

VINTAGE COUTURE If the haute couture shows in Paris this month have you longing for that perfect Yves Saint Laurent or Versace creation, but you'd rather spend \$100,000 on a new car than on a single dress, fear not. A surge in interest in vintage haute couture



Feathers seem to hover in the air around a salmon silk Hubert de Givenchy gown.

has made so much available that you can't afford not to buy it. Take the sleek Christian Dior ca. 1953 black wool evening ensemble of a sheath dress with a rhinestone-encrusted bodice and blouson jacket, which recently sold for a mere \$977.50 at Doyle New York. "Buying vintage couture opens up a century of fashion to you," says Linda Donahue, couture specialist at Doyle New York, which holds the most extensive biannual couture sales in America. Of course, the most spectacular pieces often go for \$20,000 or more—but that's still a fraction of their original price. At the May 1999 Doyle sale, a black tulle Chanel evening dress from the 1930s, decorated with black sequins, sold for \$18,400. And though vintage couture can still command high prices, perfect condition is not imperative.



Breathtakingly fine pleats embellish a Madame Grès gown.

For example, a 1953 evening gown in satin, silk, and velvet designed by American couturier Charles James, whom Picasso once called the world's first "soft sculptor," brought in \$18,400 at Doyle New York's sale last spring, despite a small, discolored area, as well as some minor breaks at the hem. (One of the best places to browse a century of haute couture is at The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Institute has also published a book, *Haute Couture*.)

Donahue estimates that interest in Doyle's couture sales have increased by about 70 percent over the past three years. Pamela Golbin, curator of the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, sees it as a worldwide trend. "There's a uniformity to today's clothing," she says. "Even high-quality brands like Gucci or Prada are status symbols that are immediately recognized. For those women who want to stand out, vintage couture allows for a creative alternative."

Marianna Garthwaite Klaiman, senior fashion specialist at Sotheby's New York, partly attributes the increase in interest to Hollywood celebrities, such as Demi Moore, Gina Gershon, and Winona Ryder, who often wear vintage couture. "These are women who can afford to buy new couture, but they want to be unique, to be sure that they won't see the same dress on another woman," says Klaiman. "And, with older couture you can find some incredible fabrics that just aren't being made today." (Sotheby's now sells couture online at www.sothebys.amazon.com;

from the home page, click on the Collectibles & Memorabilia section, then Fashion.)

The most coveted vintage couture pieces include anything by Charles Frederick Worth, the 19th-



Painstaking embroidery of clover and grass give Christian Dior gowns a light, whimsical touch.

century inventor of haute couture; early 1920s outfits by Paul Poiret, especially his early Orientalist garments or Sorbet gowns; 1920s–1930s Chanel, when Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel began designing;



A Christian Dior evening dress by Yves Saint Laurent glitters with a dusting of rhinestones.

early pieces by Yves Saint Laurent, both when he was with the house of Dior, (from 1956 to 1961) and when he designed his first collection (which he presented on January 29, 1962); and anything by Mariano Fortuny or Balenciaga.

TRAVIS NEIGHBOR WARD