

Charles Worth and the Advent of Haute Couture

In the 1800's, before Charles Worth and his revolutionary ideas, royals and well known ladies told the dressmakers or couturiers what they wished to wear. The couturiers then sewed the outfits to fit their client's specifications.

Then, in the mid-1800's, entered onto the scene, Charles Worth who is know today as the Father of Haute Couture.

Born in England, he moved to Paris at the age of 20. Already skilled in the art of textiles and the supplying dressmakers, he became a seller for Gagelin, a prominent textile supplier.

During this time, he had begin creating his own unique designs, which he exhibited at the Great Exposition in London during 1851, and the Exposition Universelle that was held in Paris in 1855. He was said to use his wife as a model to show off his own unique designs. Due to the success of his designs, in 1858, he opened his own business with the help of a partner.

Around that time, France restored their royal house, elevating Emperor Napoleon III to the throne. When he married Empress Eugenie, her taste in style set the stage for what the entire court would wear. Her love of Charles Worth's designs and therefore patronage, assured his success and he became a popular dressmaker, and was named her Royal Dressmaker in 1860.

Charles Worth revolutionized the couture industry in this way. He designed his own unique clothing, and the ladies and royals would come to him, chose his designs (from live models, another on of his ideas) and then be fitted. Due to the immense amount of clothing a lady would need throughout the day, this could result in quite a large order. Ladies needed morning dresses, afternoon dresses, evening dresses, tea dresses, dressing gowns, special event dresses such as wedding and ball dresses. Ladies from as far away as America journeyed to Paris to have Worth design and fit dresses just for them.

His attention to detail, the lavishness of his costumes, the inclusion of historical details, and very importantly, his attention to the fit of the dress all led to his renown. Not only did he dress the royals and ladies of the day, he also outfitted many famous actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtry.

In order to maintain the high standard he had set for himself while allowing new up and coming designers (or Houses), he created the Chambre Syndicate in 1868. This initially was created to stop the copying of his designs, but later set forth standards by which new designers could reach the designation of Haute Couture, a label signifying extreme attention to detail and style, the creation of new and innovated designs.

The House of Worth continued successfully for many years, finally disappearing when Charles Worth's great-grandson retired from the family business in 1952. However, we can now thank Mr. Worth for setting standards and allowing the creation of great designers that we know today such as Chanel, Yves St. Laurent, Givency, and Christian Dior to name a few.

As a closing note, let me mention that while there at one time were over 100 "Houses" of design that met the strict rules of the Syndicate, there are now only about 9. There is hope that new designers of today will breathe life back in Haute Couture and that it may continue for many years to come.



Evening Dresses designed by Charles Worth



Day Dress by Charles Worth



Another Evening Dress by Charles Worth

I couldn't find just one link that showcased many of his dresses, but this one, <http://www.metmuseum.org/search/iquery.asp> does have several. To view an array of his dresses, go to Google Images and type in Charles Worth. You will be met by an array of pictures, showcasing his work. Due to his popularity, many of his works have survived.