



Dior, Christian (1905-1957)

by Shaun Cole

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The name Christian Dior is the most recognized name in fashion, synonymous with luxury and haute couture. His designs were consistently characterized by a feminine classic elegance.

Dior was born on January 21, 1905 to a wealthy family in Granville, France. He was the second in a family of five children. While growing up he spent much of his time in museums and galleries, but at his parents' insistence he studied political science at the Ecole des Sciences Politiques.

After two years of military service Dior began his design career by selling sketches. Both before and after World War II (when he served in the south of France), Dior worked for a number of design houses. In 1946, backed by the textile manufacturer Marcel Boussac, he launched the House of Dior.

For his first collection in 1947, Dior created the extremely popular "New Look." In direct opposition to the "manly and depraved" styles of the war period, the New Look celebrated femininity with rounded shoulders, cinched waists, and full bell skirts in luxurious fabrics. The New Look was considered revolutionary by the fashion press, but it was very popular and set the look of post-war women's fashion.

In the space of ten years Christian Dior created a fashion house whose name is famous worldwide. Each of his collections during this time was themed, and he was responsible for creating a whole series of new looks for women, including, for example, the short waistless sack dress or H-line (1954), the Y-line (1954), and the A-line (1955).

It was partly due to Dior's success that Paris was re-established as the capital of world fashion in the 1950s.

Dior also pioneered in the fashion world by setting up licensing agreements for furs, cosmetics, stockings, and accessories. These agreements assured Dior a world-wide presence and established policies that have since been much imitated.

In 1953 Dior hired Yves Saint Laurent as an assistant. After Dior's sudden death in Italy in October 1957, Saint Laurent became head designer and introduced the trapeze dress in his first collection.

Dior never married, and there were and continue to be rumors and speculation about his sexuality. When he first moved to Paris in the 1920s Dior was drawn to the artistic bohemian life of the city and became friends with artist Jean Cocteau.

Dior's sexuality has never been publicly disclosed and he does not mention the issue in his autobiography published shortly before his death in 1957. The nearest he gets is in the penultimate chapter, "Friendships and Frustrations," where he comments that he and Pierre Colle, the manager of a shop in the Rue Cambacérès in Paris where the surrealists exhibited, became "intimate friends, for we both placed the same high value on friendship."

The absence of any discussion of Dior's private life in his autobiography may constitute a kind of negative evidence of his presumed homosexuality, for it was difficult, if not impossible, for gay men in the public eye to come out in the first half of the twentieth century.

The House of Dior has continued to flourish under a series of chief designers. Marc Bohan replaced Saint Laurent when the latter was called up for military service in 1960; and in 1989 Italian Gianfranco Ferré took over from Bohan.

In 1990 the House of Dior was bought by luxury products manufacturer Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LMVH). In October 1996, LVMH chairman and CEO Bernard Arnault moved the *enfant terrible* of English fashion, John Galliano, from another of LVMH's major holdings, the House of Givenchy, to serve as chief designer at Dior.

At first this news was greeted unenthusiastically by the Paris fashion press, but Galliano has proved himself a worthy successor. Galliano's approach reflects Dior's original intention of creating (in contrast to the practicality of Chanel, for example), a romantic and feminine look, which emphasizes luxury rather than comfort. Today, Galliano creates an equally feminine Dior look, blending freedom of expression with a reminder of past opulence.

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Shaun Cole is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).