

dreaming OF DIOR

Dawn Gibson gets a sneak preview of one of the year's most talked-about exhibitions, opening in London this month.

What springs to mind when someone mentions Dior? Classic elegance? Hollywood A-listers traipsing the red carpet in exquisitely detailed gowns? Perfume?

As one of the most celebrated haute couture houses and a byword for refined taste, it is amusing to consider that Christian Dior was what we would now call a disruptor when he burst onto the Parisian fashion scene with his first collection in 1947. It was a game-changer not just for the elite but for the way women at all levels of society all over the world would dress for decades to come.

In stark contrast to the utilitarian 'make do and mend' culture of the Second World War, which had ended two years earlier, Dior brought sexy back with dresses that emphasised womanly curves; a silhouette created by a cinched-in waist and a blossoming full skirt which fell to below mid-calf. This debut collection – famously dubbed the 'New Look' by *Harper's Bazaar* editor-in-chief Carmel Snow – began a fashion story which would captivate fans from European royalty to movie stars.

Princess Margaret wore Dior for her 21st birthday celebrations and was a loyal client of the house for many years; Princess Grace was an admirer, while Princess Di had a Dior handbag named after her. Dior was appointed as exclusive designer for Marlene Dietrich's character in the Alfred Hitchcock film *Stage Fright*, while other celebrity fans included Elizabeth Taylor and Ava Gardner, and, more recently, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp, Rihanna and Lupita Nyong'o.

This influential and star-studded pedigree makes the latest exhibition at London's V&A the must-see fashion event of the year. *Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams*, supported by Swarovski, is a cornucopia of fashion riches and the biggest Dior exhibition ever held in the UK, telling the couture house's story across more than 70 years through over 500 objects, from rare haute couture gowns to vintage perfumes, shoes, handbags, fashion photography and the designer's personal possessions.



Christian Dior with model Sylvoie, circa 1948. Courtesy of Christian Dior



Princess Margaret (1930–2002), photo Cecil Beaton (1904–80), London, UK, 1951.
© Cecil Beaton, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Diorling perfume, 1963.
© Laziz Hamani

Based on a major exhibition organised by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, V&A curator Oriole Cullen has naturally made the most of Dior's love affair with England – the designer admired our grand homes and gardens, Savile Row suits and London hotels. "There is no other country in the world, besides my own, whose way of life I like so much. I love English traditions, English politeness, English architecture. I even love English cooking," Dior



Sketch by Christian Dior for model Londres, Autumn–Winter 1950 Haute Couture collection
© Christian Dior

enthused in his memoir. He held his first UK show at the Savoy, and further events at some of England's best stately homes, including a couture show attended by Princess Margaret at Blenheim Palace in 1954 (her 21st birthday dress is among the star exhibits).

The exhibition focuses on key influences, from 18th century decorative arts to flowers and Dior's international travels, as well as the way the six artistic directors who followed the ground-breaking designer paid tribute to his legacy while stamping their own signature on the house. From Yves Saint Laurent, just 21 years old when asked to fill the influential designer's shoes, to the dramatic and sensational Brit John Galiano and the present director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, the first woman to take the helm.

Of course, there's absolute wow factor – think a recreated ballroom inspired by the opulent interiors of great British houses showcasing haute couture evening wear through the decades. But there's also plenty of lovely little details, for example, gorgeous vintage perfume bottles (perfume was no afterthought for Dior: he had planned to create a perfume even before he opened his couture house, and named his first, Miss Dior, after his much-loved younger sister).

Overall, the V&A show is a sensory delight which pays glowing tribute to one of the world's most influential and enduring designers. The next time you buy a Dior lipstick or pair of shoes, think of the talented disruptor whose hard work and inventive vision made his brand a sought-after symbol of luxury.



Pérou short evening dress, Autumn–Winter 1954 Haute Couture collection, H line. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Gift of Cecil Beaton.
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AT A GLANCE

Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams, supported by Swarovski, is at the V&A from 2nd February – 14th July 2019. Curator: Oriole Cullen. Designer: Nathalie Crinière. [#DiorDesignerofDreams](http://www.vam.ac.uk)