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Richard Avedon: the photographer that made Dior

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VERUSCHKA, 1967 CREDIT: THE RICHARD AVEDON FOUNDATION

Christian Dior, the fashion designer who gave us the New Look, and the street photographer Richard Avedon were two quite different people, but when they formed a creative partnership the results were magical – and influential

It was Carmel Snow, then editor of US Harper's Bazaar, who introduced Richard Avedon to Christian Dior, shortly after the latter opened his own house in 1946. Although Avedon was a modernist, happiest photographing expensive clothes on the street, and Dior a nostalgic romantic, their work proved highly complementary. Avedon accentuated the bold architecture of Dior's designs, which in turn brought additional layers of emotion and nuance to Avedon's bracing streetscapes. Perhaps the happy juxtaposition of their different sensibilities is what Snow intended. She was, in all matters of style, exceptionally perceptive.

It was Snow, on seeing those sweeping, full skirts and nipped waists of Dior's first collection for his own house in February 1947, who dubbed it the New Look. Dior himself, a man who, according to Cecil Beaton, resembled 'a bland country curate made out of pink marzipan', kept well away from the main action during those shows. He only appeared when it was over, once he had gauged the critical reaction.

He could be forgiven his nerves. The storm unleashed on that debut in February 1947 – both positive and negative – created waves far beyond the confines of the fashion world, and placed enormous pressure on Dior to produce collections of cultural as well as aesthetic importance.

It was his retro mania that irked the modernists. The post-war aspiration was to look forward – with a degree of pragmatism and frugality. Dior's New Look, with its yards and yards of costly fabric (Britain was still subject to severe rationing), displayed neither of those qualities.

Yet those extravagant, refined silhouettes spoke to something almost atavistic in millions of women around the world. And perhaps there was something a little practical about them.

'Yesterday I stood at Dior for two hours while they moulded me with great wadges of cotton wool and built a coat over the result,' wrote Nancy Mitford to her sister Diana in September 1947. 'I look exactly like Queen Mary. Think how warm though... All the English newspapers are on to the long skirts and sneer. But all I can think is now one will be able to have knickers over the knee.'

When Dovima – born Dorothy Virginia Margaret Juba in Queens, New York – wore Dior, there was no thought of knickers. The haughtily elegant model could carry off the grandest ballgown with aristocratic disdain. Avedon's genius was to frame her in a flawless Dior column dress with elephants who were neither fazed by her froideur nor dwarfed by her lofty poise.

They are, however, manacled. It's a poignant symbol of captivity and cannot have been unintended: there is frequently a sly visual aside in Avedon's fashion photographs – witness the poodle making eye contact with the plumed, jewelled and be-furred woman on a shabby Parisian street.

Christian Dior died suddenly in 1957, aged 52. The New Look lasted more than a decade. Audrey Hepburn, a young, exceptionally stylish starlet, photographed in 1959 as a charming gamine in a slimmed-down Dior skirt suit, showed how the brand was adapting under the brief tenure of a relative unknown called Yves Saint Laurent.

After still, under the helm of Marc Bohan, Dior's still striking, but evolving, silhouettes proved perfect for a new breed of stars, including Barbra Streisand and the model Veruschka.

Inevitably the New Look defined – and continues to define – Dior. Women adored it. To them it felt relevant. Avedon made it look relevant.

For Christian Dior, it was relevant. 'Everything that goes beyond the simple fact of food, clothing and shelter is a luxury,' he wrote. 'Our civilisation is a luxury, and that is what we are defending.'