

The *Couture* Client as Patron of the Art of Fashion

The period between the two world wars is considered to be *haute couture*'s first golden age. At this time, the leading patrons of the art of fashion were sophisticated and cosmopolitan women who traveled constantly between Paris, New York and resort towns such as Biarritz and Palm Beach, feeling equally at home in all these places. Paris was the host city for fashion culture. As Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) simply puts it, fashion “must always be made to be French.”ⁱ

From the early decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of tourists appointed Paris their playground. Travelling in luxurious ships, wealthy tourists arrived for extended stays, thirsty for high culture, avant-garde art and *haute couture*. “Buying is of as much importance as sightseeing in this enchanting city,” suggested Thérèse and Louise Bonney in their *Shopping Guide to Paris*.ⁱⁱ Worldly women, who believed in the theatrical facet of clothes, turned to *couture* as means to display their good taste and influence people.

The Honorable Mrs. Reginald Fellowes (1890-1962), known as Daisy, was a half French, half American fashion icon starting in the 1920s. Her sleek and modern style found its ideal match in Chanel's deceptively simple clothes, which she adorned with enormous jewelry. Daisy Fellowes was known for ordering the same dress in different colors and for her obsession with details such as working pockets. In the 1930s, she favored Schiaparelli's witty, hard chic. Her remarkable taste and reputation for setting trends made her the Paris fashion editor at *Harper's Bazaar* from 1933 to 1935.

The American Mrs. Harrison Williams (1897-1983), later known as Mona Bismarck, was part of the same international circle of Paris fashion. Her name appeared in the Best

Dressed list for over twenty years and she was famous for her simple, yet feminine style. Cecil Beaton (1904-1980) described her as “fascinatingly beautiful, like a rock crystal goddess with aquamarine eyes.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the 1930s, she wore Vionnet’s soft dresses in plain colors. She was also known to favor white, which highlighted her prematurely grey hair. While most women would consider this characteristic a drawback, she chose to emphasize it. She was a client of Balenciaga from the early 1940s until his retirement in 1968, when according to Diana Vreeland (1906-1989) she locked herself in her room for days in despair.^{iv}

Aimée de Heeren (1903-2006), known in the international scene in the 1930s as Madame Lopes, perhaps a lesser-known contemporary, was a South American who represented the quintessence of this glamorous circle (fig. 1). Born Aimée de Sá Sottomaior in Brazil, she moved to New York in the late 1930s, after her first marriage to Luis Lopes was dissolved. She was an instant success in the media. Photographs and illustrations of her were published in prominent periodicals and by 1940 she was emerging as a fashionable woman in New York. At this time, she resided in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, but travelled to Paris regularly. Aimée and her sister Vera “who by then were exotic beauties ... caused a stir due to their charm and originality.”^v Bettina Ballard, Paris editor for *American Vogue*, mentioned Aimée in her memoirs:

I particularly remember the season when Aimee Lopez (sic) was lionized in Paris. She was so pretty, so genuinely nice, carried gaiety with her like a fan, and she was almost eaten alive. Hung with diamonds, she was pushed from fittings to balls, never allowed a moment for private conquest because every hostess needed her for her party to prove that she could draw the lioness of the season. Aimee just wanted to dance and flirt and have fun. That wasn’t what Paris expected of her.^{vi}

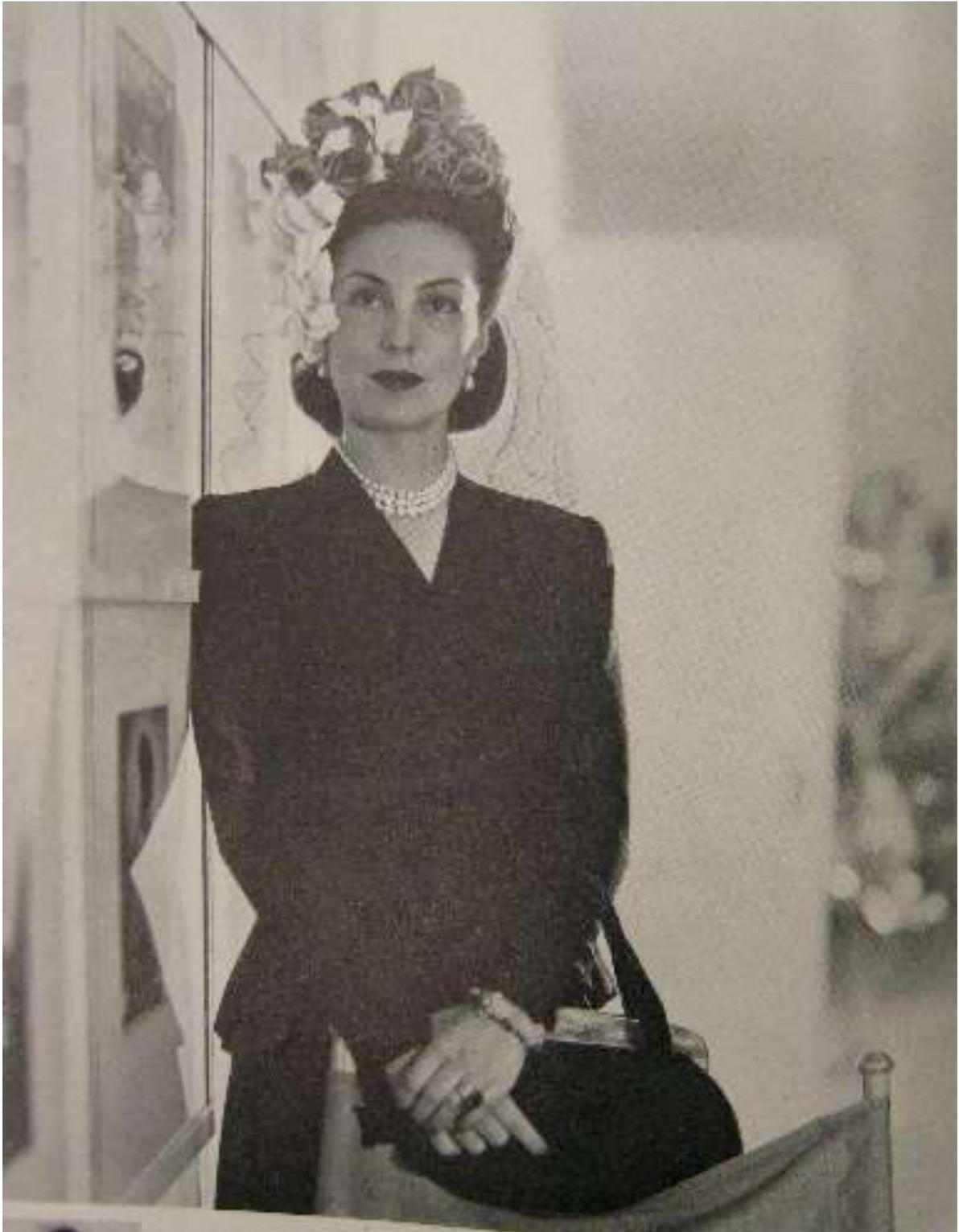


Fig. 1
Aimée de Heeren wears a Balenciaga suit and hat in the full-page spread “Hats They Chose.” The article mentions she purchased the ensemble in Rio de Janeiro. *Vogue*, January 15, 1946, p. 72. Photograph by John Rawlings © Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

Aimée led a spirited social life that demanded the finest fashionable clothes and accessories for all times of day. Her collection, donated to The Museum at FIT in the late 1970s, show us she wasn't afraid of experimenting with fashion, using it to express different aspects of her personality. Her discerning eye quickly spotted design talent and she was able to single out the most characteristic styles from each couturier: sporty stripes from Marcel Rochas, white cotton separates from an early Givenchy collection, and Alix Barton's – later known as Madame Grès – slim, slender, yet feminine style. She also acknowledged Cristóbal Balenciaga's genius in his first collection (winter 1937), when she purchased an impeccably cut dinner dress in cream cotton piqué with navy blue pinstripes (fig. Aimée was keen in finding fashion innovators and new styles, and was present at the debut collections of several designers. In 1955 she purchased a lady-like, full-length evening dress from Pierre Cardin and in 1958, a waist-less, boxy tunic dress by Yves Saint-Laurent for Dior. These garments, which are only three years apart, eloquently display the range of her style. They also prove her commitment to fashion as a system, which to her did not mean loyalty to a specific designer or aesthetic.

In 1941, the same year she was named to the Best Dressed List, Aimée married Rodman Arturo de Heeren, son of Fernanda Wanamaker, heiress to the Wanamaker department store fortune, and the Spanish Count Arturo de Heeren. During World War II, Aimée was based in New York while her husband Rodman was a Captain in the United States army stationed in the Pacific. Upon Mr. de Heeren's return, the couple moved to Biarritz and later also maintained homes in Paris, New York and Palm Beach. Unable to travel to Paris during the war, *couture* enthusiasts turned to North American designers. In 1943 Aimée purchased a silk and lace dinner ensemble designed by Adrian. Her polished, custom-made dress would have been considered an investment at the time and would last several seasons.

Soon after France was freed from German Occupation in August 1944, Aimée de Heeren rushed to Paris to attend the first post-war fashion shows. The “Liberation” collections presented in November 1944, were described by Michel de Brunhoff, editor of French *Vogue*, as “toned down and serious, not lacking in ideas but sober and responsible.”^{vii} Aimée de Heeren’s red Piguet day dress, confirms her dedication for French high fashion, a habit she was forced to abandon for the duration of the war (fig. 2). An illustration of the dress was published in the May 1945 edition of *Vogue*. The article mentioned, “no French models have been imported as yet,” alerting the American reader that fashions from those collections were still impossible to find in the United States.^{viii} The following spring, the *Théâtre de la Mode* exhibition was mounted in New York. It was the first attempt by French designers to show their post-war fashions to the America. Coverage of the New York opening featured photographs of Aimée de Heeren with one of her favorite milliners, Madame Paulette.

Throughout her life, Aimée de Heeren attended important social events in America and Europe, such as the *Bal de la Voilette* held in Paris in September 1948. *L’Officiel de la Mode* reported on the event:

Within a framework of dream imagined by Christian Bérard, it was held in Paris one of most dazzling evenings of the season, dedicated to the Veil. It was an occasion for our dressmakers and our modistes to lavish all the imagination of which only Paris is able. Laces, tulle, flowers, feathers and veils have flowered the most charming heads of the Parisian world.^{ix}

Photographs taken at the Circus Ball, which was held in Paris in July 1939 reveal a gown from Robert Piguet’s spring collection of that year (fig. 3). Sketches from the Bergdorf Goodman Collection now kept at the Special Collections of The Fashion Institute of Technology’s library show variants of the dress she wore. At the time, Christian Dior was employed by Piguet as a designer.^x



Fig. 2
Robert Piguet's silk day dress, from the spring 1945 collection shows Aimée de Heeren's dedication to Paris fashion. The "Liberation" collections presented restrained styles and lack of decoration, still reflecting wartime conditions. Additionally, prices were very high due to scarcity of materials and a ban on exportation. The Museum at FIT, 70.57.61. Gift of Mr. Rodman A. Heeren



Fig. 3
Aimée de Heeren at the Circus Ball held in Paris and hosted by Lady Mendl, the former Elsie de Wolf. She wears an evening dress from Robert Piguet's spring 1939 collection, possibly designed by Christian Dior. *Vogue*, August 15, 1939, p. 90 © Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

She was also present at one of the most important parties of the post-war era, the masquerade ball held in the Venetian home of Carlos Beistegui in September 1951. Invitations were sent six months in advance and were offered in the black market around the world for US\$500, which represent in today's money circa US\$4,000.^{xi} The party was attended by 1,500 international society figures, including Daisy Fellowes, who wore a yellow and leopard skin gown designed by Dior.^{xii} Desmond Guinness, who accompanied her to the party, later mentioned that due to the grandeur of the event, "Beistegui became a hero overnight."^{xiii}

Unlike Daisy Fellowes and Mona Williams, Aimée de Heeren did not exclusively patronize a single couturier. Her collection at The Museum at FIT proved that she visited many. The objects range from hats by Descat, Patou and Paulette, to *couture* gowns designed by Augustabernard, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Christian Dior, Jacques Fath, Edward Molyneux, Robert Piguet, Marcel Rochas, Elsa Schiaparelli, Madeleine Vionnet, among several others. It is not an understatement to suggest that she supported almost all of the *couture* industry. The extent of her wardrobe and her dispersed patronage is proof that she relied above all on her distinguished taste in choosing what suited her style, reinforcing her uniqueness as a patron of fashion. Fashion collectors at this level share a "sense of individuality central to the identity of *couture*" and perhaps more importantly, they add their own authentic aesthetic interpretation, becoming a cultural model for others.^{xiv}

Despite being a client at many *couture* salons, Aimée de Heeren had clear favorites. She liked Balenciaga's precise silhouette, with his graceful full skirts in the late 1930s, and his sculptural Modernist designs in the post-war years. At Schiaparelli, she gravitated towards the sharp tailoring, witty details and colorful prints. Dior gave her a delicate, feminine look, with his draped necklines, floral prints and hourglass silhouette. The fact that

these designers had very different aesthetics didn't seem to deter her—she was able to lend her body to their creations and at the same time, give them life.

Aimée de Heeren would never leave home without a fashionable hat or headdress. More than just accessories, for her hats were a unique way to interpret fashion with originality (fig. 4). Her favorite millinery shop was Reboux, one of the finest in Paris and of the longest established—it was founded in 1857. After Caroline Reboux's death in 1927, Lucienne Rabaté took over as a designer, beginning in 1929. She worked like a sculptor, molding each hat on the client's head.

Reboux's autumn opening is always one of the important fashion events of the new season. Reboux is to the millinery mode what Vionnet is to dressmaking. Both occupy a place removed from all that is merely superficially smart, and each season finds them setting new records in the stratosphere of style creation.^{xv}

Her shoe collection is a gem. As a serious devotee of *couture*, most of her shoes were made to order – custom shoemakers were abundant in her day. Aimée strove for the best even in her shoes, purchasing pairs from well-known creators in fashionable cities around the world.



Fig. 4
Aimée Lopes in a Charity Ball at the Eiffel Tower wearing a Caroline Reboux hat trimmed with ostrich feathers. This photograph marked Aimée's first appearance in the American press in which *Vogue* describes her as "the new Brazilian Beauty."
Vogue, August 15, 1939, p. 90. © Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) mentions in her memoirs, “Dress designing ... is to me not a profession but an art.”^{xvi} Several *couturiers* shared her feeling.^{xvii} Furthermore, *couture* clients believed that they were “in direct and privilege communication with a ‘genius’ who could produce for [them] an inimitable artifact...”^{xviii} This paper proposes an analogy between the client-*couturier* relationship and that of artists and their patrons. People who sponsor the arts are active spectators as they play an important role in disseminating styles, knowledge and appreciation art. While patrons provide economic support, artists help legitimize patrons’ social distinction while strengthening their own prestige. The relationship is two-fold and represents a full circle: artists need patrons, who need artists. Analogously, the client of *couture* turns to the designer for high fashion as a means to establish and develop her personal style. She passively lends her body to the changes of fashions, but actively “interprets and creates the way it looks,” as Anne Hollander wrote.^{xix} Without the client’s participation, there is no fashion; she represents the fulfillment of the designer’s vision.

Aimée de Heeren’s collection at The Museum at FIT constitutes the wardrobe of a fashion leader over the course of forty years and although individual pieces have been featured in many exhibitions at The Museum at FIT and loaned to international institutions such as the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, little is known about her, even among Museum at FIT staff. Her clothes show not only her passion for high fashion but also her relationship to the industry. It also reveals how taste can lead to social prestige. Anthropologists and sociologists have attempted to explain the mysteries of dress at the social level. Scholars such as Simmel and Bourdieu emphasize the importance of class distinction and its “capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal ... or common.”^{xx} While the consumer clearly helps “produce the product he consumes,” social representation is not fashion’s sole concern.^{xxi} Similarly, Herbert Blumer mentions that while fashion helps define one’s identity, it “introduces order.”^{xxii} He suggests that while there are

virtually unlimited models being offered every year, the choice one makes - one's taste - is a matter of experience. He goes further, shrewdly acknowledging the symbolic importance of aesthetics, style, and craft.

The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to a wish to be in fashion, to be abreast of what has good standing, to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world.^{xxiii}

Being abreast of new fashions is the vocation of the true fashion leader. Patrons of the art of fashion are specialized in deciphering its cultural symbols and are of crucial importance to the fashion system. The fashion model has the ideal body and other physical features, yet her role is fictional, she can only pretend she is a client. Only the real client can take fashion to the real social world it was meant to inhabit. The client-*couturier* relationship begins when she commits to fittings, a time consuming ritual that can be compared to the patron's visit to an artist's studio. The practice of visiting the *couturier* enhances and deepens the engagement: the client is exposed to the craft and process of *couture* and has a chance to fully assimilate its luxury and artistic qualities. To the artist and patron of fashion, clothes are a metaphor for identity.

Before World War II and during the last golden age of *haute couture*, in the 1950s, fittings took up an enormous part of a lady's day. As Diana Vreeland puts it: "It was a whole life. The life of fashion was very strenuous."^{xxiv} Fashion followers from around the world would go to Paris on buying trips in the spring and fall, jumping from *couture* salons to *bottiers*, to *modistes*, to glove makers as if they were in a style marathon. The name of each artist of fashion was as appealing as his or her designs, "...for the quality of what you bring back with you that will give your trip distinction and the legitimate cost of it that will keep it an every-present memory."^{xxv} For the serious *couture* client attending numerous shows was more than a shopping ritual, it was a lifestyle. In the salons of *couture* houses clients, editors

and buyers met to experience together the theatricality of fashion. What these leaders of fashion bought and wore became instant news in the specialized press, influencing the wider public.

Aimée de Heeren's collection was the subject of my master's thesis, which took form of an exhibition proposal. The premise was to interpret her collection in its cultural context by displaying historically and aesthetically important objects alongside the coverage of her social career by the fashion press. Suzy Menkes, fashion editor at *Herald Tribune*, wrote recently that fashion exhibitions are a "global phenomenon."^{xxvi} The establishment of such shows originated from Diana Vreeland's career at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which began when she was fired from *Vogue* in 1972, and lasted until her death in 1989. Her "spectacular fashion exhibitions ... made the museum a center of fashion excitement for New York City and the world."^{xxvii} During her time at the Museum, she organized a total of fifteen exhibitions, including "The World of Balenciaga" (1973), "The Glory of Russian Costume" (1976) and "La Belle Époque" (1982). Her retrospective of Yves Saint-Laurent in 1983 was the "first devoted entirely to the work of a living designer."^{xxviii}

While purists still find ways to condemn such exhibitions, they are nonetheless forced to accept the huge crowds drawn by them. The public not only admires the beauty and craft of fashion, they see it as an art form, as "part of [their] cultural heritage."^{xxix} Monographs of living designers and of brands that still exist may propose a conflict of interest, as there could be economic motives behind them.^{xxx} However, exhibitions on single-collectors provide an interesting perspective. "Because collectors are free to indulge their vision, venturing into new or unfashionable areas, they can lead taste."^{xxxi} Recently three major museums have organized exhibitions on fashion collectors: the Metropolitan Museum of Art presented in 2005-2006 "Rava Avis: Selections from the Iris Barrel Apfel Collection," which celebrated Mrs. Apfel's "witty and exuberantly idiosyncratic" style.^{xxxii} In 2009, The Fashion Institute

of Design and Merchandising Museum organized “High Style: Betsey Bloomingdale and the Haute Couture,” which included a blue gown by Marc Bohan for Dior that Mrs. Bloomingdale wore to the first inauguration of Ronald Regan. And finally, the recently opened “Daphne Guinness” at The Museum at FIT; the exhibition press release described her as “a serious collector of *couture*, who is also a creative force in her own right.”^{xxxiii} The release further defends the value of exhibiting personal collections of dress:

The fashion or style icon is a special type of fashion insider, someone who is far more than an “early adopter” or celebrity clothes horse. The fashion icon not only inspires fashion designers and validates their clothes, but actually creates a look that affects the way other people dress and/or think about dressing.^{xxxiv}

I would argue that the analogy proposed in this paper, between the patron of the arts and clients of *haute couture* is worthwhile. This fashion cycle begins with a woman going to a *couture* house and ordering a dress. During the fittings, she is no longer passive and while she embodies the wearable art, it becomes a collaboration between herself and the designer, that is then spread to the world. The fact that these same clothes end up in museum collections and are exhibited is the proof that they are not just objects with historical and cultural interest, they are art. After all, who ever said fashion is not art?

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- ⁱ Gertrude Stein, *Paris France* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996), 35.
- ⁱⁱ Thérèse Bonney and Louise Bonney, *A Shopping Guide to Paris* (New York: Robert M McBride & Co, 1929), v.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cecil Beaton, *The Wandering Years: Diaries, 1922-1939* (Boston: Little Brown, 1962), 181.
- ^{iv} Diana Vreeland, *D. V.*, ed. George Plimpton and Christopher Hemphill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 107.
- ^v "Paid Notice: Deaths Heeren, Aimee de Sa Sottomaioir," *New York Times*, 26 Sept 2006.
- ^{vi} Bettina Ballard. *In My Fashion* (New York: D. McKay Co, 1960), 81.
- ^{vii} "Paris Fashions Toned Down," *New York Times*, 10 Nov 1944.
- ^{viii} "What's The New Look In Paris?," *Vogue*, May 1945, p. 145.
- ^{ix} "Sous le Signe de la Voilette", *Le Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode de Paris*, no.317, Fall 1948, 93.
- ^x Lourdes Font, "Dior Before Dior," *West 86th*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2011): 32.
- ^{xi} "Italy: The Big Pary," *Time*, 17 September 1951.
- ^{xii} Annette Tapert and Diana Edkins, *The Power of Style: The Women Who Defined The Art of Living Well* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994), 80.
- ^{xiii} Wendy Moonan, "Antiques; The Selling of a Legend of Décor," *New York Times*, 28 May 1999.
- ^{xiv} Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.
- ^{xv} K.C., "Paris Millinery Looks Up," *New York Times*, 18 Oct 1936, p. D8.
- ^{xvi} Elsa Schiaparelli, *Shoking Life: The Autobiography of Elsa Schiaparelli* (London: V&A, 2007), 46.
- ^{xvii} Such as Paul Poiret, who stated in 1913: "I am an artist, not a dressmaker." Quoted from Nancy T. Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 47.
- ^{xviii} Breward, p. 50.
- ^{xix} Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Avon, 1980), xv.
- ^{xx} Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 5.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 100.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 289.
- ^{xxiii} Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *Sociological Quarterly* 10 (Summer, 1969), 282.
- ^{xxiv} Vreeland, 134.
- ^{xxv} Bonney and Bonney, vi.
- ^{xxvi} Suzy Menkes, "Gone Global: Fashion as Art?," *New York Times*, 4 Jul 2011.
- ^{xxvii} Bernaine Morris, "Diana Vreeland, Editor, Dies; Voice of Fashion for Decades," *New York Times*, 23 Aug 1989.
- ^{xxviii} Morris, "Gala Night At The Met Hails Saint Laurent," *New York Times*, 6 Dec 1983.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxx} The same argument could be made to rebuke the purchase of contemporary art by important museums: they can raise their value in the market.
- ^{xxxi} Judith H. Dobryznyi, "A Growing Use of Private Art in Public Spaces," *New York Times*, 16 Mar 2011.
- ^{xxxii} The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Rara Avis: Selections from the Iris Barrel Apfel Collection," http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={7CB39788-9BE9-4A2E-B8E1-483662C5BC63}
- ^{xxxiii} The Museum at FIT, "Daphne Guinness," <http://www.fitnyc.edu/10861.asp>
- ^{xxxiv} The Museum at FIT, "Daphne Guinness," <http://www.fitnyc.edu/10861.asp>