought a breach of contract action against Douglas Cox for seventy-five designs (valued at £AUS 70,000) which had been despatched to Australia but never paid for.²³

By November 1951 *The House of Youth* had successfully negotiated a three year licence to manufacture Dior's American designs in Australia.²⁴ Produced in their Sydney workrooms, the first fifty designs were reproduced

‘exactly from Dior patterns, photographs, colour and fabric swatches’, ready for showing in early January 1952, and available for sale at select stores in each city around the country.

In 1954, it was further announced that three lengths of wool jersey made in Sydney by Austral Swiss Textiles had been sent to Dior in Paris and that the world famous designer was so pleased with the quality of the Australian fabric that he used it in several of his designs, thereby proving that textiles produced in Australia were equal to anything in the world and that locally produced fabrics might be capable of gaining the same international reputation as our award-winning fleece.

By 1957, Christian Dior was again planning to visit Australia, this time as part of a joint initiative by Mary Hordern and Hannah Lloyd Jones (wife of David Jones’ Chairman, Charles Lloyd Jones) to bring the first complete Dior haute couture collection out to Australia. Despite the unexpected death of the designer, on 24 October, the project went ahead as scheduled. Under the supervision of Suzanne Luling, *directrice* for the House of Dior, eighty-three original creations from Dior’s final collection (*Libre*) were paraded around Australia by seven of his house mannequins. The link between David Jones and the House of Dior continues to this day, with the ongoing use by the Australian department store of Dior’s black and white houndstooth check as its brand.

Conclusion

By the end of the 19th century, Australian merino wool was renowned as the fibre of choice for the finest quality woollen dress textiles woven in Europe from which the French haute couture trade made the world’s most exclusive women’s wear. With the unsurpassed reputations of Australian wool and French haute couture globally interlinked, it is perhaps not surprising that French-born couturiers and milliners migrating to Australia took every opportunity to promote the sale of high fashion garments made in their country of origin, while adding an essential air of Parisian authenticity to the local scene with their own designs. French migrants have long added a touch of old-world glamour to Australian society.²⁵

France was always anxious to even out the balance of trade with Australia, and the enthusiastic support of the *Chambre syndicale de la haute couture parisienne* for the *Australian Women’s Weekly’s* French fashion parade

initiative (1946-1949) was very much part of that effort. As a result, Australians from all levels of society had greater opportunity to see high fashion exhibited in their own country than people in any other part of the world. Combined with the fact that Australian women had more disposable income to spend on fashion than women anywhere else, it is not surprising that local retailers and fashion designers quickly rose to the challenge of helping their customers to spend this surplus.

The launch of Sydney retailer David Jones' Paris Fashions for All Policy (1947) coincided with the post-war opening of several new couture houses in Paris including that of Christian Dior. The overnight success of this revolutionary designer was assured when he reached out across the world to make his brand known. A decade later, if a woman was not dressed by Dior, she was dressed in a style influenced by his 'New Look' fashions. While simultaneously reinstating Paris as the centre of the fashion world, Dior's extravagant designs were also enthusiastically received by Australian audiences who may have perceived the couturier's lavish use of textiles, many using Australian merino wool, as a stimulus to the local wool trade, thereby providing a much-needed boost to the economy.

As the frenzy for French fashion captured the imagination of the Australian buying public, 1950 saw the inauguration of the Australian Fashion Fair. The task of organising this first Australian-only fashion exhibition, was given to the *Weekly's* parade director, Madame Chambrelent (now Mrs Kenneth Cole and an Australian resident), who concluded that, 'in the four years since I first visited Australia I have been greatly impressed by the rapid development of the fashion [by local designers] and I feel sure that Australia should soon become one of the world's youngest fashion leaders'.²⁶

In 1957, Australian fashion was also shown at the first International Show of Designer Fashion staged at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. Germaine Rocher took a collection of garments teamed with millinery by Henriette Lamotte and exhibited it to some acclaim alongside items by Hartnell and Givenchy, with the aim of showing that Australia was part of the world family of fashion.²⁷

Notes

- 1 For further reading on the topic see R. Butler (ed.), *The Europeans: Émigré Artists in Australia 1930-1960*, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 1997; C. Dior, *Dior by Dior: The Autobiography of Christian Dior*, translated by A. Fraser, London, V & A Publications, 2007 (First edition: London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957); J. Dwyer, *Flanders in Australia: A Personal History of Wool and War*, East Roseville, N.S.W., Kangaroo Press, 1998; A. Fine-Collins, 'Toujours Couture', *Vanity Fair*, New York, The Conde Nast Publications Ltd, September 2009, pp. 316-330; V. Lawson, *Connie Sweetheart: The Story of Connie Robertson*, Port Melbourne, Heinemann Australia, 1990; A. Palmer, *Dior: A New Look, a New Enterprise (1947-57)*, London, V & A Publishing, 2009; *Christian Dior: The Magic of Fashion*, Sydney, Powerhouse Publishing, 1994; *Vive la différence!: The French in NSW*, Sydney, State Library of NSW, 2004.
- 2 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24.12.1909, p. 2.
- 3 From the 1880s to the present day, New South Wales has attracted over 40% of Australia's French residents and settlers. Due partly to work opportunities arising from the wool trade, and partly to the fact that many ships carrying French passengers called at Sydney on their way to the Pacific, newcomers were attracted by the concentration of high profile, influential members of the French-Australian community resident in the city.
- 4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.2.1939.
- 5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9.8.1934.
- 6 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.2.1953, p. 24.
- 7 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12.8.1954, p. 7.
- 8 *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 14.9.1946, p. 10.
- 9 *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 28.9.1946, p. 36.
- 10 *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 31.8.1946, p. 9.
- 11 *The Mercury*, 16.8.1947, p.1
- 12 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.5.1947, p. 13.
- 13 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.5.1947, p. 13.
- 14 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8.5.1947, p. 13.
- 15 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19.7.1947, p. 8.
- 16 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11.9.1947, p. 8.
- 17 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.2.1952, p. 5.
- 18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3.3.1949, p. 8.
- 19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19.5.1948, p. 3.
- 20 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19.4.1948, p. 3
- 21 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2.8.1948, p. 5.

- 22 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1.5.1949, p. 2.
- 23 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11.7.1953, p. 9.
- 24 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15.11.1951, p.13
- 25 The collections of the State Library of NSW are well known for records of early French explorers in the Australia Pacific region, but they also reveal the surprising impact of French settlers on Australian life since 1788, including material on the wool and fashion industries.
- 26 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27.11.1947, p. 13.
- 27 ‘Australian Fashions hailed in New York’, *QANTAS Empire Airways Magazine*, May 1957, pp. 1-4.