Evening coat

Place of origin: London (made)

Date: 1937 (made)

Artist/Maker: Elsa Schiaparelli, born 1890 - died 1973 (designer)
Cocteau, Jean, born 1889 - died 1963 (designer)
Lesage (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Silk jersey, with gold thread and silk embroidery and applied decoration in silk

Credit Line: Given by the American Friends of the V&A

Museum number: T.59-2005

Gallery location: Fashion, Room 40, case CA10, shelf FIG7

Public access description

Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973) was famed for her attractive and wittily designed evening ensembles. Her clothes were smart, sophisticated and often wildly eccentric, and she had a huge following. Her ideas, coupled with those she commissioned from famous artists, were carried out with considerable skill. She had close connections to the art world, and to the Cubist and Surrealist movements in particular. Salvador Dali and Christian Bérard are among the artists who collaborated with her. This connection with the wider art world and its ideas set Schiaparelli apart from most other fashion designers.

This superb evening coat is one of the best examples of her close artistic collaboration with the French artist, poet and film maker Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). Cocteau produced two drawings for Schiaparelli which were translated into designs for a jacket and this evening coat for the Autumn 1937 collection.

The design for the evening coat reveals Cocteau's preoccupation with the double image, a motif he consistently returned to in his work. The double image held particular fascination for several other artists associated with the Surrealist movement, including Dali. The strong linear design on this coat can be read as two profiles facing each other, and in the negative space, a vase of roses standing on a fluted column.

Descriptive line

Ankle-length coat of black silk jersey with facial profiles forming a rose-filled vase, Elsa Schiaparelli, Jean Cocteau and Lesage, London, 1937.

Physical description

An ankle-length coat of black silk jersey by Schiaparelli. The collarless neckline with short lapels and the waist with a single black ceramic button having a design of a petticoated skirt and dancing leg, the hook fastening beneath. The back bodice designed by Jean Cocteau and embroidered by Maison Lesage with confronting facial profiles in gold thread forming a shaped vase filled with roses of tucked pink silk and leaves of green thread decorating the upper back and shoulders, the eyes of a blue stone and the lips of red foil, the centre back skirt with applied gold thread to imitate pleats. The lining is of sea green silk (shattered) and interlining of black wool, labelled Schiaparelli London and numbered 4995.

Dimensions

Width: 53.5 cm intact panel of silk, including selvedges

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Object history note

This superb evening coat, designed by Elsa Schiaparelli, is one of the best examples of her close artistic collaboration with the French artist, poet and film maker Jean Cocteau.

Cocteau produced two drawings for Schiaparelli which were translated into a design for an evening coat and a jacket for the Autumn 1937 collection. In September that year he also illustrated one of Schiaparelli's dresses for American Harper's Bazaar, writing "Schiaparelli made this dress for dance and I copied it for Harper's Bazaar. Jean".

The design for the evening coat reveals Cocteau's preoccupation with the double image, a motif he consistently returned to in his work. The double image held particular fascination for several other artists associated with the Surrealist movement, including Salvador Dali. The strong linear design on this coat can be read as two profiles facing each other, and in the negative space, a vase of roses standing on a fluted column. The use of bold lines to define the composition is typical of Cocteau's style and was beautifully translated into embroidery by the Paris firm of Lesage.

Dilys Blum, curator of Fashion and Textiles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and author of Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli has suggested that the double profile design on the reverse of the coat may represent Tristan and Isolde. Salvador Dali used a similar double image for his Tristan and Isolde brooch of 1953.

Another example of this evening coat is in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (part of the Schiaparelli bequest). However the
example in Philadelphia has faded to a mid-lavender and the design differs slightly. In the V&A's example, the appliqué roses are more profuse, covering the shoulders; the collar is lower and the column motif has four flutes rather than the five found on the Philadelphia example.
The shape of the back panel may also differ.

Two examples of the Jacket are known. One in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and one in the Historical Society of Chicago.

Provenance:
The coat was bought or especially ordered from Schiaparelli London by the Viscountess Doris Castlerosse (1901-1942, nee De Lavigne, first wife of Valentine Browne, Lord Castlerosse, later 6th Earl of Kenmare).

The Viscountess was a leading socialite of the 1930s. She was a close friend of Cecil Beaton and posed for several photographic portraits.
Married to the Viscount Castlerosse, the couple bought and lived in the Palazzo Venier in Venice. Late in 1948, Peggy Guggenheim purchased the Palazzo from the heirs of the Viscountess.

The coat has remained with the family and has been worn up until the present day.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O117953/evening-coat-elsa-schiaparelli/