

feminism and femininity at maria grazia chiuri's dior couture show

The Dior designer continues to reposition couture for the woman of today.



A house is a home. Though when it's a couture house, it's usually a household name too; a maison with heritage and history. Millions of us might carry a bit of it around with us, whether it's a perfume, lipstick or a handbag. The very few that are lucky enough to be haute couture clients may even consider the hand-crafted garments as homes for their bodies – at least that was the thinking behind Maria Grazia Chiuri's latest couture show for Dior, which was held at the house's home at 30 Avenue Montaigne. "Couture is a space where you can design the house for your body the way you want – with the help of the designer, the team and the ateliers," Maria Grazia said before the show. She also meant it quite literally. To close the show, she sent out a model wearing a golden doll's house of Dior HQ. It ignited the internet, spurring thousands of memes, almost immediately.





This season, Chiuri was getting philosophical about the role of clothes in our lives. She stumbled across Austrian-American polymath Bernard Rudofsky's seminal 1944 book *Are Clothes Modern?* A book that questioned and criticised fashion's function and potential harm to health. He deemed corsetry, stilettos and restrictive skirts – the hallmarks of his contemporary, Christian Dior – as harmful, functionless and dangerous. Instead, he favoured the Ancient Greeks' *peplos* (a draped, shapeless tunic) and comfortable sandals – if he was alive today, he's probably be wearing T-shirts and Birkenstocks. Monsieur Dior, on the other hand, interpreted the toga in 1957 with an internal boned corset and posed drapery. Function versus form, nature versus artifice, reality versus fantasy... You get the point.

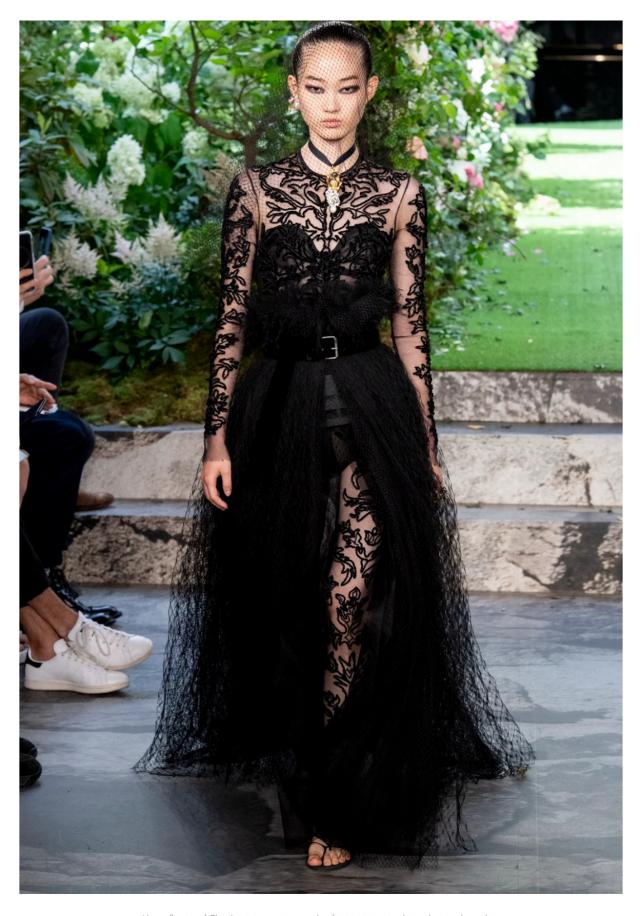




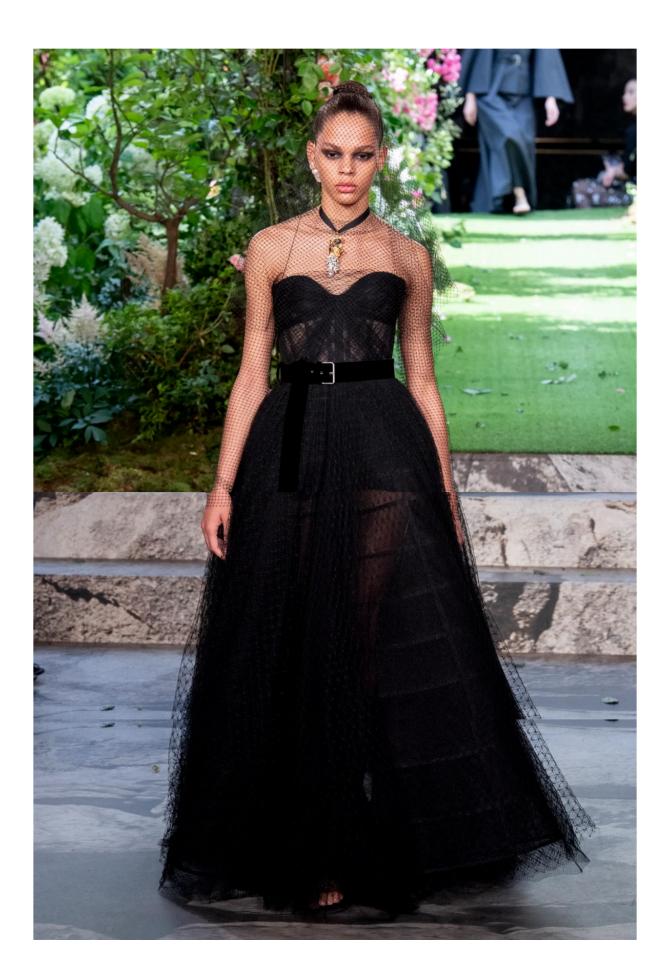
Maria Grazia set out to combine both and prove Rudofsky wrong. "I wanted to explain we can do any shape or any construction with effortlessness," she explained. I don't want this idea that you are nonfunctional or functional, minimal or decorated. You can find a balance in the contradictions." Her gowns for Dior came with "comfortable corsets" – made of fabric, rather than boning – and there were plenty of grounded Grecian sandals. To reiterate the point, she sent out two versions of the *peplos*. One was elegantly free-flowing with a drawstring waist. The other sinuously form-fitting.



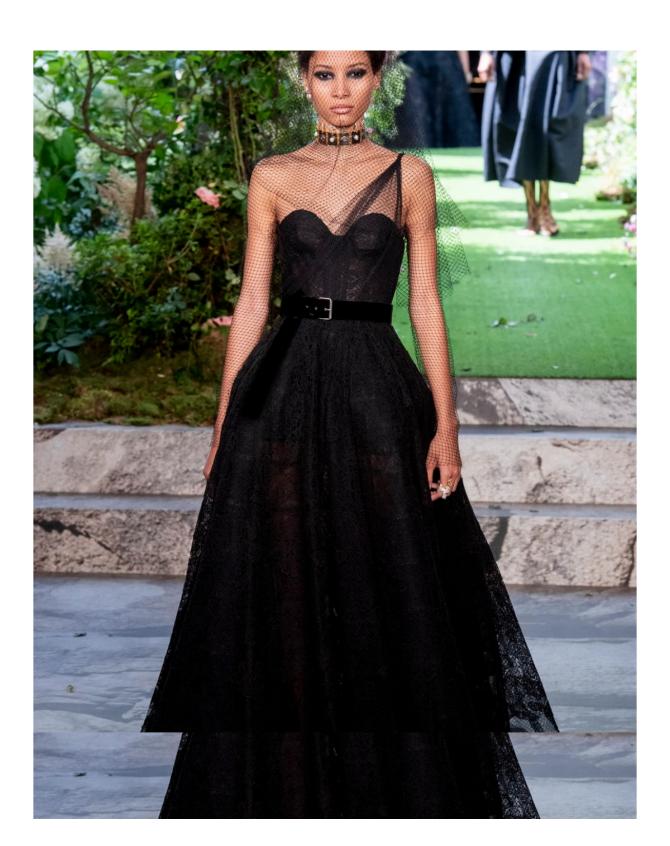
The approach resonated with Chiuri's broader mediations on the purpose of haute couture. As she mentioned, she sees it as a second home for her clients. In her eyes, it's all about them; couture is the ultimate individual experience. Hence why she made the collection almost entirely in black — it was designed to be a blank canvas for her clients, namely because Dior can make the dresses for them in any colour or fabric that they choose. "The customer needs to be more conscious of what they want for themselves," she explained. "In the past, the creative director defined the house and the clients came. Now couture is an experience where the clients come to build a one-of-a-kind experience. You can decide the shape. You can decide the material."



It's a reflection of Chiuri's mission as an outspoken feminist, just as it is her welcoming legendary feminist artists into the Dior fold. This time it was Penny Slinger, the British-born surrealist who is the subject of an upcoming documentary and a current exhibition in London. Penny Slinger created a fantastical set for the show, evoking nature's transformation throughout the seasons and spiritual sculptures of female body. She also came up with the idea of that golden 30 Avenue Montaigne dress, a surreal take and witty take on the couture bride.

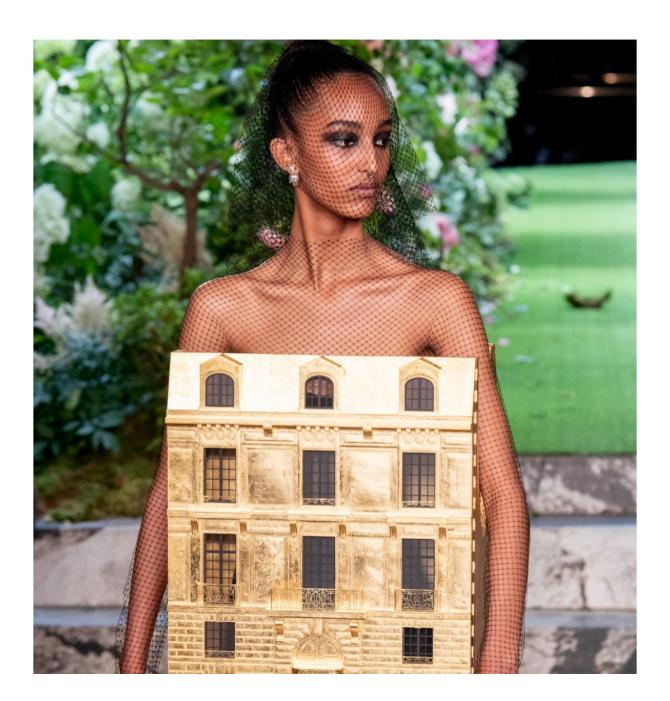


Interestingly, Christian Dior was criticised for arguably setting the women's lib movement back a decade following WWII. He re-introduced corsets, longer skirt lengths and high-maintenance glamour. Feminists protested against it at the time, carrying placards emblazoned with "Burn Mr Dior". As we see a revival of those arguably Victorian values in the age of social media – Kim Kardashian in a corset at the Met Gala, Kylie Jenner in impractically long acrylic nails, Elle Fanning fainting in a too-tight gown at Cannes – it's an poignant moment to consider the dichotomy between modern women's lives and fashion's ideas about femininity.





What did Slinger, the 72-year-old feminist make of the modern corsets? "What I like is that Maria Grazia is using the aesthetic of that look and the way you can transform silhouettes, but doing in a way that is soft and free-flowing, using soft fabrics and moulding with the materials themselves rather than constricting the bodies of women," she said. "We do want to use our bodies as art forms but we also don't want to lose a rib or two in the process. We want beauty and style without harm."



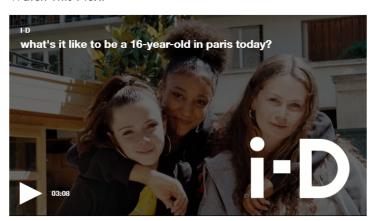


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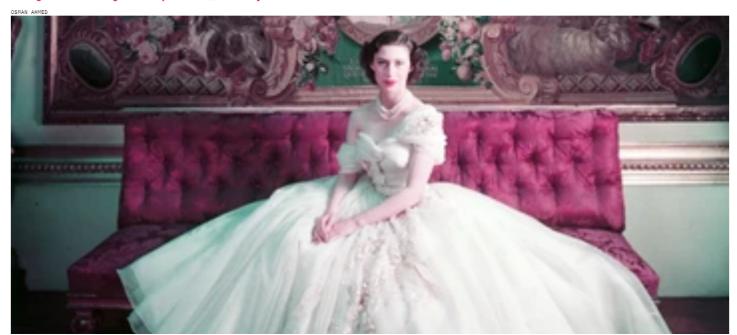


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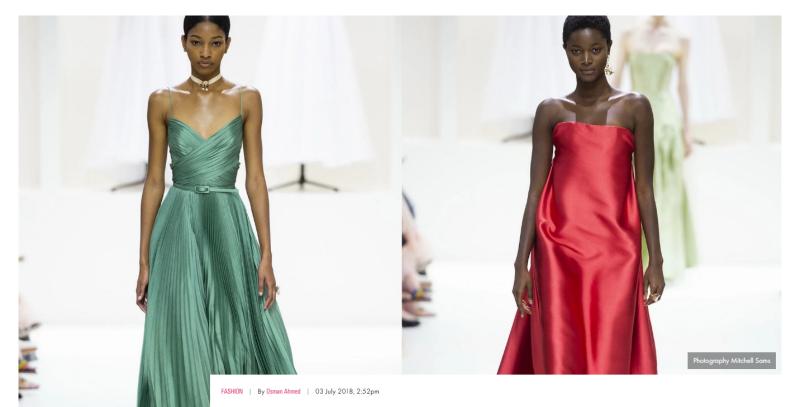


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maria grazia chiuri reimagined dior's past for the 21st century

These are modern-day goddess dresses for women who want old-school femme realness without worrying about cracking a rib if they bend over.



"Couture today is, above all, a conceptual gesture," read the notes at Maria Grazia Chiuri's latest offering of Dior couture, which consisted of 71 looks to mark the 71 years since the birth of Dior. "It is through an encounter between a system of established rules and the freest creativity that, for Maria Grazia Chiuri, couture becomes akin to rebellion: a kind of ideological guerrilla that explodes on the frontiers of entrenched tradition, without ever overstepping them."

Rodin was a taste of what's to come. White cotton toiles of hallmark designs from Dior's sevendecade history were on full display. They were originally in the exhibition at Musée des Arts Décoratifs last year.





Of course, Christian Dior was hardly a feminist by today's standards – in fact, many argue that his 'New Look' set the women's liberation movement back a decade by ushering women back into corsets and flesh-shy skirts, "I design women-flowers with soft shoulders, blossoming busts, lithe, slender waists, and skirts as full as corollas," gushed Dior in his 1954 book *The Little Dictionary of Fashion*.

Today, that kind of perfumed-glove femininity seems arcane – and, quite literally, Dior's message is that we should *all* be feminists. But then again, saccharine femininity is also pervasive right now as fourth-wave feminism has ushered in new perceptions of conventional femininity.





Whereas once, for instance, women relied on perpendicular shoulders and mannish tailoring to be taken seriously in the workplace – not that many couture clients have to work – today power dressing is about unapologetic femininity, prettiness and 'girlishness'. Just look at the success of Simone Rocha and Molly Goddard. In other words, it's *okay* to indulge in a love of flowers and ballroom skirts.

Chiuri's dusky satin ballgowns in Queen Mum colours reiterated that. And whereas Monsieur Dior's original *guêpiere* (wasp-waist) corsets had detachable ruffles to enhance the hips and the bust and were worn under ice-hard hourglasses, Maria Grazia has deflated that exaggerated silhouette and softened it with her lodestone love of tulle and Delphic pleats. The level of craftsmanship on display, too, was silently magnificent – a scarlet satin column dress sewn from a single piece of fabric, for instance, or even Madame Grès-esque pleats sculpted around the body.



What Maria Grazia has done is taken the codes and the rules at the heart of a historic house and discreetly disguised them for the 21st century. These are modern-day goddess dresses for women who want old-school femme realness without worrying about cracking a rib if they bend over. Looking around the room full of women in her tulle confections (even at 3pm on a sunny afternoon, we should add) it's clear that there is still a huge appetite for it. And in the world of haute couture, that's what matters.



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maria grazia chiuri discusses dior at the v&a

The house's first female creative director reflects on the power and the glory of Dior.



As the V&A opens its biggest fashion exhibition since the record-breaking *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, prepare to lose yourself in the beauty of Dior and the craftsmanship of couture. Across 11 spaces, 500 objects including 200 rare dresses are being exhibited alongside accessories, fashion photography, film, perfume, make-up, illustrations, magazines, and Christian Dior's personal possessions – *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams* traces the history and impact of one of the 20th century's most influential couturiers, and the six artistic directors who succeeded him. Beyond getting to know Monsieur Dior better, visitors are able to explore the house's thematic changes right through to the first woman to take creative control, Maria Grazia Chiuri.

most influential couturiers? Do you know what New Look is beyond the high street chain? What do you know about the designers who carried on Dior's legacy after his death? Have you seen the dress that Princess Margaret wore for her 21st birthday celebrations? *Designer of Dreams* teaches you all this and so much more.

