

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON THE COUTURIERS

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Cristobal Balenciaga

In her novel *October Blood*, Francine du Plessix Gray described her narrator's mother, a woman who lived for elegance: "To say that Mother was fussy about clothes is like saying Queen Victoria was conscious of etiquette." The picture of one of fiction's most chic women is further clarified by the mention that she dressed only in Balenciaga, and only in one of his chemise dresses at that: beige linen for summer, black serge in winter.

Cristobal Balenciaga, who was born in the Basque area of Spain in 1895, ran his own Spanish fashion house, which sold Paris imports as well as his own designs, before relocating to Paris in 1937. In Paris he opened a couture house at 10, avenue Georges V. His most influential designs, year in and year out, were his most subtle and strict, but he was also admired for his passementerie, ball fringes, and Spanish laces; for color combinations like cinnamon, hot pink, iced aquamarine, or creamy white with black; and for shapes that ranged from bubbles and balloons to free-form billowing sails. Balenciaga styles, which reigned over fashion until he closed his house in 1968, included variations on the chemise, sometimes with tunic or overblouse; unfitted suits, especially those whose collars pulled away from the base of the neck in back; and evening clothes that relied on shape and cut rather than embellishment for impact.

Pierre Balmain

In 1945 Pierre Balmain opened his own couture house in Paris and was immediately heralded by American *Vogue* as the newest French sensation. As one of the top couturiers, for decades Balmain consistently came up with elegant, flattering, and pretty clothes. One of his silhouettes was specifically known as "Jolie Madame," but any of them could have also been thus described. Balmain was more involved with costuming for the movies than any of his colleagues; his credits

run into the dozens. Perhaps his favorite actress was the deliciously feminine and witty Kay Kendall, whom he dressed for *The Reluctant Debutante*, among other roles.

Balmain was born in 1904 near Aix-les-Bains in France. His father, who died when he was seven, had been involved with a wholesale fabric business and his mother had once worked in a boutique. As a widow she returned to running a boutique, and Balmain grew up playing with scraps of materials and reading in fashion magazines about couturiers like Doucet, Poiret, and Patou. Early influences also included Madame Premet and Madame Becker of Bernard et Cie, both in charge of well-regarded couture houses. Although he knew he wanted to work in the couture, he appeased his mother by attending architecture school. While a student he showed sketches to Molyneux, who hired him as an apprentice even after he was called up for his military service. In 1939 he began working for the house of Lucien Lelong, where he stayed off and on until after the war, when he established himself at 44, rue François I. After his death in 1982 the role of couturier was assumed by his former assistant, Erik Mortensen.

Pierre Cardin had been a couturier in charge of his own house in Paris for seven years when he was suddenly discovered (in 1957) by the American press and hailed for his youthful, avant-garde designs. Although he worked within the confines of the narrow-waisted, full-skirted New Look silhouette, he also experimented throughout the fifties with more relaxed shapes: versions of what would come to be known as the sack dress, with variously raised or lowered waistlines and fitted fronts paired with ballooning backs, often made in bold, heavy tweeds. During the sixties his imagination ran wild. He designed backless evening dresses with silk flowers nestled into low cowls, pop-art appliquéd mini-dresses, knitted dresses molded with three-dimensional patterns reminiscent of egg cartons, clothes suspended from molded metal body jewelry, dresses and tunics held out by hula-hoop-sized wires, dresses with see-through cutouts, and since he was designing for both men and women, unisex ensembles featuring ribbed turtle-neck bodysuits with low-slung trousers or tunics.

Cardin was born in 1922 in Venice, but soon returned to France with his family. He began work at the age of fourteen, when he was apprenticed to a tailor. During World War II he served with the Red Cross and afterwards worked for the couture houses of Paquin, Marcelle Chaumont, and Schiaparelli. When Dior was assembling his own house, in 1946, he hired Cardin, and there he remained for three years before leaving to strike out on his own. By 1954 he was already involved with boutiques and with ready-to-wear designing;

Pierre Cardin

these ventures have grown so phenomenally that the vast quantity and range in quality of his licensing arrangements have eclipsed his couture designs, which remain very much entrenched in his 1960s signature looks.

Chanel

Of all the couturiers who ever plied their trade, Gabrielle Chanel can be considered the most successful. She believed in style as opposed to fashion, and style is what she provided for her like-minded customers from before World War I until the start of World War II, when she retired, and from 1954, when she reopened her rue Cambon couture house, until her death in 1971. So appropriate was her own personal style to modern women and so appealingly easy to wear, that it has again come to the forefront of fashion, as led by Karl Lagerfeld, who took over designing for the by-then moribund house in 1984. Copies of Chanel clothes and accessories abound, and not just in the traditionally unimaginative lowest rung of ready-to-wear, but on into the haute couture.

Chanel's innovations can be summed up by mention of a very few garments—the three-piece suit, the little-nothing short evening dress, the tailored long dress—as well as by a handful of accessories, like her two-toned sling-back shoes, chain-handled quilted pocketbooks, silk lapel flowers (preferably camellias), boater hats, jewelry of molten glass and baroque faux pearls set in heavy gilt metal with chains, and, of course, one of her perfumes. Within these limited parameters Chanel, and those inspired by her, produced endless variations on a theme; whether designed in the teens, twenties, thirties, fifties, sixties, or eighties, they were never slavishly reflective of their particular epoch. Chanel's clothes could be and were worn by all types of women from the most chic *belle-laide* to great feminine beauties like Suzy Parker, one of her favorite models. They were also suitable for all ages, beginning at about twenty-one and extending seven or so decades. It is telling about her breadth of vision that Chanel could be so popular with so many generations all at once.

André Courrèges

Mini-skirts, go-go boots, and hip-hugger pants, perhaps the three most definitive sartorial items of the sixties, all made their couture debuts in the 1963 and 1964 collections of André Courrèges. While Courrèges did not invent the mini-skirt, his version, almost always flared from a slightly raised or lowered and unfitted waistline, did become one of the most-worn looks of the decade, along with his equally youthful flat-soled mid-calf boots and his navel-baring stovepipe trousers.

Courrèges, who was born in the Basque region of France in 1923, studied civil engineering, worked for a tailor, and served as a pilot during World War II before finally

discovering his vocation during the eleven years he worked for Balenciaga. He opened his own couture house at 48, avenue Kléber in 1961. Almost immediately, his perfectly cut simple suits and coats were influential, accessorized with either his short boots or mary janes, gloves, and hats that managed to combine the styles of astronaut helmet and baby bonnet. Typical Courrèges designs were strictly tailored dresses or coats or pants made in whimsical materials like appliquéd organdy or heavy machine-made lace. He favored heavy materials with lots of body, sometimes very thick, as in the dress and jacket that Madame Claude (Paris's most renowned madam) was wearing when she was shot in the shoulder; her Courrèges ensemble stopped the bullet.

Christian Dior's first collection under his own name, shown in 1947, was so shockingly luxurious that it was mind-boggling; the world heard all about the New Look seemingly within moments after it was first shown at 30, avenue Montaigne. All credit for reviving the couture after World War II was given to Dior, despite the resumption of couture showings two years earlier and the production of plenty of beautiful and feminine clothes during that time. During World War II the world had begun to think of fashion as being somewhat scattered, as something that could be produced in New York, California, or London as well as in Paris. Dior managed to provide fashion with leadership, and in doing so reconfirmed that the French couture was the apex of fashion.

Christian Dior was born in Granville, France, in 1905. After studying political science, he opened an art gallery in Paris in 1928, which would fail to survive the depression that followed the 1929 crash. After family tragedies, and a severe illness of his own, Dior began a new career in 1935 selling fashion sketches to various milliners and couturiers. In 1938 he went to work for Robert Piguet, but he was drafted into the French army the following year. In 1941 he was hired as an assistant designer by Lucien Lelong, and there he remained until 1946, when Marcel Boussac of the Boussac textile company offered to back him in a couture house of his own. In the decade that followed, Dior produced two collections a year, each with a theme that embodied its slightly different, or very different, silhouette. Women around the world knew to watch Dior for the proper new hemline, or waistline placement. By 1955 Dior's assistant, Yves Saint Laurent, was providing design input; when Dior died in 1957 Saint Laurent would succeed him, but only to design two collections before being drafted. His replacement was Marc Bohan, who, like Dior, had worked for Robert Piguet and was then an assistant at Molyneux for five years before going over to Dior.

Christian Dior

Givenchy

Hubert de Givenchy burst onto the scene of the aftermath of the New Look and, with a first collection designed primarily in cotton poplin, breathed fresh air into the somewhat baroque post-war couture scene. Because he was unable to afford more expensive fabrics, Givenchy used the poplin for everything from ruffled evening capes to blouses and skirts. Much of his collection was based on the idea of separates that could be worn in a variety of combinations, and Givenchy's fresh young ideas were an immediate success.

Givenchy was born in 1927 in Beauvais, France. Beginning in 1944 he worked for Jacques Fath, Robert Piguet, Lucien Lelong, and finally, for four years, for Schiaparelli, where he designed for her boutique. In 1952 he showed his first collection in his own house on the avenue Alfred de Vigny. Within the next two years he would strike up two friendships that would shape his future work. First he met his idol Balenciaga and, especially after he moved his couture house across the street from Balenciaga's on the avenue Georges V, rarely designed anything that didn't show his influence. Although Givenchy continued to work in a young vein, using whimsical prints and patterns, his design became more disciplined and sculptural. In 1954 Givenchy met Audrey Hepburn and began to design her clothes for her movies and for real life as well. More than thirty-five years later, their collaboration of couturier and muse still provides the world with one of its most potent images of elegance.

Madame Grès

Unlike most women designers, who tend to produce only the kind of clothes they themselves like to wear, Madame Grès works not just within the confines of her own taste but instead with an allegiance to an artistic aesthetic. For more than fifty years, as Alix Barton, then as Alix, and finally as Grès, she has created clothes that express her own vision of the female form and of the possibilities inherent in the play of fabric upon that form.

Born Germaine Barton, Madame Grès wanted to be a sculptress but ended up training with the small couture house of Premet in the late twenties before starting her own house in 1930 with the new first name of Alix. Her clothes, which were very much in tune with 1930s fashion in that they highlighted the natural figure, were also innovative. Inventions of Alix in the thirties included the strapless evening dress and the diaper-wrapped bathing suit. After a dispute with her backers she lost the rights to the name Alix. When she reopened, at 1, rue de la Paix, her new name was Grès, which she borrowed from her painter-husband.

Grès continued to work with her specially woven matte silk jersey, making intricately draped sculptural dresses, and in stiff paper taffeta or faille for dresses with

bubble shapes, harem hems, or origami-folded lines, as well as in most other materials for day dresses, playclothes, sportswear, and, one of her specialties, at-home clothes. During the forties and fifties she was known for never having resorted to shoulder pads or boning; so beautifully draped and constructed were her clothes that they didn't need any extra interior supports to hold their shapes.

At a time when the pertinence of the *couture's* existence is being questioned, Christian Lacroix serves to remind the fashion world that relevance isn't everything. Lacroix's poufs and other fantasy concoctions have not been any more outlandish and controversial than Poiret's wired tunics over hobble skirts, Schiaparelli's surrealist accessories, Dior's New Look, or the 1960s street- and space-age-inspired creations of Saint Laurent, Courrèges, and Cardin. That the *couture* is a laboratory of ideas doesn't mean that all of its ideas have to be realistic. Some, like Lacroix's, can be more visual than functional.

Christian Lacroix was born in 1950. With the intention of one day becoming a museum curator, he studied at the Musée du Louvre and the Sorbonne but decided instead to go into fashion design and was hired by Hermès. Next he went to work for the house of Jean Patou, where, as his collections became more and more dramatic, his reputation soared. In 1987 he left Patou, ostensibly because he was frustrated at not being able to work with ready-to-wear, and opened his own house in the Faubourg St.-Honoré, where he designs *couture*, luxe ready-to-wear, lesser-priced ready-to-wear, and accessories.

Christian Lacroix

The house of Lanvin, which in 1990 will have been in existence for one hundred years, was established by Jeanne Lanvin, who began by making millinery and then branched out into designing children's clothes as well as clothes for the children's mothers. Until her death in 1946, when her daughter, the comtesse de Polignac, took over, Jeanne Lanvin specialized in evening clothes, *tailleurs*, lingerie, and accessories that ran the gamut from romantic and youthful *robes de style* to the most sophisticated of evening clothes and sportswear. In 1950 the *couture* house hired Antonio del Castillo as its *couturier*, and for the next thirteen years his label would appear alongside that of Lanvin. Castillo, born in Madrid in 1908, had worked for Robert Piguet and for Paquin before moving to New York to run the *couture* salon at Elizabeth Arden during World War II.

Like Lanvin's, Castillo's designs were unabashedly romantic. They typically were made in dashing, vibrant-

Jeanne Lanvin

colored materials with fichu or off-the-shoulder necklines and such details as large-scale embroideries and scalloped edges. After Castillo left to start his own house, Jules-François Crahay became the Lanvin couturier. Crahay was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1917, and studied fashion design in Paris before returning to his home town to run his mother's couture house. He was a prisoner of war from 1940 to 1945, after which he returned to Paris, where he briefly ran his own couture house and then went to work at Nina Ricci. By 1950 he was designing under his own name for Ricci. Crahay was an innovative couturier, basing collections on themes having to do with Russia, India, or Peru for clothes that featured bloomer, dhoti, or gaucho pants, oversized prints and ornaments of feathers, loops of self-piping, or organdy ruffs. Upon his retirement in 1984 Maryll Lanvin, wife of the son of the cousin of Jeanne Lanvin's daughter, who for several years had been designing Lanvin *prêt-à-porter*, became the house couturiere as well.

Maggy Rouff

The house of Maggy Rouff was known for delightful, feminine clothes usually made with an amusing or eye-catching twist in silhouette, color, or ornamentation. It was begun in 1929 when Maggy Besançon de Wagner took over her parents' couture house, Drecol, which was relocating as it merged with the house of Beer. She changed her name to Rouff, and opened for business at 136, avenue des Champs Elysées. She continued designing until she retired in 1948, when her daughter became the couturiere and the business moved to the avenue Matignon. In the sixties the business moved again, first to the avenue Marceau, then to the avenue Montaigne. Its designers included Jean Marie Armand, Serge Matta, and Guy Douvier.

Yves Saint Laurent

In the more than thirty years he has been a couturier, Yves Saint Laurent has consistently managed to merge fantasy with practicality. Even in his Russian-peasant-, African-, and Picasso-inspired collections, unusual embroideries and patchworks, and fabulous color and material combinations have been interpreted in the most classical and wearable of silhouettes. His impeccable pantsuits, day dresses, and "smokings" have for decades determined how women look when not in ballgowns.

Yves Saint Laurent was born in Algeria in 1936. At the age of seventeen he won first prize for a dress design in a contest sponsored by the International Wool Secretariat and, after briefly attending fashion design school, went to work for Christian Dior. By 1955 his designs were being included in Dior's couture collections. When Dior died in 1957, Saint

Laurent was hired as his successor. After two collections he was drafted to serve in the army and the house replaced him with another Dior assistant, Marc Bohan. In 1962, Yves Saint Laurent opened his own house in the rue Spontini, relocating in 1974 to the avenue Marceau.

Emanuel Ungaro was born in 1933 in Aix-les-Provence. While still quite young he went to work for his father, who, with his four other sons, ran a local tailoring shop. Thus Ungaro was already trained when, in 1958, he took a job as tailoring assistant to Balenciaga, where he stayed six years. In 1964 he quit to work with Courrèges, another Balenciaga alumnus, but after a year he decided to open his own couture house, which he did in 1965 with the print designer Sonia Knapp.

Ungaro's first designs, which were immediately popular, were not unlike those of Courrèges. Ungaro designed peppy suits and coats with bright contrasting bands for trim, transparent jumpsuits of organdy with three-dimensional appliqués, dresses with matching boots, and low-slung trousers paired with back-baring tops. Most of his designs were avant-garde, such as a beaten brass mini-skirt paired with a bare breastplate hung with chains and a peace symbol. By 1971 Ungaro, who had relocated in 1967 to the avenue Montaigne and had the following year branched out into ready-to-wear, began to find his own specific signature. This was based both on the idea of layering different elements together in a single costume that could then be worn in many ways, and on combining the various prints that Sonia Knapp had designed to complement each other. These prints ranged from complex geometrics worked out in a variety of subtle colorways to large-scale, hand-painted-looking abstracts. The ensembles played proportions against each other as well as various patterns and textures. By the eighties Ungaro was continuing to work with mixing elements, and the elements themselves were becoming more luxurious; by the middle of the decade he was playing soft fluid shirring against the more tailored lines of jackets and coats.

Emanuel Ungaro

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