

CULTURE COURSE

French Fashion & Haute Couture

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

FRENCH FASHION & HAUTE COUTURE

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French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · What Is French Fashion? Scope & Sources

Paris has called itself the capital of fashion for more than three centuries, and a large part of the world has agreed. French fashion is a set of craft workshops, a legal label, a calendar of shows, a global luxury industry and a national self-image. This first chapter explains what the main terms mean, how the couture houses differ from ready-to-wear, the vocabulary needed to follow the story, why the course treats fashion as culture and not only as clothing, and where to find reliable sources. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

French Fashion in Outline

Haute couture

"High sewing" is a protected term in French law, not just a description. To use it, a house must meet conditions set by the ministry of industry and judged by a committee: made-to-measure clothes for private clients, a workshop in Paris with a minimum number of skilled staff, and collections shown twice a year (check the current rules). Very few houses qualify, and the official list changes from year to year (check).

Ready-to-wear

Prêt-à-porter means clothes made in standard sizes and sold in shops. The big names sell both: a house may show a few couture collections a year for prestige and earn most of its money from ready-to-wear, accessories, perfume and cosmetics (check). Chapter 6 explains how this shift began in the 1960s.

The institutions

The trade body for the couture houses was founded in the 19th century as the *Chambre syndicale*, and today's federation (the *Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode*) organises the Paris shows and the calendar (check). Paris is one of the "big four" fashion weeks, with New York, London and Milan.

More than clothes

French fashion is unusual because the state, the trade and the press have all treated it as a national asset. Louis XIV's minister Colbert backed the luxury trades in the 17th century, the state has protected the couture label since the 1940s, and the Paris shows are covered by the national press as news (check). That is why this course treats it as a part of French culture, with its own history, myths and language.

Couture and Ready-to-Wear

Point (check each)	Haute couture	Ready-to-wear
Made for	One client, with fittings in the house	Many customers, in standard sizes
Made where	In the house's own Paris workshops (*ateliers*)	In factories, in France or abroad
Shown	In couture weeks, twice a year	In the fashion weeks, twice a year
Cost	Very high; each piece may take hundreds of hours	Much lower, but still luxury at the top end
Role for the house	Prestige, craft and publicity	Most of the sales, with accessories and perfume

The Language of French Fashion

Term (check each)	Meaning
Maison	"House": a fashion house, named for its founder, such as Chanel or Dior.
Couturier / couturière	A male or female dressmaker who designs and runs a couture house.
Atelier	A workshop. A house has separate ateliers for dresses (*flou*) and for tailoring (*tailleur*).
Première	The head of an atelier, who turns the designer's sketch into a garment.
Petite main	"Little hand": a skilled seamstress or finisher, usually unnamed in the history.

Term (check each)	Meaning
Toile	A trial garment in plain cotton, used to test the cut before the real fabric is cut.
Défilé	A fashion show, from the word for a procession.
Mannequin	A model, from the older word for a dummy.
Collection	The set of designs a house shows each season.
Griffe	The label of a designer, literally a "claw" or signature mark.

Why a Culture Course?

- **It is a way into French history.** The court, the silk trade of Lyon, the Revolution and the Occupation all shaped the clothes (Chapters 2 to 5).
- **It is a way into French society.** Fashion shows class, gender, work and the roles of women, and the history of couture is also a history of the unnamed workers (Chapter 9).
- **It is a mirror of business.** The modern luxury groups are among the largest companies in France (Chapter 7).
- **It has produced myths.** "Paris is the capital of fashion" and "Chanel freed women" are claims to test (Chapter 10).

Scope of the Course

Part (check)	Chapters	Topics
Beginnings	2, 3	The court, silk and Worth; the Belle Époque and Poiret
The great designers	4, 5	Chanel, Vionnet, Schiaparelli; Dior and postwar couture
Change	6	The 1960s revolt and ready-to-wear
The industry	7, 8	The luxury groups; the calendar and the media
Craft and method	9, 10	Craft, labour and ethics; testing the legend

The course is about fashion as a culture and a story. It is not a shopping guide, a style guide or a dressmaking course. It keeps designers' names and dates to those needed for the story (all flagged "check"), and it deals with labour, the Occupation and the industry's disputes factually and respectfully.

Myths to Test

Common claim	The question a careful reader asks (check each)
Paris is the capital of fashion.	By what measure, and compared with Milan, London and New York? (Chapters 7, 8 and 10)
Haute couture is a dying art.	What do the number of houses, clients and the share of sales show? (Chapters 5, 7 and 9)
Chanel freed women from the corset.	Which designers moved first, and what did "freed" mean? (Chapters 3 and 4)
The New Look brought glamour back after the war.	Who liked it, who criticised it, and why? (Chapter 5)
French women are effortlessly chic.	Who sells this image, and what does it leave out? (Chapters 8 and 10)
The designer is a lone genius.	What do the ateliers and the business teams contribute? (Chapters 7 and 9)

Sources to Use

- **Museums.** The Palais Galliera, the city of Paris's fashion museum, and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs hold large dress collections, and several houses run their own museums and archives (check which are open).
- **Magazines and archives.** The French national library's Gallica site has digitised fashion journals such as the 19th-century *Journal des Dames et des Modes* (check what is online), and *Vogue Paris* and other magazines are essential for the 20th century.
- **The trade.** The federation's website carries the calendar and member lists, and each house's website tells its history from its own point of view (check).
- **Books and essays.** Histories in French and English by museum curators and historians of dress, and the memoirs of designers, which need to be read as interested accounts (check which are in print).
- **Film and television.** Documentaries on the houses, and films such as those in *French Film & Television*, which often use fashion as a symbol of Paris.

A British comparison

The British role is larger than it looks. The founder of haute couture in Paris, Charles Frederick Worth, was an Englishman (Chapter 2, check), and British designers have headed French houses since the 1990s (Chapter 7). At home, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has one of the largest dress collections in the world, and Scotland has its own fashion tradition in tweed, cashmere and knitwear, with Edinburgh's department stores as part of the story (check). An Edinburgh reader should keep these comparisons in mind: French fashion has often borrowed British fabrics and tailoring (Chapter 4, check).

Check the details

The rules for the couture label, the list of official members and the structure of the luxury groups change often. The figures and dates here are from memory and should be checked against the federation, the ministry and a reliable reference. Stories about famous designers are often retold in a polished form, so check the dates and names of any anecdote before you rely on it.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the difference between haute couture and ready-to-wear to a friend who has never followed fashion, and say why a house still bothers with couture.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Describe an imaginary fitting in two paragraphs using at least six terms from the vocabulary table.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Pick two claims from the "Myths to Test" table and say what evidence you would look for and where you would find it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Couture:** a protected label for made-to-measure clothes from Paris workshops
- **Ready-to-wear:** prêt-à-porter, standard sizes, most of the sales
- **Words:** maison, atelier, toile, première, petite main, défilé
- **Method:** describe the story, check the figures, test the claims

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · Origins: Court, Silk and Charles Frederick Worth

French fashion did not start with the couture houses. It began as an instrument of the state, in the court of Louis XIV, and was carried by the silk weavers of Lyon, the dressmakers of Paris and the first fashion magazines. This chapter follows that story from the 17th century to the 1850s, when an Englishman, Charles Frederick Worth, opened the house that is usually called the first haute couture house. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Louis XIV, Colbert and Luxury

Fashion as policy

Louis XIV (reigned 1643 to 1715) used the court at Versailles as a stage for the monarchy, and clothes were part of it. His finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, treated the luxury trades (silk, lace, tapestry, mirrors) as a way to bring money into France and to make Europe copy French taste (check).

Lace and silk

Colbert set up royal workshops and gave privileges to makers of French lace in the 1660s, to reduce imports from Venice and Flanders (check). Silk weaving, centred on Lyon since the 16th century, received royal support and became one of the country's main industries.

A French fashion

By the late 17th century French dress was copied across Europe. Dolls dressed in the latest styles were sent to foreign courts as a form of advertising, and the first publications described what was worn at court (check). The court's rules of dress also made the king the arbiter of taste.

Taste as a national asset

The pattern set in the 17th century lasted: the state backed the luxury trades, and Paris and Versailles were presented as the place where fashion was made. Later chapters show

that the pattern lasted into the 20th century, with the state protecting the couture label and helping the industry (Chapters 5 and 7, check).

Lyon and the Silk Weavers

- **The industry.** Lyon became the centre of French silk weaving in the 16th century, when the king granted privileges to the city's merchants (check). Its fabrics, designed by specialist artists, were sold to the court and to buyers across Europe.
- **The Jacquard loom.** Joseph Marie Jacquard, a Lyon inventor, developed a loom controlled by punched cards in the early 1800s, which made it possible to weave complex patterns automatically (check). It is also remembered as an ancestor of the punched-card idea in computing.
- **The workers.** The silk workers of Lyon, the *canuts*, were skilled but poorly paid, and their revolts in 1831 and 1834 are among the first large industrial disputes in France (check). The luxury of the court depended on this labour.
- **The link to couture.** The Paris houses bought their fabrics from Lyon, and the relationship between designers and weavers continued for the next two centuries (Chapter 9).

Rose Bertin and Marie Antoinette

Point (check each)	Detail
Rose Bertin	A dressmaker and milliner (*marchande de modes*) from Picardy (1747 to 1813) who opened a shop in Paris and became the favourite supplier of Marie Antoinette, queen from 1774. She was nicknamed the "minister of fashion".
The guilds	The trade was organised in guilds. Dressmakers (*couturières*) were allowed to make women's clothes from 1675, and the "modes" merchants, who added trimmings and accessories, were a separate trade (check).
The queen's style	Marie Antoinette favoured elaborate hairstyles and hats, and later simple muslin dresses. A portrait in a muslin dress in 1783 was criticised as too informal for a queen (check).
The criticism	The queen's spending on clothes was attacked by critics before and during the Revolution. Historians debate how far the criticism reflected her real spending and how far it was propaganda (check).

Point (check each)	Detail
The Revolution	The Revolution ended the guilds and the court's dress code. Plain styles and the trousers of the sans-culottes became political, and the Directory and Napoleon's Empire brought a classical, high-waisted style (check).

Napoleon supported Lyon's silk industry, and Empress Joséphine's dressmakers, such as Louis-Hippolyte Leroy, were well known (check). The idea that a dressmaker could be a name, rather than a servant, had begun.

The First Fashion Press

Publication (check each)	Note
Le Mercure Galant (from 1672)	A gazette of court news that also described fashions.
Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français (from 1778)	A series of engraved plates showing current dress.
Journal des Dames et des Modes (from 1797)	A magazine with coloured fashion plates, widely copied abroad.
Fashion plates	Engravings of dresses, collected by historians as a record of how clothes looked and how they were described.

The plates are one of the most important sources for the period, but they show the ideal and not the ordinary dress, so they need to be read with care (Chapter 10).

Charles Frederick Worth

- **The man.** Worth (1825 to 1895) was born in Bourne, Lincolnshire, and trained as a draper's apprentice in London before moving to Paris in 1845 (check). He worked for a silk and shawl firm, Gagelin, and in 1858 opened his own house at 7 rue de la Paix with a Swedish partner, Otto Bobergh (check).
- **The patron.** His break came when Princess Pauline de Metternich, the wife of the Austrian ambassador, wore his dresses at the court of Napoleon III, and Empress Eugénie then became a client (check).
- **The innovations.** He sewed his name into his clothes, as an artist signs a painting. He showed designs on live models (his wife, Marie, was the first, check), designed a collection

in advance each season, and told clients what to wear, instead of waiting for their instructions.

- **The trade body.** The Chambre syndicale de la couture parisienne was founded in 1868, with Worth's house among the leaders (check), to protect the trade and regulate its practice.
- **The legacy.** His sons Gaston and Jean-Philippe ran the house after his death, and it lasted until the 1950s (check). He is called "the father of haute couture", a title that needs qualification (Exercise 2).

A British comparison

The British links run through the story. Worth was an Englishman, and the trade treaty between Britain and France in 1860 (the Cobden-Chevalier treaty) opened the way to cross-Channel trade in textiles (check). A much earlier Scottish link is Mary, Queen of Scots, who was brought up at the French court in the 1550s and introduced French dress and styles to Scotland (check). The paisley pattern that appears in French and British fabrics was copied from Kashmir shawls and named after the Scottish town of Paisley, where it was woven in large quantities (check). Edinburgh's own department store, Jenners, opened in 1838 and sold imported silks and fashions (check).

Check the details

Fashion history is full of "firsts". Claims that a designer was the first to sign garments, show on live models or hold a seasonal collection are repeated in many books, and earlier examples are known. Dates of founding, the names of partners and the details of Worth's life should be checked against museum catalogues and biographies. Stories about Rose Bertin and Marie Antoinette are often retold in a polished form, so check them against historians.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Draw up a timeline from Colbert to the Chambre syndicale of 1868 with at least eight entries, and mark the ones you would want to check.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Test the claim "Worth invented haute couture". What is true in it, what is missing, and what evidence would you use?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Compare Rose Bertin and Charles Frederick Worth as dressmakers to the powerful: who held the creative authority in each relationship, and what changed?

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **State and luxury:** Louis XIV, Colbert, Versailles; Lyon silk and the Jacquard loom
- **People:** Rose Bertin, Marie Antoinette, Charles Frederick Worth, Empress Eugénie
- **Dates:** 1858 Worth's house; 1868 Chambre syndicale (check)
- **Sources:** fashion plates and early magazines, read with care

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · The Belle Époque and Paul Poiret

The years from about 1890 to 1914, later called the Belle Époque, were the first great age of the couture houses. They dressed an international clientele in elaborate gowns, and then one designer, Paul Poiret, turned away from the corset and made himself a celebrity. This chapter covers the great houses, the corset and what its end really meant, Poiret's career, the influence of the Ballets Russes, the new fashion illustration, and the effect of the First World War. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Great Houses

Doucet and Paquin

Jacques Doucet's house in the rue de la Paix dressed actresses and aristocrats, and he was also a great collector of art (check). Jeanne Paquin opened her house in 1891 with her husband, and was among the first to open branches abroad, in London and elsewhere (check). She is also remembered as the first woman to lead the trade body.

Callot Soeurs and Lanvin

The Callot sisters opened a house in 1895 that was known for lace and for fabrics from the East (check). Jeanne Lanvin began as a milliner in 1889 and grew a house famous for children's and women's clothes, with a family logo of a mother and daughter that is still used (check).

The British houses in Paris

The English tailor Redfern had a house in Paris from the 1880s, known for tailored suits (check). Lucy Duff Gordon, who worked under the name Lucile, had branches in London, Paris and New York (check). Paris was international from the start.

A trade run by women

Many of the successful houses of the period were led by women: Paquin, the Callot sisters, Lanvin and Lucile. Dressmaking had long been a trade open to women, and the couture

houses show that a woman could run a large international business before she could vote (check). The "great male designer" story, which this course tests in Chapter 10, hides this fact.

The Corset and What Replaced It

- **The shape.** Around 1900 the fashionable silhouette was the S-bend: a corset pushed the chest forward and the hips back, creating a curved line. It was widely criticised by doctors and reformers as harmful (check).
- **The claim.** Poiret later said that he freed women from the corset with a high-waisted, straight-hanging line from about 1906 (check). Dress reformers had called for rational dress for decades, and other designers moved in the same direction.
- **The reality.** The corset did not disappear. The new line needed a different, longer corset or a girdle, and the hobble skirt, which Poiret showed in 1910, narrowed the hem so much that women could barely walk (check). "Freed" is a claim to test, not an accepted fact (Chapter 10).
- **The change.** Even so, the shape of dress moved away from the extreme curve, and the idea that fashion should allow movement became part of the language of the next decades (Chapter 4).

Paul Poiret

Point (check each)	Detail
Training	Born in 1879, Poiret was the son of a cloth merchant. He worked for Doucet and then for the Worth house before opening his own in 1903.
The style	Colour, loose lines, tunics and turbans. His name is linked with a vivid, Oriental look, with harem trousers and lampshade tunics, in strong colours.
The Ballets Russes	The Russian company led by Sergei Diaghilev arrived in Paris in 1909. Its production of *Schéhérazade* in 1910, with designs by Léon Bakst, helped to set off a fashion for Eastern colour (check).
The showman	He held parties such as the "Thousand and Second Night" in 1911, toured Europe and the United States with his models, and sold perfume and decorative objects under the names of his daughters (check).

Point (check each)	Detail
The decline	After the war his business lost out to new rivals such as Chanel, and he closed the house in the 1920s and died in poverty in 1944 (check).

Poiret's memoir, *En habillant l'époque* (1930), is a colourful but interested account written after his decline (check), and it should be read with other sources.

Pictures and Magazines

- **Fashion illustration.** In 1908 Poiret commissioned the artist Paul Iribe to draw an album of his designs, and in 1911 Georges Lepape did another (check). The drawings treated clothes as art, with flat colour and strong lines.
- **La Gazette du Bon Ton.** This magazine, founded in 1912, brought together couture and illustration, and sold the idea of Paris as the centre of taste (check).
- **The effect.** Fashion illustration shaped how people imagined the clothes, and was often further from the real garment than a photograph would be (Chapter 8).

The First World War

The war closed many houses and sent designers to the front, including Poiret, who made uniforms (check). It also changed the way women dressed. Women took jobs in factories, hospitals and offices, and skirts rose to the calf and became simpler, and the demand for practical clothes grew (check). The black of mourning was common. Houses that survived turned to a market that was more international, and the American buyers became central. The way was open for the designers of the next decade (Chapter 4).

> **A British comparison**
>
> The British link in this period is Lucile, who dressed the British stage and aristocracy and opened a house in Paris, and who survived the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 as Lady Duff Gordon (check). A Scottish link is the Glasgow School: the Glasgow designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his group were shown in the Vienna Secession in 1900 and influenced the Wiener Werkstätte, from which Poiret took ideas for his own decorative arts school after a visit to Vienna in 1910 (check). In the other direction, British suffragettes

used colour, in purple, white and green, as a political statement in their dress (check), another case of clothes as politics in the same years.

Check the details

Poiret told his own story, and many books repeat it. Dates of his collections, his claims about the corset and the number of his guests and clients should be checked against museum catalogues and independent histories. The same applies to the houses of Paquin, Callot and Lanvin, whose own archives give a house's point of view.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Test the claim "Poiret freed women from the corset" with the six questions.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Treat Poiret's memoir *En habillant l'époque* as a source: what can it tell you, what are its limits, and what would you set beside it?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Write a short research note on one house of the period (Paquin, Callot Soeurs, Lanvin or Doucet): what to find out, where to look, and what to treat with caution.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Houses:** Doucet, Paquin, Callot Soeurs, Lanvin, Redfern, Lucile
- **Poiret:** own house 1903; Orientalism and the Ballets Russes; the hobble skirt 1910 (check)
- **Pictures:** Iribe, Lepape, La Gazette du Bon Ton
- **War:** shorter, simpler skirts and practical dress

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Chanel, Vionnet, Schiaparelli and the Interwar Years

After the First World War the dress of women in France changed quickly, and a new group of designers, most of them women, defined what modern clothes looked like. This chapter covers the three best known, Gabrielle Chanel, Madeleine Vionnet and Elsa Schiaparelli, their rivals, the business of perfume that made some of them rich, the effect of the Depression, and the couture houses during the German Occupation. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Three Designers

Gabrielle Chanel

Born in 1883 in Saumur and raised partly in an orphanage, she began as a milliner and opened shops in Paris, Deauville and Biarritz in the 1910s (check). She used jersey, a soft knitted fabric then associated with underwear, to make simple, comfortable clothes. Her house in the rue Cambon grew in the 1920s into one of the most successful in Paris.

Madeleine Vionnet

Trained in the Callot house (Chapter 3), she opened her own house in 1912 and reopened it after the war (check). She developed the bias cut, cutting fabric diagonally so that it clings and falls in soft folds, and she designed without a corset, often draping fabric on a small wooden doll. Her work was admired by other designers as the most skilled of the period.

Elsa Schiaparelli

Born in Rome in 1890, she moved to Paris in 1922 and made her name in 1927 with sweaters knitted with trompe-l'œil bows (check). She worked with Surrealist artists, notably Salvador Dalí and Jean Cocteau, on the lobster dress and the shoe hat of 1937, and she made "shocking pink" her colour (check).

Three answers to the same question

All three answered the question of what modern women should wear, but in different ways. Chanel offered ease, simplicity and a recognisable look for her own and her clients' lives. Vionnet offered technical skill and a new relation between cloth and body. Schiaparelli offered wit and art. The history of the period is often told as a story of Chanel alone, a version this course tests in Chapter 10.

The 1920s Look and the Business

Item (check each)	Detail
The silhouette	The 1920s brought straight lines, dropped waists and hemlines to the knee, with cropped hair. The type was called *la garçonne*, after a controversial novel of 1922, and was linked to women entering work and the loss of men in the war.
The 1925 exhibition	The Paris exhibition of decorative arts in 1925, which gave its name to Art Deco, showed fashion as part of the wider design world.
Chanel No. 5	Launched in 1921 with the perfumer Ernest Beaux, it used synthetic aldehydes and became one of the best-selling perfumes in history. The company that sold it, Parfums Chanel, was set up in 1924 with the Wertheimer brothers, who owned most of it (check).
The little black dress	In 1926 the American *Vogue* printed a simple black dress by Chanel, comparing it to the Ford car (check). Black was no longer only for mourning.
Jean Patou	A designer of sportswear for women, including tennis clothes for the champion Suzanne Lenglen, and of the perfume Joy (1930) (check). In 1924 he took American women as models, after a search in New York (check).
The Depression	After 1929 the American market, on which many houses relied, shrank, and some houses closed. Perfume and licensing became more important (check).

Craft, Copying and Workers

- **Copying.** The couture houses sold patterns and toiles to American manufacturers and department stores, and were copied widely. Vionnet fought copyists and put her thumb-

print on her labels to prove authenticity (check).

- **Workers.** Vionnet is also remembered for providing her workers with paid holidays, a canteen and medical care at a time when few did (check). The staff of the ateliers were mostly women, and the history of couture is also the history of their work (Chapter 9).
- **The designers' background.** Chanel, Schiaparelli and Vionnet all came from modest backgrounds and built their houses on talent and contacts. Chanel's rise was helped by wealthy lovers and patrons, a part of her story that she described in different versions over the years (check).

The Occupation

Point (check each)	Detail
The plan to move	In 1940 the German authorities considered moving the couture industry to Berlin and Vienna. Lucien Lelong, the head of the trade body, argued that couture could not be moved because it depended on its Paris workers and traditions, and the plan was dropped (check).
The houses	Many houses stayed open, selling to German officers' wives and French clients and to export markets in neutral countries, while others closed. Schiaparelli spent the war in the United States, and Chanel closed her fashion house in 1939 (check).
The shortages	Fabric was rationed, and women improvised with wooden soles, hats and recycled materials. Hats became large and ornate as a form of defiance (check).
Chanel	She lived at the Ritz hotel in Paris during the Occupation and had a relationship with a German officer, Hans Günther von Dincklage. In 1941 she tried to use anti-Jewish laws to take control of her perfume company from the Wertheimers, who had left France, and the attempt failed (check). Historians still debate her wartime contacts and what she knew, and she was questioned after the Liberation but not charged (check). She then lived mostly in Switzerland until 1953.

The account of Chanel's wartime activities is based on archives and has been revised by historians, and it should be described only to the extent that it is documented (Exercise 3).

> **A British comparison**

The British links are strong. Chanel's friendship with the Duke of Westminster, one of the richest men in Britain, took her to his estates in England and Scotland, and the tweeds and cardigans of her suits were influenced by that world (check). She bought tweed from British mills, including Linton Tweeds of Carlisle (check). The Englishman Edward Molyneux had a successful couture house in Paris from 1919 (check). Schiaparelli was also popular in London. The Scottish tradition of knitting, from Fair Isle to the Borders, is a natural background to the jersey and knitwear of the period (check).

Check the details

Chanel's own accounts of her life changed with the telling, and later biographies disagree about her wartime actions, her relationships and her business dealings. Check all dates, quotations and claims about her against more than one scholarly source, and distinguish documents from interpretation. Claims that she "invented" trousers, the suit or the perfume are exaggerations (Chapter 10).

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Test the claim "Chanel freed women" with the six questions, and give a more careful sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Chanel, Vionnet and Schiaparelli in a table (background, what each contributed, how each is remembered) and say whose contribution is most easily overlooked.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Separate what is documented from what is disputed in the accounts of Chanel during the Occupation, and say what each kind of source adds.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Designers:** Chanel (jersey, No. 5, the little black dress), Vionnet (the bias cut), Schiaparelli (Surrealism, shocking pink), Patou
- **Business:** perfume and licensing; the Wertheimers and Parfums Chanel
- **The Occupation:** Lelong and the plan to move couture; Chanel's wartime record is debated
- **British links:** the Duke of Westminster, tweed, Molyneux

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · The New Look and Postwar Couture

In February 1947, in a country still short of food, coal and cloth, a new Paris house showed a collection that gave the next ten years their silhouette. Christian Dior's "New Look" was admired, attacked and copied, and it helped to restore Paris as the capital of fashion. This chapter covers the collection and the argument about it, the other great postwar designers, Cristóbal Balenciaga and Hubert de Givenchy, the system that supported couture, and the business of licensing that kept it alive. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

Dior, February 1947

The man

Christian Dior (1905 to 1957) was born in Granville, in Normandy, and began as an art-gallery owner before he worked as a designer for Robert Piguet and Lucien Lelong (check). With the financial backing of the textile manufacturer Marcel Boussac he opened his own house at 30 avenue Montaigne in Paris in December 1946 (check).

The collection

His first show, on 12 February 1947, presented two lines, *Corolle* and *En 8*, with rounded shoulders, a tightly cinched waist, padded hips and a very full skirt reaching the calf. It used many metres of fabric per dress (check). The effect was of a flower, hence the name *Corolle* (the petals of a flower).

The name

The editor of the American magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, Carmel Snow, is said to have exclaimed that it was a "new look", and the phrase stuck (check). In France the line was called the *Corolle* line, and "New Look" was an English-language label that spread back to Paris.

A success in the right year

The timing helped. Paris had been cut off from the world during the Occupation, and the houses wanted to show that French luxury was back. Dior's backer Boussac sold cloth, and a style that needed many metres suited him. Within a few years, Dior was one of the largest earners of export income among French fashion firms (check). Some historians stress that Dior did not invent the style from nothing: nipped waists and full skirts had been shown in the late 1930s, and his achievement was to present it as a whole and at the right moment (Exercise 1).

The Argument

- **For.** Many welcomed the collection as a sign of recovery, glamour and femininity after the plain dress of the war years. The press, and especially the American press, celebrated it.
- **Against.** Critics said it was wasteful in a time of shortage. In Britain, where clothes rationing lasted until 1949, politicians and the press criticised the use of so much cloth (check). In Paris, an incident in which women were reported to have attacked a model who wore the New Look is often told, though its details are uncertain (check).
- **The question of women.** Some writers said that the New Look returned women to a restricted and decorative role after they had worked and taken on responsibility during the war. Others said that women chose it freely and enjoyed the change. Women in France had gained the vote only in 1944, and the argument cannot be settled by one answer (check).
- **The legacy.** The silhouette dominated the 1950s. It also made "the line" of each season into a news story, which journalists have followed since.

Other Postwar Names

Designer (check each)	Note
Cristóbal Balenciaga	A Spanish Basque who opened his Paris house in 1937. He was admired by other designers for his sculptural cuts and skill, and avoided publicity. He closed the house in 1968, saying that the standards of couture could no longer be kept (check). Dior is reported to have called him "the master of us all".
Hubert de Givenchy	Opened his house in 1952 at the age of 25. He is best known for his friendship with the actress Audrey Hepburn, whom he dressed in films including *Sabrina* (1954) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) (check).

Designer (check each)	Note
Pierre Balmain	Founded his house in 1945 and dressed royalty and film stars. A classic designer of the elegant daytime and evening dress of the period (check).
Jacques Fath	A younger designer, known for his glamour and his relations with the press and with the United States, who died young in 1954 (check).
Madame Grès	Known for draped dresses in the Greek style, a link back to Vionnet (Chapter 4).
Coco Chanel	Returned in 1954 at the age of 70. The French press was cool, but American buyers liked the suit (check).

How the System Worked

- **The label.** The use of the term "haute couture" was fixed in law in the 1940s, with rules set by the ministry of industry and the trade body (check). A house had to be a member to be called a couture house and to take part in the Paris shows.
- **The houses.** There were over a hundred couture houses in the immediate postwar years, fewer than twenty by the 1970s (check). The change shows the shift to ready-to-wear (Chapter 6).
- **The clients.** Aristocrats, film stars, rich Americans and, increasingly, the buyers for department stores and manufacturers, who paid to copy models. The price of a couture dress was well above the cost of the cloth and labour.
- **The money.** The real profit came less from the dresses than from licensing the name: perfumes, stockings, gloves, scarves and later ready-to-wear. Dior's perfume *Miss Dior* (1947) and the licensing deals of 1948 and 1949 for the United States were early and influential examples (check).
- **The workers.** The ateliers employed hundreds of seamstresses, often women from the provinces or abroad, working long hours, and their conditions are covered in Chapter 9.

> **A British comparison**
>
> The British reaction to the New Look was mixed. The Board of Trade, which ran rationing, was openly opposed, and the press argued over whether women should accept it. Even so, the British royal family and its designers joined the Paris cycle: Dior showed in London in 1950 and designed Princess Margaret's dress for her 21st birthday in 1951 (check). British

couturiers such as Norman Hartnell, who made the wedding dress of Princess Elizabeth in 1947 and her coronation gown in 1953, and Hardy Amies, worked on the same models of elegance but with a different clientele (check). Audrey Hepburn, Givenchy's muse, was born in Brussels to an English father (check).

Check the details

The story of the New Look has been told so often that a polished version has replaced the record. Check the date and size of the collection, the quote attributed to Carmel Snow, the reports of attacks on models and the figures for exports against contemporary reports and a scholarly history. Claims about what the collection meant for women are interpretation, not fact.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Test the claim "The New Look liberated women from wartime austerity" with the six questions, and give a more careful sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare Dior and Balenciaga as businessmen and as designers: how did each deal with publicity, copying and licensing?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Explain why the number of couture houses fell from over a hundred to fewer than twenty, and say what evidence would test each explanation.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **1947:** Dior's first collection, the New Look (Corolle and En 8) (check)
- **People:** Christian Dior, Marcel Boussac, Balenciaga, Givenchy, Balmain, Fath, Madame Grès
- **System:** a protected label, a trade body, copying rights and licensing
- **Argument:** waste in a time of shortage, and what the style meant for women

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Revolt and Ready-to-Wear

In the 1960s fashion stopped flowing down from the couture houses and began to rise from the street. A young market, new materials, rival centres in London and New York and the upheavals of May 1968 pushed Paris to change. This chapter covers the designers who broke with the postwar style, Yves Saint Laurent's decision to sell ready-to-wear under the name of a couture house, the creation of the Paris ready-to-wear system, a famous show at Versailles, and the designers from other countries who built careers in Paris. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Youth Market

A new customer

The postwar baby boom produced, by the 1960s, a large group of young people with money of their own and no wish to dress like their mothers. Singers, films and magazines made the young a fashion market for the first time (check). The couture houses, built for rich older clients, were slow to notice.

New centres

London's boutiques and the "Swinging London" of Carnaby Street and the King's Road, and New York's manufacturers, made the case that fashion could come from the street and from cheap production. Paris, for the first time in a century, risked looking old-fashioned (check).

New materials

Synthetic fabrics, plastic, metal and vinyl made new shapes and cheaper manufacturing possible. The designers of the "space age" used them to suggest the future, in the decade of the first astronauts (check).

From top-down to bottom-up

The old model had been that couture set the line and everyone else copied it, as Chapter 5 described. In the 1960s the lines of influence ran in several directions, with the street, the

singer and the boutique setting trends that the houses then followed. Historians call it a shift from "trickle-down" to "trickle-up" fashion, a convenient label that simplifies a more varied picture (check).

The Space-Age Designers

Designer (check each)	Note
André Courrèges	Trained with Balenciaga and opened his own house in 1961. His 1964 "space age" collection in white and silver, with trousers, short skirts and flat boots, made him the face of the new look. He and the British designer Mary Quant are both credited with the miniskirt, and both claims are argued (Exercise 1).
Pierre Cardin	Born in Italy in 1922 and raised in France, he left Dior's circle and opened his own house in 1950. In 1959 he showed a ready-to-wear line for a department store and was briefly expelled by the trade body for doing so. He later built a vast licensing empire (check).
Paco Rabanne	A Spanish-born designer who made dresses from plastic discs and metal links in 1966, in his collection of "twelve unwearable dresses in contemporary materials" (check).
Emanuel Ungaro	A tailor's son from Italy who trained with Balenciaga and Courrèges and opened his house in 1965 (check).

Yves Saint Laurent

- **The prodigy.** Yves Saint Laurent, born in Oran, Algeria, in 1936, became head designer at Dior at the age of 21 on Christian Dior's death in 1957 (check). His first collection, the "Trapeze" line, was a great success.
- **The break.** Called up for military service in 1960, he suffered a breakdown and was dismissed by Dior. With his partner Pierre Bergé and American backing he opened his own house in 1961 (check).
- **Rive Gauche.** In 1966 he opened a boutique, *Saint Laurent Rive Gauche*, on the Left Bank, selling ready-to-wear under his name at moderate prices (check). It was one of the first times that a leading couturier took ready-to-wear seriously, and it set the model for the next generation of houses.

- **Le Smoking.** In 1966 he showed a woman's tuxedo, and in 1967 he began to sell trouser suits to the public (check). Women in trousers were still controversial: in 1968 the socialite Nan Kempner is reported to have been refused entry to a New York restaurant for wearing a Saint Laurent trouser suit, and to have gone in wearing the jacket as a tunic (check).
- **The old rule.** A French ordinance from 1800 required women to ask the police for permission to wear trousers, and it was formally repealed only in 2013, though it had long been ignored (check).
- **Other works.** The 1965 Mondrian dress and the later perfume Opium (1977) are among his best-known works (check).

May 1968 and the New System

Point (check each)	Detail
May 1968	A wave of student protests and strikes shook France. Couture continued, but the events showed the gap between the world of the houses and the young. The fashion press discussed whether couture was out of touch (check).
Prêt-à-porter creators	A group of designers who sold ready-to-wear under their own names became known as the *créateurs*: Sonia Rykiel in knitwear (1968), Emmanuelle Khanh, Christiane Bailly, Daniel Hechter and Jean Cacharel (check). Cacharel used Liberty prints from London (check).
Chloé	The house of Gaby Aghion, founded in 1952, offered luxury ready-to-wear from the start, and employed Karl Lagerfeld from the 1960s (check).
The institution	A federation of ready-to-wear makers was formed in the early 1970s, and Paris ready-to-wear shows took their place on the calendar beside couture (check).
Couture's new role	Couture came to be treated as a showcase of craft and prestige, with the money coming from ready-to-wear, perfume and licensing (Chapters 5 and 7).

The Battle of Versailles, 1973

In November 1973 a charity fashion show was held at the Palace of Versailles to raise money for its restoration. Five French designers (including Givenchy, Dior's Marc Bohan, Saint Laurent, Ungaro and Cardin) showed in the first half with elaborate staging. Five American designers (including Halston, Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass and Stephen Burrows) showed in the second half

in a quick, modern show with a mixed cast of models, many of them Black (check). The Americans were widely reported to have won the audience, and the show is cited as the moment when American sportswear challenged Paris. Some accounts are more nuanced and note that the French productions were well received too, and that the event was a charity gala and not a contest (check). It is a good example of a story that has been polished in the retelling (Chapter 10).

The Outsiders

- **Kenzo Takada.** Born in Japan, he arrived in Paris in 1965 and opened a boutique, *Jungle Jap*, in 1970, selling colourful, loose clothes (check). His success opened the way for other Japanese designers.
- **Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto.** Their first Paris shows in 1981 presented black, asymmetric, deliberately unfinished clothes, and surprised and divided the critics (check).
- **Azzedine Alaïa.** Born in Tunisia, he trained there and moved to Paris in the 1950s, worked for Dior and Guy Laroche and built a reputation as a master of the body-fitting cut in the 1980s (check).
- **The pattern.** Paris has always drawn designers from other places: Worth from England, Schiaparelli from Italy, Balenciaga from Spain, Cardin from Italy and, from the 1960s, a growing number from Asia and Africa. The "French" label in fashion has meant a place of work as much as a nationality (Chapter 10).

A British comparison

The British contribution to the 1960s is Mary Quant, whose King's Road shop Bazaar and short skirts shaped the decade, and the boutique Biba and the models Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton (check). The row over who invented the miniskirt has a Scottish footnote: the knitwear firm Pringle of Scotland, from Hawick, supplied cashmere and knit to many designers in the period (check). Cacharel's use of Liberty prints from London is another link, and Paris designers were openly influenced by what was being sold in London shops. An Edinburgh reader might compare the shops of George Street and Princes Street in the 1960s with those of the Left Bank (check).

Check the details

This period was written about at the time and since by people with a stake in the story, including the designers, the press and the houses. Dates of collections, claims of "firsts" and descriptions of events such as Versailles 1973 and May 1968 should be checked against several sources. Statements about what a garment "meant" are interpretations.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Test the claim "Courrèges invented the miniskirt" (or the same claim for Quant) with the six questions, and give a more careful sentence.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Explain why Saint Laurent's Rive Gauche boutique and Le Smoking mattered, and say what sources you would use to test each claim.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Treat the Battle of Versailles as a source problem: list the claims usually made, who made them, and what evidence would test them.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Designers:** Courrèges, Cardin, Rabanne, Saint Laurent, Rykiel, Kenzo, Kawakubo, Yamamoto, Alaïa
- **Dates:** 1964 space age; 1966 Rive Gauche and Le Smoking; 1968 May; 1973 Versailles; 1981 the Japanese shows (check)

- **Shift:** couture sets the line, then street, boutique and ready-to-wear
- **Pattern:** Paris as a workplace for designers from other countries

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · Luxury Groups and Global Brands

Since the 1980s most of the famous French fashion names have belonged to a few large companies. The founders died or sold, businessmen assembled portfolios of brands, and a house that was once a workshop with a designer at the head became a global business with a creative director on a contract. This chapter covers the two great French groups, LVMH and Kering, the family firms that stayed independent, Hermès and Chanel, where the money really comes from, and the British and other foreign designers who have run French houses. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Groups

LVMH

The group was formed in 1987 by the merger of the trunk maker Louis Vuitton and the champagne and cognac firm Moët Hennessy (check). Bernard Arnault, a businessman who had bought the failing textile group Boussac in 1984, and with it Dior (Chapter 5), took control in 1989 after a bitter fight (check). It has since bought Givenchy, Céline, Kenzo, Fendi, Bulgari and Tiffany among many others (check).

Kering

Built by François Pinault from a timber and retail business, the group was known as Pinault-Printemps-Redoute (PPR) until it was renamed Kering in 2013 (check). It bought Gucci in 1999 after a fight with LVMH, and took in Yves Saint Laurent, Balenciaga, Bottega Veneta and Alexander McQueen (check). Pinault's son, François-Henri, took over the running of the group.

The independents

Hermès, founded as a harness maker in 1837, is still controlled by the founding family, and Chanel is owned privately by the Wertheimer family (Chapter 4) (check). Both have stayed out of the big groups, and both are among the most profitable in the industry.

A change in the meaning of "house"

A couture house of 1950 was a firm built round a designer who was its owner and signature. A luxury group's house is a brand that can outlive its founder, with a creative director hired to carry its image. The same name may be used by a series of designers, none of them the founder (Chanel after Lagerfeld, Dior after Dior). That raises the question, discussed in Chapter 10, of what a house actually is.

Where the Money Comes From

Source (check each)	Role
Haute couture	Small in sales, large in prestige. It is often described as loss-making or break-even, a marketing cost for the brand.
Ready-to-wear	A larger share of sales, but the shows and design staff are costly.
Leather goods and accessories	Handbags, belts, shoes and small goods are often the biggest and most profitable part of a luxury fashion house's sales (check).
Perfume and cosmetics	Often made and sold under licence, and sold in great volume. Chanel No. 5 is the classic example (Chapter 4).
Licensing	Selling the name to other firms for products the house does not make. Cardin carried this very far, and some houses later cut back to protect their image (check).
Retail	The group's own shops, which control prices and the experience, and sell to tourists, with Asia a major market (check).

The catwalk show is therefore partly an advertising event: it costs a great deal, and its purpose is to give the brand attention so that customers will buy handbags and perfume. Critics say this has made the shows more about spectacle than clothes (check).

Hermès and the Bag

- **The firm.** Hermès began as a maker of harnesses and riding goods for the carriage trade. It moved into silk scarves (the *carré* of 1937), leather bags and ready-to-wear (check).

- **The Birkin.** The Birkin bag was named for the actress and singer Jane Birkin, who met the Hermès chairman Jean-Louis Dumas on a flight in 1984 and described the bag she wanted (check). The Birkin and the earlier Kelly bag are sold through waiting lists and at very high prices.
- **The method.** Hermès makes most of its leather goods in its own workshops in France, using single craftspeople for each bag (check). It uses scarcity as a strategy and does not discount.
- **The fight.** In 2010 LVMH was found to have built up a stake of over 20 per cent in Hermès without telling the family, who set up a holding company to protect their control. A court dispute followed, and LVMH eventually agreed to distribute most of its shares (check).

Karl Lagerfeld and Foreign Designers

Designer (check each)	Houses
Karl Lagerfeld (German, 1933 to 2019)	Head of Chanel from 1983 until his death, and also of Fendi and his own label. He revived a house that had lost its direction since Chanel's death in 1971 (check).
John Galliano (born in Gibraltar, raised in London)	Givenchy from 1995 and Dior from 1996 until 2011, when Dior dismissed him after he made antisemitic remarks in a Paris bar and was later convicted in a French court of public insults (check).
Alexander McQueen (British, 1969 to 2010)	Head of Givenchy from 1996 to 2001, then his own house, partly owned by Gucci Group from 2000 (check).
Stella McCartney (British)	Chloé from 1997 to 2001, then her own label (check).
Marc Jacobs (American) and Nicolas Ghesquière (French)	Jacobs at Louis Vuitton from 1997 to 2013; Ghesquière at Balenciaga from 1997 to 2012 and then at Louis Vuitton (check).
Maria Grazia Chiuri (Italian)	In 2016 the first woman to lead Dior's women's collections (check).

The pattern is clear: "French fashion" is run to a large extent by designers from elsewhere, working for groups that are French-owned. That also means that the products often depend on supply chains in Italy and Asia as well as France (check).

> **A British comparison**

The British contribution to French houses (Galliano, McQueen, McCartney) is one of the notable facts of the 1990s. In the other direction, French groups have used Scotland as a setting: Chanel showed a collection at Linlithgow Palace in 2012 and Dior showed a cruise collection at Drummond Castle in Perthshire in 2025 (check). Scottish cashmere and tweed mills supply fabric to French and Italian houses, and the groups own or have invested in some of them (check). British luxury names such as Burberry and Mulberry compete with the French groups in the same markets (check).

Check the details

Company histories, ownership stakes and the names of creative directors change often, and some facts here may be out of date. Check ownership, sales and appointments against company reports and the financial press. Statements about profit by product type are estimates, since the groups do not publish all details. The Galliano case should be described only from the court record.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a short paragraph why a luxury house may keep a loss-making couture collection, using the table of income sources.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Compare the strategies of LVMH and Hermès: what does each protect, and what does each risk?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Test the claim "The luxury groups have killed creativity in French fashion" with the six questions.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Groups:** LVMH (1987, Arnault), Kering (Pinault); independents Hermès and Chanel
- **Money:** leather goods, perfume and licensing; couture as prestige
- **Designers:** Lagerfeld, Galliano, McQueen, McCartney, Jacobs, Ghesquière, Chiuri
- **Key idea:** the house as a brand that outlives its founder

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Fashion Calendar and the Media

A dress on a rail is not yet fashion. It becomes fashion when it is shown, photographed, described and bought, and Paris built a whole apparatus for that: a calendar of shows, a press of magazines and critics, photographers who defined the look of each decade, department stores that brought fashion to the public, and a long partnership with cinema and literature. This chapter covers each of these and asks how the press helps to make a designer. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Calendar

The seasons

Paris holds women's ready-to-wear weeks twice a year, in spring (for the next autumn and winter) and in autumn (for the next spring and summer), with couture weeks in January and July and menswear weeks in January and June (check). Collections are shown months before they reach the shops.

The order

The "big four" weeks run in sequence: New York, London, Milan and then Paris, so that Paris ends the cycle. Being last is seen as a mark of status, and designers and buyers travel from city to city (check).

The venues

Shows are held in salons, museums, palaces, tents and unusual locations. The tents in the Louvre's Carrousel and Tuileries gardens became the centre of the shows from the 1990s, and the Grand Palais and other places are now used too (check). The venue is part of the message.

From salon to spectacle

In the early 20th century a house showed its collection to buyers and clients in its salon, with models walking among the chairs. The idea of a staged public show grew through the

century: Poiret toured his models (Chapter 3), the postwar houses held large presentations (Chapter 5), and from the 1990s the shows became media events with celebrities in the front row and online coverage. Today a show may last ten minutes and cost millions, and the audience that matters most is the one that sees pictures of it (Chapter 7).

The Magazines

Title (check each)	Note
Vogue Paris	The French edition of Vogue began in the 1920s and became a showcase for the best photographers (check). It was edited at times by Edmonde Charles-Roux, later a prize-winning novelist, and Carine Roitfeld.
L'Officiel	A fashion magazine founded in 1921 and aimed at the trade and the rich (check).
Marie Claire	A women's magazine launched in 1937 that reached a mass audience (check).
Elle	Founded in 1945 by Hélène Lazareff, it brought fashion to a younger and wider readership and promoted ready-to-wear (check).
The newspapers	*Le Figaro* and *Le Monde* have fashion pages, and the American trade paper *Women's Wear Daily* and the British critic Suzy Menkes, writing for the *International Herald Tribune* and *Vogue*, were highly influential (check).

Editors and critics have real power: their praise helps a young designer to find buyers and backers, and their criticism can hurt. The relationship between the press and the houses is close and, in part, financial, since the magazines depend on advertising from the same houses (check). That is a reason to read fashion journalism as a source with care (Chapter 10).

Photographers and Models

- **The photographers.** Man Ray and Horst P. Horst worked in Paris in the 1930s. After the war Irving Penn photographed Dior's models, and Richard Avedon's picture of the model Dovima in a Dior gown with elephants at the Cirque d'Hiver in 1955 is one of the most reproduced of all fashion photographs (check). Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin made provocative pictures for *Vogue Paris* in the 1960s and 1970s that are admired and debated (check).

- **The mannequins.** The first models were shop assistants and seamstresses who showed clothes to clients. In the 1950s a few became known by name. The supermodels of the 1990s, among them Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell, became celebrities in their own right. Inès de la Fressange was the first contract model of Chanel under Lagerfeld in the 1980s (check).
- **Diversity.** Black models were rare on the Paris catwalks before the 1970s. Mounia, from Martinique, was a muse of Yves Saint Laurent from 1970s, and the Versailles show of 1973 used many Black models (Chapter 6, check). The industry has been criticised for the lack of variety in the size, age and ethnic origin of its models (check).
- **The rules.** A French law of 2015 aimed to prevent very thin models from working, and a 2017 charter signed by LVMH and Kering set a minimum age for models and rules on conditions (check). Chapter 9 returns to the question of working conditions.

Department Stores

Store (check each)	Note
Le Bon Marché	Opened in the 1850s and led by Aristide Boucicaut, it is often called the first modern department store, with fixed prices, free entry and a wide choice (check).
Printemps	Founded in 1865, and known for its fashion departments and its department of couture copies (check).
Galeries Lafayette	Founded in 1894, with a famous glass dome built in 1912 (check).
La Samaritaine	Founded in 1870, closed in 2005 and reopened in 2021 as a luxury shop and hotel under LVMH (check).

The stores made fashion available to the middle class and created the shopper as a type. Émile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883) is set in a fictional department store and gives a vivid picture of its power over its customers and its staff, which is useful for readers of *French Literature* (check).

Cinema and Fashion

- **Givenchy and Hepburn.** The partnership between the designer and the actress Audrey Hepburn gave the house a worldwide image (Chapter 5).
- **Saint Laurent and Deneuve.** Yves Saint Laurent designed the costumes worn by Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour* (1967) and in other films, and she remained a friend and client (check).
- **The New Wave.** Films of the French New Wave made clothes part of their look, and Chanel designed costumes for *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) (check). *French Film & Television* covers these films.
- **Films about fashion.** There are films and documentaries about Chanel, Saint Laurent and Dior, which should be treated as interpretations and checked against sources.

A British comparison

London Fashion Week began in the 1980s under the British Fashion Council, and its place in the calendar between New York and Milan has made it an important showcase for young designers (check). British magazines and critics, from Suzy Menkes to *Vogue UK*, have a direct influence on Paris. In Edinburgh, the annual graduate fashion show of the Edinburgh College of Art is a regular showcase of new talent, and the city's department stores, including Jenners on Princes Street, played the part for Scottish shoppers that Le Bon Marché and Printemps did in Paris (check).

Check the details

Fashion media change quickly, and several of the magazines and venues named here have changed owners, editors and places over time. Check the dates and names of editors and photographers against the publications and archives. Stories about famous pictures and shows are often retold in a polished form, and the circumstances of some photographs are disputed.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain the Paris fashion calendar to a newcomer in a short paragraph, and say why the order of the "big four" matters.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Test the claim "The fashion press makes and breaks designers" with the six questions.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Choose a famous fashion photograph and treat it as a source: what does it show, what does it leave out, and what else would you want to see?

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Calendar:** two ready-to-wear weeks, two couture weeks, two menswear weeks; Paris last of the big four
- **Magazines:** Vogue Paris, L'Officiel, Marie Claire, Elle
- **Pictures:** Man Ray, Horst, Penn, Avedon, Newton, Bourdin
- **Stores:** Le Bon Marché, Printemps, Galeries Lafayette, La Samaritaine

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · Craft, Labour and Ethics

The glamour of the shows depends on people whose names rarely appear: the embroiderers, feather-workers, seamstresses and pattern-cutters of the ateliers, and the factory workers who make the ready-to-wear. This chapter looks at the craft trades behind couture and how they have been protected, at the history of the seamstresses and their strikes, at the supply chains and laws that cover them, and at the arguments about counterfeits, fast fashion and waste. It is written from the record, and all claims about companies are limited to what is documented. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".

The Métiers d'Art

The workshops

Behind each couture house stand specialist workshops called *métiers d'art*: embroidery (Maison Lesage, founded in 1924), feathers and flowers (Lemarié), hats (Maison Michel), shoes (Massaro), gold and costume jewellery (Goossens), buttons and ornaments (Desrues) (check). Many worked for several houses, and Schiaparelli was among Lesage's early clients.

The rescue

By the 1980s many of these small firms were in danger as couture shrank (Chapter 5). From 1985 Chanel began to buy them through a subsidiary, Paraffection, to keep the skills, and bought Lesage and Lemarié in the early 2000s (check). In 2021 the group opened a Paris building, Le 19M, that houses several of them (check). Chanel also bought the Scottish knitwear firm Barrie of Hawick in 2012 (check).

The training

The skills are learned through apprenticeships and schools. The fashion school ESMOD, founded in 1841, is often described as the oldest in the world, and LVMH set up an Institute of Excellence in Crafts in 2014 to train craftspeople (check). The state also gives a label, *Entreprise du*

Patrimoine Vivant, to firms with rare skills (check).

Why the houses buy their suppliers

The groups have a commercial reason to preserve the crafts: handmade work is part of the claim to luxury, and it is hard to find elsewhere. A critic could say that the groups are buying control of scarce skills, and a defender could say that without them the skills would have vanished. Both are true in part, and both can be tested against what happened to firms that were not bought (Exercise 2).

The Seamstresses

- **Petites mains and midinettes.** The workforce of the ateliers was largely female, from the provinces and from abroad. The Paris seamstresses and shop workers were called *midinettes*, because they took their midday break (*midi*) in the street (check).
- **The strikes.** The dressmakers of Paris struck in 1901 and again in 1917, when thousands of women walked out of the houses in May and June for higher pay and shorter hours. One of their demands was the *semaine anglaise*, an "English week" with Saturday afternoons off, borrowed from British practice (check).
- **The exiles.** After the Russian Revolution, Russian women of the aristocracy and others worked as models and embroiderers in Paris, and the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna opened an embroidery house, Kitmir, in 1921 (check). Italian, Spanish and Polish workers were also common in the trade.
- **Today.** Houses report a shortage of skilled workers, and wages and recognition for the trades are discussed. The names of the individual makers of a couture piece are rarely credited, though some houses have begun to name their ateliers (check).

Supply Chains and the Law

Point (check each)	Detail
Made in France	Couture and a share of high-end ready-to-wear is made in France, but most clothing sold under French names is made elsewhere in Europe or Asia. "Made

Point (check each)	Detail
	in France" has legal conditions, but "designed in France" has none.
Subcontracting	Luxury goods are often made by subcontractors, which can be hard to monitor. In 2024 Italian prosecutors placed the subcontractors or subsidiaries of several luxury houses under court supervision for labour practices, and the companies responded and cooperated with the investigations (check). The findings were allegations of the prosecution until tested.
Rana Plaza	The collapse of a clothing factory in Bangladesh in 2013, which killed over a thousand workers, put the working conditions of the global garment industry in front of the public (check).
The duty of vigilance	A French law of 2017 requires very large companies to identify and prevent serious human-rights and environmental harm in their supply chains. It was passed partly because of Rana Plaza (check).
Models	The rules on models' age and weight (Chapter 8) and reports of abuse in the industry from 2017 led to codes of conduct at the major groups (check).

Counterfeits, Fast Fashion and Waste

- **Counterfeits.** French luxury goods are among the most copied in the world. The luxury trade body, the Comité Colbert, founded in 1954 and named after Louis XIV's minister (Chapter 2), represents the houses and lobbies against counterfeits (check). The houses and French customs seize large numbers of fakes each year. Counterfeiting causes losses, but it also works as unwanted advertising, and the real effect on sales is disputed (check).
- **Fast fashion.** Companies such as Zara and the online firm Shein sell cheap copies of catwalk styles within weeks. France has debated laws on "ultra-fast fashion" and a bill passed in the Senate in 2025 (check). The designers of the luxury houses face the same copying issue that Vionnet faced in the 1920s (Chapter 4).
- **Waste.** A French anti-waste law of 2020 bans the destruction of unsold goods from 2022 (check). It followed reports that luxury firms had burned or shredded unsold stock to protect their brand.
- **Sustainability.** The big groups have set targets for emissions and materials, and in 2019 a group of fashion companies signed a "Fashion Pact" at the G7 meeting in Biarritz (check). Critics say that the commitments are voluntary and that a business model based on constant new collections is hard to make sustainable (check).

A British comparison

The British luxury brand Burberry reported in 2018 that it had destroyed unsold goods worth millions of pounds in the previous year, and promised after public criticism to stop (check). Scotland has its own craft protection: the Harris Tweed Act of 1993 defines Harris Tweed as cloth handwoven by islanders in their homes in the Outer Hebrides, a legal label much like the couture one (check). The Hawick knitwear mill Barrie, now owned by Chanel, is another example of how Scottish crafts supply French luxury (check). The semaine anglaise of the 1917 strikes is a reminder that French workers have borrowed from British labour practice.

Check the details

This chapter covers contested and recent matters, and the position of companies and laws changes quickly. Check any claim about a named company against court records, company statements and reliable reporting, and separate allegations from findings. Do not treat an unproven allegation as established. Dates of laws and strikes should be checked against official and academic sources.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain in a short paragraph why a craft such as embroidery needs protection from a fashion house or the state, and what each form of protection risks.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Write a short research note on one métier d'art firm (Lesage, Lemarié, Maison Michel or Barrie): what to find out, where to look and what to treat with caution.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Test the claim "Luxury fashion is ethical because it is handmade in France" with the six questions.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Craft:** Lesage, Lemarié, Maison Michel, Massaro; Chanel's Paraffection and Le 19M
- **Labour:** petites mains, midinettes, the 1917 strike and the semaine anglaise
- **Law:** the duty of vigilance (2017), the anti-waste law (2020), model rules
- **Issues:** counterfeits, fast fashion, unsold goods, sustainability

French Fashion & Haute Couture

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Testing the Legend

Fashion history is full of founders, firsts and slogans: "the father of haute couture", "Chanel freed women", "French chic". This last chapter pulls the course together: a timeline, a table that tests the claims from Chapter 1 against what the course found, a six-question method for testing any claim about fashion, and some advice on reading fashion history as a source. Dates are from the earlier chapters and flagged "check" where they were.

A Timeline of French Fashion

Period	Strand (see chapter)
17th and 18th centuries	Louis XIV, Colbert, Lyon silk, Rose Bertin and the first fashion press (Chapter 2)
1850s to 1914	Worth and the first couture houses; Paquin, Callot, Lanvin; Poiret and the Ballets Russes (Chapters 2 and 3)
1920s to 1945	Chanel, Vionnet, Schiaparelli, Patou; the Depression and the Occupation (Chapter 4)
1947 to 1960	The New Look, Balenciaga, Givenchy and the postwar system (Chapter 5)
1960s to 1981	The youth market, Saint Laurent's Rive Gauche, May 1968, Versailles 1973 and the outsiders (Chapter 6)
1984 onward	The luxury groups, global brands, foreign designers at French houses (Chapter 7)
Throughout	The calendar, the press and the stores; craft, labour and ethics (Chapters 8 and 9)

Myths and Evidence

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
Paris is the capital of fashion.	Defensible for couture and luxury, and as the place where designers from many countries work, but "capital" needs a measure, and Milan, London and New York lead in other respects (Chapters 6 to 8, check).

Claim from Chapter 1	What the course found
Haute couture is a dying art.	Too strong: the number of houses fell sharply after the 1950s, but couture has survived as prestige and a showcase of craft, supported by the luxury groups (Chapters 5, 7 and 9).
Chanel freed women from the corset.	Partly true: she popularised simple, comfortable dress, but Poiret, Vionnet and the dress reformers moved in the same direction, and the changes of war and sport also mattered (Chapters 3 and 4).
The New Look brought glamour back after the war.	True in that it made Paris the centre again, but it was criticised as wasteful, drew on the late 1930s and its meaning for women is argued (Chapter 5).
French women are effortlessly chic.	A marketing image, built by houses, magazines and films, which leaves out effort, money and most French women (Chapters 8 and 9).
The designer is a lone genius.	Misleading: ateliers, craft firms, business teams, press and owners all contribute, and many "French" designers were foreign (Chapters 7 and 9).

Testing a Claim: Six Questions

1. Who says it?

A house, a designer, a magazine, a museum, a historian or a customer? Each has an interest.

2. What exactly is claimed?

Pin down the words: "invented", "first", "freed", "chic". Define them before looking for evidence.

3. What would count as evidence?

Dated garments, photographs, account books, press reports, court records, sales figures. Decide before you look.

4. Compared with what?

Other designers, other cities, other periods. A claim of "first" or "best" needs a comparison.

5. Which period?

6. What would change my mind?

State in advance what finding would count against the claim.

The fashion world of 1858, 1947, 1973 and 2023 differ so much that a claim about "French fashion" needs a date.

Worked example: "French women are effortlessly chic"

1. It is said by fashion houses, magazines, tourist boards and many writers, nearly all of whom sell something. **2.** "French women" means all of them or a type, "effortlessly" means no cost or time, and "chic" is a matter of taste. **3.** Evidence: surveys of what French women spend on clothes and how they shop, studies of dress by region and class, and the history of how the image was built (magazines, films, perfume advertising). **4.** The comparison is with women in other countries and with the same women in other periods. **5.** The image of the 1950s, the 1970s and the present differ. **6.** Surveys showing that French women dress no differently from others, or that the image comes from marketing, would count against it. **Verdict:** not testable as stated; as a description of a national character it is a stereotype, and as a marketing image it is real, powerful and manufactured. A careful sentence names the source: "French fashion marketing presents..." (check).

Fashion History as a Source

- **It records objects,** such as dated garments in museums, which are hard evidence of cut and fabric but rarely of who wore them or how.
- **It records stories,** such as the New Look's naming or Chanel's own life, which are valuable for the image of a house and unreliable as facts (Chapters 4 and 5).
- **It records pictures,** which show an ideal made by a photographer, a magazine and a house, not ordinary dress (Chapter 8).
- **It records money and power.** Ownership, licensing and group strategy show who gained from a name (Chapter 7).
- **It records what is left out.** The petites mains, the foreign designers and the Black models appear late or not at all, and the sources must be read for their silences (Chapters 6, 8 and 9).
- **Method.** Use museum objects and account books for what was made and sold, court and press records for disputes, and the magazines and houses for the image. Say which is which.

A British comparison

The same method works on British fashion legends: "Mary Quant invented the miniskirt", "the trench coat was invented for officers in the First World War" (a claim made for Burberry and for its rival Aquascutum), "Harris Tweed has always been handwoven by islanders", "Savile Row tailoring is the best in the world". Each can be broken down in the same way (who says it, what exactly, what evidence, compared with what, which period, what would change my mind). An Edinburgh reader might try the method on a local claim, such as the age or status of a Scottish knitwear or tweed firm (check).

Check the details

The timeline and tables summarise the earlier chapters, and their "check" items still apply. The verdicts are conclusions from the sources used in this course, not proof, and a different set of sources might shift the emphasis. Ownership, laws and designers' appointments change often.

Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Choose one entry from the myths-and-evidence table (other than the worked example) and apply the six questions to it in a short paragraph for each.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

Take one famous fashion anecdote (the naming of the New Look, Nan Kempner's trouser suit, or another) and test it as a source: what evidence supports it, who told it and when, and what would you want to see?

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

Apply the six questions to a legend about British or Scottish fashion and say what you conclude.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Six questions:** who, what exactly, what evidence, compared with what, which period, what would change my mind
- **Verdict on the legend:** a real and remarkable tradition whose claims need careful wording
- **Sources:** objects and account books for what was made, court and press records for disputes, magazines and houses for the image

Course complete

You have finished *French Fashion & Haute Couture*: the idea of Paris as a fashion capital, the court and the silk trade, Worth and the first houses, Poiret and the Belle Époque, Chanel, Vionnet and Schiaparelli, the New Look, the revolt of the 1960s, the luxury groups, the calendar and the media, craft, labour and ethics, and a method for testing the legend. Related courses include *French Film & Television*, *French Literature*, *French Music*, *Jeux Sans Frontières*, *Franco-Belgian Comics: Bande Dessinée*, *The Tour de France* and *Les Bleus: The History of French Football*.