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Opening Extract from...

London Couture 1923-1975

Written by

Edwina Erhman and Amy de la Haye

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A woman with blonde hair is shown from the chest up, smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly silver or champagne, strapless gown with a large, elaborate floral corsage on the bodice. The corsage features numerous small white flowers and green leaves. She is holding a bouquet of flowers, including red roses and greenery, near her face. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

LONDON COUTURE
1923-1975:
BRITISH LUXURY



LONDON COUTURE 1923-1975: BRITISH LUXURY

EDITED BY
AMY DE LA HAYE & EDWINA EHRLMAN

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images whose copyright does not reside with the V&A, and we are
grateful to the individuals and institutions who have assisted in this
task. Any omissions are entirely unintentional, and the details should be
addressed to V&A Publishing.

Front cover: **XXXX**
Back cover: **XXXX**
Endpapers (front): INCSOC members (clockwise, from top left:
Digby Morton, Charles Creed, Norman Hartnell, Michael, Hardy Amies,
Elspeth Champcommunal of Worth [London], Giuseppe ‘Jo’ Mattli,
John Cavanagh; Victor Stiebel, Morton, Cavanagh, Peter Russell)
as published in British *Vogue*, (March 1953). Photographs by
Norman Parkinson.
Frontispiece: Angele Delanghe, ‘Poinsettia’ ballgown,
lace embroidered with chenille, London, 1953.
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I'd like to think that I was almost born on the steps of a Court dressmaker. Hardy Amies¹

London’s court dressmakers formed the precursor to – and overlapped with – the city’s couture industry as it emerged in the early 1920s. It was in Mayfair, an exclusive residential and luxury trades area, where the two industries became concentrated and converged. Dressmakers and court dressmakers both made fashionable dress. The distinguishing characteristic of a court dressmaker, as the name suggests, was the additional provision of ceremonial dress. In Britain, elite social life revolved around the royal court (see Murphy, pp.247–57), and occasions such as the presentation of debutantes to the monarch, royal weddings and coronations generated numerous orders for etiquette-correct dress, accessories and robes.

Court dressmakers can be divided into three core categories: those established from the outset as court dressmakers (the majority); firms that evolved from menswear tailors; and those operating within department stores. In this chapter, a series of case studies is situated within an analysis of the broader industry, drawing on evidence newly gleaned from London’s street directories. Emphasis is placed upon court dressmakers whose lives intersected with the fashion personnel and houses featured in subsequent chapters. In an era when Paris was considered the international fashion capital above all others, London’s exclusive dressmakers and court dressmakers placed great premium upon Parisian designs. While many of London’s couturiers who came after them initially set up using the title ‘court dressmaker’, it was to be the individual fashion identities they carved out, independent of Paris, that would set them apart.

Looking back to the year 1924, when he was appointed head of *Vogue*’s London office, Harry W. Yoxall wrote in 1966 that, ‘there was no couture in London, except for our branches of Worth and Paquin. Lucille [*sic*] and Reville, our only “native claimants to the title” had both retired.’² In fact they both were still operating, but note the premise that Lucile and Reville (discussed below) were proto-London couturiers.

THE BUSINESS OF DRESSMAKING & COURT DRESSMAKING IN THE METROPOLIS

By the late 1880s, London spanned 122 square miles: it had doubled in size over 50 years and was home to a population of some 4,358,000 people.³ The demand for clothing was huge. London’s geographic and social spaces were commonly divided into the East End, the West End and the City, the latter being the financial and commercial centre. The East End housed thousands of small, labour-intensive clothing production units creating both cheap and luxury garments, and was home to scores of out- and home-workers. Skilled immigrants, many of whom had fled religious and political persecution, had expanded and enriched the workforce, particularly the Jewish community in the East End of London, and many Europeans worked as tailors on Savile Row. Fashion and textiles wholesale and warehousing businesses were primarily located in the City.

Twenty years earlier, in 1863, *Punch* had published a satirical illustration by John Leech titled ‘The Haunted Lady or “the Ghost” in the Looking Glass’. As a client tries on her new, silk-flower-decorated, crinoline gown, the proprietor remarks that – whatever the sacrifice – completion on time had been assured. Looking into the mirror, the client sees not her fashionable self reflected, but the deathly appearance of the exhausted dressmaker who had honoured the deadline.⁴ Such injustices were also highlighted by contemporary social investigators Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Charles Booth, in *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1897), and in 1906 by *The ‘Daily News’ Sweated Industries’ Exhibition*. They later formed the subject of historical studies, such as Christina Walkley’s *The Ghost in the Looking Glass: The Victorian Seamstress* (1981) and *The Sweated Trades: Outwork in Nineteenth-Century Britain* by Duncan Bythell (1987). Less effectively documented are the experiences of permanent employees, engaged within exclusive West End court and dressmaking firms.

2. (previous) Frederick Bosworth, tailored jacket and skirt, wool tweed with leather trim, London, c.1908. Worn with a matching flat cap, for golf, by Miss Heather Firbank. V&A: T.20-D–1960.

3. (opposite) ““Town Life” in Bond Street. After the black & white drawing by Edward King”, c.1904.





SUPPORTING COUTURE:

THE FASHION GROUP
OF GREAT BRITAIN &
THE INCORPORATED SOCIETY
OF LONDON
FASHION DESIGNERS

EDWINA EHRLMAN



The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers (INCSOC; the Society) was incorporated by the Board of Trade on 6 January 1942, in the third year of the Second World War, and dissolved in 1975.¹ Various known as ISLFD and INCSOC, its aims were threefold:

*to maintain and develop the reputation of London as a centre of fashion; to collaborate with groups of fabric and other manufacturers, and with companies, firms and individuals, with a view to increasing the prestige of British fashions, and promoting the sales of British fashions in both home and overseas markets; and to assist fashion designers by protecting their original designs; enabling them to exchange information to their mutual advantage, arranging dates for their respective showings; fostering the professional and trade interests of persons engaged in creating British fashions; developing the standards of skilled workmanship[,] and representing their views to government and trade bodies and to the Press.*²

This chapter draws primarily on the Lilian Hyder Archive, which is housed in the Archive of Art and Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum.³ (Dorothy) Lilian Hyder (1897–1987) was the organizing secretary of INCSOC from around September 1941 to February 1954. (Her successor Ann Ryan was in post from 1956 to 1960. Rosemary Borland, née Chubb, b.1925, of prominent British advertising agency W.S. Crawford Limited, ran INCSOC in the interim.) Hyder's papers include two Minute Books which together cover the period 6 January 1942 to 2 September 1959.⁴ Some pages have been cut from the first volume, with significant losses in 1942, 1943, and 1944–5.⁵ In addition, with no known surviving documents, bar one, from the last 14 years (1962–75) of the Incorporated Society's existence, and dwindling contemporary media interest, it has been impossible to reconstruct its later history.⁶

Margaret Havinden's previously unstudied papers also shed new light on the genesis of the group, the introduction of associate members in 1955, and on forerunner The Fashion Group of Great Britain, to which many members of INCSOC had belonged.⁷ Havinden (née Sangster, 1895–1974, pl.19) was instrumental in the formation of the Society, and its first chairman (March 1941 to April 1942). She was a director of W.S. Crawford Limited, with special responsibility for the fashion industry, which she promoted assiduously throughout her career. The Hyder and Havinden papers have here been supplemented with other archival material, commentary in the press and references to INCSOC in memoirs and diaries.

The founding members of INCSOC were London-based couturiers. They created seasonal collections of original designs, from which private clients could select models to be custom-made, and overseas companies could purchase models for sale, reproduction or adaptation (pl.17; see Kim, pp.217–27; Lassig, pp.229–43). They employed highly skilled staff, who used labour-intensive, hand-sewing techniques to create perfectly fitting, immaculately finished garments. Given the prestige of couture, it is appropriate to ask why the group decided to call themselves 'fashion designers' rather than couturiers.

The answer is unrecorded but the decision was probably political. The wartime government supported the formation of INCSOC, wanting to promote the export of couture clothes, and the fine British textiles from which they were made, to raise hard currency (particularly US dollars), for the war effort. The government was also exploring ways to champion London as a fashion centre with its own identity when the war was over. Ministers realized that they needed to work with a group.⁸ Couture, however, was viewed as a luxury and, from June 1940, the government had introduced measures to reduce the domestic consumption of luxuries in order to divert raw materials and manpower towards exports and war production.⁹ Clothes rationing was introduced on 1 June 1941. Forming a society of couturiers under these circumstances could have been misunderstood as promoting high fashion for the few. The term 'fashion designer' was more neutral, while serving to distinguish the couturiers from London's 'court dressmakers' (see de la Haye, pp.9–27). However, INCSOC's role of promoting couture specifically is implicit in its aim 'to assist fashion designers by protecting their *original* designs'.¹⁰ (Most British 'dressmakers', and all wholesalers, were thought to adapt and



17. (previous) 'London Spring 1951: Fashion Lines, Fashion Trends', *The Ambassador* (1951), no.3. V&A: AAD/1987/1.

18. (opposite) Fashions by Owen Hyde-Clark for Worth (London) and Hardy Amies (right), 'In London', *British Vogue* (March 1955). Photograph by Norman Parkinson.

19. Mario Bucovich (1884–1947), portrait of Margaret Havinden, 1936. Private collection.



Norman Hartnell

JANE HATTRICK



45/6. Mr Owen for Lachasse, skirt suit (and co-ordinating hat), wool tweed (suit) and felt and cock feathers (hat), London, 1950. V&A: T.213-C–1976.

47. (opposite) Michael at Lachasse, original sketch for Lady Hore-Belisha, pen and pencil on headed notepaper, early 1950s. Private collection.

Another Irishman, ‘Mr Owen’ (in private life the Marquis MacSwiney of Mashanaglass, a papal title) designed under the label ‘Owen at Lachasse’, succeeding Michael (pls 45/6). Like him, Owen created ‘lines’ each season, perhaps his strongest being the ‘Scarab’ line of the Autumn/ Winter 1956 collection. Naturally, he favoured Irish tweeds, though he also introduced modernist printed textiles by innovative company Ascher and jewel-coloured mohair tweeds by Bernat Klein. Clive Evans, who had trained with Michael in Carlos Place, joined in 1958 and became assistant to Owen (but was only permitted to design blouses and then dresses), leaving the next year to go to Cavanagh (see Eck, pp.181–9) before opening his own house in 1963, just at the time when established houses were closing. It was a sign of the times that both Giuseppe ‘Jo’ Mattli (see Ness, pp.147–9) and Creed came to Lachasse for business advice, and an indication of the strength and loyalty of Lachasse’s clientele (and the appeal of its collections) that as a small house, with latterly virtually no fashion-press profile, it was able to continue trading successfully for so long, while others faltered. In 1960, British *Vogue* summed up the lasting appeal of Lachasse couture: ‘The luxury you find here is not the kind that flaunts itself in outward display.... Rather it’s a controlled generosity in the handling of beautiful fabrics, a refusal to skimp on workmanship or details, even unseen ones – a costume’s lining may be one of its chief attractions.’¹⁰

The last designer–director, Peter Lewis-Crown, who took the helm in 1964 and subsequently became sole owner, introduced a ready-to-wear element in 1981, but up until this point, and exceptionally, Lachasse had remained exclusively a couture house for more than 50 years. Over time, as others’ fortunes had ebbed, Lachasse became in Lewis-Crown’s words, ‘an elegant octopus’,¹¹ taking in couture businesses, including two milliners, former INCSOC member Angele Delanghe (see Faiers, pp.143–4), who was invited by the directors to put six to nine of her own softer dresses and blouses into Owen’s collections under the Lachasse label during the 1960s), and, lastly, London-based Japanese designer Yuki (b.Gnyuki Torimaru, 1937), who worked from rented space above the Lachasse workrooms during the 1980s. The house moved to Thurloe Place, South Kensington, in 1986, and couture business was still good (Baroness Thatcher, 1925–2013, was among the clientele). It was only in 2007, when many of his workforce were about to retire, that the dearth of sufficiently skilled workers to replace them, coupled with a series of ‘outlandish’ rent rises, caused the sprightly and charming Lewis-Crown finally to close the books.

Edwina Ehrman, especially, helped establish the foundation date for Lachasse and made departmental material and her own articles available to me. Peter Lewis Crown OBE kindly shared his memories of Lachasse and allowed the use of original, previously unpublished Lachasse sketches from his personal archive, Clive Evans talked to me about his time at Lachasse, Suki Bishop kindly loaned material from her private Digby Morton archive, Austin Mutti-Mewse at the Hardy Amies Archive was similarly very helpful, allowing me to view press books and use original images, and Rosemary Harden and Elaine Uttley at the Fashion Museum, Bath, gave me access to their Lachasse archive. Peter Winning, librarian at the London College of Fashion also kindly facilitated my research.





PETER RUSSELL

JOANNA HASHAGEN

Peter Russell (1886–1966) is rarely mentioned in books on twentieth-century fashion, but between 1932 and 1953 the fashion press regularly featured his work. He was known for clever, sophisticated tailoring and impressive court and evening gowns in new fabrics and rich, unusual colours.

Russell was reported to have learnt to draw entirely from studying illustrations in *Vogue* magazines.¹ However, his army record shows his occupation in 1915 as a costume designer, listing his employer as Henry Reece & Co., London, which suggests some formal training.² Returning from the First World War, Russell went to Malaya (now Malaysia) to be a rubber planter. There, he said, he discovered that he had a talent for design, creating evening gowns for the English wives to wear at Government House Balls.³

There is a scarcity of sources regarding Russell’s career, especially from the 1920s, but in 1930 he advertised for staff in *The Times* and appeared to be established as a dress designer at ‘Peter’s Studio’, in Regent’s Park, London. From 1932, *Harper’s Bazaar* featured his designs for day, evening and wedding dresses. He advertised for more staff in 1933 and took on Michael Sherard (see Davies-Strodger, pp.155–7) as his apprentice.⁴ Russell first became known as a court dressmaker; there are numerous entries in *The Times* ‘Court Circular’ column from 1930 to 1939, describing his elaborate presentation gowns and listing the names of his elite clients. One of eleven women dressed by Russell for the royal court on 16 May 1934 was Victoria Weld-Forester, who wore ‘a gown of gold and parchment tinted brocade with a classical sun-rayed [pleated] skirt forming a train. A court train of sun-rayed gold tissue. Peter Russell Ltd. 1, Bruton St. W.’⁵

Russell’s successful entry into the London couture world, on return from Malaya, ‘with only £20 capital’, is hard to explain, unless he had not only financial backing but an entrée into high society.⁶ It is possible that his mother may have given him such an introduction, through her employers. Russell’s mother was in service in London before her marriage, as a lady’s maid to the daughter of Edward Fellowes MP of Felthorpe Hall, Norfolk. Her employer was very well connected through a brother, who married a daughter of the seventh Duke of Marlborough. A possible financial backer was Henry Russell (1871–1937), an internationally renowned impresario, perhaps a distant relation. He was a rich and influential man whose third wife was a member of the aristocracy (Lady Patricia, a daughter of the second Marquess of Dufferin). Faith Bevan (b.c.1896, fl.1920–5), a successful silent movie actress, was an early business partner; though in 1933 she put a notice in *The Times*, to disassociate herself from Peter Russell Ltd.⁷

Despite this, Russell went from strength to strength. In August 1934, *The Times* ‘Court & Social’ column announced that Peter Russell was visiting Mr Henry and Lady Patricia Russell at Deauville, to design Lady



48. (opposite) Peter Russell, evening dress, pleated rayon satin, and separate satin petticoat (not shown), London, c.1937. V&A: T.56&A–1979. Given by Mr. Julian Orbach, the grandson of the weaver Mrs. Vera Orbach.

49. Peter Russell, label inside a wool coat (part of an evening ensemble), London, 1937. V&A: T.362–1974. Given by Mrs John Fraser.



Charles James

TIMOTHY A. LONG

of the house, recalling that, at Grosvenor Street, the firm occupied nine workshops – five for dressmaking, two for tailoring and one each for millinery and fur. The embroiderers undertook work for them all (clients’ monograms were embroidered into fur coats, and they made hat-pins).⁵ A striking and very modern evening dress housed at Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, dating from c.1938, is made from a metallic woven shawl fabric in blocks of green and red, with stylized floral and paisley motifs in gold metal thread, which is probably Indian (pl.90).

During the Second World War, the young Hardy Amies (see Whyman, pp.xx–xx) entered into an arrangement whereby he showed his models in ‘a small corner of the downstairs showroom’ at Worth (London) and obtained a commission on orders placed.⁶ His fine tailoring would have provided a foil to Champcommunal’s dressmaking skills. Both were among the designers who contributed prototype designs to the 1942 Utility Clothing Scheme, introduced by the British Board of Trade to provide affordable, durable clothing from limited supplies of textiles available during the war. As embroidery was considered an unnecessary extravagance, Miss Gordon was transferred to a dressmaking workroom, where staff made garments, presumably designed by Champcommunal or Amies, using clients’ curtains and bed-covers.

In 1945, Worth (London), was acquired by Paquin Ltd. For that Spring/Summer, a new ‘Junior Collection’ included dresses in strawberry pink and pale blue printed rayon. As materials shortages continued into peacetime, old embroideries were unpicked and the beads re-used. Miss Gordon became head of the embroidery department in 1948: she preserved and subsequently donated to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, many of her samples (pl.91).

Worth (London) was best known for romantic, silk-satin evening gowns. For Spring/Summer 1949, Champcommunal designed a pale-grey and lavender balldress with three deep folds below the waist and pale-pink tulle swathed across the bodice and one shoulder. The following summer she offered a pink silk-satin ballgown with bunches of artificial violets on the strapless side of the décolletage and in the pannier. In May 1952 *Harper’s Bazaar* recommended Worth (London)’s cerise silk-tussore coat (which had a bell-shaped skirt), and a spotted dress in stone-coloured taffeta, teamed with a matching cerise straw bonnet by Vernier, to wear at Henley.⁷ Worth (London)’s sculptural ‘melon sleeves’ were also much commented upon that season.

In 1953, Owen Hyde-Clark was engaged to design ready-to-wear collections. He had trained with Maggy Rouff in Paris and at Bradley’s in London, and created film costumes. From 1955, around the time Champcommunal retired, he also designed couture garments. The V&A houses five evening dresses (pl.88, two short ingénue and three models for more mature women) and one wedding dress designed by Hyde-Clark, dating from between 1955 and 1961, and some fashion drawings by Marcel Fromenti of his models for *The Lady*.

Joan Forsberg went to work as an assistant gown-hand at Worth (London) the year Hyde-Clark started. She remembers him as a ‘real English gentleman’ and fine tailor (there are fewer examples of tailored daywear in museum collections). She also remembers that a friend of hers later had her ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) uniform made by Worth (London).⁸

In 1957, Worth (London) opened two new departments at the Grosvenor Street house: Worth Boutique and Miss Worth (the ready-to-wear workrooms were situated elsewhere). Alison Adburgham reported:

*Behind its intimidating portal the Miss Worth clothes and accessories are happily informal and inexpensive, although exclusively designed by a Madame Bery – not to be picked up elsewhere. The idea is to provide the happy hunting ground for the daughters of couture clients who having married are no longer dressed by the substantial, if reluctant, parental purse.*⁹

Sales of these garments contributed to the firm’s record sales that year. (Further information about Madame Bery, other than that she was Viennese, could not be found.) The director’s annual report noted, ‘Continued emphasis will be given in future to these new developments so that the Worth business is placed on a wider foundation.’¹⁰

The following year, 1958, Hyde-Clark received extensive publicity for the wedding dress he designed for Lord Louis Mountbatten’s daughter Pamela; he himself married Maureen Elay Williamson (1916–65), an editor at *Flair* magazine. Worth (London) celebrated the firm’s centenary: the Autumn show comprised 76 outfits, each named using the first letter W – ‘Worthwhile’, ‘Wistful’, ‘Winterhalter’, ‘West End’.

By the early 1960s the firm was suffering, a consequence of both the high costs of making couture clothing and competition from exclusive ready-to-wear firms. In 1967, Worth (London) Ltd ceased trading. Paquin Ltd sold the Worth name to American entrepreneur Sidney Massin, who briefly re-launched the label in 1968.

I would like to thank the staff at the V&A’s Archive of Art and Design; Cassie Strodder-Davies for introducing me to Mrs Joan Forsberg; Edwina Ehrman for genealogical research on Madame Champcommunal; and Martin Pel at Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove, for providing access to, and arranging photography of, the 1930s dress shown opposite.

91. Miss Eveline Gordon for Worth (London), embroidered chiffon with appliqué taffeta and rhinestones and beads, London, 1935. T.247–1986. Given by Miss E. Gordon.



DIGBY MORTON

EDWINA EHRLMAN



Rahvis *Gobel*
Geffers *Lutyens*
ETCHES *Delanghe*

JONATHAN FAIERS



172. (*opposite*) (left to right) Norman Hartnell, suit, wool, fur, metal and glass (embroidery), London, late 1930s; anonymous, suit, wool and synthetic fibre, London, 1930s; Miss Cooke, suit, wool and silk, London, late 1930s. Museum of London: 82.692a-c, 82.695a-d, 82.693a-b.
173. Myra Alice (née Newton), Lady Fox, half-plate film negative, 19 October 1977. Photograph by Bassano Ltd. National Portrait Gallery: NPG x173850.



FASHION ILLUSTRATION & PHOTOGRAPHY

ORIOLE CULLEN



‘Mrs Piozzi’, Mosca, Russell and Delanghe’s draped and bustled ‘fish-wife skirts’ and a medieval-style red dinner dress embellished with Victorian embroidery by Victor Stiebel (see de la Haye, pp.85-97).

This spirited challenge to the perception of London couture as irrevocably lost in its tailored past, is continued the following year in the justly celebrated ‘renaissance’ article in British *Vogue* (pl.239). Magnificent photographs by American Clifford Coffin (1913–72) show mannequins including Wenda Rogerson (1923–87, who married photographer Norman Parkinson that year), in Rahvis, Molyneux and Russell outfits amid the bombed-out shell of a Mayfair mansion.¹¹ Yet, among the loaded visual metaphors of the glamorous phoenix rising from the rubble of the Blitz, the narrative takes a decidedly fatalistic tone, unconvinced by its own promise of a new life for couture and the London season, so that the impossible contrast between Rahvis’ pink faille and black lace gown and the dilapidated grandeur of Mayfair only makes sense as a yearning for what will never be. Or, as the enigmatic editorial ponders, ‘whether she was more of substance than of shadow we cannot guess’, finally warning that ‘the future holds equal hope and hazard’. Prophetic words, as it transpires, for although these articles express the desire for London couture to slough off its tailored carapace, they are also saturated with the industry’s ongoing stasis, which would, in turn, compromise its ability to turn this romantic fantasy into a fashion reality.

A RETURN TO TAILORING: THE LONDON LOOK

By the 1950s, press coverage had to all intents and purposes relinquished any claim it might once have made for London couture as a serious rival to its Parisian counterpart. Articles consigned couture to an immaculately tailored, timeless world, in which elegant and discreet women wore smart suits, impeccable overcoats and grand ballgowns. The journalists’ need for news had to be satisfied by the meagre rations of innovation exemplified by variations in colour and weight of the obligatory tweeds and wools that proved so popular with overseas clients. Discussions concerning minor modifications to the shape of a collar, or length of a jacket were magnified into significant sartorial changes of direction. This arid landscape, as is so often the case, produced startling and ground-breaking results, and saw the emergence of some of the most perceptive writing, and editorial direction, applied to what in many instances were variations on a well-known theme – the incessantly applauded ‘London look’.¹² This ‘look’ was, in the majority of articles at the time, a form of journalistic code for masculine tailoring, and, in the press at least, was made to seem relevant only by innovative art direction or by contrast to more excessive Parisian creations.

Again, Walter Benjamin’s understanding of fashion – as a series of failed love affairs, the previous season’s fashion reassessed as unattractive in order to make way for its successors – is useful here to highlight by contrast London couture’s eternal romance with tailoring, running counter to his suggestion that ‘each generation experiences the fashions of the one immediately preceding it as the most radical anti-aphrodisiac imaginable’.¹³ London’s tireless loyalty to the tailor-made, its inability to fall out of love with the suit and move on to fashionable pastures new, became an obsession; fashion understood as the fetishized details of cut, and tailored modulation, is devoid of the ‘bitter satire on love’ Benjamin suggests is necessary to the maintenance of fashion’s cycles.¹⁴

A brief survey of articles from this period is instructive: Nina Batchelor’s article for *The Times* in 1947 titled ‘Britain’s Place in Fashion: The Home of the Tailor-Made’ is an early corrective to any fickle flirtation with fashion as innovation seen in the *Vogue* articles of the brief postwar renaissance. By 1951 and *Picture Post*’s ‘The London Look is Tailored’ (written by Marjorie Beckett again, pl.244), the ‘timelessness’ of London fashion is re-established.¹⁵ Beckett informs her readers that ‘post-war [sic] exuberance has subsided’ and in its place is a ‘line without affectation or exaggeration. Above all, a tailored line – a line at which London excels’, commenting that ‘most women will



242. (opposite) ‘Who Buys Our Best Clothes?’, *Picture Post* (5 March 1949).
243. ‘The London look is tailored’, *Picture Post* (3 March 1951).





CONCLUSION

AMY DE LA HAYE & EDWINA EHRMAN

In 2013, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in Paris invited the London-based couture house Ralph & Russo, established in 2007 by Australians Tamara Ralph and Michael Russo, to show its collection on the official *haute couture* schedule. Lucile (see de la Haye, pp.25–7) in 1915 and the milliner Philip Treacy (see Stemp, p.309) in 2000 are among the very few London houses to have received this signal honour. Russo describes his business as a global company with a London location that enables him to draw on the pool of highly skilled craftsmen from across the world who live in the city. ‘We make everything in Britain and we pride ourselves on that – it’s very important, as it allows us to control the quality.’ In the same interview, Russo spoke of the length of time taken to create a single garment, its potential longevity in a client’s wardrobe and the ‘timeless’ nature of such garments, in an allusion to their intrinsic value.¹

Other London-based couturiers include long-established firms such as Bruce Oldfield (est.1975), Catherine Walker & Co. (est.1976), Thomasz Starzewski (est.1981) and Amanda Wakeley (est.1990). Less well-known are successful houses Anna Valentine (formerly Robinson Valentine, est.1988) and Ulrich Engler (est.1991). The industry is also attracting talented newcomers. Nicholas Oakwell (Nicholas Oakwell Couture, est.2011), specifies the photography of Cecil Beaton (1904–80) and 1950s couture garments by Charles James (see Long, pp.71–83) among his stylistic reference points.

Russo’s description of his company is a reminder not only of the global migration of skills from which the British fashion industry has benefitted for decades, but also of the new worldwide audience for couture – in emerging markets, and new centres of production. While Paris remains the epicentre for luxurious *haute couture* clothing, with all the kudos

that term brings, serving a tiny international clientele of some 2,000 women – many from China, the Middle East, Russia and Brazil – there are other emerging regional centres of couture able to draw on exceptional hand-craftsmanship and artisanal skills. These include Singapore, where the Asian Couture Federation holds seasonal shows, and Delhi, the home of Delhi Couture Week, which operates under the auspices of the Fashion Design Council of India. Both events feature garments created for the cultural and social needs of their regional client base by designers who are acclaimed in their own countries.² In Europe, while Italy’s houses offering *alta moda* and their highly specialist staff are represented by Altaroma, London remains without an equivalent.

In Paris, even following the worldwide depression of 2008, the fortunes of the houses presenting *haute couture* are reported to be rising.³ For the big brands such as Chanel and Dior this is due not to clothing sales (even though an *haute couture* ensemble can easily cost £50,000), but to the highly lucrative profits generated by licensed goods, which glamour-laden *haute couture* shows and their attendant media attention secure. In London, while some £100 million-worth of orders are placed for London fashion annually and the industry as a whole was worth around £26 billion to the British economy in 2013, figures relating to the city’s couture industry are hard to come by.⁴ Small in scale, its success depends largely on the high levels of personal service couture offers and the potential for a strong designer–client relationship. In a globalized world in which the exclusivity of couture remains a unique signifier of wealth, status and taste, it is encouraging that couture houses like Ralph & Russo and Catherine Walker & Co. find both the skills they need to create luxurious, hand-crafted, custom-made clothing and a suitable location for headquarters in London.

258. Ralph & Russo couture at *Fashion in Motion*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 17 October 2014.