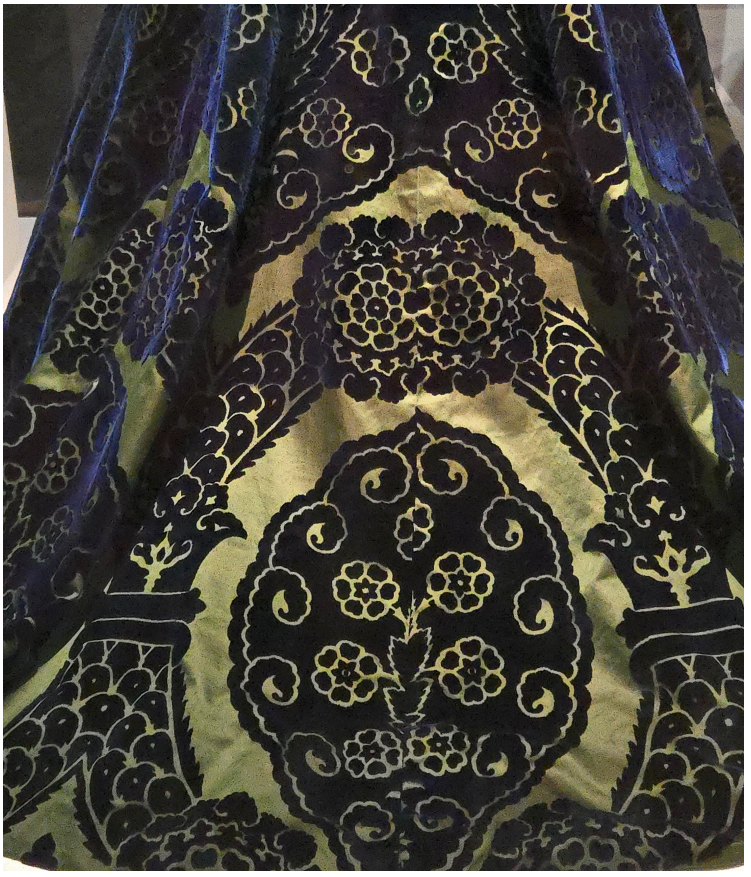
The Crafted Newsletter

Worth: Inventing Haute Couture



The last of the Paris exhibition installments today, and the one covering the origins of haute couture as we know it today. Worth: Inventer la Haute Couture is on display at the Petit Palais for just about another week, closing 7th September, so if you want to see it with your own eyes you'd better be quick!

Before we dive in - that fabric in the header picture is from a "tea gown" (a dress for receiving afternoon visitors at home) which belonged to Countess Greffulhe, and dates from 1896-1897. It has undergone conservation to be included in this display, and it is probably the last time it will be displayed on a mannequin due to the fragility of the silk fabric. At the time it was made, lead was added to silk fabric during production to add weight to the resulting garments, but this causes a chemical breakdown of the fibres much faster than pure silk fabric would deteriorate.

This was just one of many gowns in sumptuous fabrics displayed in this exhibition - after all, Worth was a house associated with the great European royal and imperial families and aristocracy for almost the entirety of its 100 year lifetime. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Charles Frederick Worth, an English expat who opened his fashion house in Paris in 1858, like Poiret after him, is credited with disrupting fashion's status quo and introducing concepts which persist to this day. Up to that point, ladies would take fabric to their seamstresses and give orders as to the style or cut they wanted made up. Worth turned that on its head and created the "couturier" - a designer as we know them today, the figurehead of their brand and the one who dictates to others what they should wear. Worth was also the first to label his clothes, with the first labels bearing his signature, like an artist signing a painting. When you look at modern fashion and the brand name often being part of the exterior design, as a display of "trendiness" or "street cred", it's amazing to think of this originating in the late 1800s, on such different garments!

Another innovation that Worth introduced was the concept of fashion seasons and the catwalk with live models - previously, garments would have been only in drawings or a sample may have been displayed on a dress form or mannequin. In fact, French still uses the word "*mannequin*" to refer to live fashion models. Worth introduced the idea of autumn/winter and spring/summer seasonal collections, but I'm sure even with the many outfit changes his clients needed daily, he would not have imagined today's additional "resort/cruise" and "pre-fall" seasons, or even the "micro-seasons" some brands began to adopt.

Thanks to imperial support, Worth was an immediate success and was dressing not only the European and Russian aristocracy, but also the most famous actresses of the day and nouveau-riche American clientele who travelled to Paris twice a year to order new

wardrobes. Worth's signature style was for sumptuous fabrics; embroidered silk and velvet, with embellishments everywhere it was possible to put them. This was a time when social mores dictated up to 7 outfit changes per day for a lady. At the beginning of Worth's operations, court dresses had huge crinolines up to 10m in circumference, but this gradually reduced and moved the remaining bulk to the back of the dress as a bustle. This weight was supported with the ubiquitous corset, at its most extreme creating an S-shape through the bust, waist and hips.




Worth began in 1858 with 1 floor of the building at 7, rue de la Paix - which became an epicentre of luxury retail - and gradually took over the whole building, with around 1000 employees working there by 1870, and by 1902 they had expanded and knocked through

into the next-door building. It was completely self-contained, with pattern and fabric cutting, tailoring, a photography studio and even a staff canteen all under one roof.

Worth's ateliers worked by producing several instances of garments that were then customised to individual clients through their embellishments, creating almost unique versions that maintained the elite luxury while enabling efficient production - it's estimated that at the turn of the 20th century around 10,000 garments were produced at 7 rue de la Paix. This is another aspect of the modern haute couture industry that Worth is credited with inventing.

The exhibition included lyrics from a song composed about Worth in 1886, which illustrates how he changed the status quo (translation from the exhibition):

Mesdam's, il ne faut plus de couturière,	Ladies, you don't want a seamstress,
Pour s'habiller c'est maintenant trop vieux,	To dress is now too old,
De bas en haut, par devant, par derrière,	From top to toe, in front or back,
Un couturier vous fera ça bien mieux!	A couturier's much more bold!
Lorsque chez lui vient une petit' femme,	When a li'l woman comes to see 'im,
D'un seul regard la devinant bientôt,	In just one look, he sees
Il prend mesure et l'oeil rempli de flamme,	Judging, with a glint in his eye,
Juge la form', le relief, tout c'qu'il faut!	Shapes and curves, if you please!
REFRAIN	CHORUS
Pour que le costum' vous aille,	To make the costume fit,
Il tât' les épaul's, la taille,	He checks the shoulders and the waist,
Sur les bosses, dans les creux,	On the bumps and in the hollows,
il prévoit les entredeux!	He adds on bows and lace!
Déjà sur votre tournure,	Already on your bustle,
Il dessin' des fioritures	He's putting frills and fancy
Rien qu'en se croisant les bras,	Standing back, his arms crossed,
Il vous jug' du haut en bas.	He judges top to toe.

The House of Worth was also renowned for its designs for costume balls - of which there were many in the Second Empire, thrown by Empress Eugénie. I particularly loved some of the sketches above involving playing cards. The umbrella costume is from 1925.

Worth was truly a dynastic enterprise - following Charles Frederick's death in 1895, his sons officially took over in the roles they had already been fulfilling; Gaston as administrative and commercial director, Jean-Philippe as creative director and head designer. The dynasties of Worth and Cartier became entwined through marriage; first in 1898 when Jean-Philippe's daughter, Andrée Caroline, married Louis, the grandson of Cartier's founder. Then in 1908, Louis' sister Suzanne married Gaston's son Jacques. Although the first marriage didn't last, the link between the two houses was solidified and there were many collaborations, including a joint opening of a London store in 1902 to capitalise on preparations for Edward VII's coronation.

As we discovered last time, it took Worth longer to adjust to the new styles of the 1910-1930s, but they did eventually do so - some examples from the exhibition below. Unlike Poiret, they weathered the economic depression and post-WWI years better, but as fashion remerged from the second world war with Dior's infamous New Look, the pendulum of style had swung again. Jacques' and Suzanne's sons Roger and Maurice, creative and commercial directors respectively, seem to have lost momentum. Unable to respond to the popular trends, Roger quit the business in 1950, and Maurice sold it to Paquin in 1954.

Unfortunately, Paquin itself only lasted another 2 years and the Worth brand was divided and sold on a number of times until being re-consolidated under new ownership in 1999. Couture collections reviving and modernising Edwardian styles were shown 2010-2013, and perfumes continue to be produced, but the House of Worth is not well known today - despite many of the modern industry's cornerstones originating with it.

Coming up next, I managed to squeeze in a trip to the Design Museum's Splash! A Century of Swimming & Style before it closed, as well as the Fashion & Textile

Museum's Textiles: The Art of Mankind. I promise to fit in some more crafting updates at some point, but these exhibitions are providing such a great run of newsletter content!

Nicole Hawkesford - a certain style

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