



# Farewell to ghosts of Dior past

BY VANESSA FRIEDMAN

The fog drifted in over the manicured lawns of the Villa Albani Torlonia in Rome just as the Dior cruise show began, lending what was already a somewhat surreal moment an extra-other-worldly air.

All the female guests wore white, including Natalie Portman and Rosamund Pike; the men, black. As they entered the verdant inner courtyard of the private home, with its collection of Greco-Roman antiquities, they walked past dancers posed like moving statuary. When the first models appeared, to the strains of a live orchestra, light rain began to fall.

Along with the mist, it made the clothes, almost all ivory and often so light as to be practically transparent, seem ghostly (even for someone like me, watching on a computer screen): an ethereal stew of references in lace, silk and velvet — with the occasional tailcoat — to different periods in history and imagination.

In a video call before the show, the designer, Maria Grazia Chiuri, said she had been after what she called “beautiful confusion,” the phrase that the screenwriter Ennio Flaiano originally suggested as a title for Fellini’s “8½.” It was an apt description, not just of the collection itself, which seemed made for phantoms slipping from one era into the next, but also of the question mark surrounding her own situation.

Ms. Chiuri had nominally brought Dior back to her home city to celebrate the romantic spirits that formed her (and helped shape fashion), from La CinéCittà studios to the director Pier Paolo Pasolini and Mimi Pecci-Blunt, an early 20th-century patroness of the arts who built a private theater Ms. Chiuri recently restored.

But she also brought herself and her audience full circle, back to the place she began.

To do so, she enlisted a host of collaborators: the Tirelli costume house, the director Matteo Garrone (who made a short film in honor of the collection), the artist Pietro Ruffo, the Dutch choreographers Imre and Marne van Opstal. If that sounds like a lot to cram into what was essentially a 20-minute fashion experience, it was on purpose.

It was widely accepted in fashion that this was Ms. Chiuri’s last show for Dior. That in a matter of days the house would

announce she was leaving after nine years and would be replaced by Jonathan Anderson, who recently joined Dior as artistic director of men’s wear.

LVMH, which owns the house, had not addressed the rumors, and when asked directly, Ms. Chiuri simply said, “Oh, I don’t answer this question.” (The announcement of her departure was made Thursday.)

It’s too bad. The lack of clarity about her future, combined with the actual fog, gave an ambiguous edge to what could have been a triumphant farewell. Instead it seemed like a vaguely elegiac swan song.

Maybe they were hedging for legal reasons. Maybe Ms. Chiuri, who has the thick skin and stubbornness of many pioneers, didn’t want it to be nostalgic or sentimental. But while the collection was lovely and she got a standing ovation, it could have been so much more.

It could have been an exclamation point at the end of what will surely be seen as a meaningful era in the life span of a major brand. A celebration of the contribution of the first woman to run the house. Such a farewell is not unheard-of in fashion, even if designers now turn over so often and so brusquely that it seems rare. Tom Ford ended his Gucci period with pink rose petals, a standing ovation and the song “Nothing Compares 2 U.” Dries Van Noten went out on a silver foil runway with a giant disco ball to commemorate the moment. There is nothing wrong with designers’ being recognized for what they brought to a brand, even if, as in this case, the decision to part ways does not seem to have been entirely mutual.

Especially a designer such as Ms. Chiuri, who both helped Dior grow to what is estimated to be close to \$9 billion in revenue. She is quoted in the documentary “Her Dior” — a study of Ms. Chiuri’s work with female artists that was directed by Loïc Prigent and released in March (an early sign, perhaps, of legacy building) — saying she knew what she was doing. She did.

She used her power and position, the financial might of her company, not just to assert a somewhat hackneyed feminism (who could forget the slogan tees or the weird playsuits under princess dresses?), but also to support a variety of female artists, as well as a panoply of artisans. To insist on the radical idea

that craft belonged on the same level as couture. And, perhaps most significantly of all, to break the stranglehold of the New Look.

Indeed, in “Her Dior,” Ms. Chiuri said she told the Dior executives when she was hired that the brand’s most signature silhouette, with its cinching and constriction of the female figure, was not for her. To look back at her collections is to see her methodically dismantling it.

She did so first by going through the motions of loosening the stays — figuring out how to preserve the shape without the restrictive underpinnings — and then by eschewing it entirely. Her strength as a designer was not in the giant productions but in the internal magic she worked with construction and material. It is why her work often seemed more enticing in previews, experienced up close, than on the runway, where it could look banal.

It is worth noting that there was not a single Bar jacket (a key style in the New Look) in the whole cruise show. Or a high heel. Instead it was strewn with Easter eggs that suggested a finale: references to Chiuri-isms past (to the short film she and Mr. Garrone made during Covid and to the dancers she had included in other shows); to a possible future (her work with the Roman theater); to the goodbye of her colleague, the former Dior men’s wear designer Kim Jones, who resigned after his January show.

Even the inclusion of 31 couture looks among the ready-to-wear seemed a last word of sorts. Couture is the next season on the women’s wear schedule, and it would have been Ms. Chiuri’s next collection, had there actually been one. For now there was just the cruise show’s closing look: an extraordinary gown micro-beaded to resemble a trompe l’oeil heroic torso. Or a relic, perhaps, of a time gone by.

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Maria Grazia  
Chiuri at the end  
of her Rome show.



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