

# The Allure of Couture

By Edith Yeomans, ASA

The allure of couture was very much in evidence in one of the last seminars presented at the jam-packed conference on textile connoisseurship offered during last October in Washington D.C. Whether we (the eager attendees) drooled over the sculptural elegance of a Paul Poiret gown or the incomparable magnificence of anything made by Schaparelli or the classicism of a Chanel suit, the enthusiasm abounded.

Recently the interest in costume and couture has gone beyond the normal purview of a few museums. Several auction houses now offer regular sales of costume, couture and fashion accessories – bags, shoes, and costume jewellery. One does not have to look too far to see the impact these sales have made in drawing clothes to the attention of public and private collectors. One only has to remember the sale of gowns and dresses belonging to the late Diana, Princess of Wales in particular to understand the attraction of beautiful clothes. While Sotheby's has taken their couture sales on line, William Doyle in New York continues to have regular catalogue sales of costume and couture. As specialist Jan Glier Reeder pointed out, collecting couture has become an increasingly popular area for collectors. In her slide presentation, Jan confirmed what we all knew – these garments now are commanding very respectable sums of money.

Haute couture is the highest level of fashion. It simply means the best quality of design and construction. Haute couture relies on a very high level of workmanship and attention to detail, which is labor intensive and therefore costly. Many couture houses closed by the end of the 1950s, giving way to less expensive ready-to-wear or pret-a-porter lines of clothing from manufacturers. During the second half of the 20th century, many couturiers licensed manufacturers to use their names on these ready-to-wear lines of clothing, cosmetics, perfumes, household accessories and luggage. For many designers, these licensing arrangements supported the couture end of the business.

The importance of fashion and haute couture as visual statements of our society and the culture we live in has increased immeasurably since the end of World War II, when Christian Dior presented his new and breathtaking designs in the spring of 1947 in Paris. During these intervening years, haute couture has expanded and developed to such an extent that fashion designers have become household names – Dior,

Chanel, Saint Laurent, Hermes, and more recently Armani, Donna Karan, Calvin Klein, to name only a few.

The growth of this industry coupled with the awareness and recognition of fashion as important design all contributes to couture as a collectible. Several public institutions have developed significant collections of costume and couture – for example, The Fashion Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Smithsonian, Washington DC, The British Museum in London (which holds the coronation gown of HM Queen Elizabeth II, designed by Norman Hartnell in 1953) and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. These collections as well as others throughout the continent provide documentary evidence of society through the ages. What we wore and why has only increased our understanding of ourselves as well as the society in which we lived and continue to live. Many private collectors collect not only to hold but also to wear.

As with any other collectible, there are important criteria which both collector and appraiser must be aware of. They are as follows:

1. The designer. First and foremost who designed that garment will have a significant impact on the importance of the garment as well as its value. For example, any gown by Charles Worth, who is considered the father of couture, is very collectible and therefore will be expensive. Other designers are symbolic of particular ages, such as Paul Poiret who defines the Art Deco era. Poiret is considered the one who developed the concept of the modern dress. Any garment by Coco Chanel will sell no matter what, simply because of the classic design and the superb construction.
2. The importance of the designer. As indicated previously, there is a hierarchy of designers, with certain ones being highly sought after by collectors. Worth, Poiret, and Chanel are three of those designers most preferred by collectors. Other would include Schaparelli, Saint Laurent, Lanvin, Hermes, and Armani.
3. The rarity of the garment. As with any other property, rarity is a characteristic of value any appraiser would consider. It is as important with couture as it is with works of fine art and rare *objets d'art*.

4. The reputation of the designer's work. Once again, we can look to Chanel, with her impeccable design and construction. Other designers to consider here are Armani, Saint Laurent, and Dior.
5. The condition. This goes without saying. As with any personal property, condition is an extremely important characteristic of value, especially when one considers that these garments will have been worn and will display evidence of such wearing, such as stains, pulled threads, small tears, missing buttons, etc.
6. Size. This is another important factor that must be considered by the collector and the appraiser. Although the sizing of women's clothing has changed over the years, anything that is too large will not be saleable. Considering that many collectors will wear their couture garments, size does become critical.
7. Publication. It is the same with couture as it is with painting and sculpture. Publication in contemporaneous sources may enhance the value of the garment.
8. The provenance. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that the astronomical prices obtained for many of Diana's gowns was simply due to ownership.

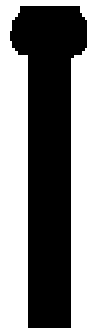
And finally, is the garment simply wonderful to look at? This is the essence of haute couture – not can we wear it and how it would look on one of us, but as an example of fine design – how magnificent is it to look at?

For the appraiser, there are two primary markets to be considered during the course of a valuation: the auction market and the second-hand clothing retail clothing store. As with all retail establishments, there is a hierarchy. With haute couture, for example, and particularly in large urban centers, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Toronto, there will be a few select clothing boutiques that specialize in the resale of designer labeled garments and haute couture. These boutiques that resell couture garments do so within strict guidelines. The garment must be in excellent condition. Many of these dresses and ensembles will be “newly worn” or in other words, will have been worn only once or twice by the original owner. The garment must be seasonal as well as *au courant* as far as style and color is concerned. Resale prices will range from about one-third the original cost to almost retail. Clothes by certain designers are so much in demand that the resale price may be as much as the original retail cost. This is a select group and includes Armani, Donna Karan and in Toronto, Lida Biday. The resale market is very strong simply because of the cost. Very few people can afford couture clothing, but many can afford to buy or rent a “newly worn”

gown or dress from one of these select boutiques. Some resale boutiques may also specialize in vintage clothing, where cost is not only dependent on design and condition but also on rarity.

In addition to dresses, ensembles and other types of clothing, collectors are also interested in accessories such as handbags and costume jewellery. Perhaps the most famous handbag is the “Kelly” bag designed and still produced by Hermes. Originally designed for actress Grace Kelly, this bag has been known to sell for as much as \$6,500 US at auction. A type of costume jewellery that has become very popular with collectors is the “bakelite” jewellery from the 1940s and 1950s. This colorful, chunky jewellery was extremely popular with collectors at the last sale at William Doyle, New York, surpassing many expectations.

Costume and couture increasingly have become an area of interest for collectors and of specialization for curators and appraisers. It also has not missed the attention of the media nor the general public. People continue to be fascinated almost as much by the clothing as they are by those who wear it.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edith Yeomans, ASA, principal with Appraisal Associates in Toronto, was one of the recipients of the Patricia Burton Scholarships awarded for attendance at the recent textiles seminar in Washington, D.C. Edie has served the Personal Property Discipline in the past as a planner and coordinator for the Personal Property Program at the Toronto ASA Annual Conference in 1996.