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Haute Couture; The Rolls-Royce of fashion shows

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Bloomberg News / An outfit by Valentino, the 75-year-old high-fashion guru

Colour Photo: Reuters / A model presents a creation by Italian designer Maurizio Galante as part of his Haute-Couture Autumn-Winter 2008-09 fashion collection in Paris.

Colour Photo: Francois Guillot, Agence France-Presse, Getty Images / Another creation by Valentino

Colour Photo: Patrick Kovarik, Agence France-Presse, Getty Images / A dress by French designer Christian Lacroix

Colour Photo: Patrick Kovarik, Agence France-Presse, Getty Images / A creation by Lebanese designer Elie Saab is shown during the Spring/Summer 2008 Haute Couture collection show in Paris.

"Haute couture" is one of those phrases bandied about in popular culture. But its uses are not always faithful to its real meaning. Like "champagne," "haute couture" is a carefully regulated term. And you can no more apply that term to any old pretty frock than you can call any glass of sparkling plonk champagne.

The Spring 2008 Couture collections are taking place in Paris, and it got me thinking about what couture means and what it takes to qualify to show at a couture collection. For all intents and purposes, the couture collections are the Rolls-Royce of fashion shows. Literally translating as "high sewing," you can't get any finer, or more expensive, garments out there.

ORIGIN OF COUTURE

The haute couture movement, and the idea of Paris as the world's fashion capital, got started in the 18th century, when French court style was imitated across Europe. Travel was also taking off at this time, meaning more people were exposed to, and desirous of imitating, the styles they saw in the French court at Versailles.

Because of the detail and decadence of these garments, French clothing was considered the height of quality, and imitations made at home were deemed inferior to those garments bought originally in Paris.

Charles Frederick Worth, ironically an Englishman rather than a Frenchman, is widely considered the father of haute couture. While taking once-off commissions for wealthy clients, he also created a collection of designs to be shown by models at the House of Worth. Customers could then choose a model, specify colours, fabrics or changes and have that garment made-to-measure.

This combination of a "showpiece" and a bespoke final garment was groundbreaking, allowing customers to easily visualize, while still customize. Others were swift to follow, including some names we still know today: Lanvin, Chanel, Balenciaga and Dior, as well as some that have faded from memory, like Schiaparelli (most famous for her trademark shade of pink), Fortuny and Patou.

The movement had legs, and designers who apprenticed under the formative houses often forged out on their own. Designers like Yves Saint Laurent, Pierre Cardin and Emanuel Ungaro and Lacroix were successful at establishing their own lines.

However, today the haute couture collection is no longer the bread-and-butter of the fashion industry and more and more houses have shied away from producing this expensive and niche line in favour of pret-a-porter (or ready-to-wear) collections and, of course, accessories.

And, while Paris is still seen as a fashion capital, it is no longer the only capital. We have London, New York and Milan and many other contenders. So, the concept of Paris as the sole arbiter of high fashion no longer holds water.

COUTURE DESIGNERS TODAY

While haute couture is no longer the bread-and-butter of a company, the term is protected by law and defined by the Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Paris. Their rules state that only "those companies mentioned on the list drawn up each year by a commission domiciled at the Ministry for Industry are entitled to avail themselves" of the label haute couture.

The qualifying conditions hark back to the provenance of the term: Items must be made-to-measure for clients with one or more fittings. The designers must have a workshop, or atelier, in Paris with a staff of a minimum of 15 people. And, finally, each season the designer must present a collection made up of at least 35 runs with both day- and evening-wear.

The individuals who buy couture are considered patrons of the arts. While designers do clamour to give away couture gowns to the rich and famous for events like the Oscars, some ensembles are actually bought by very wealthy individuals who believe in supporting the haute couture tradition. They believe that it gives a designer the ultimate opportunity to be wholly creative in creating a collection that doesn't have the same pressure to sell as the pret-a-porter collection.

Many of the couture creations end up in museum collections as representations of the evolution of design and the finest instances of hand-created craftsmanship out there.

SO WHAT?

I'm going to make the brazen assumption that none of the people reading are actually in the market for couture pieces. So why should you be interested? Well, for much the same reason a car enthusiast will stop and admire a Ferrari, regardless of the fact they drive a Honda CRV. It's not about having an expectation to own, it's about having an appreciation for the craft.

Also, like any fashion collection, couture has its trickle-down effect. The creative spark a designer exercises in his couture collection will remain with his design.

So, what Karl Lagerfeld does at Chanel's couture collection, might influence (with less expensive adornment) his subsequent ready-to-wear collection for Chanel. And what shows at Chanel's ready-to-wear, gets recycled fast and furiously by high-street stores like Zara and H&M (with whom Karl himself once collaborated).

So, you see, it's myopic to poo-poo the designers and the collections whose influence goes into the clothes you're wearing. Sure, we're talking about mega-buck pieces available to a spoiled few, but eventually, we're wearing some form of these clothes at a fraction of the cost. It may not be hand-sewn and made-to-measure, but with a little creative accessorizing and extra-tailoring, you can still feel pretty damn great.

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