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### Lucien Lelong and the *Théâtre de la Mode*: the Preservation of Haute Couture during Wartime

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#### Introduction

This article was inspired by a lesser-known project of the fashion world, a travelling exhibit conceived at the end of World War II in a country in great difficulty, devastated by the German occupation. The *Théâtre de la Mode* represents France's need to reemerge, sweep away the debris of war, restore the unity and national identity that Nazi Germany had tried to repress, and relaunch a key sector of the economy.

As a starting point, France chose what had been its most flourishing activity for over a century: fashion. For four years, the international fashion world had been unable to go to Paris for the seasonal collections; this time the collections would travel to foreign buyers in an exhibition. And, given the shortage of fabric and production materials, the clothes would be produced on a small scale, about one third of human size. The proceeds of the show would be donated to the *Entraide Française*, a charity organization aiding the victims of war in France.

This was all made possible by the extraordinary diplomatic ability of the president of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* (Parisian Chamber of Commerce for Fashion), Lucien Lelong. During the war, he had negotiated with the Nazi regime that planned to move the French fashion industry to Germany. Not only was he able to deter the occupants from implementing this program, but he even obtained an increase in the quota of fabrics for haute couture during rationing.

The French fashion industry radically changed after the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent German occupation. Paris, the capital of the fashion system, was isolated, its international connections interrupted, and its designers unable to set trends. French fashion in the years 1939-1945 is examined in depth by Dominique

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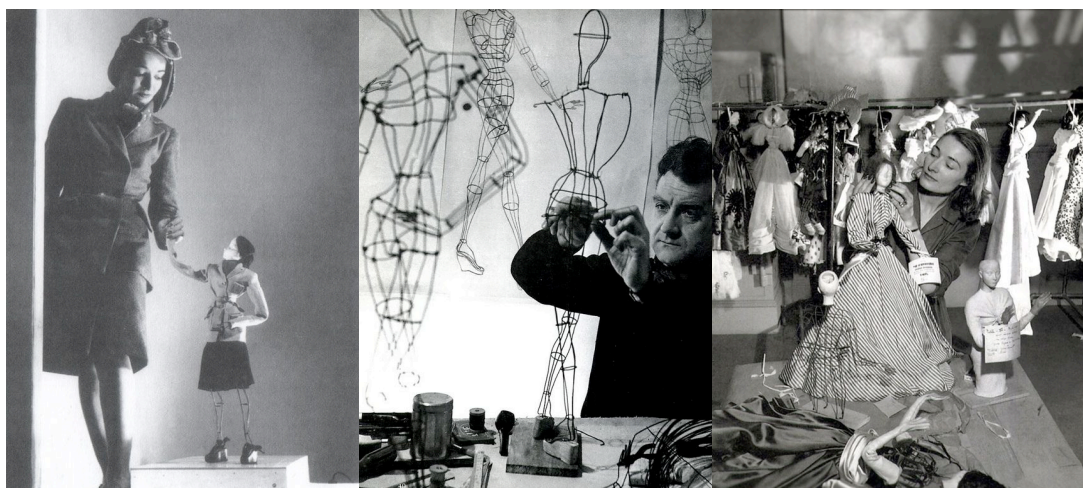
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Veillon in her book 'La mode sous l'Occupation', where she describes both the structural changes in the organization of the fashion system, as well as the consequences of German rationing on everyday clothes (Veillon, 2002).

## 1. The origins of the project and the rebirth of French fashion

Surprisingly, the liberation by the Allied Forces in June 1944 did not improve the living conditions in France, nor did it immediately boost the economy. In fact, the years that followed were, if possible, even harsher than wartime. Liberated France was again required to provide resources, labour and machinery to continue the war, and also had to rebuild infrastructure and transport in order to launch economic recovery (Sauvy, 1978).

In fact, it was during the first post-war winter in Paris that the *Théâtre de la Mode* project took shape. The organization of an event to showcase the vitality of the couture industry, which also strived to support people in need seemed the best way to revitalize the economy and communications (McDowell, 1997). The *Chambre Syndicale* discussed and approved the project, which was assigned to Robert Ricci and Paul Caldaguès. The exhibition also benefited from the collaboration of some of the greatest French artists of the time, such as Christian Bérard, Boris Kochno and Jean Cocteau. Garments for the dolls were designed by well-known fashion houses such as Balmain, Schiaparelli, Dior, Lelong and Balenciaga.



**Figure 1-2-3:** The event required a new type of doll, with an image different from the traditional toy for girls. Designed by the young artist Eliane Bonabel (pictures 1, 3) and crafted by Jean Saint-Martin (middle), they were 70 cm tall, with wire bodies and heads made of plaster.

Source: Bonabel Archives, Robert Doisneau in *Théâtre de La Mode: Fashion Dolls ; the Survival of Haute Couture*, ed. by Edmonde Charles-Roux and Susan Train (Portland, Oregon: Palmer/Pletsch Pub, 2002).



**Figure 4:** The Theatre scenography designed by Christian Bérard, which gave the name to the exhibition. The dolls were displayed in 13 sets, created by 13 different artists.

Source: Picture by David Seidner for *Théâtre de La Mode: Fashion Dolls ; the Survival of Haute Couture*, ed. by Edmonde Charles-Roux and Susan Train (Portland, Oregon: Palmer/Pletsch Pub, 2002).





**Figure 5:** A variety of settings was created, ranging from imaginary worlds (above, “La grotte enchantée” by Jean Cocteau) to morning town scenes (figure 6 – “Croquis de Paris” by Jean Saint-Martin) coexisted, to display both daytime and evening outfits.

Source: Picture by Lauren Sully-Jaulman for *Théâtre de La Mode: Fashion Dolls ; the Survival of Haute Couture*, ed. by Edmonde Charles-Roux and Susan Train (Portland, Oregon: Palmer/Pletsch Pub, 2002).



**Figure 6:** “Croquis de Paris” by Jean Saint-Martin, who replicated the Paris skyline with wire.

Source: Picture by Lauren Sully-Jaulman for *Théâtre de La Mode: Fashion Dolls ; the Survival of Haute Couture*, ed. by Edmonde Charles-Roux and Susan Train (Portland, Oregon: Palmer/Pletsch Pub, 2002).



Similarly to the *poupées de mode* of the 18th century, the aim was to promote Parisian creativity abroad. During the occupation, American customers and buyers were not free to visit Paris; at the end of the war, it was Paris who travelled to them (Taylor, 1992). Although it was difficult to obtain materials, the initiative soon attracted contributions – even financial ones. The *Grand Galerie* of the *Pavillon de Marsan* at the Museum of Decorative Arts of Paris was offered for free, and the exhibition was opened on March 27th 1945. All the proceeds from the sale of tickets, and of some of the dolls, were donated to the *Entraide Française*. The success of the exhibition was such that it was prolonged for several weeks, and as many as 100,000 visitors attended it.



**Figures 7-8-9:** Close-up photographs of dresses by maison Schiaparelli, Dupuoy and Balenciaga. Many of the garments presented were miniature replicas of actual collections, sewn in great detail to accurately reproduce the full-scaled ones.

Source: Pictures by David Seidner for *Théâtre de La Mode: Fashion Dolls ; the Survival of Haute Couture*, ed. by Edmonde Charles-Roux and Susan Train (Portland, Oregon: Palmer/Pletsch Pub, 2002).



**Figures 10-11:** Initially the fashion houses were asked to simply dress the dolls, style their hair and provide hats; but soon a sort of competition began among the *maisons*. Each one tried to find out what the others were doing to enhance their outfits: some added miniature shoes, umbrellas, hosiery, belts, gloves, bags and even real buttons. Source: Pictures by Bela Bernard.

On September 12th 1945 the exhibition opened in London, and was renamed “The Fantasy of Fashion”. It then travelled on to Leeds, Barcelona, Copenhagen and Vienna. The press celebrated the new vitality of French taste and craftsmanship; the great number of visitors admired French extravagance, in countries where severe rationing of fabric was still operating.

In spring 1946, the *Chambre Syndicale* decided to present a modified version of the exhibition in a tour in the United States, made up of 13 newly designed scenes, and 237 dolls dressed in the styles of '46. Given both the social and artistic nature of the show, it was welcomed triumphantly by the press and the women of America, who yearned for a new femininity. After showing in New York and San Francisco, the sets and dolls were forgotten in the deposit of the ‘City of Paris’ department store for years. Yet, the *Théâtre de la Mode* had achieved its double purpose: donating over one million Francs to the *Entraide française*, and showing that Parisian fashion was as lively and brilliant as ever.

## 2. A story still fascinating today

The world of fashion, and the people who had worked on the project, seemed to have forgotten the dolls that had marked the rebirth of Parisian *couture*. In 1983 Stanley Garfinkel, an American professor and historian, learned of the existence of this magnificent collection. About 160 of the original dolls, stripped of the jewelry that was taken back to Paris, had been acquired by the Maryhill Museum of Goldendale, Washington. With the support of important personalities of the fashion system, such as



the editor in chief of Condè Nast, Susan Train, and Pierre Bergé, Garfinkel was able to give new visibility to the *Théâtre de la Mode* (Charles-Roux & Train, 2002).

A close cooperation between America and France followed, to organize a new exhibition of these miniature masterpieces in the newly created fashion department of the *Musée des Arts Decoratifs* in Paris. In 1988 the dolls were sent to France to be restored, and there nine of the thirteen original scenes were recreated, thanks to photographs taken at the time of the first exhibition. On May 10th 1990 the *Théâtre de la Mode* opened to the public again (Charles-Roux & Train, 2002). The event was welcomed with enthusiasm for the same reasons that had made it popular fifty years earlier; yet, this new edition was also accompanied by the recognition of the resilience of France, and by memories of a period that the country had tried to ignore for years.

In December of the same year the exhibition, renamed '*Théâtre de la Mode – Fashion Dolls: The survival of Haute Couture*', opened at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York. Here the settings with the dolls were preceded by a gallery of photographs portraying American and French women during wartime, to show the different influence of World War II on clothing in the two countries (le Bourhis, 1991). French women wore extremely feminine, exaggerated clothes, which represented a form of resistance, an act of rebellion against the occupants: dressing with taste was a national feature that the Germans could not eradicate. On the other side of the ocean, American women wore military uniforms, or 'victory suits' with short and narrow skirts, imposed by the government to save on fabric. America saved to support its soldiers, not the Nazis: this was the substantial difference that made French women 'waste' all the material they could (Steele, 1991). Following New York, the complete exhibition, or parts of it, travelled to The Fashion Foundation of Tokyo, the Imperial War Museum in London, Baltimore, Portland and finally Honolulu. The exhibition then returned to the Maryhill Museum in 1995. The proceeds of ticket sales went towards saving the dolls from oblivion.

## Comments

It is important to highlight the role of the exhibition in the reconstruction of postwar France: the *Théâtre de la Mode* was an attempt to reaffirm the superior style of French designers with their exclusive, tailor-made garments, compared to the comfortable and informal clothes that had caught on during the war, especially in America. The event originated in Paris, supported by the Ministry of Reconstruction, to give work to hundreds of dressmakers, embroiderers, artisans and decorators whose skills were vital to the success of the textile industry. The ministry realised that the fashion sector had suffered relatively few losses during the war: the creativity of designers, as well as the ability of dressmakers and decorators were intact, even if materials were scarce. The event also aimed to revive the devastated economy of France by taking its collections abroad again after years of absence, announcing that Paris was still the world capital of fashion. The exhibition also conveyed the message that French fashion

was to be considered the opposite of American fashion, which was casual, easy to wear and prim. The dolls embodied the hopes of many, they were ambassadors of glamour and style, sent to seduce wealthy postwar America. They paved the way for Dior's extravagant New Look of 1947, which led to the supremacy of Parisian *couture* until the Sixties.

For many years, the development of French fashion under the occupation was considered a taboo subject. In publications on the history of French fashion, the period 1940-1944 is often ignored, or described superficially, as if no collections had been presented, and fashion had not evolved. Most texts only refer to *couture's* opposition to being moved to Germany. Until the Nineties, France had not come to terms with the defeat and the humiliation of collaborationism. Any reference to fashion during those years was considered offensive, unacceptable, a scandal. The first detailed study on the subject was published in the Nineties and entitled '*La mode sous l'Occupation*' by Dominique Veillon: the author describes the extraordinary creativity and resistance of some *couturiers*, the great diplomatic ability of Lucien Lelong, as well as more critical matters such as rationing and collaborationism.

At the end of the second tour of the *Théâtre de la Mode* in the Nineties, the dolls returned to the Maryhill Museum, where they seem to have been forgotten once again. Ironically, the only ones to show any interest in what remains of the exhibition are doll collectors: they foster limited editions of replicas inspired by the *Théâtre*, and any online discussion on the subject. For the second time, the world of fashion has set these dolls aside, confining them in a small museum of the state of Washington, where they are only occasionally on show in larger exhibitions. This oblivion is inexplicable. After all, the association between dolls, mannequins and fashion is not new: in 1945 France simply renewed the tradition of the *poupées de mode*, created a century earlier to promote Parisian fashion abroad. In France, fashion has never been considered as frivolous, useless, or as something that can be ignored in difficult times. On the contrary, as I have tried to show here, it was exactly in these times that fashion was more necessary than ever.



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