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Paris Refashioned, 1957–1968
February 10–April 15, 2017
Organized by Colleen Hill
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#ParisRefashioned
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By the early 1960s, a few designers were challenging the traditions and confines of the couture system. André Courrèges, a protégé of the famed couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga, established his own house in 1961 and immediately eschewed some of the formalities of couture. Courrèges’s first collection was devoid of eveningwear, and his clothes were introduced on models who strode briskly to lively music, a striking contrast to the slow pace of traditional couture showings. Courrèges’s 1964 “Space Age” collection – featuring his famous white, calf-length boots – would come to epitomize the decade’s future-forward fashion aesthetic.

In her 1964 style guidebook, Elegance, Geneviève Antoine Dariaux wrote, “While high fashion is still the star of Vouge and Harper’s Bazaar, the ready-to-wear industry, because of its financial means and its enormous clientele, is playing an increasingly important role.” Dariaux, a former couturier who was then employed as the director of the couture house Nina Ricci, provided fascinating insight into an industry turned upside-down. At the time of Dariaux’s writing, the century-long reign of French couturiers was being undone by an unlikely group of young, ready-to-wear designers known as the stylistes, whose vibrant aesthetic and democratic approach to dressing proved highly influential.

Stylistes such as Emmanuelle Khanh, Karl Lagerfeld, Michèle Rosier, and Sonia Rykiel, among several others, provided a new identity to French fashion sold off the rack. Earlier machine-made, mass-produced garments in France were labeled as confection and had been generally disliked for their poor design and inconsistent quality. During the 1950s, prêt-à-porter – a literal translation of the English phrase “ready-to-wear” – had begun to replace both the term confection and its negative connotations. It became evident during the following decade that the future of French fashion was in prêt-à-porter. In 1966, Saint Laurent launched his ready-to-wear line, called Rive Gauche, to enormous success. While the fashion world laughed Rive Gauche for its progressive approach, some of Saint Laurent’s experiments with new designs and materials can be traced to the influence of the stylistes. Cardin, Courrèges, and Givenchy also produced ready-to-wear fashion that offered high style at more affordable prices.

Long-established couturiers such as Balenciaga, Chanel, and Madame Grès did not make the transition to ready-to-wear, but they did adapt their aesthetics to keep pace with the changing times. Other well-known houses hired younger couturiers to breathe fresh life into their businesses. Gérard Pipart, formerly of the pioneering prêt-à-porter label Chloé, took over the house of Nina Ricci in 1963 when he was still in his late 20s. In spite of these efforts, the once-unassailable dominance of haute couture could not regain its lost ground. Balenciaga closed his business in 1968, lamenting that it had become impossible to design true couture. By 1972, the fashion writer Hebe Dorsey concluded, “Fashion liberation has taken over from fashion determinism. Each woman is free to choose for herself, to interpret the mode according to her own style, taste and figure, to participate in creation without being reined by absolutes.” Through the innovations of both couturiers and stylistes during the 1960s, the French fashion system had been forever changed.

Colleen Hill, curator