

# FEATHERY SILICONE GOWNS? SURPRISE!

Snickering if you must at the high-fashion offerings for fall/winter 2013/14, some of which won't even be reproduced. As a famous French devotee tells **Amy Verner** in Paris, the unexpected is to be expected (and therein lies the thrill)

**O**n the Monday night of Couture Fashion Week, which ended last week, Les Arts Décoratifs was the backdrop for a cocktail party celebrating Christian Lacroix's turn as the first of several guest designers enlisted to revive the Schiaparelli label, now owned by Diego Della Valle of Tod's fame. Rotating on a mirrored, slowly turning carousel, mannequins showed off looks that married Lacroix's penchant with the late legend's eccentricity. There were goat-haired booties, a heavily embellished cape that weighed 20 kilograms, a dress that required 380 metres of material, insect accessories and — *mon dieu!* — a giant, jewel-encrusted lobster pochette. As if haute couture isn't already rarefied and inaccessible enough, this display — none of which, admittedly, will be reproduced — turned it into an opulent peep show.

That isn't how veteran fashion muse Inès de la Fressange saw it, though. "Do you know why fashion is a nice place to work?" she asked, after snapping pictures of the furry footwear. "Because each season, you have a surprise and you get surprised."

It's true that surprises mark haute couture (less so in the realm of ready-to-wear). Leave it, for example, to Karl Lagerfeld, who has both the means and the moxie to show high-fashion finery inside a suggested theatre in ruins. Had it been bombed out? Was it felled by an earthquake? Does it really matter? The mise-en-scène was so well simulated that some seats remained empty because they were strewn with faux rubble. And when the tattered curtain drew back to reveal a gleaming, futuristic metropolis populated by models sporting squared-off boater hats and suits that were embroidered to resemble tweed, it seemed as if Lagerfeld was stringing together disparate notions of decadence, disaster and detail. You could draw your own symbolic conclusions or you could just sit back and appreciate his ability to make daywear look cool and classic from afar and exceedingly complex up close.

## NEW DAYWEAR

While there was no shortage of ornamentation this season, designers also considered how to create more wearable looks that still conveyed the same degree of *savoir faire*. Valentino's Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli paid as much respect to herringbone, cashmere and tawny men's-wear tartans as to precious Chantilly lace. In a way, the renewed respect for the couture *tailleur* makes perfect sense. Before Yves Saint

Laurent and the explosion of ready-to-wear, a *tailleur* was the cornerstone of a couture house. Jean Paul Gaultier did suiting, too; his was accented in every manner of feline pattern (some were actually feathers) and equipped with flamboyant fin-shaped pockets — wardrobe essentials for minx and cougar alike. Russian fashion-plate-turned-legitimate designer Ulyana Sergeenko merged her signature folkloric fantasies with architectural shapes for fall. There were still some highly costumed looks (including panier short shorts), but strictly cut, dense grey wool jackets and New Look coats slashed at the sleeves made this her most wearable col-

lection yet. Paris-based Canadian designer Rad Hourani continued to re-imagine a unisex wardrobe free of any conventional codes. His meticulously shaped jackets and tunics were only occasionally hindered by one layer too many.

## IN THE NUDE

"Nude" was the name that Giorgio Armani bestowed on his Armani Privé collection, a sensuous mix of soft suits and barely-there evening wear. Tissues were layered so finely and draped so delicately that the gowns often became extensions of the body. Embroidery and pearly accents were employed for sinuous effect or to direct the light and the Old World glamour

suggested the designer felt compelled to take a stab at Gatsby, too. Some might object to his narrow idea of nude as a palette, but let's believe that his meaning was figurative versus literally flesh-toned. Donatella Versace, meanwhile, revealed skin in strategic, immensely satisfying ways. This is now the fourth season for Atelier Versace but the first that pushed the house forward. Hook-and-eye closures were used for silhouette emphasis and to deliberately undress shoulders or panels across the décolletage. Silk *point d'esprit* (a fine mesh with black pin dots) became a second skin. Maison Martin Margiela's Artisanal collection included cropped vests and dickies that left wide areas of midriff exposed before arriving at the relaxed waistline of couture vintage jeans.

## HAUTE CURIOSITIES

MMM's Artisanal collection differs from all the others in that the atelier reworks and reassembles vintage pieces, hand-making them into provocative couture pieces like a suit jacket puffed out with a crinoline of tulle from the 1950s and embroidered with flowers that date back even earlier. According to press notes, part of an embroidered smoking robe belonged to a high-ranking civil servant from the Beijing Opera circa the 1930s. Iris van Herpen recruited Toronto-based architect Philip Beesley for the third time to produce otherworldly silicone-based fabrics that feathered outward, quivering and culminating in skeletal-like accent points. "I think people respond intuitively to these ideas with a mixture of fascination and disorientation; there's a warmth to wildness," Beesley said post-show. Giambattista Valli's porcelain-themed collection moved from Sèvres through Meissen, balancing the fragility of his textural biscuit-style blooms with moulded teacup-shaped pleats and a mini-dress in Wedgewood blue. The Valentino team took its cue from a cabinet of curiosities, allowing it the freedom to explore coral motifs, insects, lion heads and chinoiserie in an entirely cohesive way. It was Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* done decadently. And, indeed, what is haute couture if not survival of the fittest?



MAISON  
MARTIN MARGIELA

ATELIER  
VERSACE

VALENTINO

GIAMBATTISTA  
VALLI

IRIS  
VAN HERPEN

CHANEL