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If Women Ruled the World, What Would They Wear?

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Dior haute couture, spring 2020. Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

PARIS — A few decades ago, around the time she unveiled her breakthrough work “The Dinner Party” and formulated her animating question “What if Women Ruled the World?,” the artist Judy Chicago made a maquette of an enormous sculpture she wanted to build.

Entitled “The Female Divine,” it would be a reclining corpulent nude, reveling in her own fleshy abundance. At the time, Ms. Chicago couldn’t get anyone to fund the piece. “Who would want to see that?” was the general drift.

Approximately 40 years later, enter Dior. On Monday, the brand made Ms. Chicago’s dream a reality. The fashion version of it, anyway.

Instead of a sculpture, the brand built a show space in the shape of Ms. Chicago’s goddess: a 250-foot long, more than 80-foot wide and 50-foot high tent splayed in the gardens of the Rodin Museum, dwarfing the French sculptor’s heroic marbles. Guests entered via a doorway cut into the tent’s curving bottom, like the entry to the birth canal, and strolled inside to sit down in the belly of the woman.

“I have learned,” said Ms. Chicago, who is 80, in an interview the day before the Dior show, “that you never know what will happen if you live long enough and put art out into the world.” Ideas, too.

That women could rule the world — or at least legislate much of it — no longer seems such a pipe dream in the era of Nancy Pelosi as speaker of the house; of Sanna Marin as Finland’s prime minister; and Ursula von der Leyen as president



of the European Commission. Of the fourth Women's March, which took place two days before the Dior show. And of Dior itself, its women's wear now designed by an actual woman, Maria Grazia Chiuri.

(That sentence may sound ridiculous, but it is correct.)

Since 2016, when she became the first female artistic director of the house, Ms. Chiuri has made it her mission to champion the feminist cause, creating logo tees based on the equality-challenging words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the poet Robin Morgan, and backdrops with the artist and poet Tomaso Binga. Ms. Chicago (whom Ms. Chiuri called one of the women who most influenced her), is now part of the gang.

In addition to the structure itself, the interior was hung with 21 heraldic banners designed by the artist and woven by a school of female embroiderers in India (where embroidery has traditionally been a male profession) that is supported by Dior. The banners were emblazoned with more questions: "Would There Be Violence?" "Would There Be Equal Parenting?" "Would God Be Female?"

Maybe a more apropos query, however, would be: If women ruled the world, what would they wear?

This is, after all, the question that fashion, in its constantly changing iterations, purports to answer. It is certainly the question at the heart of couture, designed, as it is, to the specifications of each individual.

Ms. Chiuri's answer? Flat shoes.

Clothes with all the stuffing taken out. Roman gowns in gold lamé and silken fringe, with jacquard shorts beneath instead of a slip. T-shirts of sheer tulle scrimmed by elaborate scrollwork atop tiers of pewter silk in a Greek key motif. Chiffon slips hanging from twists of rope at one shoulder. Waltzing dresses embroidered with sheaves of wheat. Bracelets that snaked, literally, up the arm. A finale look featuring a burnished moon rising over a sea of midnight blue beads.

Also metallic jacquard pantsuits that gave the Bar some boardroom chic. Imagine Minerva in Davos, and you will get the idea.

Still, it was hard not to wonder: If women ruled the world, wouldn't they deserve clothes that redefined them entirely, instead of making them look like slightly more modern versions of deities gone by? The point of learning from history is not to repeat it. Yet at the couture, perhaps because it is often seen as fashion's umbilical cord to the past, designers can't seem to stop.

Giambattista Valli's presentation of more than 30 signature looks at the Jeu de Paume museum, for example — bubble dresses in silk taffeta covered in organza petals; sweeping ball gowns in 300 yards of daffodil tulle; a lime green silk faille caftan encrusted in crystals — spoke of Jackie Onassis and Truman Capote's swans with cigarette holders. Daniel Roseberry's sophomore Schiaparelli couture leaned a little too heavily into the traditional surreal tropes of the house, including winking eyes and trompe l'oeil candelabra, that were great in slouchy trouser suits and gowns that provided their own cloud cover, but off the mark entirely in fake tan lines and awning-striped bathing suit gowns emerging from seas of hot pink skirts.

And Virginie Viard's Chanel simply carried on with the semiotics set by her mentor and predecessor, Karl Lagerfeld, albeit in a more minimal, unforced kind of way.

On a set built to mimic the vegetable gardens of the abbey orphanage in Aubazine, France, where Coco Chanel spent her youth among nuns and (apparently) tomatoes, complete with vintage linens hanging on the line, Ms. Viard sent out



a collection almost entirely in black and white, etching a progression of silhouettes from schoolgirl through governess, and attitudes both naïve and strict. Collars pie-crust and Peter Pan in lace and jewels framed bouclé uniform skirt suits and ballerina dresses; narrow, pleated shirtwaists swept the ankles; and evening gowns had shoulders swathed in sheer organza, glinting like stars.

They were light in step, timeless in message (we all grow up), yet old fashioned in effect. These were roles, after all, that once confined women. Chanel herself broke free. Ms. Viard hasn't yet. At least she's moving — baby steps! — in the right direction.

One currently occupied by Iris Van Herpen, a designer whose imagination is not bound by the expectations of forms past, but rather shaped by a search for forms and techniques future: 3-D printing, laser cutting, heat bonding. Her inspirations, this time around, bridged the work of the Spanish neuroanatomist Ramón y Cajal and the exploration of the taxonomic class hydrozoa: the deepest marine life.

The result was a nebula of organza, chiffon and cotton, oil-painted and glassine layers, cut into vines and extruded squiggles, swirling around the body in constant flux.

Instead of a silhouette, her clothes (because they are recognizably clothes, not concepts) embrace evolution. To update the existing status quo can be admirable. But to make your own rules is — well, divine.