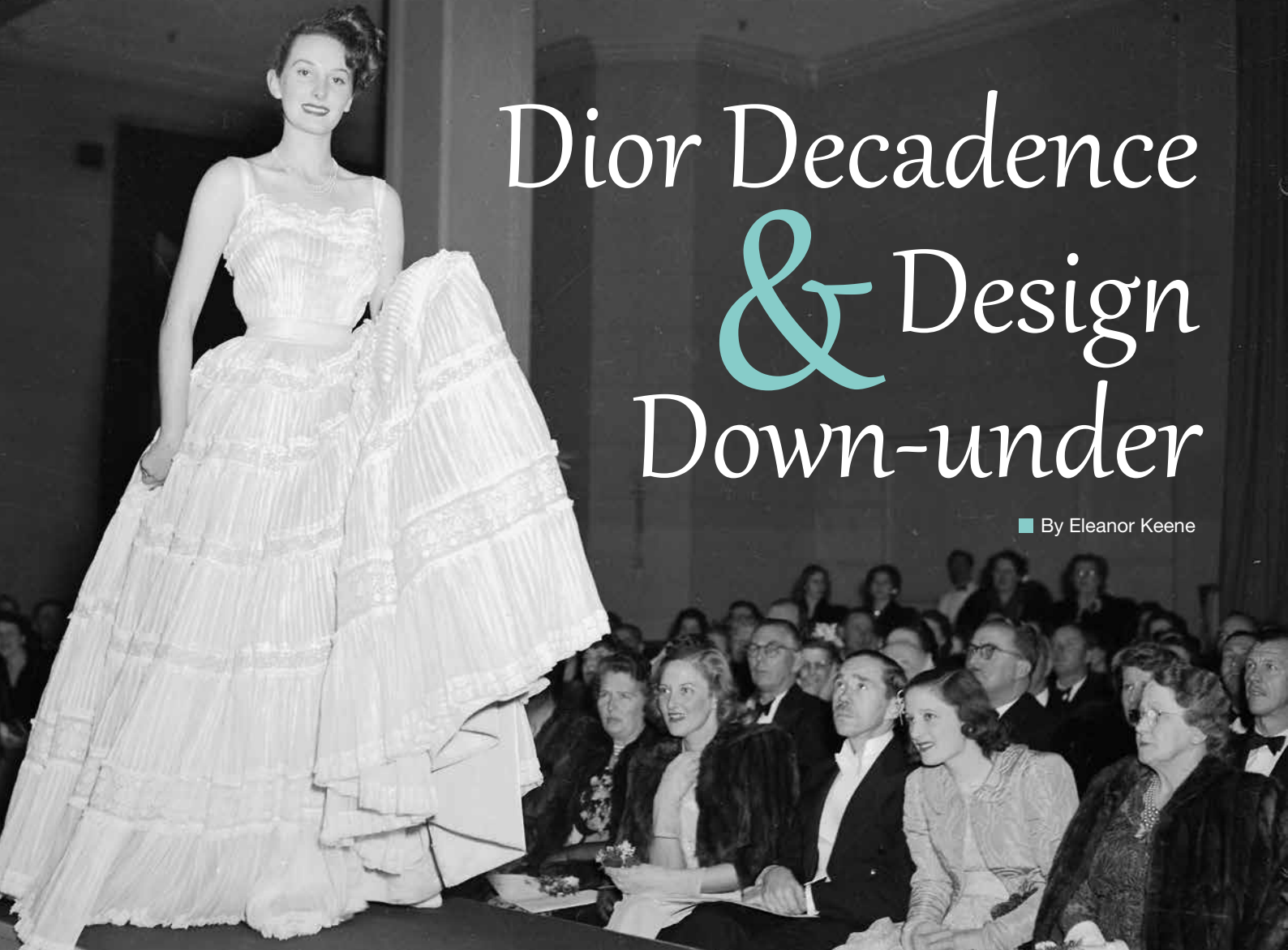


Dior Decadence & Design Down-under

■ By Eleanor Keene



Little known to many, Australia was the first country in which an entire collection of *Dior* was shown outside Paris. In July 1948 at the Sydney Department store *David Jones*.

So how did this remarkable 'fashion first' come about.....

The first Paris fashion parade was formed as a stimulus initiative collaboration between the *Australian Women's Weekly* and several leading department stores to include *David Jones* and *Myers* to help generate interest and sales in fashion post war.

Mary Hordern the Editor of the *Women's Weekly* was sent on the reconnaissance mission to choose and negotiate the designer gowns and models to be flown to Australia for this inaugural fashion parade. The show opened in September 1946 in the grand Great Restaurant in *David Jones* Sydney and included six Parisian 'live' walking fashion models wearing outfits by the famed houses of: *Balmain, Fath, Patou, Molyneux, Lanvin, Lelong and Carven*. (Dior not yet on the scene)

The parade was a great success and toured Australia with great publicity. However crucial negotiations on licensed reproductions for this designer fashion had not been had; perhaps as Mary Hordern's perspective and motivation was for magazine sales, rather than production as primarily her trip was funded by the magazine group. Workrooms in the department stores however, did make styles in the 'fashion of', which were as 'creditable copies' as they could get away with.

In 1947 the second Australian French fashion show took place. Again Mary Hordern visited Paris to make her selection where she met and had her photo taken with Christian Dior.

Christian Dior, the emerging new designer had just hit centre stage in the fashion world, with his debut collection he called 'Corolle', which was famously renamed the 'New Look', by American Fashion Editor Carmel Snow of *Harper's Bazaar*. This event is arguably one of the most influential standalone fashion moments of the 20th century. From the austere wartime fashion and

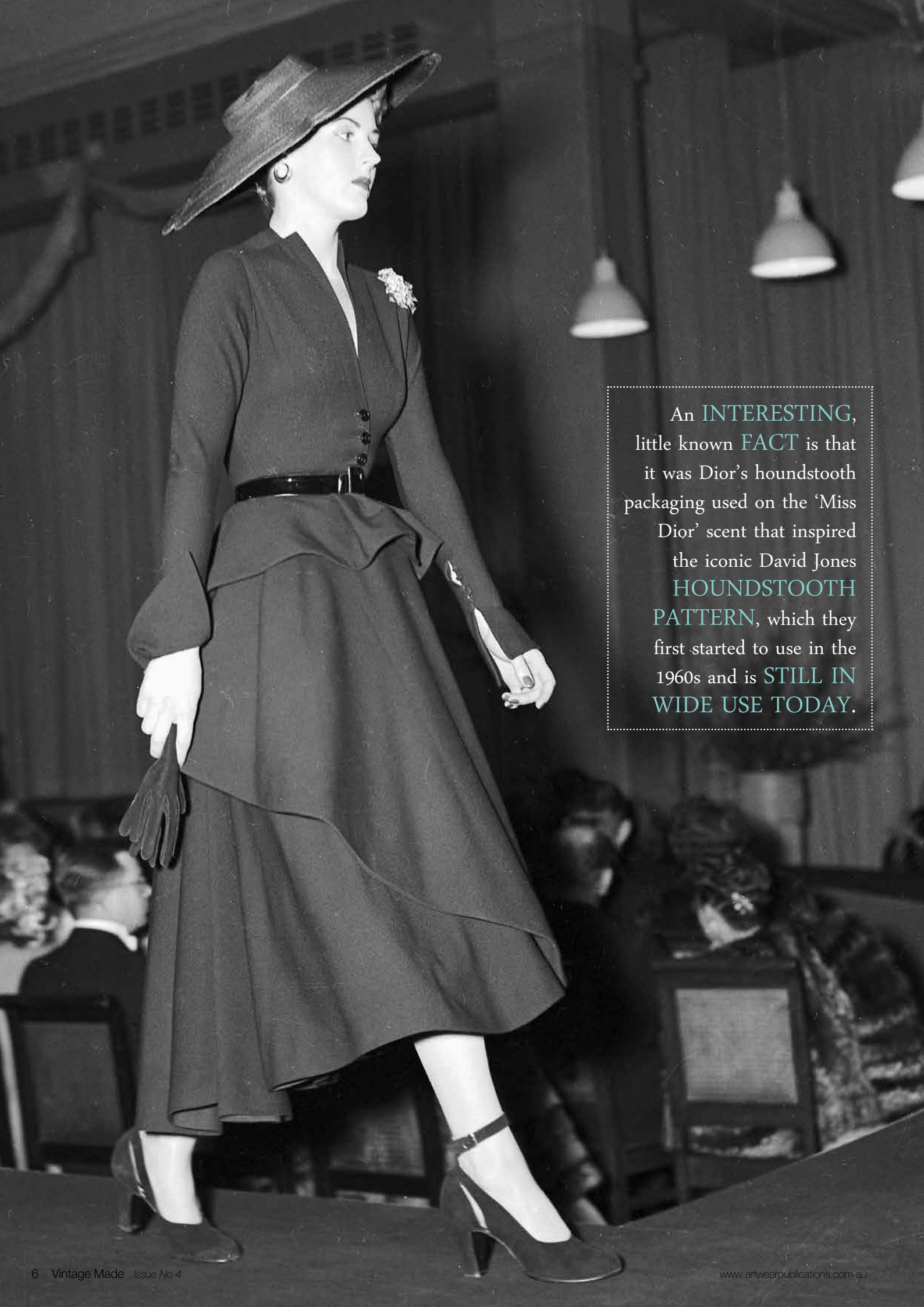


rationing, came this romantic vision of feminine fantasy, with his full skirts, curvy busts, nipped in waists and big hats. Rejecting the fashion silhouettes of the previous decades, Dior created a feminine look that women wanted to be part of and it exploded on a global scale. Australia was right there in the mix, lapping up this new Parisian style.

After running Dior and Hordern's photo together in the *Weekly*, it was followed up by a photograph of a Dior 'New Look' cocktail dress, with a pattern so readers could make their own!

Hordern included a few of Dior's dresses in the 1947 parade along with more established Paris designers, many of which they had featured the year before; however this time they changed allegiances, and hosting their parade in Sydney they paired up with *Mark Foy's*, rather than *David Jones*.

David Jones having been left out of the party, decided to bring Paris to Sydney themselves. Holding their own parade,



An INTERESTING, little known FACT is that it was Dior's houndstooth packaging used on the 'Miss Dior' scent that inspired the iconic David Jones HOUNDSTOOTH PATTERN, which they first started to use in the 1960s and is STILL IN WIDE USE TODAY.



they entitled: 'Paris Fashions for all', and promoting the copying of the designer gowns. This parade featured the work of: *Paquin, Grès Balenciaga, Molyneux, Balmain, Dior*, along with others.

Later that year they engaged Pierre Balmain, to make the long trip out to Australia, where he appeared in their Sydney store and gave a talk to a selection of their customers, as well as creating a range of women's fashion for the Australian climate and lifestyle.

After the great success of Balmain's visit and collaboration, David Jones went after Christian Dior. They sent Mary Alice Shiell (Condon), one of their top store buyers, to secure the World Famous designer. (Accounts of her travels can be read in '*David Jones 175 years*', by Helen O'Neil, 2013) After many days of negotiation and language translations, a contract was drawn up, which secured *David Jones* the exclusive rights to show a *Dior* collection of 50 garments and accessories in Australia. This was in fact done to create an exclusivity among their rival department stores, and ended up being a world first! 'The first complete *Dior* Collection ever to be shown outside Paris' as the original program states.

The garments were flown express, and went straight to the *David Jones* Marlborough St, Surry Hills workrooms and carefully examined and copies of many made, under licence agreements with *Dior*. 34 of these copies were shown in the parade alongside the real *Dior* gowns. However it was Douglas Cox of Melbourne who in 1949 obtained the right to mass-produce *Dior* copies with the 'Dior Australia' label.

Licensed copies were often modified to suit the local market, climate and materials to hand. In 1951 a selection of *Dior* fashion was made out of Australian wool, thus helping to promote the Australian wool industry.

Where there had been some initial hesitation in European countries that had been hit hard by war and rationing, Christian Dior's fashion was received with open arms by Australia's fashionable women.

Dior was forward thinking, and moved fast to also open businesses in America, as well as his support of Australian licences. Although Dior never made it to Australia to promote his work, he supported it in a press interview in 1948 where he told the *Herald* how his clothes suited Australia,



Further reading:

CHRISTIAN DIOR: the magic of fashion, A Powerhouse Museum Publication, Sydney: 1994.

175 YEARS OF DAVID JONES, Helen O’Neil, Newsouth Publishing, Sydney 2013.

DIOR, Alexander Palmer, V&A Publishing, London 2009.

‘PARISIAN CHIC COMES TO AUSTRALIA’, Margot Riley, in *Australian Modern* 2012 Edition.



Marlene Dietrich in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright*, 1950. Dress by Dior (Public domain)



Elizabeth II and the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs in Australia, 1954. The Queen’s summer suit features a fitted short-sleeved jacket with a peplum and a full skirt.



Natalie Wood and Tab Hunter arriving at the 28th Academy Awards 1956 with gossip writer Louella Parsons in the background.

saying ‘Living in the sunshine of a comparatively new country unscathed by war, Australians have a cleaner, brighter outlook and are more receptive to new ideas than the tired people of European countries’.

Rumours and whispers were rife that Dior was to make the trip down under and with a possible appearance at the parade of his work that *David Jones* and the *Australian Women’s Weekly* had once again collaborated on. The parade was scheduled for the end of 1957; Christian Dior died of a heart attack at just 52 years of age, on the 24th of October, only months before the date of parade. Whether or not he would

have made the journey is hearsay and speculative, and now I guess we’ll never know.

The parade still took place, in memory of the great man, his death coming after only a decade of fashion fame.

His name has continued to live on, and is notably the first 20th century fashion designer whose business continued to thrive after his death, and traded on the name of the label, rather than the designer himself.

The Sydney 1957 parade showcased the 83 outfits from his last collection, *Libre* (Free). Seven of Dior’s models

flew out with the gowns, overseen by Madame Suzanne Luling Dior’s sales and staff manager in tribute to the designer. This last parade showed the glamorous, luxurious, beautiful full gowns he was known for, but also moved with the fashions. His last collection also included shapeless shift dresses aimed towards the change of direction in youth culture, the next decade would see much of it.

Christian Dior changed the face of fashion and Australia enjoyed being part of it.