



A model presents a creation by Alexis Mabille during the Haute Couture Fall-Winter 2013/2014 collection shows, on July 1, 2013 in Paris.

On the Radar

## Comeback Kid

It has outlived repeated attacks on its reputation, its powers of endurance and its very state of being. Haute couture, the best bespoke handmade clothing, with dresses costing upwards of QR300,000, is undergoing a metamorphosis to embrace its new clientele from Asia, Russia and the Middle East. This beast is not extinct.

BY ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE



THERE HAS BEEN A LOT of debate over whether haute couture will survive, or indeed whether it even should. And that's just since its inception in the middle of the 19th century, when the English "father of couture" Charles Frederick Worth produced garments in Paris. But haute couture has survived. It has demonstrated strength of character in adversity and overcome traumatic life events that could have seen it all go up in a puff of smoke to the grand couturier in the sky. And yet the art remains, although its relevance is repeatedly queried.

The golden age of haute couture can be dated from 1947 when Christian Dior unveiled his New Look and couture prospered, until 1966, when the house of Cristobal Balenciaga closed down, indicating that change was afoot. Those were the days of a glittering and affluent couture clientele whose lifestyle warranted grand dresses. The hallowed couturiers back then were Dior, Givenchy, Balmain and Yves Saint Laurent, and their cherished clients were the likes of Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn and Lee Radziwill.

So what's the big deal? "Haute couture is something very specific: a garment that is completely custom-made, from impeccable lining to hand-stitched hem. Not only is the dress bespoke, the fabrics and embellishments are of the highest quality, and the tailors, seamstresses, embroiderers, lace makers and other craftspeople who spend hundreds of hours assembling these pieces are the most skilled in the world," explained *Forbes* magazine in 2006.

In fact the label of haute couture is a legally controlled term granted by the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, which was formed in 1868 and is helmed today by elected president Didier Grumbach. The criteria required in order for a fashion house to claim its position as an esteemed maison of haute couture are that each garment must be hand-stitched, exclusively tailored for an individual customer, and that it can only be made by an officially elected couture house. The official list of haute couturiers is reviewed each year. This is serious stuff. The kudos this designation grants a fashion house is immense in terms of the mystique and glamor that subsequently shrouds it via the inevitable editorial column inches. This in turn translates directly into massive sales of perfume and lipstick. There could not be a more

CLASSIC COUTURE:  
Clockwise from right: A creation by Christian Lacroix for Elsa Schiaparelli for Haute Couture Fall-Winter 2013/2014 collection; a Giambattista Valli presentation during the Haute Couture Fall-Winter 2013/2014 collection, Georges Chakra's Haute Couture Collection on January 25, 2011; a creation for Giorgio Armani Prive during the Haute Couture Fall-Winter 2012-2013



powerful marketing tool. Even though the couture runs at a loss economically, in real terms it is worth every last penny.

Time was, in the 90s, when the headlines screamed couture was in its death throes. The industry was running scared with the sale in 1999 of Yves Saint Laurent to Gucci Group, even though Saint Laurent retained the rights to create two haute couture collections a year. "Fin de couture?" screamed *The Independent* in January 1993 of an earlier takeover. "The sale of Yves Saint Laurent looks nothing less than a death sentence." And on Saint Laurent's retirement from an illustrious career spanning nearly 50 years at the pinnacle of the industry, *The Economist* crowed "Out of fashion" on the eve of his final couture collection in 2002. That same year, even Saint Laurent's long-time partner and business manager Pierre Bergé pronounced couture utterly dead: "High fashion is finished. We are in an era of marketing, not creativity."

But then an extraordinary thing happened and the headlines executed an about-turn in 2009 when, rather than declaring the industry dead, they RAISED ITS STATUS to that of struggling uncertainty. "Chanel battles to keep couture alive", declared *The Guardian* that year



(FROM TOP) CLOUTIER; APP PHOTO/REINOLDIS GULLOT; APP PHOTO/MICHEL MEUNIER; APP PHOTO/BERNARD GUY; APP PHOTO/MARTIN BUREAU





Middle Eastern clients have particularly supported the fresh new wave of Lebanese designers including Elie Saab and Bouchra Jarrar.

ON THE RUNWAY: From top: A model presents a creation for Christian Dior 2013-2014 fall/winter collection. Creations by French fashion designer Christian Lacroix for Elsa Schiaparelli, a creation for Christian Dior during the Haute Couture Fall-Winter 2013/2014 collection



prompting fighting riposte by Chanel's President of Fashion, Bruno Pavlovsky, "Haute couture is for everyone. Couture exists to keep our customers dreaming." By 2010 it was "Bonjour Couture" according to *Vogue*, "Top Parisian labels, including Chanel, Dior and Jean Paul Gaultier, have revealed a marked increase in both sales and demand." And Sidney Toledano, Dior CEO, couldn't contain his delight, "We have received so many orders, we are not sure we can deliver them." In 2012 the rise of haute couture sales was big news, "Return of haute couture," shouted the *Wall Street Journal*; "Paris says merci as haute couture sales rise," said the *Guardian*. Giorgio Armani and Valentino couture sales were up on the previous year. Women's Wear Daily revealed in 2013 that Christian Dior Couture sales had risen 24 percent for the year on the appointment of Raf Simons as creative director.

Designers have been flocking back to the couture schedule. Donatella Versace returned to Paris in 2012 after an eight year absence, Dutch design duo Viktor & Rolf followed in July 2013 after 13 years and Azzedine Alaïa returned in 2011 after an eight-year hiatus. At its last count for the Spring/Summer 2012 season, the haute couture club consisted of ten official members, five correspondent members and six guest members.

In July of this year, at Les Arts Decoratifs in Paris, Christian Lacroix exhibited a capsule haute couture collection for the revived house of Schiaparelli, paying homage to legendary designer Elsa Schiaparelli who had always inspired his work. The house has not yet announced its new creative director but when it does Schiaparelli will also be boarding the couture train once again.

So why is there still a demand? Couture is evolving to embrace its new Middle Eastern, Asian and Russian clients. "The rise has been credited to an influx of orders from China, the Middle East and Russia," explains the *Wall Street Journal*. This new niche market is being expertly tapped into. In their turn, the new clients have embraced new designers. Middle Eastern clients have particularly supported the fresh new wave of Lebanese designers including Elie Saab and Bouchra Jarrar. Taking the process one step further, new client Goga Ashkenazi from Kazakhstan has bought the house of Vionnet and appointed herself not only chairwoman but creative director too.

Which brings us to the upcoming French Haute Couture Week due to take place this coming October at the Marina Bay Sands resort in Singapore. Organised by Pide Fashion Weeks, this will be the third such event — which goes to prove its success so far. The French heritage and tradition of the art is celebrated and yet also exhibited to recently-discovered glamorous and wealthy potential customers.

Designers Christophe Josse, Alexis Mabille and Gustavo Lins, are returning to Singapore this year, having already showcased for the previous two years. The line-up for this October's event has yet to be announced. Maurizio Galante, Bouchra Jarrar, Julien Fournié, On Aura Tout Vu and Yiqing Yin have all shown previously in Singapore, and all the designers are haute couturiers or invited members of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*. The *Business of Fashion* commented early this year, "Why should others not follow, especially in emerging markets? We are told that Asia, and especially China, has a longing for couture. Why shouldn't it sponsor its own couture houses with talents from Paris — initially at least?"

So for now, haute couture finds itself back where it belongs in the consciousness of its adoring public who are willing it not just to survive, but to reinvent itself for its new audience and clientele. And long may it continue ■