Inside Story of Costume Creation

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Lois Madsen finds Hollywood’s clothing industry a bright spot in the textile world

LIGHTS on the avenues in Paris have been dimmed for war but within the shops of the haute couture, creation of fashions goes on with the same brilliance. Hollywood, London, Riviera, New York and Saint Moritz, other leading fashion centers of the world, all adapt the ideas that are created in the Paris shops, and they too remain undaunted by the war raging not far from France’s metropolis.

These large centers might cut off their relations with Paris and take advantage of the barrier that war has placed around Europe, but American designers have not yet managed completely without the influence of Paris, the city of fashion authority. Paris, to many women, means clothes. All of her life a woman has read about the Parisian clothes and styles. Women who go abroad consider bringing some article of clothing back from Paris a cherished desire.

For over a score of years the fashion business has claimed for herself the position of a great industry in France. It is not just a matter of chance that Paris has achieved its high position. In the days of Marie Antoinette, dolls dressed in the current mode were sent to Rome and other centers for the ladies of the court to select their styles. Shops have been handed down through the families from one generation to the next. As apprentices, children assumed with great respect the work of their ancestors.

The output and workmanship of the dressmakers themselves have been primarily responsible for the success of the industry. Most of the larger houses have one or two showings a year, while some have as many as four. In August the 50 main houses along the avenues show about 5,000 different models with jewelry, shoes, handbags and accessories accompanying them. These 50 houses range in size from the large concerns which turn out 250 to 400 models twice a year to the houses that make 30 or 40 in a year.

Because the textile industry is closely connected with the style centers in Paris it is handy for the designers to obtain the fabrics that they want for the coming season. The materials are created before the styles, and often the houses order their textiles 6 months in advance.

One of the clearest marks of a great designer is whether or not she can meet the changing needs and demands of the people. One of the strongest challenges of many years is the present war situation in Europe. The shaded street lights and the pale lights on the window displays have taken some of the glitter from merry Paris. Windows have been covered with net or strips of adhesive tape to stop glass from flying in case a bomb from an air raid should hit.

Many new textiles are guarded as military secrets. Textiles which cover windows, skylights and other openings are required by government specifications to allow no more than .001% light penetration. Blanket felt and sponge rubber gaskets covered with cloth are making doors and windows gas proof. Asbestos clothing is being worn as a guard against fires.

The war has created hundreds of new problems for the fashion industry in Europe. Changing methods of fighting necessitate new head gear. Women want to appear strong and so adapt straight-lined styles. Dressmakers have met this demand with the d’alerte pajamas which are to be worn in air raid shelters. London, the city which has excelled in the creation of tweeds and sport clothes, predicts suits of khaki color and hats which are militaristic.

Style piracy has been one of the strongest problems with which dressmakers have had to contend. When copies of designs shown at openings would appear in inexpensive shops, creators lost their incentive. Purchasers disliked seeing someone in an identical dress that had cost one fourth the price of their original. To meet this problem, the Fashion Originators Guild has tried to unite dress shops with a Declaration of Cooperation which states that they will not purchase copies of dresses which are registered and labeled by the Guild.

Hollywood and all of California cannot be overlooked when talking about the clothes that are created under the influence of Old Sol. Hollywood’s industry is one of the strongest fashion inventors in the United States. When a movie star wears a hat in a movie, thousands of women, seeing and admiring it, want a similar hat; a Hollywood creation immediately storms the country.

New York is known for creating a larger quantity of ready made dresses and millinery than any other place in the world.