

2 THE PURCHASE OF HAUTE COUTURE BY PRIVATE CLIENTS

Women would come and want help getting an outfit, usually for a special occasion. Often they would drop in after to tell me what a success it had been. Knowing that you are well and suitably dressed gives one a wonderful feeling of confidence. Dora Matthews, 1984

Buying haute couture was a quintessentially feminine experience. Whether the client shopped directly in the couture salon in Paris, London, or Rome, or in a North American couture salon within a prestigious specialty store or a department store, it was a feminine affair. In all these venues, the relationship between consumer and retailer was carefully orchestrated. Haute couture consumption was like a classical musical composition. It began with an overture, the presentation of the designs in a fashion show. This was followed by a series of formalized movements within which the players each contributed to the sale. At the crescendo of the performance, the consumer, wearing the dress, entered society and had a public reception.

Since the *raison d'être* of the Paris haute couture was the private female customer, a closer examination of the relationship between client and couture house is warranted. Consumption of family goods, and especially clothing, has been clearly sexed as a feminine occupation since at least the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has pushed the time frame back as far as the second half of the eighteenth century.

In eighteenth-century Paris, “as shops became more inviting and hospitable spaces for women . . . the relationship between client and merchant — the nature of the entertainment provided by shopping — changed.” The increasing number of female shoppers upset the traditional courtship roles of male consumer and female merchant. It was feared that the rise of female consumers and the development of seductive new boutiques “would lead to women’s moral corruption, as if the lust

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for hats would provoke more dangerous desires . . . [Some] contemporaries were concerned that these sanctuaries of frivolity would lead to an equally pernicious character flaw, bad taste." As historian Jennifer Jones so well points out, the female merchant was cast in the role of "promoter and seducer" of the new female customer.¹ The twentieth-century Paris *vendeuse* inherited this role. By the late nineteenth century, the female retailer or saleswoman was seen as the temptress of the female consumer, who was viewed as riddled with uncontrollable urges and usually hysterical.² This notion still lingers today, and is profoundly associated with luxury goods such as haute couture. The myth is a far cry from the controlled and judicious decisions that actually framed most female consumption.

The Social Introduction to a Couture House

In the 1950s, a small percentage of North American women still went regularly to Europe and purchased clothing at the couture house. Yet a woman who wanted to buy directly at an haute couture salon could not just walk in.³ The social contacts required and the etiquette code surrounding the couture system were steeped in traditions resembling gaining membership to an elite club. Some Paris couture houses were much harder to get into than others. This hierarchy was largely based on the popularity of the houses and was usually determined by the fashion press. Prestige also determined prices; the more elite the couture house, the higher its prices. Balenciaga, for instance, was known for being "le plus cher, et clientèle le plus riche." Even in the course of my research I discovered that these rules still apply.⁴

The private customers who purchased directly at the haute couture house can be divided into three groups. The first was an established, elite prewar group, the members of which had inherited an introduction or gained it through wealth and who passed on this tradition of consumption to the second group, their daughters. Very few of the daughters continued to buy haute couture regularly in Europe after they were married, however, even though they had inherited the *entrée*. They would usually buy only if it was convenient when they were in Europe, or if they needed something very special. The third group comprised women with new postwar wealth, some of whom became regular customers and some of whom bought infrequently or only once. For this group, the introduction usually came either from a friend who was already a "member" of the haute couture club or

through social-professional connections that could be established through a society *vendeuse*. Others in this group obtained recommendations from local department store contacts.

The experiences of several Torontonians illustrate the typical process of introduction for postwar women. Rosemary Boxer was initiated into haute couture buying by her mother, who went regularly to Europe with her husband, an international lawyer. In 1946, Rosemary Boxer was married in a Norman Hartnell gown, even though her mother usually dressed at Molyneux. Molyneux, however, was known for “never doing wedding clothes” so they went to Hartnell, “who was a friend.”⁵ The referral system made the transition from one house to another easy. Another society leader, Mona Campbell, was introduced to the system of buying directly at the design house by her mother. Her first couture garment was purchased in 1937, a full-length black evening coat with fox collar and muff from Olive Todd, a couturier on Dover Street in London, England. She was living in London at the time, attending a finishing school before she came out in Toronto that same year.⁶ Signy Eaton went first to Europe with her mother, who went annually to both Paris and New York.⁷ Alternatively, some women went only once or twice to an haute couture showing, often while they were travelling in Europe with their mothers before getting married. The experience was considered part of their European tour, not expected to be assimilated as a regular pattern into their future married life, and the clothes they bought functioned as a form of trousseau. The process reflects the difference between prewar and postwar clients.⁸ Once a client was accepted into an haute couture house, the system of looking at the collection and selecting a purchase was also controlled by rules of haute couture etiquette.

The Role of the Paris *Vendeuse* and the Society *Vendeuse*

A *vendeuse* was the saleswoman in an haute couture house who sold the merchandise to clients.⁹ The job was complex and required a great degree of social skill, as she was the liaison between the house, workroom, and client.¹⁰ Her duties encompassed the following: “to see that the purchaser is completely pleased. It is she who puts the order through to the *atelier*, checks fabrics, colours, trimmings — everything — to make certain all are in accord with the original garment and any changes requested are recorded. She supervises fittings and checks on the progress of the

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garment so that the promised delivery date is met . . . Each *vendeuse* has one or more assistants, also known as *secondes*.”¹¹

The ideal *vendeuse*-client relationship was long term, and the house attached a great deal of importance to it. Ginette Spanier, *directrice* for Balmain, commented on this in her memoirs: “One of my jobs is to give the right *vendeuse* to a client, because the agreement, psychologically, between the two often is very important to the happiness of the customer.”¹²

This private relationship is very difficult to research because even today *vendeuses* protect their clients’ intimate details. They are privy to informal chat and details of clients’ personal lives and social activities. They keep notebooks on clients and sales but are not willing to share the specific information as it is considered personal and would break the established haute couture etiquette. Clients are also reticent and forgetful. Nevertheless, the stock books from the British house of Lachasse record its transactions from before the war until 1989.¹³ The records are organized by client name and *vendeuse* and testify to a rapport often lasting decades. Mrs Arthur Milner of Castlefrank Drive in Toronto went to the male *vendeuse* Peter Crown from 1955 to 1966. The records have the name “Effie” crossed out and Peter Crown’s name written above. It seems likely that Mrs Milner’s original *vendeuse* was Effie, who retired or left the house, and that she was then passed on to Mr Crown, who was with the house for a long time as a tailor and salesperson and would have been known to Mrs Milner.¹⁴

An haute couture design purchased directly from the couture house was an insurance of exclusivity for a client’s wardrobe. Her *vendeuse* acted as a type of insurance agent who would be familiar with the client’s lifestyle and social circle, thus providing security against the client encountering someone else in “her” design. By the 1950s, a more serious issue was to safeguard a private client against buying a “Ford,” a design that would soon be knocked off in the mass-produced clothing market. This became such a problem that an idea was discussed, though never implemented, that part of the French collections be reserved for sale exclusively to private clients.¹⁵ Thus, a refined and complex record-keeping system was important to maintain the relationship between a client and *vendeuse*. Christian Dior described the system:

Each private client has her file, which tells her name, address, passport number, measurements, credit rating, publicity value, workroom and vendeuse. In other columns are written the money

she spends at every collection through the years, her personality (hard or easy to handle), her place of birth, how she came to us and her favourite department — clothes, furs, hats, the boutique . . .

We also keep a model file containing the name of each dress, the name of the mannequin who wears it, its number in the show. It also gives the names of the private clients who buy it, their standing, their nationality and date of ordering.

For professional buyers, the file shows whether they purchased the paper pattern, canvas or the original dress. There is also a file by countries which will tell you in half a minute how much America, Greece or Italy spent during any season of the year.¹⁶

Tantalizing as this is for researchers, I have not been able to get access to any of this type of record and was repeatedly told that they did not exist. Either they have been disposed of or, more likely, are considered either an infringement of the client's privacy or too commercial to support the myth of couture as art.

The *vendeuse* acted as a taste editor on behalf of the haute couture house and directed the client's final appearance and image. It was the responsibility of the *vendeuse* to assure that garments fit correctly and were appropriate for her client's figure, age, and lifestyle, thereby demonstrating the workmanship and taste of the haute couture house. For the client, the *vendeuse* was a key person, saving her time and unnecessary or inappropriate purchases by knowing the collection, her taste, and often how the new acquisition would fit into her existing wardrobe.

In the 1950s, there was another type of *vendeuse*, who had probably existed early on in the haute couture system. Celia Bertin called her a society *vendeuse*, which she defined as one who "dealt only with customers she herself introduced, receiving 10% commission."¹⁷ Mary Picken and Dora Miller called her a *vendeuse mondaine*, meaning a woman who had a "social following and can bring desirable business to the house . . . Many ladies of title serve the great houses . . . She receives what in the United States is called a drawing account (enough salary for actual expenses) and in addition she is paid a commission on all her sales. A *vendeuse mondaine's* job is to look chic, to evidence perfection in grooming, to be on intimate terms with the international and theatrical set and keep customers coming to the house."¹⁸

Prewar and postwar, a very influential woman performing such a role for North Americans in Paris was American expatriate Laura Bacon. She lived in the Ritz and would furnish introductions to Paris couture salons to women who were

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anxious to make the socially correct purchases but did not know where to start. Introduction to her services was through word of mouth. Laura Bacon left New York for Paris in the 1920s and worked for Anne Morgan, daughter of the American banker John Pierpont Morgan. In Paris, she met and married Howard Bacon, who worked for *Barron* newspaper. In 1927, she set up a business helping wealthy North Americans to experience the luxury services of Paris.¹⁹

*She would tell you what to do in Paris . . . When [Americans and Canadians] came to Paris they looked her up and she shopped with them. When I first knew her [before the war] she was in Molyneux's as a vendeuse but she didn't go in except when she was helping someone to choose clothes . . . She knew a lot of very well-to-do people coming over from the States who were friends of hers . . . She always lived at the Ritz in Paris, never lived anywhere else . . . She finally went into business for herself . . . helping people shop . . . She had an office in the Place Vendôme across from the Ritz. If you went there she could take you wherever you wanted, whatever it was [you wanted] purses, jewellery, or clothes, or whatever . . . She was an amazing person.*²⁰

Laura Bacon probably began to work professionally as a type of cultural ambassador because she was constantly being asked for advice about other aspects of society Paris. She is remembered as the first person in Paris to provide a complete shopping service for foreigners, a role she created for herself. She set up arrangements with all the leading luxury trades — couture and accessory houses, hair-dressers, florists — and established a system whereby she sent them clients on the understanding that she would receive a commission.²¹ As one Paris couturier told me, “She knew a lot of rich Americans with no taste.”²² Her clients came to her by referral.²³ If she did not personally escort the client she would call ahead to the establishment and make an appointment. The client would go with her business card printed with “Laura Bacon suggests . . .” It was then the responsibility of the *vendeuse* who had served the client to call Laura Bacon with details of the sale. This was customarily supplied before evening, or else Mrs Bacon would quickly be on the telephone for the information.²⁴

Laura Bacon established her own reputation for exclusivity, as she only patronized the houses with the highest status. Before the war, she sent clients to Molyneux and after to Dior, Fath, Balenciaga, Lanvin, Givenchy, and Venet.²⁵ Postwar, when Torontonian Mary Carr-Harris went to Paris, she had a luncheon appointment at

the Ritz to see Laura Bacon, who took her to Givenchy, Venet, Dior, Schiaparelli, Lanvin, and Fath. She had been to Paris before, going annually with her husband when he was on business, and had bought clothes at other small couture houses but never from the prominent names.²⁶ It was Laura Bacon who introduced her to these top houses, guided her through the experience, and ensured that she made appropriate selections.

How a Private Client Made a Purchase

In 1957, *Time* magazine quoted a *vendeuse* at Dior, who in reaction to a client's dismay at the price of a dress said, "When they hesitate, I always tell them to buy elsewhere . . . Remorse is better than regret."²⁷ Such an attitude perpetuated a tradition of couture as privileged consumption and linked haute couture with high art collected by connoisseurs. The investment in an haute couture purchase, however, was not only a question of capital but also a serious commitment of time. Time, invested by both the client and the house, is one of the keys to the origins of couture mythology and helps to explain why a couture garment was believed to be priceless.

Buying haute couture in Paris was a structured process. Having arranged an appointment with a *vendeuse*, the client would attend a viewing of the collection or the parts of the collection that would relate to the intended purchase or purchases (fig. 2.1). These showings were for private clients only. During the 1950s, the collection was shown an average of two to three times a day on live mannequins. The mannequins worked exclusively for individual couture houses, and their quarters were called the *cabine*. At Nina Ricci, the haute couture collection was shown in the morning and afternoon. Later on, with the introduction of the *Jeune Femme* collection, a show was added at 3:00 p.m., and by the 1950s, the new boutique collection was also shown in the morning.²⁸

At Dior, Toronto client Rose Torno would make an appointment, and her name would be checked off a list at the door when she arrived. She would then go upstairs to the salon, where she sat in a chair reserved by her *vendeuse* and watched the daily fashion parade. She would be given a pad and pencil to mark down the dress numbers she was interested in trying and would give these to her *vendeuse* after the show. She then went to "an impossible little dressing room" to try on the clothes, which would not fit because the samples were made to measure for the



2.1 A *petite main*, or assistant, at the haute couture salon of Pierre Balmain in Paris taking the dresses to show to a prospective customer in 1956.

individual house mannequins. Sometimes she would not bother to try on a garment if the price was “astronomical.” Having selected her purchases, she usually did not have more than the prescribed three fittings.²⁹ This system did not suit all customers. Sonja Bata was a client who preferred to look at the clothes on the rack and herself select designs for the house mannequin to model, rather than sit through a show. She discussed the fit with her *vendeuse* and would sometimes disagree. She did not like the tight armhole that was typical of the period, and especially fitted in French clothes, while the *vendeuse* would say it looked beautiful. Even so, she conceded that the *vendeuse* was “frequently right.”³⁰

It was during the selection of garments that design modifications occurred. This not only guaranteed an “original” design but also permitted personal taste to change the couturier’s original conception. Redesigning was a collaborative effort between the *vendeuse* and client. By comparing the original design house sketch to a garment actually purchased, one can see the scope and type of alterations. A Balmain cocktail dress in the Royal Ontario Museum collection, for example, is similar to a model called “Espoirs perdus” from the winter 1956 collection (figs. 2.2 and 2.3). The main design feature of the dress is the diagonal draping that meets at centre-front waist and is clearly seen in both dress and design. The dress differs from the sketch in that it is sleeveless, has no centre-front buttons, and the line of the skirt is much less flared. Another, more subtle example of modification can be seen in a custom-ordered Balenciaga dress on which the waistline has been dropped; the couturier’s original concept had a more avant-garde high waist (figs. 2.4 and 2.5). This type of customizing, or redesigning, stemmed from the historical relationship between the tailor or dressmaker and the client before the advent of celebrity couturiers. The ability of a client to redesign is an aspect of haute couture that has been largely overlooked in favour of promoting the designer as artist and quintessential arbiter of taste.

Not only did a client have to schedule time for the initial appointment and the later fittings but her order had to fit into the overall production schedule of the house. The length of time involved in actually acquiring a final garment depended on both the client’s schedule and that of the house. The time necessary to obtain a garment thus secured the client’s involvement, heightened her desire by developing her anticipation, and increased the significance of the purchase.



2.2 Pierre Balmain cocktail dress that was probably based on the original model "Espoirs perdus." The dress differs from the model in that it is sleeveless, has no buttons, and has a narrower skirt. **2.3** (opposite) Design sketch for fall 1956 Pierre Balmain dress model 392, called "Espoirs perdus."





2.4 Fall 1956 Balenciaga black lace cocktail dress ordered by Toronto socialite Rose Torno at the couture house in Paris. Mrs Torno had the waistline dropped from the original design.
2.5 (opposite) The same dress as designed and shown by Balenciaga, model 74. The detail shows how the lace has been seamed by hand to follow the floral pattern.



The *Vendeuse* and the Value of the Garment

A *vendeuse* made her income from her sales commission, so had to be a good saleswoman and encourage customers to buy. Because the business was based on returning clients, however, a *vendeuse* had to balance the short-term sale carefully with long-term customer satisfaction. Rose Torno's experiences were typical. She never felt pressured to buy and believed that all aspects of her lifestyle were considered. Having been satisfied with a few houses, primarily Dior, Balmain, Balenciaga, and Chanel, she stayed with them as it was easier for her to go to a house that already knew her, understood her taste, and had knowledge of her existing wardrobe. In one instance, she very much wanted a particular Balenciaga dress but was going to Rome and returning to Paris in five days, then leaving again. She was told it was impossible and that the house could not even make a nightgown in five days.³¹ A *vendeuse* thus sometimes had to discourage a sale if scheduling did not permit its creation. Even a regular client could not have all her wishes satisfied and had to "earn" garments, thereby justifying the expense and personal involvement in haute couture production. Denial of some garments also heightened the pleasure of the successfully obtained clothes. It is also possible that in this instance the *vendeuse* did not think that the client would be happy with the design she wanted — it had been requested as an afterthought to the main order — and used this tactic to deter her.

By contrast, another Torontonians' experience at Balmain reflects the effort made by the houses to capitalize on a client's desires. Grace Gooderham was a regular client at Balmain. In 1956, she was buying day clothes but had seen a ball gown that she liked very much but considered expensive (fig. 2.6, and see fig. 7.20, p. 273). The *vendeuse* knew that she admired the design, and when Mrs Gooderham was having fittings for her day clothes, the *vendeuse* would bring in the ball gown to tempt her. Finally, toward the end of her stay she decided to order it even though it could not be completed before she left Paris. She had the inner corset of the strapless dress fitted before her departure, and the garment was then finished and shipped to her in Canada.³²

That haute couture purchases were contemplated on a number of levels relates to another important aspect of the non-economic value of couture. An haute couture dress had a value that went beyond the monetary because it was considered a rare design object that conferred status on its wearer. This image was publicly

advocated by the couture houses and is validated today by museums, couture collectors, and rising auction prices for these designs, as well as by the fact that many women who wore couture still have pieces in their wardrobes years later even though they will probably never wear them again.

Grace Gooderham's Balmain ball gown was embroidered after it was sewn together, making it impossible to alter without ruining the design and impractical to mass produce. The high price of the gown, its technical complexity, and the fact that she ordered it directly from the design house were a form of insurance of its scarcity.³³ At the time, Mrs Gooderham did consider the dress to be expensive, but she also judged its value in terms of design, workmanship, and exclusivity in her Toronto circle. She wore the dress to the Artillery Ball that year when her daughter came out as a debutante.³⁴

The purchase of this particular gown is also an example of "impulse buying" within the couture system, as Grace Gooderham had gone to Paris with the express purpose of filling in her day wardrobe, and the ball gown was an "extra."³⁵ Colin Campbell defines this as "consumption rhetoric," which he explains as the difference between need and want. He suggests that while people typically make lists for the things they need, they do not do so for what they want, "as there is little likelihood of forgetting one's desires. How consumers cope with the 'chore' of simple replacement need-shopping, therefore, is to 'compensate' or 'reward' themselves for performing it by indulging one or more 'wants.'"³⁶

These different experiences, the denial of the Balenciaga design to Rose Torno and the fulfilment of Grace Gooderham's desire for the Balmain, illustrate the complexity of the private haute couture sales system, which was geared toward controlling the production of quality garments in order to maintain its elite and exclusive image. The Paris *vendeuse* was pivotal in this process and served as a type of taste broker. Her Toronto equivalent, who was just as influential, was the saleswoman in the couture salon of the local department stores, specialty shops, and boutiques.

Toronto Couture Salon Buyers and Sales Staff As Taste Makers

By the 1950s, most North Americans shopped for couture locally instead of going to couture houses in Europe. Torontonians Rosemary Rathgeb, who did buy in Paris, explained that she preferred to buy from local stores as this gave her time to think





2.6 This fall 1956 Pierre Balmain ball gown of silk faille, "Agéna," was ordered at the Paris haute couture salon by Grace Gooderham, who wore it to the Artillery Ball in Toronto for her daughter's debut in the winter of 1956. The dress was embroidered with roses after it had been sewn to fit the customer, making it impossible to alter. See also fig. 0.1, p. 2.

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about her purchases. She found that custom-made clothing did not always come out as she expected, making it difficult for her to be satisfied, so she preferred to have ready-made couture that she could try on before buying.³⁷

Nonetheless, the Paris haute couture salons were an internationally recognized model for an environment in which to purchase luxury clothing, and local merchants emulated them. Retailers that traded in couture provided richly decorated salons, elegant seating, and fitting rooms for customers. The lavish decor was intended to reflect the lifestyle of those buying the clothes. The setting and the whole experience of the purchase was integral to the sale and a testament to the retailer's understanding of the cultural and social context of the merchandise and therefore the client.³⁸ Historians Susan Benson and Cynthia Wright have both noted the importance of the "non-selling areas" in defining department stores as feminine space. Gail Reekie has likened the dressmaking room of late-nineteenth-century department stores to a boudoir and the public spaces and selling areas of stores to the drawing room.³⁹ Department store lounges, dining rooms, exhibition areas, and theatres were intended for women's events and entertainment, thus promoting the store as a social gathering point with links to art and culture.

In Toronto, Eaton's and Simpson's both placed great value on the interior design of their couture departments, attempting to create an atmosphere in which the customer would feel pampered, as though she were in a rarefied European luxury setting. When Ollie Smythe took over as buyer for Eaton's Ensemble Shop in 1955, she described it as "a dreary place with little stock that was very high priced." She asked for the salon to be refurbished as a condition of her accepting the job, and the three small fitting rooms were decorated with matching paint and carpets in pink, green, and blue. The other large department store, Simpson's, sold couture in the St Regis Room, which its couture buyer, Margery Steele, described as having black and white tile that was "copied from Versailles" and crystal chandeliers (fig. 2.7).⁴⁰

Another aspect of private haute couture sales often neglected by scholars was the husband. He could play a significant role as an arbiter of taste, not just as a source of money. He, too, was directly linked to the value and meaning of couture purchases as capital and cultural investments that were a direct reflection of his socio-economic status. Rose Torno's husband would accompany her shopping most of the time, and she said that he was "most generous." Couture salons, though designed as feminine



spaces, also accommodated trappings associated with male comfort, often by including a club chair, serving beverages, and making newspapers and magazines available.

Toronto retail buyers and sales staff were the local equivalent of the Paris *vendeuse*. Ollie Smythe clearly saw her role as a taste and etiquette advisor.⁴¹ Most couture clients called ahead to make an appointment with their saleswomen, who would preselect styles for them and have the garments ready when they came in. In the salon itself, only a few items of clothing would be displayed, as the bulk of the stock was hidden from view. This practice secured the privacy of both stock and price for any potential customers and upheld the exclusivity of the merchandise.⁴²

Specialty stores and boutiques operated the same way. At Toronto's Joan Rigby boutique, the young saleswomen were from the same social group as the customers. They "naturally" understood clients' requirements and could offer very personal, insightful advice. Their own dresses were usually purchased from the shop because they got a discount, and this, too, promoted the store because everyone knew where they worked. Helen Stimpson, Lee Allen, and Ardith Gardiner, all saleswomen at Joan Rigby, were photographed and their dresses described in the local

2.7 The St Regis Room in Simpson's Queen Street branch in the mid-1950s.

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newspaper when they appeared at Woodbine racetrack during the King's Plate in May 1947.⁴³ As the occasion was social, no reference was made in the newspaper to Joan Rigby, but it would have been understood by knowledgeable readers and by the women's friends that their ensembles were from the shop. Thus, they championed the reputation and merchandise of the store within a purely social context.

A well-known Toronto model told me that she would wear clothes from the exclusive store Creeds to the members' enclosure at the racetrack, where her dress would be noticed and understood to have been from that store. This sort of "silent" promotion of haute couture worn by recognizable, fashionable individuals was successfully employed in the late nineteenth century, when actresses wore couture on stage, and by such early-twentieth-century designers as Paul Poiret, who sent his mannequins to the racetrack wearing his designs. It is clearly seen today in the dresses worn by those attending the Academy Awards in Hollywood.

The influence of buyers and sales staff over clients was considerable, in positive and negative ways. Creeds salon, for example, was closely identified with saleswoman Alexandra Dorothea Burton, known as Lexy. She had graduated from Molton College for young ladies at age eighteen and worked for a French milliner, Mrs Nedo, for eight years in midtown premises at Bay and Bloor Streets. In 1930, she went to work at Creeds, where her sister, Eleanor, was the buyer at the time. She was put in charge of sales, and had about thirty-five customers "who bought nothing but the finest French designers." As she said, "I had one customer in particular who . . . if I called her at five o'clock . . . and told her what I had, she'd be down in five minutes and take the whole collection." Lexy said that she would "rather not sell anything than see a woman walk out in something that [didn't] suit her." It was known that "she possessed a keen eye for style, an appreciation of couture fashion and a joy of working with people that made for a success on the floor of the city's most select women's fashion store."⁴⁴ She retired in 1988. Lexy noted that her job in sales was "lady-like sort of work because it was the best shop in Toronto, with the best clientele. I had been well brought up, schooled in all the niceties. I had the same savoir faire my customers had."⁴⁵

Ollie Smythe also exerted considerable influence. She recalled having to dress a large-sized client for a special cocktail party. The woman had been referred personally by Signy Eaton, wife of the president of Eaton's, so the situation was infused

with importance from the start. Having taken one look at the client, Ollie Smythe knew that she had only a single dress in stock that would fit her and suit the occasion. Nevertheless, the client was taken to a dressing room and shown several dresses before the destined one. The client did choose the only dress possible, but as Ollie Smythe said, "She believed she had a choice and had an enjoyable experience."⁴⁶ An opposite tack was taken at Joan Rigby if staff had to deal with customers who did not pay their accounts. They were instructed to show the clients fashions that would not suit them so that they would see nothing to buy.⁴⁷

Consequently, buyers and saleswomen were highly instrumental in understanding and influencing the taste of Toronto's social world. Many of these clients moved in international circles, extending the influence of the buyers and local sales staff well beyond the city.

Department Store Services

Customers had innate expectations of in-store services to accompany retail couture. Deliveries were usually made twice a day, and stores permitted customers to take goods home to be tried on with personal accessories and viewed in the context where they would be worn. Another important service was a reliable in-store fitting and alterations department. Custom fit was synonymous with haute couture, and this attribute carried through to imported, already made-up couture models. In order to retail haute couture successfully outside of the Paris setting, a good alterations service was essential. Clayton Burton, wife of Edgar G. Burton, the president of Simpson's, summed this up when she said, "You're only as good as your alterations department."⁴⁸ Selling high-priced clothing, and particularly couture, therefore necessitated having highly trained professional seamstresses available to work on the stock. In Toronto, as elsewhere in North America, many of these were skilled European immigrant women.

The importance of the alterations departments was directly reflected in the staffing. Creeds had an alterations staff of thirty to forty that was run by a forewoman or foreman.⁴⁹ Joan Rigby had two fitters, Nellie Cubban and Margaret Curran, who earned \$35 a week and were sometimes helped out by another sewer, Bessie Love.⁵⁰

Haute couture clothing purchased away from the design house almost always required alteration for a personal fit, a fact that accounts for the high number of

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alterations in the Royal Ontario Museum collection. The time required for alterations was calculated into the couture shopping process and described in Eaton's staff magazine, *Flawb*: "As soon as a customer has decided she wants to buy a certain dress . . . the fitter is called by the salesclerk and there is a deft taking-in here, and a letting-out there . . . indicated by pins, until the garment fits. Next the garment is brought to the workroom where girls expert in their line . . . some for coats and suits, some for dresses . . . do the work indicated by the fitter . . . After the pressers have done their work . . . the garment is hung on a 'finished' rack to be thoroughly inspected before going out."⁵¹

The scale of alterations varied from small adjustments, such those in a Balmain evening gown that has been taken in at the front darts (figs. 2.8 and 2.9), to major modifications, such as that in a lace Balmain evening dress that has been let out approximately four centimetres at the waist (fig. 2.10). The alteration to the first dress was more difficult than it appears, as the rose embroidery had to be worked around. In the lace dress, a white lace V similar to the original lace has been inserted at the centre back and at the sides of the bust and blends into the rest of the garment. It is further disguised by the addition of copper-coloured sequins similar, but not identical, to the original French sequins on the dress. These dresses and numerous others demonstrate that alterations, either minor or substantial, were not a deterrent to the haute couture consumer but *de rigeur* to achieve the perfect fit.

For both store buyers and clients, knowing that the clothes would be altered influenced the selection of merchandise. A garment that was designed in a highly complex way, making alterations very awkward or obvious, would be passed over in favour of another style. As the average couture customer was a mature woman, the issue of size was key in determining selections. Buyers tried to order couture garments in large sizes for their clients. A change in scale could change the look of the original design and had to be taken into consideration when placing orders.

The private consumption of haute couture should be viewed as a specialized undertaking. Etiquette, time, money, setting, social connections, and relationships were all integral to a purchase. In-store services including home deliveries, exchanges, and alterations were essential to finalizing sales. But at the same time there existed another set of rules, with its own series of constraints and relationships, governing the mass consumption of couture by merchants and manufacturers.



2.8 Pierre Balmain sketch for the spring 1955 gown "Rose de Paris," altered for Dorothy Boylen (fig. 2.9).





2.9 This Pierre Balmain evening gown, "Rose de Paris," was worn by Toronto socialite Dorothy Boylen and probably purchased at Simpson's. It has had a very small alteration in the front darts, which have been taken in. The roses are carefully embroidered over the centre back seam after the seam has been sewn up.





2.10 This fall 1952 Pierre Balmain ball gown has been let out about four centimetres in the centre bodice to accommodate the customer, socialite Ethel Harris. The alteration has been patched with similar lace and sequins to hide the adjustments. See fig. 5.15, p.162.



3.1 Toronto socialites and members of the Junior League in evening dress at a party at the home of Helen Phelan, president of the Toronto Junior League, prior to the League Christmas Tree Ball, 4 December 1954. From left to right: Mrs Harold Grant, Mrs R.F. Porter, Mrs G.E. Bunnett (Mary Bunnett, wearing Hartnell), Mrs Paul Phelan, Mrs John Bull, Mrs John Weir (Frances M. Weir), and Mrs F.M. Gaby.