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Mass Couture

A shake-up in ready-to-wear

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PARIS -- The geometric pattern on a tight-waisted coat at Balenciaga's show Tuesday harkened back to classic 1960s couture designs from the house's original designer, Cristóbal Balenciaga.



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But this wasn't a couture coat. It was an offering from Balenciaga's ready-to-wear collection. "Our ready-to-wear borrows aspects from couture, but are meant to be produced in quantity," Balenciaga designer Nicolas Ghesquière said after the show.

Now, as fast-fashion labels such as Zara, H&M and Mango have become expert at reinterpreting runway fashions at a fraction of the price, couture is creeping into high-end ready-to-wear. The result: ready-to-wear details that will likely be harder for less-expensive brands to mimic.

The couture approach was much in evidence at the Paris shows this week, which finish on Sunday. Brands from Balenciaga to Dior and Givenchy have shown elaborate designs that use sophisticated techniques such as intricate seaming, origami folding and heavy brass studs.

The approach may also wind up widening the price gap between designers' goods and those at stores like H&M. Because the couture touches are often more complex -- and therefore more costly -- to make, retailers expect price tags to reflect that. "Retail prices in the last few years have become outrageously high," says Robert Burke, head of the New York-based luxury-goods consultancy Robert Burke Associates, and the former fashion director at Bergdorf Goodman. "The gap between couture and ready-to-wear is narrowing."

Couture clothes are custom made and hand-sewn, while designers' ready-to-wear collections are produced in quantity, though sometimes limited, and sold off the rack. Fast-fashion labels borrow heavily from these collections for their lines, which are usually made in larger quantities and with less-expensive fabrics. Experts say the fancier ready-[his article now](#).



to-wear could make life harder for these mass-produced lines. For example, the origami-style sleeves on Dior's newest suits were folded by hand. The copious amounts of fur used also won't translate well to fake fur for the mass market, says Mr. Burke.

Raising the complexity of off-the-rack apparel also helps bolster a brand's elite image. "We are currently increasing the sophistication of our ready-to-wear," Dior Chief Executive Sidney Toledano said backstage after the brand's show in a tent in Paris's Tuileries Gardens on Tuesday.



Getty Images Style.com (YSL)

Designer: Givenchy Sleek suits with brass buttons

Of course, high-end garments such as Dior's origami-sleeved suits aren't suddenly going to become bestsellers. Top luxury houses make the bulk of their sales on high-margin accessories, perfume and more basic clothing such as T-shirts with logos. Moreover, department store and boutique buyers spend the majority of their budgets on the more wearable precollection.

Still, high-end ready-to-wear brands are filling the gap left by couture, which has been in decline for decades. Many of France's oldest fashion houses -- Balenciaga, Yves Saint Laurent, Lanvin, Nina Ricci -- stopped their couture lines years ago, as women switched to less-expensive ready-to-wear that doesn't require numerous fittings in Paris and a months-long wait to get the garment.

But even as couture is on the wane, wealthy women are still looking for unusual and exclusive clothing. Last season, for example, Balenciaga sold a few pairs of the futuristic metallic leggings it featured on the runway for as much as \$140,000. "The same clients that would have gone to couture in the past now don't need to," says Pamela Golbin, the curator at Paris's Musée de la Mode et du Textile, who last year organized a Balenciaga exhibition.

This season, in addition to coats made stiff and shapely by elaborate seaming, other extravagant designs included red, white and blue silk prints, folded and pleated into halter-top dresses with a silver fringe. Barneys fashion director Julie Gilhart predicts the print dresses will be hits with consumers. She also thinks private school-inspired blazers, such as one trimmed in purple fabric, with a gold zipper all around the hem, will be a hit.

For fashion houses that continue in couture, the cross-over with their ready-to-wear collections was palpable this week. A recent trip to Japan inspired Dior designer John Galliano to craft his January couture show around "Madama Butterfly," the Giacomo Puccini opera. The theme poured through again in this week's ready-to-wear show. A gray silk coat was shaped like a Japanese robe with a wide, plunging collar, folded into origami squares, and made even more



Getty Images Style.com (YSL)

Designer: Balenciaga Geometric pattern borrows from '60s couture



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Designer: Yves Saint Laurent Fabric quilted into a crocodile pattern

luxurious with thick strips of fox fur.

Givenchy also replayed its sailor and mermaid couture theme in its ready-to-wear collection. Neiman Marcus fashion director Ken Downing says the sleek suits -- in navy, black and white, with brass buttons and studs -- represented "a whole new polish."

Fashion watchers expect the couture-like theme to continue through Sunday's grand finale, when brands such as Miu Miu, Nina Ricci and Lanvin show their collections.