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Colleen Hill, *Paris Refashioned 1957-1968*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. 248 pp. 130 figures, notes, and bibliography. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780300226072

Review by Sima Godfrey, University of British Columbia.

Colleen Hill's handsome volume, *Paris Refashioned 1957-1968*, is the companion book to an exhibition the author curated at the Fashion Institute of Technology in early 2017. Hill introduces the book with a lengthy historical, cultural and technical overview of the changing face of French fashion during the eleven years covered by the exhibition. Four brief essays by fashion historians follow, with reflections on the political context, two *couturiers*—Cristobál Balenciaga and Yves Saint Laurent—and the French fashion press from 1956-1965. The purpose of the book is to provide a detailed look at the combined influence of French haute couture, ready-to-wear, and popular culture during this era. [1] More specifically the book focuses on the transformations of the Parisian couture industry that occurred alongside the emergence of a ready-to-wear fashion industry that asserted its own cachet and catered to a new generation of female consumers. Ready-to-wear or ready-made clothing had existed in France since the late 19th century. (In fact, the term “ready-made” that Marcel Duchamp chose to characterize his art works in the early 20th century came from the clothing industry where it described items that were manufactured as opposed to being handmade.) The period covered in *Paris Refashioned* marks the final destigmatization and positive reorientation of that term for French women.

The book, like the exhibition, is built around selections from the extensive collection of French fashion held by FIT with a particular focus on the sixties. In some instances, the clothing in question is identified with the celebrity who wore and donated it to the museum, as is the case of a mini-dress by Pierre Cardin worn by Lauren Bacall that furthered his reputation as an avant-garde couturier (p. 67). More examples of the successful twinning of actresses and French couturiers reinforce the intersection of fashion, cinema and popular culture in the 1960s: Brigitte Bardot and Jacques Esterel (the pink gingham wedding dress, 1959), Catherine Deneuve and Yves Saint Laurent (“Belle de Jour,” 1967), Audrey Hepburn and Hubert de Givenchy (the iconic black dress in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” 1961), among others. Less familiar to American readers perhaps is the association of youthful French fashion of the sixties with the iconic “yé-yé” girls of French pop music, Françoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan.

Paris Refashioned 1957-1968 tells the story of how French couture reinvented itself during this period with, among other things, the creation of the couture boutique that defined a new aesthetic and catered to a new demographic. Emma McClendon reminds us in her essay, “Branding the Boutique: Saint Laurent and His Rive Gauche,” that whereas the *maisons de haute couture* were clustered on the Right Bank, when Yves Saint Laurent created his ready-to-wear line in 1966, he named it Rive Gauche and located his boutique in that part of Paris as well. Although there were strong links between items in the Yves Saint Laurent boutique and latest couture collections, Rive Gauche capitalized on connotations of youth, bohemianism, counterculture and creativity. *Haute couture* was associated with a century-old tradition of labor-intensive, impeccable, customized elegance; designer experiments in more youthful, democratic ready-made clothing placed fashion on the margins of art and industry. Pierre Cardin

predicted that the word “laboratory” would replace “atelier” and, indeed, Yves Saint Laurent viewed his ready-to-wear line, Rive Gauche, as a “laboratory” for his ideas.

The rise in fashionable ready-to-wear reflected not simply changing economic and material conditions in the industry, but also the changing role of women in French society. Hill quotes Pierre Bourdieu’s comment on André Courrèges who had emerged from the world of couture with new ideas: “Courrèges made statements that went well beyond fashion: he was no longer talking about fashion, but about the modern woman, who had to be free, uninhibited, sporty, relaxed” (p. 74). In the final essay of the book, “Paris, Prêt-à-Porter, and Women in the French Fashion Press, 1956-1965,” Alexis Romano illustrates the changing image of those “free, uninhibited, sporty, relaxed” women that the fashion press conveyed not simply through the dresses they wore, but also through the way they were photographed against a backdrop of modern urban change. Whereas in the fifties couture-dressed women might be typically photographed near iconic French monuments that mythologized Paris fashion prestige, by the early sixties photographs of active women dressed in stylish ready-to-wear represented women’s existence almost photojournalistically in the everyday, non-iconic city. Such representations affirmed that it was not just the standards of feminine dress that had changed but the feminine sphere itself. The October 1960 issue of *Elle* magazine thus offers images of hurried women moving in and out of cafés, telephone booths, offices, etc. (p. 235). Romano’s is the essay that most explicitly tackles questions regarding the representations of women as opposed to clothing. One regrets all the more that in Hill’s text which details the move from the masters of haute couture to the “stylistes” of ready-to-wear, more consideration is not given to the fact that whereas virtually all of the former were men—Balenciaga, Saint Laurent, Courrèges, Cardin—many of the new innovators of ready-made fashion were women, including Emmanuelle Khanh, Christiane Bailly, Michèle Rosier, and Sonia Rykiel. The new feminine sphere would be increasingly defined and defended by women.

Hill’s selected parameters of 1957 and 1968 span the period from the sudden death of Christian Dior (and the ascension of 21-year-old Yves Saint Laurent to take his place) to the opening of Courrèges’ first ready-to-wear boutique in New York and the simultaneous closing of the couture house of Balenciaga in Paris. But the death knell of the *maison de haute couture* had already rung in 1956, a year before Hill’s starting date, when the House of Worth—the first Parisian *maison de haute couture*, founded by Charles Worth in 1858—shut down its couture operations. Hill quotes Gilles Lipovetsky: “The golden age of modern fashion had Parisian haute couture at its epicentre ... This aristocratic and centralized phase is over” (p. 161). The closing of the House of Balenciaga in 1968 dramatized this. Despite the industry’s dramatic changes, as Patricia Mears notes in her essay “Balenciaga in the 1960s: Beyond Fashion,” the master couturier and mentor to many of the younger fashion designers continued to design for mature woman as opposed to responding to a young fashionable ideal. By 1968 he acknowledged that it had become impossible to create true couture; the future of fashion was in ready-to-wear, a path he would not follow. He was, furthermore, unnerved by the student riots of May 1968, that signaled to him the conclusive end of an era.

Valerie Steele’s essay “May ’68,” addresses these events and asks what impact they may have had on fashion. The language of revolution—minus the politics—was enthusiastically co-opted by the fashion press. Two months after the riots of May *Women’s Wear Daily* reported on the couture collections: “There was another Revolution in Paris Monday. Yves Saint Laurent has put women in pantsuits and virtually given up dresses in his new collection ... Close friends of Saint Laurent say he was deeply moved by the student revolt and his own revolution is a reaction.” (p. 171) Saint Laurent’s longtime business partner, Pierre Bergé, insisted that Saint Laurent was not particularly inspired by the May ’68 events and he had been designing pantsuits and jumpsuits as early as 1966. Nevertheless, in September 1968, *Women’s Wear Daily* again declared: “YVES SAINT LAURENT IS THE YOUNG LEADER OF FASHION REVOLUTIONARIES.” For all the revolutionary rhetoric, Steele notes, press images of the Paris Fall 1968 fashions, both couture and ready-to-wear, showed little obvious influence from the events. It was the image—as opposed to the fact—of revolution that had sales market appeal. (One can only imagine how students protesting capitalism and consumerism in May ’68 would have responded to

the equation of revolutionary action with putting women in pantsuits.) In the end, May '68 remained an iconic image of youthful rebellion and, as Steele notes, "that is something that will always be an inspiration to fashion." To the extent that the legacies of both revolution and (high) fashion play a role in the imagined construction of Frenchness, as we reassess the events of May '68 with the hindsight of 50 years, the idea of revolutionary fashion invites us to question the fashionability of revolution itself.

Paris Refashioned 1957-1968 is first and foremost a book of fashion history. Although much of the contextual territory it covers will be familiar to students of French social and cultural history, for those same students the description of the French fashion establishment and its transformations offers insight into a less familiar chapter of the social history of post-war France. For students of fashion history, on the other hand, for whom the sixties are invariably associated with "swinging" London, this book offers an unexpected vision of the sixties seen through a French fashion lens, complete with the space age aesthetics of Pierre Cardin and André Courrèges. (It was Courrèges who designed the famous streamlined white boots that closed with vertical strips of Velcro, a relatively new product used by NASA.) On the heels of reading this book, it is all the more ironic for the reader in 2018 that in a parallel twist, Paul Thomas Anderson's recent British fashion film, "Phantom Thread," starring Daniel Day Lewis, mythologizes the aristocratic world of midcentury British haute couture before the swinging revolution of Mary Quant and her allies descended on Carnaby Street.

NOTES

[1] <http://www.fitnyc.edu/museum/exhibitions/paris-refashioned.php>

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