

IN FASHION

Survivors

THIS year marks the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles de Gaulle, a milestone that the French chose to commemorate one night in June by booming the "Appel du 18 Juin"—his famous rallying cry broadcast over the BBC in 1940—from a giant model of a radio console erected in the Place de la Concorde. Also, as it happens, it was fifty years ago this June that the Nazis occupied Paris—an anniversary that passed unmarked. At the Louvre's Musée des Arts de la Mode, however, the liberation of Paris and the end of the war are being celebrated, in an exhibition dating from that era and titled "Le Théâtre de la Mode."

In the spring of 1946, some two hundred dolls, dressed by fifty-three French couture houses in outfits from their spring/summer collections (the first available for export since the war) and displayed in sets created by twelve painters and designers, including Christian Bérard and Jean Cocteau, set sail for America to prove that Paris fashion was alive and well. They were not without precedent: French dressmakers had been outfitting dolls in the latest styles and sending them off to private clients all over the world as long ago as the seventeenth century. The "Théâtre de la Mode" was conceived in the fall of 1944, after Paris was liberated but before the war ended—when the street lamps in the City of Light had been turned back on but were dimmed. In 1945, after an opening stint at the Louvre's Pavillon de Marsan, the dolls made a good-will tour of the capitals of Europe; the following year, wearing a new, updated wardrobe, they travelled to New York (where the exhibition was housed in the

Whitelaw Reid mansion, at Fiftieth and Madison) and San Francisco (to the de Young Museum). The proceeds went to Entraide Française, a war-relief organization.

Once their mission was accomplished, the dolls were retired, but they were not forgotten. In 1951, when a young woman named Susan Train arrived in Paris to work for American *Vogue*, people were still talking about them. No one seemed quite sure what had become of them, however, and, as time went on, it was assumed that they had been destroyed. Train's inquiries were met with characteristically French shrugs, and replies to the effect that "*la mode est si éphémère.*" Five years ago, Train (by then Condé Nast's Paris bureau chief) was visited in her office by Stanley Garfinkel, a professor at Kent State University, who told her that he had discovered the dolls in Goldendale, Washington; they had been rusticated at the Maryhill Museum of Art, a formidable-looking poured-concrete mansion built in 1914

on a bluff overlooking the Columbia River by a wealthy American eccentric named Sam Hill, who moved in international circles and numbered among his friends Queen Marie of Romania and the dancer Loie Fuller. Garfinkel was determined to remount the "Théâtre de la Mode." Train went to investigate, and found the dolls in decent condition. Resolved that they should be shown at the Musée des Arts de la Mode, which had recently opened, she returned to Paris, where she enlisted the help of Pierre Bergé, the president of Yves Saint Laurent, and began to make arrangements for their passage home. It is through Train's persistence that the "Théâtre de la Mode" has come into being for a second time. After hearing about it for all these years, she says, she simply wanted to see it.

The "dolls"—which are not the kind of dolls that little girls play with, or the kind that certain grownup women proudly display in lighted curio cabinets, but, rather, twenty-seven-inch-tall wire figurines that look like the ones in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings—arrived back in Paris in a jumble. Their heads and some of their limbs had been detached, and it was often impossible to tell which shoes,

which gloves, which hat had gone with which clothes. Train compiled photographs from the original exhibition in order to document every outfit and match it with its proper accessories, and Nadine Gasc, the head of the Musée des Arts de la Mode's department of textiles and fashion, consulted the fashion magazines of the time. Like Train, Gasc had been hearing about the "Théâtre de la Mode" for ages. At a *bouquiniste* in Angers a few years ago, she bought a copy of the original program—a souvenir of an event she would like to have attended. The late Stephen de Pietri, who was the artistic director of the current exhibition, and to whom it is dedicated,



"I love you, but, hey, I'm flexible."

began the task of re-creating the sets.

Eliane Bonabel, who in her early twenties designed the dolls and chaperoned them on their original tour, was called in this time around to perform what Gasc calls "a little plastic surgery." By late 1944, Bonabel was already embarked on a successful career as an illustrator; she had also worked with marionettes. Her assignment, she recalls, was to devise a mannequin that would not be a cutout. She decided against solid figures, and, using the measurement charts found in fashion magazines as the basis for the proportions, devised a body contoured in wire—one that would look as if it had been, as she puts it, "drawn in the air." The wire had the added advantage of permitting some flexibility: the arms and legs could be manipulated to make each doll look a little different from the rest and to introduce the idea of movement. Joan Rebull, a Catalan sculptor living in Paris, molded the heads, and replicas were cast in plaster, with the features left unpainted. (At some point over the years, lipstick was added, but the conservators removed it.) Bonabel says that the idea was to make dolls that would be "a little too thin and a little too pale," like the fashion models of the time. The hair varied: it was real or it was string or silk thread or wool, sometimes glazed with glue. (Alexandre de Paris, the coiffeur, was called in to refurbish the hairdos, most of which looked as if they'd been slept on for forty-five years; he reset the limp tresses on tiny rollers and rewound the curls with tiny hairpins.)

Each of the fifty-three couturiers was asked, in 1944, to dress one doll at the least, five at the most, for different scenes, to be set in the morning, at the cocktail hour, and in the evening. In some cases, the process of miniaturization was particularly complicated. The stripes in the fabric for one dress by Carven were too wide for the scale of the dolls, so the fabric was cut and resewn to make the stripes narrower. At Patou, a special weave was re-created in miniature. There were miniature hand-stitched buttonholes for miniature hand-covered buttons, which could actually be unbuttoned; there were tiny zippers, which opened and closed; and there were real pockets and exquisite linings. According to Bonabel, the instructions to the houses were to provide only the clothes, which, they were told, would be aug-

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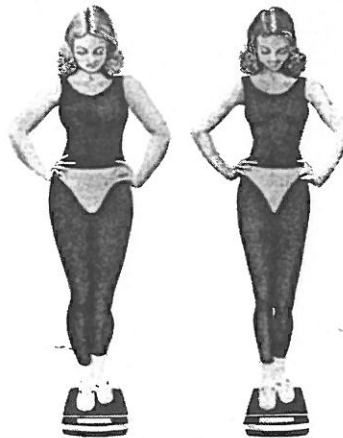
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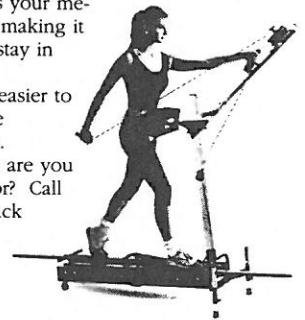
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mented by hats, but some of the houses got into the spirit and furnished matching shoes and gloves and umbrellas, and in no time a competition developed, with one or two ateliers in the end going so far as to produce lingerie.

Two years ago, when all the crates were unpacked at the Musée des Arts de la Mode, some accessories were missing. "We had twenty ladies in *tenue de ville* who had no shoes," Train says. She called on Massaro, the custom shoemaker on the Rue de la Paix, in the rather faint hope of persuading him to re-create what was missing. Then she spotted some miniature shoes in a showcase there, and took heart. One of his best clients, Massaro told her, had been Mrs. Gilbert Miller, a famously elegant American who collected dolls, and in filling her orders for shoes he had been obliged to make shoes for her dolls as well. He agreed to Train's request. Two missing plastrons by Cartier (one of a jewelled bird in a cage, designed as the symbol of the Occupation) were re-created by Yves Saint Laurent's costume jewellers; François Lesage reproduced Van Cleef & Arpels' jewelled epaulets in embroidery for Schiaparelli's evening gown; Chaumet remade a matching necklace, hair ornament, and bracelet.

As it turned out, the dolls had stayed on in San Francisco after their tour, in the basement of a department store called the City of Paris. Other cities had wanted the exhibition but had been unable to come up with the financing. No one, even in France, was willing to pay to have the dolls shipped back to Paris. "Thank God," Train says. Chances are that they would have been dispersed and sold, for lack of storage space. In the archives of the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, the trade association that still organizes the shows every season, she found the minutes of a meeting of the executive committee in September, 1951, recording that the president of the City of Paris, insisting that the dolls must not be destroyed, proposed to send them at his own expense to the Maryhill Museum; the committee agreed. But even more remarkable than the fact that the "Théâtre de la Mode" survived, perhaps, is that it came about in the first place. Fashion designers have never been known for their solidarity; that so many of them agreed to participate in a project like this probably says less about

the designers themselves than it does about the circumstances that united them.

IN most fashion histories, the years from 1940 to 1944, so painstakingly examined by historians of every other field, are summarized briefly, and only, one feels, as a setup for the voluptuous dawn of Dior's New Look, in 1947. There has been a sense that the less said about the behavior of many fashion designers during these years the better. In Paris, Chanel, who closed the doors of her couture house in 1940, is alleged to have had an affair with a Nazi officer, and among the designers who stayed in business were several who apparently behaved no better; it's said that Marcel Rochas would cross the street rather than greet his former Jewish clients. As for the clothes, it is taken for granted that the war years weren't fashion's finest hour, given the restrictions under which the couturiers were forced to work, to say nothing of the daily matters of life and death which must have eclipsed questions of style. We assume that under the circumstances practicality won out over fantasy—that the immediacy of an occupying army and ration coupons must have prevented the imagination from wandering very far. If anything, the Occupation of Paris is routinely regarded by Americans as the event that launched American fashion on its own course, with New York cut off from the French inspiration on which its designers had previously relied. It is only now, with the publication, in Paris, of Dominique Veillon's "La Mode Sous l'Occupation," that we learn how valiantly French women's impulse to express themselves in the clothes they wear adapted itself to their straitened lives, and how narrowly the French fashion industry escaped extinction.

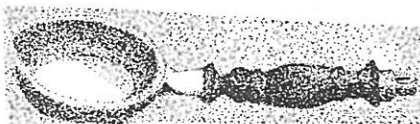
Veillon, a historian and the author of two other books on the Occupation, describes a city that woke up with a champagne hangover one morning in September, 1939, and found itself at war. The *caves* of the Ritz were transformed into air-raid shelters, complete with fur coverlets and Hermès sleeping bags. A new fashion was born, and, with it, a new adjective, *utilitaire*, to

describe innovations like Schiaparelli's enormous pockets, designed to take the place of a handbag. The conscientiously stylish woman would request a *vélo-taxi*—a go-cart of sorts, pulled by a man on a bicycle—that matched her outfit.

According to an essay by Nadine Gasc in the "Théâtre de la Mode" catalogue, the system for rationing clothes which went into effect in the summer of 1941 was a complicated one. In some cases, two old garments could be bartered for one new one. Since men's clothes could not be exchanged for women's, newspapers published patterns for turning a man's three-piece suit into a woman's. Gasc quotes Colette: "I feel I ought to save this diary, so that I can open it again at a later date to attest to the fact that in February, 1941, even as we stood in line for our milk, our rutabagas, and our mayonnaise made without oil or eggs, and even though we had no crêpes to celebrate Candlemas and wore leatherless shoes, Paris went on accomplishing its most characteristic feats, producing a figured velvet dress . . . a very dressy pink lamé blouse."

Colette was perhaps the most impassioned witness to the ways in which French women of the time made do, psychologically as well as materially; she memorialized an era when "three wisps of straw, a furled handkerchief, a scrap of waxed cloth, a domino tile, and a dog's leash" could add up to a hat. Veillon documents hats made from blotting paper and from newspapers—the latter executed in a range of different dailies, and worn as a means of advertising the wearer's political views. A fashion for plaid sprang up, as a declaration that the wearer sided with the British. From time to time, women working for the Resistance, receiving shipments of arms from London, gave in to the temptation to make a blouse out of silk from a parachute, even though it might signal their ties to the English or the Gaullists. On exhibit at the Mémorial de la Paix, an excellent new museum of the war, in Caen, is a bridal gown made from a parachute.

That life went on we knew, but that it went on with such good-natured vigor—that couturiers produced outfits called Coal or Black Coffee, or an entire collection with each number named after a stop on the Métro; that they turned their hands to disguising culottes as a skirt; that a "journée de



L'élégance à bicyclette was organized as an open-air fashion show of stylish clothes for getting around town on a bicycle—comes as something of a surprise. To the American mind, particularly after the sartorial free-for-all of the seventies and eighties, the effort required to sustain an elegant appearance seems like a luxury in peacetime, let alone in time of war. How staggering, how amusing it is now to come upon photographs (in the exhibition catalogue) of Parisian women in a beauty salon where the hair dryers, for lack of electricity, were powered by two men on a bicycle in the basement, pedalling the equivalent of three hundred and twenty kilometres a day to dry the hair of a hundred and fifty clients. The instinct for fashion, put to the test during the war by relentless indignities and deprivation, proved to be fundamental to the French character. Veillon recognizes that for most women the act of making a dress out of an old tablecloth or going to the hairdresser as usual constituted not only a refusal to give in to adversity but a means of safeguarding the identities they had built for themselves in a world that, morally and physically, was being reduced to rubble. She calls the hats they wore a provocation, a “*manifestation d'insolence*,” that did not go unnoticed by the occupying soldiers in the streets; in 1944, the Germans tried to close down the milliners altogether.

Meanwhile, Veillon reports, the leaders of the Third Reich had a plan for the fashion industry: the French couture houses would be integrated into the German enterprise, based in Vienna and in Berlin, which was to take the place of Paris as the cultural capital of Europe; the French ateliers would provide the specialized handwork; the French couturiers would be transferred to these new centers of fashion, where they would find reserved for them “*de brillantes situations*.” Lucien Lelong, the designer who was then the president of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, replied that the Germans could, of course, impose anything on the French by force, but that the haute couture could not be transferred, either as a whole or in part—that its creativity was “not only a spontaneous outburst but also the consequence of a long tradition cultivated by specialized workers” in diverse *métiers*. In No-

vember, 1940, Lelong went to Berlin to argue that since the Germans considered fashion a cultural activity, every country should have the right to create its own. Eventually, the Germans relented and allowed the French couture to continue but under constant surveillance, on the premise that, deprived of its foreign outlets and of choice materials, it would find its creativity weakened and would finally, in Lelong's words, “die of asphyxia.” The houses now worked under a system of “*dérogation*”—a special dispensation that, according to Lelong, was called into question fourteen times during the four years of the Occupation. The Germans imposed a series of restrictions, limiting the number of couture houses in operation and eventually forbidding photographs of the clothes (in order to curb sales). Lelong stalled for time, and fought to have the number of couture houses increased. In March, 1942, he organized a group fashion show in Lyons, in the Unoccupied Zone. In 1944, the Germans closed the houses of Mme. Grès and Balenciaga, on the pretext that they had exceeded the quotas set for fabric.

Evidently, Lelong had the foresight to recognize that France's economic future lay in a continuation of its long-standing role as the provider of luxury goods to the rest of the world—that the luxury-goods industries, of which fashion was the most highly visible, would be France's bread and butter. Veillon relies on Lelong's own account of his dealings with the Germans, from the archives of the *Chambre Syndicale*. Susan Train, who came across it in her research for the “*Théâtre de la Mode*,” was moved to translate it, and it is her translation I quote. In his report, made in 1944, Lelong writes, “The maintenance of this industry in activity and the survival of its skilled workers represents for France the immediate possibility of earning a great deal of foreign currency in exchange for very little raw material, very little transport, a great deal of invention and hard work. Before the war, it was calculated that one exported haute-couture model enabled us to purchase ten tons of coal; the export of one litre of perfume, two tons of oil; one bottle of champagne, three kilos of copper.”

As for the clients of the haute couture during the Occupation, Veillon reports that, contrary to popu-



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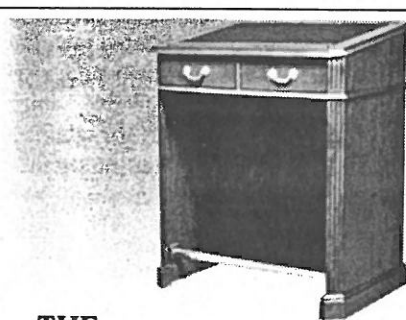
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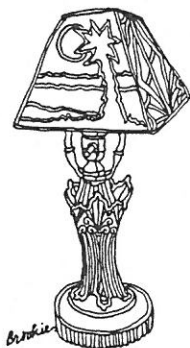
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lar assumption, they were not predominantly the wives of German officers. In 1941, the *Chambre Syndicale* registered around twenty thousand couture cards (required for access to the shows), of which two hundred were reserved for the "authorities of the Majestic" (the hotel that served as Nazi headquarters in Paris). In the spring of 1944, the number of cards in circulation had fallen to about fourteen thousand; still, there were only two hundred set aside for the Germans. The majority of the customers, by Veillon's description, were French, wealthy Parisians and residents of Neuilly, Versailles, and other surrounding towns, or rich foreigners—South Americans, Spaniards—who moved in what she calls "a protected universe." It was not unheard of for two friends who wore the same size to go in together on a suit and take turns wearing it. As the war went on, a new contingent began to appear, opportunists the French called "*les BOF*," for "*beurre-oeufs-fromages*," the scarce products that these entrepreneurs sold at scandalous prices, amassing fortunes. Veillon passes along the story, recounted by a journalist of the time, of the woman who arrived in the salons of one couture house with her daughter, for whom she bought four dresses at eight thousand francs apiece; these new clients were the wife and daughter of a man who had come by the service stairway and offered to sell the designer butter at three hundred francs a kilo.

Under the leadership of the octogenarian Marshal Pétain, who habitually made pronouncements to the effect that a woman's place was in the kitchen, and who had only got around to taking a bride at the age of sixty-four, the Vichy government launched its own attempts, more modest but no more successful, to manipulate fashion as a means of propaganda. In keeping with the sturdy pastoralism that Pétain, from his office in a hotel at a health resort, promoted as France's salvation, the state encouraged couturiers to work in *le style campagnard*. Among the wartime photographs that accompany the "Théâtre de la Mode" exhibition is one of an outfit with a dirndl skirt and puffed sleeves, titled "The Milkmaid." Every once in a while, a client

would order one of these outfits—something to wear on vacation or while working in the garden.

A WEEK before the recent opening of the "Théâtre de la Mode," the floors of the galleries at the Louvre are strewn with wood shavings and scraps of wire; the windows looking out over the tops of the chestnut trees in the Tuileries are open to let in some air; a visitor steps out of the elevator and is greeted by the smell of paint. A steel ladder towers above Jean-Denis Malclès's scene of a Surrealist garden, still under construction, where some of the dolls will go for a moonlit promenade. Among sawhorses, toolboxes, a sewing machine, and a portable generator, Anne Surgers, a young woman in a white smock, who has re-created the sets



on the basis of the original designs and photographs, shuttles between Joan Rebull's carousel—a Dionysian merry-go-round populated by mermaids and centaurs—and André Dignimont's set, where the dolls will congregate in the arcades of the Palais-Royal. André Beaurepaire, the painter and set designer, has arrived—a vigorous man who looks to be in his sixties, wearing a plaid shirt and sporting a backpack. He is reviving his own original décor, "La Grotte Enchantée."

Meanwhile, the dolls are gathered in the conservation laboratory, where they hang, headless, by their clavicles. A doll in Jacques Heim's tropical floral-printed cotton bandeau bra, diaper, and tulip overskirt—the wire cage of her midriff exposed—is dressed for the beach at Biarritz. Balenciaga's full-skirted black wool suit with a fitted jacket and a fringed black faille sash draped at the hips looks as glamorous today as it must have in 1946. Jacques Fath's black velvet mermaid dress with a skirt of sequin-dotted black tulle over pale-pink satin is still being imitated. Mme. Grès's black silk-organdie evening gown, with a series of pleats pinched at the waist and falling open over a bright-green organdie underskirt, has lost none of its impact. (In many cases, Alexandre says, it's the hairdo that looks dated, not the clothes.)

Note cards on which are written the specifications for the various outfits

dangle from satin ribbons that attach the dolls' shoes to their feet. On tables in another room, more shoes are arranged: thumb-size gold leather ankle boots in three scalloped tiers with platform soles; red-and-ivory platform saddle oxfords with tiny red leather tassels at the ends of the laces; ankle-strapped black suède sandals with black leather piping no wider than the line made by a pencil. There are miniature pocket-books and ruffle-edged umbrellas that open; suède gloves with nearly microscopic topstitching around the fingers; belts that actually buckle, for four-inch waists. The dolls' heads—immaculately coiffed, hats already in place—are on pikes driven into boards. Seen all together, they form a disembodied crowd. One blonde with shoulder-length hair is waiting until the last minute for her black straw picture hat, which is sitting in front of her.

Everyone who has worked with the dolls, it seems, has fallen under their spell. Train claims that each doll has a distinct personality. Bonabel talks about how some of the dolls looked instantly chic and others needed some fiddling with—which, she adds with a laugh, is the way it is in life. David Seidner, whose still-life photographs of the dolls, taken for the catalogue, are featured in the exhibition, says that for him the mere idea of the dolls seemed "charged somehow—atavistic and pagan, full of fantasy and voodoo." Working in the museum at night and on weekends, Seidner would find himself spending an hour positioning a sleeve or coaxing some movement into an eighteen-inch-long skirt intended, in the life-size original, to drape and fall several feet. Exasperating as all this was, however, he found the dolls "expressive" and "dear." There is, he says, "something vulnerable about their being so small." In his portraits they are shown against a backdrop of wooden doors that were found in the basement of the Louvre—chosen, he explains, because he finds old textures "narrative"—or against pieces of zinc and lead that remind him of the rooftops of Paris, or against shards of plate glass. By the end of the project, he says, his role and the dolls' role were reversed: Seidner stiff and tense, hunched over a tripod, and the dolls set free, running through a carpet of dried leaves.

Once the exhibition opens, the dolls seem back in their element. (The

"Théâtre de la Mode" remains at the Louvre through September 9th; in December, it comes to New York, to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum.) Animated and graceful, their heads held high, they revisit the Pont des Arts in Georges Douking's view of the Île de la Cité, veiled in mist. The skyline of Montmartre—the windmill of the Moulin Rouge and the dome of Sacré-Cœur outlined in black wire beneath small wire cumulus clouds—looms in the distance in Jean Saint-Martin's set, "Croquis de Paris." In Louis Touchagues's scene of the Rue de la Paix and the Place Vendôme, seen in one-point perspective, the square is in motion, full of chic Parisiennes window-shopping at the jeweller's, hurrying to meet a friend at the Ritz, en route to the box office at the Opéra.

In Cocteau's "Ma Femme Est une Sorcière" (based on René Clair's movie "I Married a Witch"), dolls in evening gowns occupy a burned-out maid's room under the eaves. A basin and a mirror are still left standing in one corner. Marcel Rochas's bride, in white satin, is stretched across the iron bed. Pierre Balmain's witch, in a gown of gray tulle embroidered at the bodice with gray pearls, is poised in midair on a broomstick. Through holes in the roof are visible glimpses of Notre-Dame and the ink-blue night sky.

From the balcony of the eighth-floor galleries, visitors look down on Bérard's opera house as if from the theatre's top tier, closer to the scaled-down crystal chandelier than to the stage. Downstairs, other visitors, like late arrivals finding their seats in the parterre, walk inside the set, where the stage is filled with dolls in evening gowns, and more dolls in full formal dress watch from the boxes. They have worn their jewels, their turbans, their evening gloves, their furs—including an ermine stole fringed in very small tails, and a full-length ermine cape, scalloped at the hem and lined in pale-pink satin. One doll, in Balmain's pink satin strapless gown encrusted with rhinestones and silver sequins, wears long gray tulle evening mitts embroidered to match.

Gasc calls discovering so many dolls all from the same season the find of a lifetime. Train agrees. "This is something that no museum in the world has," she says. Gasc remarks on the "cohesiveness" of the clothes: it was a

time when designers worked—and women dressed—in harmony, if not in outright unison. Bonabel recalls that people then had a different notion of fashion: it was, she says, "like a set of regulations, and we dreamed of submitting to them." The smaller couture houses, Train says, had their eyes on what the big ones were doing. The level of quality not only of the workmanship but of the designs, even by those couturiers whose names are long forgotten—Annek, O'Rossen, Blanche Issartel, Georgette Renal, Calixte, Véra Borea, Ana de Pombo—is astonishingly high. The clothes of the "Théâtre de la Mode" fill a gap in our understanding of fashion, providing a transition from the mannish silhouette of the war years to the literary grandeur of the New Look. In Lucien Lelong's turquoise-and-white polka-dot day dress with a draped bodice and a full skirt, and in his ivory tulle strapless evening gown embroidered with slate-gray leaves and flowers over a white satin underskirt—both designed by Christian Dior before he left Lelong and formed his own house—there are unmistakable intimations of the revolution that Dior would soon launch, and they prove once again, Train says, that "fashion is an evolution." The New Look didn't materialize out of thin air; it was on its way. Dior simply accelerated its arrival.

Paris had survived intact, its bridges and landmarks still standing. The fashion industry had held its ground. As it happens, the "Théâtre de la Mode" depicts a world without men. There is something touching about these dolls, so painstakingly turned out in sumptuous clothes made possible by peace, as if the wool suits and fur coats and festive ballgowns were French women's just reward for the dignity with which they went about their lives, for their makeshift chic. While the men who had fired guns and flown warplanes were driving their tanks down the Champs-Élysées in V Day parades and getting medals pinned to their chests, these dolls were being created—a passing monument to a more domestic heroism.

—HOLLY BRUBACH

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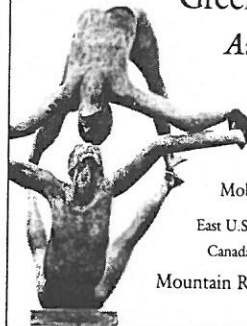
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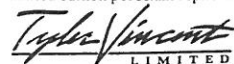
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