



Betty Long-Schlieff shows the lining of the ermine cape worn by the Rose de France mannequin, the centerpiece of the opera display at Maryhill Museum of Art.

Maryhill's French Fashion Treasures

Theatre de la Mode mannequins wear 1946 haute couture

By Jeanie Senior

Eight elegant French fashion mannequins from Maryhill Museum of Art's legendary Theatre de la Mode collection take a place of pride in the collection's exhibit this year.

It is the first time these particular mannequins have been displayed at Maryhill in almost three decades, says Betty Long-Schlieff, the museum's retired collections manager and former longtime curator of the Theatre De La Mode.

Resplendent in evening gowns created in 1946 by a Paris designer, the mannequins are from the opulent opera house set, itself so large that it has never been displayed at Maryhill.

Betty selected the group of eight from the 42 mannequins in the opera set with an eye to the designer's fame—included are dresses by Heim, Paquin and Schiaparelli—and the color of each gown for the greatest effect against a stark black exhibit space.

She chose two mannequins that are wearing fur. The Heim model wears a full-length brown mink

coat over a slim crepe evening dress. Mendel's Rose de France mannequin has a lavish ermine cape lined with the same gold-embroidered pink satin as the evening gown.

Two other sets, both of Paris street scenes, complete this year's exhibit.

Collections Manager Anna Berg, Betty and a handful of volunteers spent several weeks this winter carefully taking down, inspecting and packing mannequins from the sets displayed for the past three years. They did the same task in reverse for the new display.

The mannequins date to the end of World War II, when depleted Paris design houses resolved to show the world that years of war had not destroyed haute couture.

With fabric and other dressmaking items—as well as electricity—in short supply, designers embraced the idea of a touring display of miniature mannequins, displayed on theater sets and wearing the latest Paris collection. Some 200 fashion dolls were accessorized with perfectly crafted shoes, handbags, gloves and hats. Some wore jewelry from



Cartier or Van Cleef and Arpel.

In all, some 70 couturiers—including Worth, Balenciaga, Hermes, Jean Patou, Balmain, Madame Gres and Nina Ricci—lent their genius to the collection. This is significant because just a few of the fashion houses still exist. Many went out of business shortly after the war.

Artist Eliane Bonabel designed the mannequins' wire bodies. Sculptor Joan Rebull created the plaster heads, each with the same aloof, serene expression. The mannequins were displayed on theater sets to maximize their effect. Well-known artists, including Jean Cocteau, designed the sets.

Hundreds of thousands of people came to see the exhibit during its 1945 tour of world capitals. The earnings went to French war relief.

A 1946 collection followed, sent on another successful tour that ended in San Francisco. There, the jewels went back to Paris, and the sets disappeared. The mannequins were stored in the basement of the City of Paris department store until Maryhill benefactor Alma Spreckels rescued them for the museum. For the next two decades, the collection was displayed in glass cases on Maryhill's ground floor.

It set the fashion world atwitter when a Kent State University historian "discovered" the collection in 1983. Many thought the priceless piece of fashion history had been lost.

In 1988, with funds from the U.S., France and Japan, the mannequins were shipped to the Louvre for two years of cleaning and conservation. Jewelry was recreated for five of the opera gowns, this time



with faux stones, rather than diamonds, rubies and other precious jewels set in gold.

Also in Paris, nine of the theater sets were rebuilt. Maryhill visitors—and the world—once again could see the Theatre De La as it was created.

Betty was hired in 1988 as the museum's first collections manager. For years, she shepherded Theatre De La Mode as it traveled around the world, in part or in its entirety. After a triumphant re-introduction at the Louvre's museum of fashion in 1990, it went to New York, Tokyo and Baltimore.

Betty accompanied the collection to Honolulu, London, Barcelona, Denver, Seattle and Portland. The sets travel in huge crates. Each mannequin has a custom-built box, swathed in acid-free tissue, with hat and head packaged separately.

The process, Betty says, is incredibly complicated and painstaking, whether the loan involves a few mannequins or the entire collection.

The opera set last was displayed at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, along with four other sets.

Museum officials decided the Theatre De La Mode—world-famous, much-loved, yet fragile and irreplaceable—will not go on the road again. Its last trip was in 2011.

Betty, who retired from Maryhill in 2010, accompanied the three sets when they went to Phoenix. She continues to help maintain the exhibit and change the mannequin displays.

After 20 years, the French fashion figures are like family to her. ■

Above, the lavish opera set for the Theatre de la Mode, designed by Christian Berard.

Photo courtesy of Maryhill Museum of Art

Top left, the original tiara and epaulets of the Schiaparelli dress were gold, rubies and diamonds. These were recreated in 1990 with faux jewels.