

# The Gray Suit Takes Center Stage

Thom Browne makes his couture debut, while Schiaparelli, Dior and Iris Van Herpen spin their own dreamy tales.



**By Vanessa Friedman**  
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In 1955 the idea of the gray flannel suit as the symbol of the soul-deadened corporate drone entered the American lexicon thanks to Sloan Wilson's novel, making it pretty much impossible to look at that particular item of clothing in a neutral way ever again. It became the stand-in for our skewed work-life balance, the triumph of business over imagination. It got, it's fair to say, a bad rep.

For the last two decades the New York designer Thom Browne has been trying to change all that: first, by shrinking the proportions of his men's suits to demand a reassessment; next, by erasing gender boundaries, and then by creating so many variations on the theme, he effectively transformed the little gray suit into a Rorschach test that contained multitudes.

On Monday in Paris, however, he took it to a new level: the couture. Effectively proposing that the gray suit deserved the same mythic status as the Chanel bouclé suit or the YSL Smoking or the Dior Bar. And that American fashion (not fashion by an American, but fashion with its roots overtly in American culture) deserves its place on the couture stage.



It was a pretty radical proposition.

The shows began in Paris in the shadow of national unrest over the police killing of a teenager of Algerian and Moroccan descent that has sparked charges of racism and discrimination. For awhile, there was a question about whether the collections would — or should — happen at all. There are few events, after all, as symbolically tied to the country's history of privilege and insularity than couture: made by hand, to order, styles for the .001 Percent. Hedi Slimane canceled his Celine men's wear show, originally scheduled for the night before the couture officially was to begin. Bulgari canceled a cocktail party.

The rest stood fast, monitoring the situation and noting, when asked, that there were few industries as representative, globally, of France's economic and artistic strength as fashion. And that the couture is a celebration of that craft at the highest level. But it was jarring to walk past protests in front of one set of historic buildings (the Assemblée Nationale, the Palais de Justice) on the way to see extraordinarily elaborate frocks in another (the Petit Palais, the Musée Rodin).

That tension might be the current human condition, but it also raised the bar for the shows that went on. Yes, they offer escapism and beauty — and, thanks to social media, escapism and beauty for everyone to look at, rather than simply the elite few to buy. At their best, however, they should also offer something more. And not just the flat ballet shoes that Giambattista Valli paired with his taffeta and lace ball gowns. Though that was a welcome addition.

## Artists and Goddesses

At Schiaparelli, for example, Daniel Roseberry provided an exegesis on the virtue of dialogue: between art and fashion, past and present.



Schiaparelli, couture, fall 2023. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

The collection was supposed to have been Part 2 of a show trilogy inspired by the Divine Comedy — Part 1, which took place in January, was based on “The Inferno,” so this would have been “Purgatorio.” But at the last minute Mr. Roseberry changed the title to “... And the Artists” to avoid any misinterpretations in light of current events. Rather, he said backstage before the show, he was looking at “the earthly realm, which is the human experience, which is the act of creation, and the desire to decorate yourself and to express yourself, which is fashion.”



Schiaparelli, couture, fall 2023. Schiaparelli



Which led him to thoughts of washed silk, draped cloudlike around the shoulders, as well as Elsa

Schiaparelli's penchant for artists, which led him to his own artistic pantheon: Yves Klein and Lucian Freud and James Whitten. Which, in turn, led him to one of his most relaxed, considered collections in seasons: black collars swirling around the shoulders of perfectly cut white coats; wooden accessories piled on bronzed body parts draped on a jewel-toned base; plush opera puffers and suits covered in mirrored mosaics.

Mr. Roseberry's work has gotten increasingly exaggerated as he has leaned into the Surrealist history of the house. Last season that resulted in a social media meltdown after a trio of life-size fake wild kingdom heads-on-dresses sparked an animal rights outcry. This time, the costumery and clichés were toned down, and the imagination turned up. The result was a step closer to divine.



Christian Dior, couture, fall 2023. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times



Christian Dior, couture, fall 2023. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

As was Maria Grazia Chiuri's meditation on Greek and Roman antiquity at Dior. The goddess in every woman is one of her favorite subjects, hackneyed though it can be, but this time there was a fierce rigor to its expression that evoked armored high priestess rather than new age claptrap. In a palette of neutrals — ivory, sand and black — she layered capelets cut short at the front and back but extending to the floor at the sides atop peplos-like gowns; wove metallic mesh that looked like macramé from afar; and peppered micropaillettes with tiny seed pearls, like very glamorous miniature ball bearings.

And though Iris Van Herpen may have shown what looked like the wardrobe of the royal court on some far-off moon, complete with bionic minidresses and iridescent chiffon that floated around the body like soap bubbles (why Marvel hasn't yet hired her as a creative director is a mystery), it turned out to be based on reality: Oceanix, the floating city being planned for South Korea.



Iris Van Herpen, couture, fall 2023. Gio Staiano



The idea of a waterborne city was once a utopian vision that now, given climate change, may

become a necessity. That could easily have led to thoughts of dystopia, but Ms. Van Herpen's genius is her ability to imagine her way through to an extraordinary future, all the way down to the shards of abalone covered in silicon and embedded on the bodice of a sea-green gown. That makes her work a gesture of faith.

## Shades of Gray

Still she was not, as it turned out, the only one thinking about the life aquatic. In his couture debut, Mr. Browne was, too — or at least thinking about drowning one's sorrows. He is one of fashion's greatest impresarios, and every collection tells a story.

This time it unfolded on the stage of the Palais Garnier, now home of the Paris Opéra Ballet, in front of an audience of 2,000 cardboard gentlemen in gray suits ranging from the orchestra to the Chagall ceiling (the IRL audience sat in the wings). As faux pigeons roosted here and there, a tale began based on the 1980 song "Fade to Grey" by the British new wave band Visage, of a man (actually the model Alek Wek) alone at a train station, watching his life go by in 58 iterations of gray and prepster suiting, each one more intricate and referential than the last.



Thom Browne, couture, fall 2023. Thom Browne



They came in patchworks etched in gold bullion that painted pictures straight from Cape Cod: of

jellyfish and sea gulls, clams and dolphins; in stripes and plaids picked out in beads or shimmering, transparent micropaillettes; in Irish knit woven from strips of tulle. They came in mostly the same simple silhouettes — small shoulders, rectangular, lean — plus some exaggerated molded bell shapes and two cream-puffy gowns. At the end, there was a bride in a simple white chiffon shirtdress with a very long train. Well, there had to be a train in there somewhere.



Thom Browne, couture, fall 2023. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

Mr. Browne can get overly enchanted with his own skill set; hence his continued penchant for putting his models in unwalkable shoes in which they inch painfully, and tediously, along. His dramas can veer very close to high camp charades. But there's no denying his achievement in taking a garment once synonymous with anonymity and reinventing it as an expression of individuality. Couture may be the vestigial tail of fashion, but that is an entirely contemporary idea.

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