

FEATURES

NO CREATIVE CRUNCH AT FASHION WEEK

Designers delivered opulent collections that transported viewers from a world of economic woe into a world of fantasy

BY JENNY BARCHFIELD
AP, PARIS

Looking at the shows that kicked off Paris' haute couture week on Monday, you'd never know the world was the midst of the most serious financial turmoil since the Great Depression.

Designers here delivered opulent, flamboyant collections that, instead of reflecting the gloomy economic reality, transported the viewer into a world of beauty and fantasy.

"My job is to make women dream," Christian Dior designer John Galliano said. "Of course I'm aware of the credit crunch, but it is not a creative crunch — not at the house of Dior, anyway." Galliano sent out voluptuous skirt suits and sculptural evening gowns that took their inspiration from 17th-century Dutch painters like Johannes Vermeer.

French designer Stephane Rolland — a newcomer to the elite club of made-to-measure labels — also went big, with a collection that played on volume through the use of ingenious bustles and capes.

Giorgio Armani Prive, the celebrated Italian designer's couture label, looked east for inspiration, delivering a distinctly Chinese-flavored collection.

Grand spectacles, the haute couture shows garner huge publicity for the handful of labels that still offer made-to-measure garments — which cost upward of \$10,000 apiece.

Yesterday's spring-summer presentations included shows by Chanel, Christian Lacroix and Givenchy.

CHRISTIAN DIOR

Duchess lace, delicate blue-and-white porcelain and other Flemish fineries recovered their long-lost status as the ultimate luxury goods in Christian Dior's majestic Vermeer-inspired show.

Designer Galliano said he was struck by the pose of subjects in paintings by the 17th-century Dutch master and his contemporaries — and by their palette of luminous blues, yellows and creamy whites.

Ever the magpie, Galliano plucked pieces from the bourgeois Flemish wardrobe — the oversize lace collars, the droopy puff sleeves, the fitted bodices — and adapted them to the labels' hallmark skirt suit, which was created by Christian Dior in the 1940s.

The notes proclaimed the spring-summer collection "More Dior than Dior," and perhaps it just was. Waspwaisted jackets with big sleeves and even bigger hips were paired with ultravoluminous skirts that used bonework on the hems to retain their four-leaf clover shape.

Ruffles abounded, draped over jacket necklines, bouncing off the seat and dripping down hemlines. The skirt of one slate blue suit was entirely covered in looped ruffles. Indigo flowers on the inside of another skirt — in ecru — made the garment look like a Flemish porcelain bowl turned upside-down.

Burlesque star Dita von Teese said she there was "something about the suit looks I really love."

"It was beautiful ... all the very cinched waists and big crinolines and all the beading," said Von Teese, a frequent guest at Paris couture shows.

Other A-list guests at Monday's show included TV star Mischa Barton, rapper Kanye West, Oscar-winning French actress Marion Cotillard — the current face of the Lady Dior bag line — and former French first lady Bernadette Chirac.

STEPHANE ROLLAND

Rolland cited Constantin Brancusi as an inspiration for the collection, and the influence of the Romanian-born sculptor was clear in the show's big, bold volumes and harmonious lines.

A stiff cone-shape panel emerged from the bust of a strapless shift dress and, curling ingeniously around itself, attached to the hemline.

Another shift dress in fire engine red had a bustle-like drapery that emerged from the shoulders and attached to the hemline, creating a sort of chic superhero cape. One show-stopping look improbably melded a one-shoulder evening gown with a pantsuit.

Lozenge-shaped leather discs covered a sleeveless organza evening gown in an intricate scale pattern.

Artful mosaic beadwork also adorned the hemline of many of the other floor-length dresses, making tinkling sounds as the models strutted their stuff. At the end, the catwalk was littered with sparkling beads and rhinestones that had popped off during the show.

It was Rolland's first display since being admitted to the select group of haute couture labels.

GIORGIO ARMANI PRIVE

Armani delivered his "dream" of China — a glossy, sleek and sophisticated version of the

Asian economic powerhouse.

Lean skirt suits in luminous silks, embellished with tassels and appliques dominated the collection. Glossy, second-skin evening gowns, heavy with sequins and beadwork, made up many of the remaining looks in the 62-outfit show.

Pointed shoulders and cuffs on jackets evoked pagoda roofs, while a purple and yellow pantsuit recalled a Chinese martial arts ensemble.

The dresses, in lacquer red and inky black, had a costume-like quality about them. A shift dress in red sequins with black piping was almost crying out to be worn by Chinese movie star Gong Li (巩俐).

The models wore severe black bobbed wigs or had their hair swept up into a long thin tower wrapped in black leather. They tottered down the catwalk in the pencil skirts and towering, richly worked heels.

Longtime Armani fan Glenn Close hailed the collection as "extraordinary." "I'm stunned [by] the pure creativity of it, the whimsy, the fantasy, the shapes," said the actress, who smiled and nodded approvingly during much of Monday's presentation.

Asked whether the collection was an overture to the emerging economic superpower, Armani said "there's no point in bringing China to China. This was a dream, a real spectacle, a film."



Above and far right, designs from Christian Dior.

PHOTOS: EPA



BY JENNY BARCHFIELD
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Paris menswear displays ended Sunday with a flourish of flowing jackets, schoolboy bow-ties and profusely pleated pants as designers here refused to bow to the gloomy recession aesthetic that has cast a pall over other fashion capitals.

French label Lanvin put its money not on pinstripes or other business-friendly fabrics but sumptuous woolen knits that billowed or clung to the body in soft waves, creating a sensuous, romantic look.

Across town, Dior Homme was all hard lines and sharp angles.

Although the house sent out mostly black suits — a menswear staple in hard times — its innovative tailoring pushed the look forward.

British designer Paul Smith staged an energetic show that drew inspiration from the mischievous English schoolboy.

Throughout menswear week, which began on Thursday, other Paris designers also put flight and fancy above pure pocketbook concerns.

Highlights included John Galliano — who sent out models made

up as Pan, the man-goat hybrid — and Givenchy, with its medieval sadomasochist look.

DIOR HOMME

Black suits that were anything but boring dominated at Dior Homme.

Asymmetrical cuts, strap and metalwork closures and heaps of pleats created an edgy, bold silhouette that played on volumes and contrast.

Designer Kris van Assche — who in 2007 replaced Hedi Slimane, the creator of the ultra-slim suit that was the house's star piece — dared to go big, sending out billowy pants that bucked the overall trend in the Paris menswear shows toward slim trousers. A plethora of pleats fanning out from the low-slung waist band gave the pants an almost bubble cut through the hips and thighs.

Jackets dispensed with buttons, with one often asymmetrical flap closing over the another with hooks or graphic straps.

Turtlenecks, a recurring favorite at the Paris shows, were given a graphic twist. Cut in stiff white broadcloth, the generously draped necks stood



Paul Smith's English schoolboy look, left, and Dior Homme's bold silhouette that plays on volumes and contrast, above.

PHOTOS: AP

straight up with contrasting black lining on the inside.

The entire show was black and white, and the closest thing to gray was a double-breasted overcoat in black and white bouclé.

French actress Beatrice Dalle praised the collection, which she

called "really nice, really sober." "Although sobriety is not necessarily what I look for in a man," Dalle said with a smile.

PAUL SMITH

The English schoolboy, with his tweed-heavy wardrobe and penchant for irreverent mixing and matching, had the run of the catwalk.

The collection was whimsical and fun even if Smith, whose flair for giving classics a twist has won him a worldwide following, didn't stray far from his label's hallmark style.

Tweed professor blazers were paired with slim plaid trousers and smart wool jackets were worn over cycling jerseys in bright primary colors. Flashes of hot pink lining peeked out from a blazer in oatmeal-colored houndstooth.

Bow-ties largely replaced conventional neckties, somehow managing to look dapper and not too out of place on the teenage models.

The same cannot be said for the show's clunky plastic eyeglasses. Those wearing the heavy, Clark Kent-style frames looked as if they were itching to rip off the nerd gear and re-emerge in tights and spandex.

