

Couture,  
ready-to-wear  
& mass  
production

Gavin Waddell

# How Fashion Works



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Couture, Ready-to-Wear and Mass Production

Gavin Waddell

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Editorial Offices:

Blackwell Science Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1865 776868

Blackwell Publishing Professional, 2121 State Avenue, Ames, Iowa, 50014-8300, USA

Tel: +1 515 292 0140

Blackwell Science Asia Pty Ltd, 550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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An early example of fashion sportswear. Archery became a popular women's sport at the beginning of the 19th century. This fashion plate of 1833 suggests what the fashionable archery devotee should wear.

# Introduction

This is not a book about the accepted history of fashion, the psychology of fashion or a chronology of its designers, but how the changes in the processes of manufacture have influenced the evolution of the fashion industry.

## A paradoxical industry

There is so much misconception, deliberate and inadvertent misinformation, and ignorance surrounding the world of fashion that it is difficult to get a clear, unbiased picture of how it really works. Information on its levels, operation and terms is essential to an understanding of the subject. This book attempts to remedy this shortcoming. Fashion deals with a world of illusion on the one hand and a hard-bitten, multi-million pound, extremely complex industry on the other. Each aspect relies on the other – the industry needs the fashion illusion to excite the market, and illusion needs the multi-million pound industry to pay for its new ideas, expensive research, extravagance, foibles and design talent.

## A complex process

It is because ‘the way we look’ – our chosen or imagined image – is so important to the human psyche that the illusion aspect of fashion plays, what would seem, such an illogically large role. This, however, is the unstoppable driving force behind that complex process of *design*, *manufacture* and *distribution* that makes fashion one of the world’s most powerful industries.

## Design

Design means to have a mental plan, make a preliminary sketch, or delineate an idea or concept

in advance of realisation. In the fashion design process this description exactly matches the fashion design activity. The fashion designer conceives the idea, experiments with several alternatives of this idea in sketch form, makes a choice from these, has a pattern cut from this sketch and then has a prototype made up from which a cloth sample can go into manufacture.

## Manufacture

This is the process whereby the design is translated into a marketable garment when it is cut, assembled, finished and delivered. This process can be either crafted by hand or mass-produced.

## Distribution

This rather unromantic term covers the whole process whereby the goods get to the customer. In fashion this means *selecting* the items from the designer or design manufacturing company and selling or distributing them to the public: in other words this is the transition from wholesale to retail. This process in itself incorporates several sub-processes: *marketing*, *merchandising*, *advertising* and *display*.

## The levels of the fashion industry

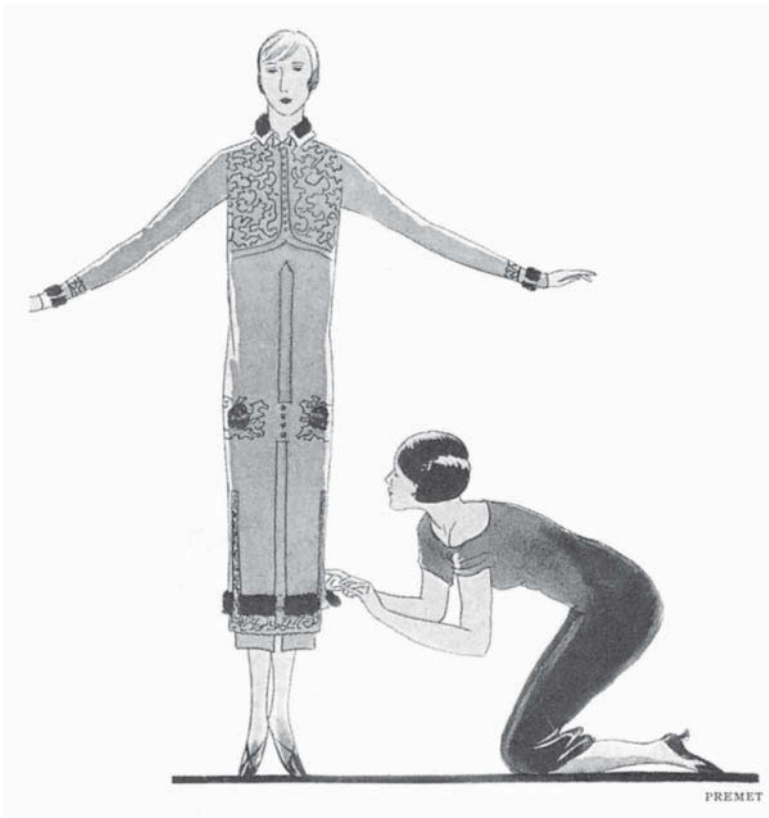
This complex process also operates on different levels: levels of excellence, quality and snobbery. Within the fashion world these levels have acquired names, *couture*, *ready-to-wear* and *mass production*, and throughout this book these are the terms that will be used to define these levels although it could be argued, for instance, that ready-to-wear is just a form of mass production.

## Introduction

The levels of the fashion industry are really levels of *manufacture*, couture being the highest level and most time-consuming especially in terms of skilled labour, the number of repeat items being only in the tens or twenties. Ready-to-wear or *prêt-à-porter* companies manufacture at a very high level, but industrially and in multiples of hundreds or thousands. Mass production

is the cheapest and most highly industrialised and can produce hundreds of thousands to millions of garments.

The history of the three levels is very different. Couture started with the beginning of dressmaking or when the art of constructing garments began – the early medieval *guilds*, the *journeyman* and the seamstress making hand-sewn



The first two scenes from a series of vignettes depicting a visit to the couturier, 'Finishing touches to the new models'. Spring 1924 (designers Premet and Drecoll).



clothes with a needle and thread. In the late 18th century this skill reached such a level of quality and sophistication in the work of court dress-makers such as Rose Bertin and, later, Hippolyte Leroy that the name *couture* was justified, but it was not until the mid 19th century, when the first *haute couture* house was set up by Charles

Frederick Worth in 1858 that the term took on its modern, definitive meaning. Ready-to-wear and mass production had to wait until garment mass production techniques were invented at the end of the 19th century. Ready-to-wear as a high fashion term did not become established until the advent of the *créateurs* in the 1970s.



The second two scenes in the series 'Finishing touches to the new models'. Spring 1924 (designers Martial et Armand and Premet).





### Why the industry divides into these levels

As with most industries, fashion needs innovation to survive and prosper; innovation relies on the inventive and original ideas of designers to prompt change, and change is what keeps the market healthy and interested. The fashion industry is the best example of why the concept of market forces in the manufacturing industries does not, in fact, work. Without the impetus of new ideas, industries like fashion soon shrivel

and die. Inventive and original design needs the hotbed environment of the highest level, couture, to nurture its experiments. The second level, ready-to-wear, although also inventive and original, relies on couture to 'soften up' the market and translate avant-garde notions into a truly marketable product. Because fashion is a slow-moving cycle, it is not until several seasons later that the third level, mass production, feeds on, translates and copies the ideas of the two upper levels into products for the mass market.



'O wad some Power the gift tae gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us' (O that some power had given us the gift to see ourselves as others see us. Robert Burns – 'To a Louse'). The fashionable woman sees herself as perfect and the artistic woman as a scruffy frump, while the artistic woman sees herself as right but the fashionable woman as over-corseted and false: the dichotomy of fashion.

# Chapter 1

## Couture

*Its meaning and place in the fashion industry – Couture house organisation – Couture controlling and supporting bodies – International couture – Paris couture houses – London couture houses – Hollywood and haute couture – The decline of the couture system in the 1960s – The revival of couture in the 1980s and 1990s – Making techniques and their influence on fashion – Characteristics and specialities of fitters – Couture today*

### Its meaning and place in the fashion industry

The word 'couture' is from the French and means sewing or stitching, so *haute couture* is the high form of this art or craft.

But haute couture means much more. In essence, the difference between haute couture and other forms of manufacturing clothes is that the couture garment is made to the client's individual measurements. This means that the methods of selection are quite different from buying in a retail store – items cannot be selected from '*the rail*' and tried on for shape, colour and size. The couture customer does not know what she will look like in a garment until it is actually completed. Selection for the couture customer is made twice a year, at the spring/summer and autumn/winter *showings* of the *collections*, where prototypes are shown on model girls at a *catwalk show* either in-house or at a particularly fashionable or prestigious venue. Collections comprise a full range of garments, from tailored outerwear to evening dresses, and usually include coats, suits, day dresses, afternoon dresses, cocktail dresses, dinner dresses and ball gowns. The couture client may select several items from the collection where each item is individually named. Names such as 'Bar' and 'Daisy' (1947) or 'Normandie' (1957) at Dior

have become famous in the history of fashion as icons of a period or look.

Another area where couture differs from ready-to-wear is the quality of *make* – how well the garment is manufactured. Be it couture or mass production, good or bad, to the discerning eye make is only too evident. In this respect the haute couture garment can be likened to a work of art where every stitch, seam, hem and binding is of superb quality – so perfect that the finished item transcends dressmaking and becomes true craftsmanship. Although made by hand, the couture garment will have all its major seams sewn together by machine, but the finishing – hems, inside seams and linings – are done by hand.

### Couture house organisation

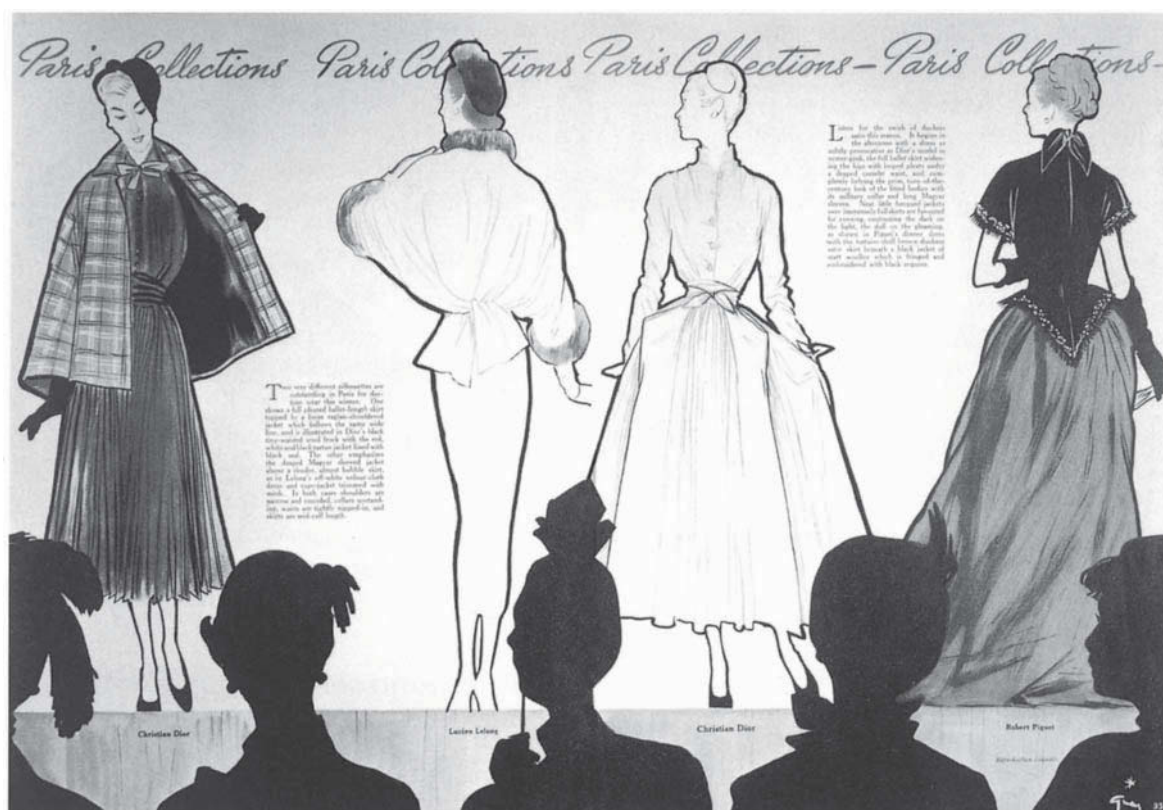
The way a couture house is set up, its personnel, its departments and its day-to-day running is entirely based on the Parisian model. The designer or couturier, the *première de l'atelier*, the *seconde*, the *tailleur*, the *flou*, the *directrice* and the *vendeuse* are all members of an established French way of running things taken up by the rest of the world.

The *designer* or *couturier* is the figurehead for the *house*; his or her name is vital to its image. From Charles Frederick Worth in the 1860s to Christian Lacroix today, this fact cannot be



Two figured taffetas, strapless evening dresses by Christian Dior, one long and one short, epitomise the ballerina influence of 1954.





This 1947 illustration by Rene Gruau of the autumn Paris collections shows two examples of Christian Dior's New Look, first shown in the spring of that year. The first left, a checked cape and pleated skirt, and the first right, a dress with bell skirt. It is interesting to note how other designers have already been influenced by Dior – the second on the left is by Lucien Lelong, a Magyar sleeved jacket with a hobble skirt; the second on the right is by Robert Piguet, a dinner dress with a black jacket and immensely full skirt.

overemphasised. Most couturiers have assistant designers but their name is never heard of until they, in turn, set up their own house with their own name. Christian Dior was assistant to Lucien Lelong, Yves Saint Laurent assistant to Christian Dior, Courrèges, Cardin and Ungaro to Balenciaga, and so on.

The designer couturier sets the mood of the house, designs the collections, oversees the toiles, the fittings, chooses the models, arranges the shows, talks to the press, negotiates with backers and takes full responsibility for the house, its reputation and its success. (For a brief

biography of the most influential designers see Chapter 8.)

The première de l'atelier is head of the workroom whose job it is to cut the first pattern; make and fit the toile; prepare, cut and fit the garment; and oversee its completion by her workroom hands. The seconde de l'atelier is her second-in-command, and the tailleur, usually a man, has the same job as the première in the tailoring workroom. The flou is in charge of the workroom where bias cut fluid dresses are toiled, cut and made, and the ateliers are the sewing hands or dressmakers.

The *vendeuse* is a high-class saleswoman who arranges for the client to be measured for the items she has selected. If the client is one of long-standing, however, not only will her measurements be known and recorded but also the couture house may have a *dress stand* dedicated to her. The *vendeuse* in a couture house, although loosely translated as a saleswoman, is a very particular and specialised member of staff. It is through her that the customer will probably have been introduced to the house as each *vendeuse* has her own list of clients that she alone serves. She oversees the whole process for the client from selection to delivery of the finished garment. She books the *fittings* and liaises with the *première* or fitter; she will even advise on the selection and suggest items from the collection which she thinks will suit the client and be appropriate to her lifestyle. She will have made it her job to be informed about this and will ensure that two of her clients do not wear the same outfit on the same occasion – the idea that couture items are exclusive to one customer is quite erroneous: a viable number of repeats must be made from each model. Only royalty can ask for the privilege of an exclusive outfit.

For the first fitting the *première*, who will have measured the client at a previous session, prepares the garment with her assistant in the chosen fabric. It is carefully *tacked* together so that it gives the appearance of a finished garment. The customer will be used to having this construction ripped apart, adjusted, re-marked, re-pinned and refitted until the first stage of the alterations is complete. The garment will then be entirely taken apart, alterations made and the item put together again, bearing in mind all the adjustments made at the first fitting. A second fitting will then be arranged where, hopefully, the fit will be perfect. The garment is now prepared for sewing together, by machine in the case of the major seams and by hand in the case of hems, seam finishes, linings, bindings, pockets and applied decoration. The *vendeuse* will arrange for the client to have a final fitting

where the finished item is tried on and any minor adjustments made. At this point the client will arrange with ‘her’ *vendeuse* to take delivery of the garment.

This long and complicated procedure in comparison with trying on an item of clothing in a retail store is one of the disadvantages of haute couture. By the 1970s many younger customers who had money to spend on couture clothes found the whole performance so time-consuming that they welcomed the advent of high quality ready-to-wear clothing. Ready-to-wear was not only instant fashion but also allowed the buyer to try on as many items as they liked and thus select the item that suited them best. Society women often complained of the hours spent at the couturier standing, being fitted and ‘having pins stuck in them’.

### Couture controlling and supporting bodies

Organisations much like the old guild systems sprang up to regulate the standards, quality and practice of couture houses. The foremost of these and the pattern for the rest of the world is the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* based on the house set up by Charles Frederick Worth, ‘the first Couturier’, in the winter of 1857/58. On this model, similar organisations were set up – in London, the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers; in Florence and Rome, the *Camera Nazionale dell’Alta Moda Italiana*; in New York, the Fashion Group International and the Council of Fashion Designers of America. The strict rules of the *Chambre Syndicale*, first made in 1945 and updated in 1992, give an idea of the standards that members have to adhere to. To quote the *Chambre*’s own rules, a house ‘must employ at least 20 people in its workshops, must present at least 50 designs; day and evening garments to the press during the Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter seasons’ and ‘present the collection to potential clients in the respective couture houses,



Charles Frederick Worth, the father of French haute couture; the Englishman that founded a dynasty of designers and the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* in 1868.

in a determined place'. The primary function of these organisations is to promote its members' products by coordinating a calendar of twice-yearly showings (see Chapter 10), liaising with the press and preventing copying. More detailed information on all these organisations can be found in Appendices I to IV.

### International couture

Couture was primarily a European practice, and couture houses of different levels and quality flourished in most European capitals. Paris led and the others followed, but Italy, Spain and Britain all had couture designers of note. America, on the other hand, with its vast wholesale garment-manufacturing base, did not have this tradition and looked to Europe, and especially Paris, for inspiration.

Paris is the recognised home of luxury and perfection: it is no accident that the Englishman Charles Frederick Worth set up his house in Paris. It was the centre for excellence, chic and elegance in style, workmanship and ambience. The highest skilled dressmakers, milliners, embroiderers, belt makers and trimming suppliers were on hand. The luxury and opulence of the great houses from Worth to Chanel and from Dior to Lacroix give Paris the supreme authority in fashion and it is only natural that the *Chambre Syndicale* should have its home in the heart of Paris in rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré.

Italian couture, probably the most stylish in fashion terms after Paris, operated from three centres – Milan, Florence and Rome – but it is only in Rome, the headquarters of the *Camera Nazionale dell'Alta Moda Italiana*, its regulating body, that it still flourishes today.

Italy has always had a reputation for high quality luxury fashion goods, and houses such as Sorelle Fontana had been established since the 1930s, but it was not until 1951 that Italian high fashion hit the international market. This was due to the extraordinary enterprise of Marchese Giovanni Battista Giorgini who brought together all the leading Italian couturiers of the day, Simonetta, Fabiani, Sorelle Fontana, Antonelli, Schubert, Carosa, Marucelli, Veneziani, Nobersca, Wanna, Pucci, Galletti, Avolio and Bertoli, in an historic presentation showing in his own house, the Villa Torrigiani, in Florence, to an international audience of fashion press and buyers. This presentation was a huge success and launched Italian couture on to the world stage. Today the records of Giorgini's work can be found in the G.B. Giorgini Archive in Florence.

Spain's fashion style is only too evident in its most famous exports, Cristobal Balenciaga and Antonio Castillo. Balenciaga had a couture house in Saint Sebastian before he opened his Paris house, and Castillo joined the famous old house of Jeanne Lanvin in 1950, which became Lanvin-Castillo. The other Spanish couturiers such as Manuel Pertegaz and Elio Berhanyer



## How Fashion Works



A very good example of how rich Americans patronised Paris couture. The subtlety of the draping on the bodice and sumptuous embroidery on the skirt distinguish this as a model by Worth made for Lady Curzon in 1900. She was the wife of George Curzon, Viscount Scarsdale and Viceroy of India, and the daughter of Levi Ziegler Leiter, founder and proprietor of Marshall Field of Chicago, one of the great department stores of America.

have now been largely forgotten by the international market, but in the 1950s and 1960s, top fashion magazines featured their collections each season along with those of Paris, London, Rome and New York.

British couture, never really as stylish as French or Italian, had a particular English elegance based on its clientele, the English upper classes, whose penchant for hunting and hunt balls meant that its tailoring was immaculate and its ball gowns spectacular. Hardy Amies, Charles Creed, Michael and Digby Morton were the great tailors, and Norman Hartnell, Bianca Mosca, Victor Stiebel and John Cavanagh created romantic ball gowns (see Appendix I).

Although Germany is the biggest manufacturer of fashion clothing in Europe it has never really made its mark in haute couture. Not until today with the brilliant Jil Sander or the innovative Helmut Lang (an Austrian, of course) have German designers had any impact on world fashion and both Sander and Lang are primarily ready-to-wear designers.

With its huge wholesale garment manufacturing base and its highly sophisticated marketing techniques, American couture has always tended to be a halfway house between couture and ready-to-wear. This approach has spawned many great designers but not really couturiers, with the notable exception of the genius Charles James, the international Mainbocher, and America's great classicist, Norman Norell (see Chapter 8). America always looked to Paris for inspiration and through its press and extraordinary buying power was probably Paris's greatest supporter. Lately, by a strange twist of fate, several American designers have taken over at famous French houses – Tom Ford at Yves Saint Laurent, Oscar de la Renta at Pierre Balmain and Mark Jacobs at Louis Vuitton.

Right: this drawing taken from a sketch from the Creed archive shows a suit designed for the celebrated World War I spy Mata Hari. It was always maintained by the staff at Charles Creed that she was in fact shot in a Creed suit in 1917.





Hardy Amies, the Queen's couturier and founder member of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, with Lady Pamela Berry, president of the Society from 1954 to 1960.

### Paris couture houses

In Paris the couture houses were huge and their influence immense. Paris dominated world fashion for a century, from 1860 to 1960. No self-respecting American millionaire's wife would consider buying her wardrobe anywhere but Paris. Even in the 19th century, Americans were buying 'models' in Paris and copying them back home either under licence or illegally. This practice was not confined to America – London court dressmakers bought Paris models to copy, as did dressmakers and gown manufacturers in the other capitals of Europe. Paris couturiers used the 'insurance' of their worldwide fame to set up branches in other cities, for example Worth in London and Molyneux in London, Biarritz and Cannes.

The most celebrated women of the day patronised particular Parisian couturiers – European

royalty had their clothes made in Paris and even Queen Victoria is reputed to have had her clothes from Worth in Paris but delivered through the London branch so as not to appear unpatriotic. Society women, actresses and even well-known courtesans not only patronised certain couturiers but might also, if they were particularly elegant or beautiful, be used as *mannequin de ville*, that is provided with free wardrobes in order to wear them in public and, in modern terms, 'advertise' them at social events such as the races and balls. Sarah Bernhardt, the great French actress, dressed at Worth; the spy Mata Hari had her suits made at Creed; and the celebrated comedienne Réjane patronised Doucet.

In order to provide for this vast market the couture houses were in themselves vast and employed large numbers of workers. At its height, the house of Worth employed more than one thousand.

### London couture houses

Even in London, from the early 1920s to the mid 1960s, couture houses were very large establishments, some employing hundreds of staff, from the directrice, the several vendeuses, their assistants and the secretaries at the front of the house, to the substantial workrooms at the back where fitters, dressmakers, tailors and dress hands worked unseen by the customers. There would be at least two large dress workrooms, a tailoring workroom and a skirt workroom. Each workroom would house up to twenty experienced *hands*, their juniors, assistants and apprentices. The workroom was run by the all-powerful fitters who modelled the patterns in mull or calico on the stand, made the toiles and did all the fittings, liaising with the designer for the first models (or prototypes) and with the vendeuses when the customer had the model made to her size. In the 1950s, Norman Hartnell employed 385 staff at his house at 36 Bruton Street. His workers, like other London couture house employees, worked a 41 hour week on a very limited wage

often as little as thirty shillings (£1.50) a week for the most junior to five pounds ten shillings (£5.50) per week for a top rate hand, whilst male tailors could earn in excess of six pounds per week and all were entitled to a holiday of one working day for each month of the year

worked. The directrice, the vendeuses or their assistants, who worked on a commission basis and would have brought their own set of customers with them, were considered to be in a different social class from the workroom staff and were able to negotiate their own salaries.



Pages 9 and 10 show the work of members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers: Left: navy wool coat by Edward Molyneux 1948. Right: tweed top coat by Hardy Amies 1950.