



Maureen Footer
AUTHOR OF DIOR AND HIS DECORATORS
BY JOAN ROSASCO

JR: I first want to ask how you came to this subject, looking simultaneously at fashion and at interior design. That is an unusual approach, it seems to me, but one for which you were superbly prepared.

MF: My interests, I suppose, have been rather serpentine. I have long been fascinated by fashion, design, and Parisian social history. All these themes coalesced in this book on Dior and the New Look aesthetic.

My first job out of school was at Vogue magazine. I was interested in dance criticism, and Vogue, with Leo Lerman running it, had a very good features department. Of course, I couldn't help but learn about fashion while at Vogue.

Later, I pursued graduate work in decorative arts at the École du Louvre in Paris, where I learned to consider an object well beyond its aesthetic properties. Key to understanding a chair, a dress, or a room, is understanding its antecedents, the tradition that led up to it. How did this object evolve from one tradition and transform it into something relevant to its time? What was the environment it responded to? How did it lead to future trends? Most fascinating of all is that a chair, or a dress provides a window into an era, especially its values and its aspirations. They

show us how a society wanted to be perceived.

I had seen photographs in old issues of Vogue of Dior's townhouse interiors. They were dazzlingly luxurious and sophisticated and French, but newly sensuous and contemporary, not coldly and historically correct like, say, the 18th century Wrightsman rooms at the Met. I wondered about the decorators who designed them -- Georges Geffroy and Victor Grandpierre. Why was there nothing written on them?

As I researched Geffroy and Grandpierre, the name of Dior inevitably came up. There was no way to write about these decorators without writing about their landmark work for Christian Dior. The couturier was not only friends with both decorators, even more relevantly, he had collaborated with them on interiors. For Dior's couture house, Grandpierre transposed Dior's fashion vision into an interior design statement—neoclassic gray and white, Louis XVI chairs, toile de Jouy, houndstooth, cane--- which became so identified with Dior, that it provided the basis for the brand of the couture house. And, like blue jeans, these elements proved timeless, continuously adaptable to modern tastes, modern needs. Thanks to Victor Grandpierre's vision, any Dior store, airport boutique, ad, or

box of perfume can be immediately identified to this day as Dior, even without glancing at a sign or label.

With Georges Geffroy we see the ultimate Café Society decorator of the post-war period. Coming from the same background in contemporary arts in the 1920s and 1930s, Geffroy was inspired exactly as Dior had been when creating the New Look--reworking history and tradition to reflect a modern time. Geffroy's "New Look" interiors are comfortable, pared down, and inviting—radical concepts for the time. His work is worldly in that it's not just based on French culture; it's broadened to include international influences then arriving in Paris after the war---new ideas about luxury, sensuousness, comfort, and function brought by chic Americans like Gloria Guinness. Practically avant-garde at its time, Geffroy's ideas are now a given for how we decorate today.

So, I was fascinated---by this intimate connection between fashion and design, so romantic and so modern. Little---maybe even nothing--- has been published on the parallels of fashion and interior design. Dior's collaboration with these two major decorators was the perfect opportunity to study how fashion and interior design work together, so I jumped in.



JR: When you wrote about Dior, you described how he consciously sought to revive the old techniques of the couture, calling upon the specialized artisans who still knew those handicrafts. He used yards and yards of the best fabrics for voluminous skirts. I wondered about the two interior designers. Didn't they do something similar? Hanging lavish curtains and portières, tenting rooms, covering walls with fabric. I was thinking particularly of the rooms where they used the technique of "gainage", basically upholstering the walls and cornices and architectural features with velvet.

MF: Having craftspeople who know how to do those exacting techniques that have been perfected over generations! It's something I admire deeply in French culture.

The interesting thing about "gainage" is where it was used. When Geffroy had a client with beautiful 17th or 18th-century architecture, boiseries, etc., he didn't resort to "gainage". He saved it for his clients who lived on the avenue Foch or in Neuilly in more contemporary buildings without particularly distinguished architecture. Gainage gave these rooms supreme style, it created "presence." The most outstanding example of his use of gainage--- and much admired by Hubert de Givenchy---is in the green velvet upholstered living room on the avenue Foch of the California-born Vicomtesse de Bonchamps.

JR: In the book you mention that a velvet-covered jewel cabinet Grandpierre designed for Lopez-Willshaw is the only surviving example of his work. In fact, most of the rooms you illustrate and describe don't exist anymore. So, how did you do your research? Are there archives? Were there articles and photographs in old periodicals?

MF: There really weren't any archives for Geffroy and Grandpierre. Neither had large offices that continued to operate after their death, and neither had descendants. Nobody collected or saved their plans and papers. Fortunately, there were still some fascinating people who had been close to them -- the charming duchesses d'Harcourt, Pierre Bergé, Pierre Cardin, Marie-Christine Sayn-Wittgenstein, suppliers, co-workers, a few clients, children of clients, design specialists who were very young and just starting their careers when Geffroy and Grandpierre were in their reign, who could bring



them alive for me with vivid stories and memories. Dior's archives were open to me, of course and I am forever grateful to them for all their assistance in helping me get to see Dior's former houses and historical parts of the couture house on the avenue Montaigne. Other sources were the archives at Condé Nast and library stacks--mostly in Paris--where I spent hours among the old photographs and back issues. I ended up turning page after page after page of Vogue, Plaisir de France, House and Garden and immersed myself in the era. This sort of research was fascinating and critical—I wanted to tell a story, to show why this work resonated with its time. The social milieu, the cast of characters, the way of life – a way of life that disappeared essentially in 1968. I wanted to draw the reader into all that, to give the details that seduce people, that make it come alive, so the stories of nightclubs and fittings, parties and perfume were actually of vital interest to me.

There is also some very good work on Dior, Marie-France Pochna's biography, for example. Recently, Pierre Arizzoli-Clementel published a chronological account of Geffroy's work.

JR: How did this post-war fashion and

interior design break with pre-war models, with the Art Deco and Modernist styles that prevailed in the 1930s?

MF: Since the 1920s there had been a love affair with modernism, with aviation, technology, industrial design but little reference to French tradition. Christian Dior and his New Look—as well as the designers who translated this into rooms---were now audaciously mixing the past and the future as had never been done before.

It was a radical idea. Flipping through the pages of Plaisir de France and other publications, you realize there had been this whole 'set design' view of interiors in the '30s. Everything was elegant but idealized. The past had been largely erased. Plus, there was no place to put down your handbag, no place to live comfortably. Grandpierre and Geffroy stood these notions on their head, when they created rooms synonymous with the New Look interior---18th century furniture, deep sofas and chairs, tiger and leopard velvet, objects from all corners of the earth, and intimate, elegant, luxurious, and chic.

JR: And it was monochrome. Art Deco was chilly, neo-classical, like those sleek, bias-cut

satin or lamé goddess dresses. Now suddenly you have color, glowing jewel-tones.

MF: It's the post-war spirit. After dreariness, deprivation, and rationing, everyone sought gaiety, romance, a return to civilization-- literally and figuratively, they craved for color! It all came back, and on every level. 1947 is not only the year of the New Look, it's the year Balanchine choreographed Symphony in C for the Paris Opera Ballet. In London, Ashton was choreographing glorious work for the Royal Ballet. 1947 was also the inaugural year of the Tour de France.

There was an exuberant use of color, with accents of leopard or tiger velvet – a detail we think of as pure 1950s chic. But leopard had been used already at Versailles, in the 18th century. Then it had been as little touches – now, taking an old tradition and making it modern, it covered sofas!

Like Dior himself, Geffroy and Grandpierre would always take from the past, but not repeat it; they would reshape it, modify it, make it appropriate for the modern world. It also makes life richer, connecting past and present, offering perspective and posing questions. We can learn a lot from them today.