

“I CANNOT DETERMINE WHAT TO DO ABOUT MY NEW GOWN; I WISH SUCH THINGS WERE TO BE BOUGHT READY-MADE.” (JANE AUSTEN, 1798)



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For millennia, clothing the human body had been an arduous and time-consuming process, involving not only innumerable hours of handwork but also numerous steps and decisions in the acquisition of the necessary materials, devising of the style, and overseeing the fit. Not everyone had the skill, inclination towards, or, most importantly, the time required for the creation of clothing. In 1798 the British writer Jane Austen wrote to a correspondent: “I cannot determine what to do about my new Gown; I wish such things were to be bought ready-made.”

As the nineteenth century progressed, many elements conspired to make Jane Austen’s wish come true. Faster than fashions could change came new machines for sewing, cutting, weaving, and embroidering. The first customers of ready-to-wear clothing were men whose wardrobes of separate pieces—such as a coat, vest, shirt, and pants—adapted far more easily to mass production than did the elaborate dresses affected by women. However, by the middle of the century, women could purchase, from a store or through mail order, items that did not require a close fit, such as cloaks and morning robes (housedresses). The quality of these first ready-to-wear items could be superb. By the end of the century, it was possible to obtain a catalogue from a New York department store, and elsewhere, and order ready-made clothing for men, women, and children—anything from dozens of different kinds of underwear to the most lavish or utilitarian wraps and coats. While these clothes could never be mistaken for custom-made or couture garments, they were marvels of the art of the machine age: rows of garments with crisp, uniform stitching, clean lines, and sturdy fabrics.

During the mid-nineteenth century, at the same time that New York City was developing into what would be the largest and most vital center for mass-manufactured, off-the-peg clothing, a new attitude towards how the most elite clothes were made was turning Paris into the center of haute couture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was commonly believed that fashion originated from the luxuriously artistic couture houses of Paris, and that ready-to-wear manufacturers watered down such creations. That an original, influential idea could come from a ready-to-wear designer, as happened in 1938 when Claire McCardell’s “Monastic” dress became a runaway success, was a radical notion.

After World War II, Paris couturiers began to reconsider their former attitudes towards ready-to-wear. The first designers to experiment with prêt-à-porter looked to American manufacturers for machinery, instruction, and skilled labor. Such pioneer lines as Christian Dior–New York and Jacques Fath for Joseph Halpert, both from 1948, were based on the idea that there was a great appetite for cheaper versions of haute couture designs. The next wave of prêt-à-porter designs, aimed at a youthful market, meant avant-garde designs at affordable prices.

At the end of the twentieth century, the situation has come full circle: while the haute couture industry struggles to maintain an identity that is forward-looking, pertinent, and creative, the most influential designers are international, working within the confines of prêt-à-porter to push the boundaries of design.

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READY-TO-WEAR



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