



THE HOUSE THAT DIOR BUILT

Frances Chan recounts the history of a time-honoured fashion house that has never wavered in its dedication to refined innovation.



According to *Project Runway*, “In fashion, one day you’re in, the next day you’re out.” Try telling that to Christian Dior, undoubtedly the most famous French fashion house of the postwar era. For the past 23,700 or so days Dior has been “in” – the very name synonymous with sophistication, femininity and glamour.

Monsieur Dior broke new ground in the fashion world, not only in haute couture and ready to wear but also in global licensing and product lines.

Born in 1905, Christian Dior studied political science, but was always passionate about the arts and owned a gallery in the late 1920s. Climbing out of the recession, he made a living selling sketches to fashion houses and magazines. His talents were spotted by designer Robert Piguet, who hired him as a *modéliste* in 1938, then he joined Lucien Lelong in 1941. Five years later, textile mogul Marcel Boussac offered to finance Dior’s own couture company and in December 1946 House of Dior

opened its doors at 30 Avenue Montaigne, which is still its headquarters today.

On 12 February 1947, Dior launched his first collection, duly named the “New Look” by the fashion press. It instantly revolutionised fashion. Leaving wartime rationing, conservative styling and drabness behind, Dior’s “Corolle” theme celebrated the female form with fitted jackets, cinched waists and mid-calf, full skirts in luxurious fabrics, while the “En huit” range had slender skirts but with accentuated hips. His extravagance may have alienated some, but the public and fashionistas alike desperately wanted to aspire to this new French aesthetic.

Later that year, Miss Dior perfume was launched, followed by Diorama in 1949.

Blessed with Boussac’s financial support and manufacturing infrastructure, Dior was a prolific designer, creating 200 to 300 new designs twice a year. Not all designs were profitable, but Dior sold more than

Opposite page: The Dior brand today is just as sophisticated and desirable as it was when it was launched nearly 65 years ago.

Above: Monsieur Christian Dior was noted for his business acumen in licensing accessories to complement his collections. The Dior handbag range has grown extensively.



any other fashion house at the time. This success was helped greatly by the Christian Dior Boutique at the company building, which stocked the boutique ready-to-wear line and accessories such as jewellery, ties, hosiery, bags, gloves, umbrellas, hats and scarves specially designed to complement the clothing.

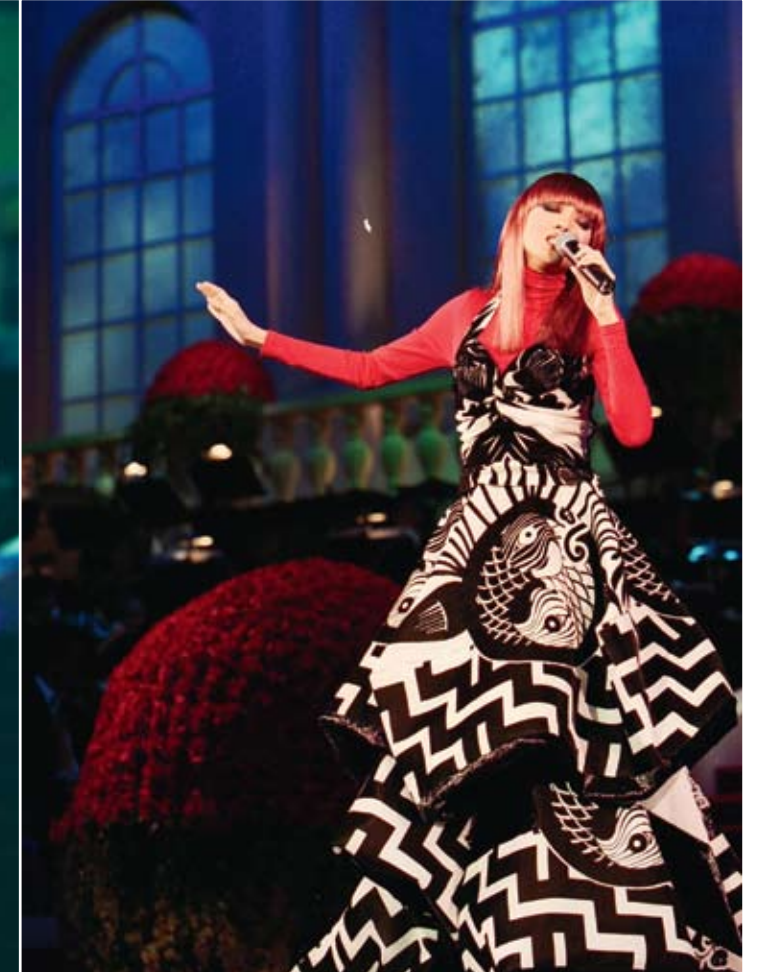
When the haute couture and boutique business expanded into five continents in the 50s, House of Dior was in full control of licensing, merchandising and distribution. The company added furs, shoes, make-up and models to its repertoire.

When Christian Dior died suddenly of a heart attack in October 1957, it shocked the world and left his empire and France's economy in jeopardy. Hundreds of highly skilled couture artisans faced unemployment if the company could not carry on. In a bold move, 21-year-old Yves Saint Laurent was appointed as head designer. Chosen by Dior himself to become his assistant in 1955, Saint Laurent was a meticulous designer with eight seasons' experience. It was a huge challenge, but Saint Laurent did not disappoint when he debuted the pyramid-shaped "Trapeze" line in 1958. The following year the haute couture range was shown in Moscow for the first time to an audience of 11,000.

Unfortunately, Saint Laurent's subsequent beatnik-influenced collections were not as popular, so when the designer was conscripted for military service in 1960, Marcel Boussac took the opportunity to appoint the more conservative Marc Bohan as artistic director. Bohan's elegant "Slim Look" collection was a return to form for the fashion house. Elizabeth Taylor became one of Dior's most famous clients by ordering 12 dresses from the collection. Under Bohan's reign, many more milestones were achieved, including

Clockwise, from left: Christian Dior created 200 to 300 designs twice a year; Charlize Theron and recent Dior designer John Galliano at the AngloMania exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006.

Opposite page: The late Hong Kong singer and actress Anita Mui was a big fan of Dior.





Diorling perfume (1963), Eau Sauvage for men (1966), Miss Dior ready-to-wear and Baby Dior (1967), Christian Dior Knit (1968), Christian Dior Homme (1970), Dior watches (1975) and Poison perfume (1985).

In 1984, Dior's owners were saved from bankruptcy by Bernard Arnault, who eventually merged the company with Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (LVMH) in 1987, making it the largest luxury goods conglomerate in the world.

Gianfranco Ferré succeeded Marc Bohan in 1989, followed in 1996 by Englishman John Galliano, who had come from LVMH's Givenchy house. It was controversial for Arnault to give the role to another non-Frenchman, but Galliano was instrumental in revitalising Dior haute couture, and was personally recommended by *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour.


Christian Dior's 50th anniversary that year was celebrated with a retrospective exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the opening, Diana Princess of Wales wore Galliano's first stunning evening gown for Dior. Diana's famous association with Dior had actually begun a year earlier, when she was given a tasteful black Dior handbag at the Cézanne art exhibition. The handbag was appropriately named Lady Dior, and accompanied the princess at many significant events.

Galliano's first collection, in 1997, was a new take on the "New Look", channelling the romantic style of Christian Dior, but adding a sassy modernity. The same year the Dior boutique in Avenue Montaigne was reopened after major renovations and Christian Dior's childhood home in Granville, Normandy, became the Christian Dior Museum.

With a new lease on life, Dior opened more boutiques and jewellery stores around the world, totalling 130 by 2002. Galliano dressed his models in paper bags in his "Homeless Show" and daring leather bondage in the "S&M Show". Also eye-catching was Galliano's saddlebag, introduced in 1999, which has become a Dior classic, as well as the J'adore fragrance.

Victoire de Castellane launched Dior's Haute Joaillerie department in 1998 with new collections every season and her first watch in 2003. Two years later Galliano released his Dior Christal stainless steel watch featuring 233 diamonds and blue pyramid-cut sapphires.

Meanwhile, in 2000, French designer Hedi Slimane, from Yves Saint Laurent, had been made artistic director of Dior Homme, becoming creative head of Dior men's fragrances three years later. Today, Dior's ready-to-wear menswear is under the direction of Belgian designer Kris Van Assche, who continues the modern, urbane look for the label.

And so the past decade has seen the House of Dior cement its legacy in fashion history with high-profile appointments, numerous exhibitions, more than 200 stores, and countless celebrity and royal red-carpet moments. Dior still epitomises an aspirational lifestyle, where high-calibre fashion and accessories go hand in hand. It started with the genius of Monsieur Dior, who once said, "Women don't wear what they love, they love what they wear." 

Left: Dior jewellery by Victoire de Castellane.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Sarah Jessica Parker wears Dior to the Academy Awards; Princess Diana sporting the Lady Dior handbag; Anita Mui in vibrant Dior print.



Photo: Getty Images

DIOR Spring/Summer 2011 Haute Couture

This season Dior Haute Couture is inspired by the work of iconic illustrator René Gruau, whose distinctive illustrations helped launch the “New Look” in the late 1940s. Gruau’s elegant line captured the essence of Dior. In this new collection, volume and movement are inspired by the spontaneity of the illustrative line and create a silhouette of effortless elegance. A dégradé of tulle wash from light to dark, as painterly techniques in sheer silk organza to bold silk faille evoke the intensity and shade of an illustrator’s gouache palette. Graphite sketches and ink outlines evoke a new spirit through layered tulle shadows, with ostrich feathered “brush strokes” and iridescent embroideries to create a virtuoso chiaroscuro effect of chalk shading and contemporary couture. The unique vision and creative friendship shared by René Gruau and Christian Dior himself unveils a silhouette that is effortless, modern and ever inspiring.



Embroidered flesh silk and light blue dégradé tulle dress.



Embroidered grey silk and white dégradé tulle dress.



Embroidered blue silk and black dégradé tulle dress.

DIOR Spring/Summer 2011 Haute Couture



Embroidered flesh silk and brown dégradé tulle dress.



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