

## APPLICATION FOR ICOM COSTUME 60th ANNIVERSARY AWARD

BOOK: Christian Dior: History & Modernity 1947-1957

*(please see link to secured pdf. Not for circulation. Password: ICOM22)*

### **Applicant:**

Dr Alexandra Palmer, Nora E. Vaughan Senior Curator, Global Fashion & Textiles, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

#### 1: Brief biography

Dr. Alexandra Palmer is responsible for the collection of 44,000 fashions and textiles from Europe and North America at the Royal Ontario Museum and teaches in Art History at the University of Toronto.

Since joining the ROM in 1996 and has curated over 21 exhibitions for the museum including *Dior 1947-1957*, (2018, travel-2021); *Iris van Herpen: Transforming Fashion & Philip Beesley: Transforming Space* (2018); and *Fashion Follows Form: Designs for Sitting* (2014), winner of the 2014 Richard Martin Exhibition Award. She is a co-curator for ROM's *Unmasking the Pandemic* (2021), and the ICOM Costume Committee international museum virtual exhibition, *Clothing the Pandemic* (2021).

Palmer has authored three award-winning publications: *Christian Dior: History and Modernity, 1947– 1957* (2018) Millia Davenport Publication Award; *Christian Dior: A New Look, A New Enterprise 1947 – 57*, (2009, revised 2019) Millia Davenport Publication Award; and *Couture & Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (2001), Clio Award for Ontario History. She has contributed to international museum catalogues, including, *Gabrielle Chanel. Fashion Manifesto* (2020); *Cloth that Changed the World* (ROM 2019); *Les années 50* (2014) Musée Galliera, Paris; *The Chanel Legend*, Draiflessen, Germany (2013); and *The Golden Age: Haute Couture 1947-1957*, V&A, London (2007). She has edited 3 volumes and contributed to many scholarly publications and is Exhibition Editor for *Fashion Theory* since 2003. Her forthcoming collaborative book, *Patterns of Fashion: Case Study 1. The context, cloth, cut and construction of three eighteenth century men's informal Indian chintz gowns*, will be published by The School of Historical Dress, London.

## 2: Overview of the book

*Christian Dior: History and Modernity, 1947– 1957* by Alexandra Palmer with photographs by Lazi Hamani and patterns by Berta Pavlov.  
Toronto, Ontario: Royal Ontario Museum; Munchen: Hirmer Publishers (2018)

The book accompanied the Royal Ontario Museum exhibition *Christian Dior* (Nov 2017- March 2018) extended 3 weeks, that travelled to

- Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (Feb – June 2019)
- National Silk Museum, Hangzhou, China, (Sept. 2019 – Jan. 2020)
- McCord Museum, Montreal. Quebec, Canada (Sept 2020- Jan 2021, extended due to Covid closures until Sept 26 2021)
  - <https://www.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/christian-dior/>
  - Conversation with Alexandra Palmer: The Legacy of Christian Dior <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zGrKiRsbFM>
  - Christian Dior • Vernissage virtuel • Virtual Opening <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnOQPU00-Qg&t=7s>
  - Christian Dior • Exposition | Exhibition <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9hAJWz5zXw&t=14s>

The book and exhibition set out to explain what it was about Christian Dior's postwar New Look fashion designs that made them so desirable and for women internationally, and so profitable for international stores and commercial buyers who had to see how they were cut and sewn in order to learn how to reproduce and copy them. Surprisingly has not been done before and was the first time and physical characteristics of the designs were explained.

The book is divided into two sections. The first chapters locate Dior's motivation for his designs and explore his socio-cultural world art and couture world influences that led to his ideas on design for his own couture house. It analyzes his shaping of femininity, and is followed by chapters that detail and analyze how this was achieved through the technical structure of the designs and use of historical nineteenth century shapes and techniques in his postwar return to corsetry and petticoats, as well as the use of darts and methods of soft dressmaking that framed the woman in the dress. What emerged from this analysis were clearly the ways and methods that the house thought about textile use, how to create the new rounded soft and fitted shoulder, and how bulk was reduced. It clearly showed the enormous amounts of yardage required that made the New Look so sensational, controversial and created a new physical feeling of wearing fashion for the wearers that ushered in and represented the new postwar era.

The research began with a close examination of the designs that is set out design by design in the second section, the Anatomies. This offers a detailed history of each dress in the museum, mapping the names and skills of Dior's numerous collaborators who contributed to the final design that was named a Dior, but only achieved by the work and creativity of a much larger team. Working with the archival records of Christian Dior Paris, it was possible to trace back the names of who made the designs in the

ateliers, the mannequin for whom it was made and fitted on, the textile manufacturer, the embroiderers, the button and sequin makers. I strove to identify as many individuals as possible who contributed to the final design. This was augmented with traditional archival research as well as detailed analysis of each design.

The extensive images of the designs in the book were a museological project that required technicians, conservators and photographers that pushed new thinking about presentation. The interior construction had to be photographed prior to mounting and the extensive detailed photography planned after close examination of each design. The pictures of objects were taken to visually explain the New Look and the designs were photographed in new ways to explain the text and underscore the technical aspects of Dior's clothes. Thus, skirts were fanned out flat to show the circular cuts and massive yardage that is not well understood on a standing form, the angle of darts and clever linings were carefully thought through for the images as undressed and dressed garments. Christian Dior Paris graciously offered Laziz Hamani to take the photos of the mounted designs and I worked with him to capture macro photography that focused on details of cut, textile and embroideries to amplify and offer new documentary evidence on the designs that reinforced and helped explain the text.

In the museum, we weighed some of the designs, measured the amount of textile used, the circumference of hems, and the numbers and different kinds of sequins and threads used in a single embroidery design. This data revealed the amazing creativity and technical skills of the many makers as well as highlighted the importance of so many suppliers that make couture fashions possible. Berta Pavlov took patterns of select designs that deconstructed the methods of the Dior workrooms for achieving the New Look. This revealed the thinking about and how the new shapes and structures were technically made, and explains who helped Dior, and how and why the house was so successful. It documents a new picture of the many names, hands and skills that went in to making a Dior and why manufacturers needed to purchase Dior's models in order to understand the new techniques for their copies.

The technical research was wedded with archival research as well as oral and social histories from the wearers of the clothes donated to the ROM, and included the history and images of the socialite wearing the design where possible. Thus, each design was rigorously documented from its inception in the couture house, to its circulation in presentations, press, magazine images and out into the social world where it was used in Canada.

### 3: A brief summary of how it meets the award criteria

This book meets the award criteria because it weds scholarly research and analysis of material culture equally. Each informs and relies upon the other. All the museum Dior images of artifacts were extensively used throughout the book and offer new ways of understanding Dior and why he was such an influence on Paris couture. The photography was integral to making the exhibition such a success and was vital to explain the dressmaking in the book. In the exhibitions, the photography was used as visuals, with limited text, on iPad (preCovid) allowing visitors to see inside the clothes while looking at the designs on display. The images of objects have offered new ideas of how to think about and show modern fashion to museum visitors/readers, makers, the public and fashion scholars. This book offers a new understanding of the skill of making fashion and is the first combined technical and social study of Christian Dior's New Look.

### 4: A summary of the project's target audience.

The book is sold out and will be republished when things are easier post-Covid. It reaches a cross section of audiences – students to older adults – and offers museums and collectors new information, research and reference material on Christian Dior's designs made during his life, though the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. The exhibitions reached a similar audience.

(Please see pdf and links to the last exhibition installation at the McCord Museum).