



Couture off to sheer start at half-dressed Dior



Less was left to the imagination at Paris' haute couture fashion shows than usual as designers turned to bright and shiny fabrics in these dark economic times

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Above, top and top right: Models present creations by British designer John Galliano for Christian Dior during the Fall-Winter 2009/2010 Haute Couture collection show on Monday in Paris.

Right: Less is more with French designer Alexis Mabille's Fall-Winter 2009/2010 Haute Couture collection, which takes its cue from nighties and underwear.

Far right: The writing was on the wall for Stephane Rolland's Fall-Winter 2009/2010 Haute Couture collection.

In these times heavy with financial worry, Paris' winter 2010 haute couture displays got off to a light start on Monday, with sheer fabrics taking center stage at Dior's half-dressed display and at budding French labels Stephane Rolland and Alexis Mabille.

Normally winter is the season of lush cashmeres and snugly wools, but Paris' couturiers opted instead for feather-light crepe silks and suggestively sheer tulle inspired by 1940s undergarments.

At Christian Dior, madcap British designer John Galliano paid homage to the women who made a living modeling the New Look styles that catapulted Dior to fashion legend after World War II.

Except that Galliano's models looked as if they'd been wrenched from the dressing rooms halfway through their wardrobe changes: Models wore a wasp-waisted bar jacket with just a garter belt and stockings or a bubble skirt with a bra — but rarely both elements of Dior's legendary skirt suits at the same time.

"I imagined the ladies backstage sort of making themselves up and someone saying the show has to start but they hadn't been really dressed. But the show had to go on," Galliano said in a backstage interview after the show, which was held on Avenue Montaigne, where Dior's favorite models once presented his creations to clients.

Stephane Rolland continued to forge his reputation as a master embroiderer with a retro-futuristic collection that was heavy with elaborate geometric mosaics made from fabric-wrapped plastic tubes.

It was the future as seen by an artist moonlighting as a plumber circa 1973.

Lace and sheer silks took center stage at Alexis Mabille, an up-and-coming French designer whose fans include ex-supermodel-turned-first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy.

Baby-doll dresses in white eyelet, toga-draped gowns and abbreviated cocktail numbers that looked as though they had been crafted from antique bed linens made up the featherlight collection.

Silk gowns sprouted fluttering, crepe-petaled flowers at Christophe Josse, another French designer known for his wispy, lacy cocktail numbers. Flowers sprouted from the neckline

on jackets, cascaded down the shoulders of dresses and were strategically sprinkled over the bustier of the sheer bride gown.

Paris' haute couture shows — displays of wildly expensive garments made-to-measure for a handful of ultra-wealthy women — moved into the second of three days yesterday, with shows by heavy-hitters Armani, Givenchy and Chanel.

In what was sure to be a poignant moment yesterday, Christian Lacroix, who has been hit hard by the financial crisis and is struggling to find his financial footing, showed what could conceivably be his last couture collection to a small audience of fashion insiders.

CHRISTIAN DIOR

Models in various stages of undress — albeit polished undress — padded languidly across the plush gray carpets of the Dior flagship, striking pouting poses as they meandered through the beehive of salons.

Hourglass-shaped dresses in vibrant jewel tones dipped in the back to reveal the suggestive laces of a tightly cinched corset. A flesh-colored slip peeked out from beneath a knee-length dress, its sexy silk undermining the dress' straight-laced seriousness. The skirt of a strapless ball gown in embroidered pink duchess satin was cut out in front and back to frame the model's stockings legs.

The innerwear-as-outerwear look extended as far as the shoes, black heels fitted with a network of bra and garter straps.

For *Harper's Bazaar* editor-in-chief Glenda Bailey, the half-dressed look was emblematic of the times.

"It implied that things are out of kilter," Bailey said from her front-row seat. "Things feel really revealing — and that's what the show was."

Galliano agreed that his pairing of innerwear with a single standout piece could be seen as a response — of sorts — to the crisis.

"By paring it down like that ... it was a bit more pure. It made you focus on the piece," he said.

ALEXIS MABILLE

Alexis Mabille's collection of lacy nightie-inspired numbers also had a lingerie touch. Sheer shirts were paired with hotpants short and tight enough to be satin panties. Short cocktail dresses looked as though they had been crafted from

heirloom pillowcases with delicate lace hems.

Mabille accented the looks with big bows in black ribbon at the waist and bustline. Little bows at the shoulders and the hips were the only thing anchoring a sexy, black hourglass gown to one model's body.

The collection was peppered with variations on the tuxedo, one of Mabille's signature looks. One model wore a tuxedo coverall with a dramatic, plunging neckline, and even the bride — traditionally the last look at couture shows — wore a tux, with sexy lace panels on the skintight pants.

STEPHANE ROLLAND

Not every designer can draw inspiration for a lush haute couture collection from wallpaper, but that's just where Rolland looked.

"There was this amazing wall-covering at this apartment in New York, really elaborate and full of tubing," he said in a pre-show interview. "I wanted to recreate those walls."

Elaborate mosaics made of fabric-wrapped plastic tubes, like bits of a plastic straws, hung from the hems of abbreviated cocktail dresses in gray and camel cashmere. Gowns of sheer silk were covered in leather lozenge-shaped appliques, like the scales of a giant lizard.

The dresses, with their powerful shoulders, dipping backs and irregular, rounded cutouts, had a retro-futuristic feel about them — as if Rolland was channeling the Space Age as imagined in the early 1970s.

"There's something architectural, something sculptural, something geometric and beautiful" about the collection, said French actress Emmanuelle Beart, from her front-row perch. "[He] is someone who's got a real vision, something that's unique and out-of-the-ordinary."

Rolland, a favorite of Middle Eastern royals, banked on the presence of some of his wealthy couture clients on Monday to launch a wildly expensive line of custom handbags with 22-karat gold metalwork and diamond-encrusted closures.

The bags, a day purse and an evening clutch made by an exclusive French leatherwear atelier, start at US\$14,000 and go way up from there, depending on the client's specifications.

When asked how much a clutch that scintillated with 2,500 diamonds would fetch, Rolland stayed mum, raising his eyebrows enigmatically.