

# COUTURE

An Illustrated History of the Great  
Paris Designers and Their Creations

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Doubleday & Company, Inc.  
Garden City, New York  
1972



ceilings, walls, alcoves and shelves where the clothes are hanging, there is warmth. The colours of the clothes themselves are the clear, true colours of nature. There are no formidable vendeuses in dark dresses to intimidate the customers. Instead, there are beautiful young girls with shapely figures who flit about wearing white rib-knitted catsuits which cling to every curve and turn their wearers into other-world beings who bear no relation to the dark, cold, winter scene outside, or to the people trudging past weighed down by dark winter overcoats. Inside the house of Courrèges it is always spring. Truly, he has created something unique.

The second Paris couturier to be labelled 'space-age' was Emanuel Ungaro. It is impossible not to draw comparisons between him and Courrèges, however odious this may be to the pair of them. In many ways, their lives have been similar, and at one stage their designing talents were bracketed.

Let us begin with the similarities: both men worked under, and were influenced by, Balenciaga. Both then worked together, when the outer-space outrageousness of miniskirts and pantsuits was at its height. Both started their businesses in a small way in tiny apartments far from the fashionable *quartier* of the other couturiers. Both expanded subsequently into impressive premises in that fashionable district. Each is supported by a woman whose role is closer than that of mere collaborator. Both these women abhor the limelight, are rarely publicised, yet are as much responsible for the design, production and presentation of the collections as their male partners. One cannot help speculating how different might their lives be today if Courrèges had not found his Coqueline and Ungaro his Sonja. Professional rivalry apart, one might imagine that the four would be good friends. But this is not so. For reasons best known to themselves they have no especially close relationship.

Ungaro was born of Italian parents in Aix-en-Provence on 13 February 1933, and describes himself as 'altogether Provençal'. His father was a tailor, and when Emanuel had completed his schooling, he joined the family business and worked with his father until he was twenty-two years old, learning to cut, sew and fit.

Then, as with all ambitious youngsters in the provinces, the charms of the big city became impossible to resist, and he travelled to Paris. His ambition was to join the house of Balenciaga, but this was out of the question for the time being, and he had to content himself with a job in the atelier of a small tailoring business. He did, though, make friends with a man ten years his senior – André Courrèges – who was in the coveted position of working for the master.

When Courrèges was struggling to free himself from the cocoon of safe anonymity at Balenciaga and to strike out on his own, the great man was resisting his efforts. During the three years of slowly withdrawing, out of gratitude and a feeling of responsibility to the master, Courrèges introduced Ungaro to Balenciaga, and in 1958 the latter took Emanuel on to



A beautifully-tailored coat with matching dress, in typical Ungaro colours of mint-green with white stripes, from the spring 1967 collection.

A classic coat in wool worsted gabardine, from Ungaro's spring 1971 collection.

his staff. When Courrèges left two years later, Ungaro was able to step into his place.

Years afterwards, Ungaro said: 'When I saw Balenciaga for the first time it was a discovery . . . something so important for my life and my mind. Balenciaga is an extraordinary person. He has a very strong dimension. He is generous and so clever and so human. I worked very very hard there, but I was so happy to work with him.' In an interview with the Paris journalist, Thelma Sweetinburgh, writing in January 1972 for *Réalités* magazine, he reiterated his great respect for Balenciaga, the teacher, saying: 'I learned that ideas follow opportunities. I try to adapt my style to the moment in life. In this manner it has progressed gradually, and I have kept it from taking perilous leaps.' To *Women's Wear Daily* he once said of his years with Balenciaga: 'Monsieur Balenciaga bears you . . . carries you shoulder high . . . he urges you to express yourself . . . contact with him is of a mystical quality.' Balenciaga taught him that: 'We are artisans, not philosophers. . . .'

One of the things that impressed him at Balenciaga was the quality of the women who dressed there: 'When a woman has looked at herself in a mirror for twenty-five or thirty years, she knows a good deal about herself.' Balenciaga must indeed have been an extraordinary person to have kept those two young men in willing bondage for so long; Courrèges for ten years, Ungaro for six.

When Ungaro finally left, it was because Courrèges had asked him to



join him in his venture in the Avenue Kléber. The younger man felt deeply indebted to Courrèges for having negotiated his admission to the house of Balenciaga. 'I had to pay my debt to Courrèges. It was for this reason that I went to him', he explained.

The year Ungaro joined Courrèges was 1964 and he remained with him for the ensuing twelve months throughout the period which Courrèges himself recalls as his 'strongest statement'. The 'Swinging' Sixties were in full sway and at Courrèges, miniskirts and trouser-suits were bringing a delicious new space-age (and permissive age) eroticism into women's lives.

For Ungaro, the change of environment must have been staggering. He left the cloistered portals of the stateliest maison de couture, steeped in the highest, old-established traditions of the trade, to step into the noisy, cramped, yet elatedly successful atmosphere of the Courrèges apartment in the avenue Kléber. He survived, and possibly even enjoyed it. After two seasons there, he said: 'Courrèges clothes convey a moral cleanness as well as a material one. The white, clean cut not only dresses the body but reacts on a woman's mind. The balance, the proportions are modern. What sort of life are women made to lead today? A man's life . . . so why not wear pants in town as anywhere else?'

Those two seasons were the extent of his collaboration with Courrèges,

Ungaro with his fabric designer, Sonia Knapp, 1970.



One of Miss Knapp's fabrics, used for a raincoat in the 'Parallèle' range, 1967.



for they marked the high-spot of the latter's career in fashion, and also the moment when he decided to extinguish the flame he had lit until he had raised the funds to light it again in a more profitable way. In 1965, Ungaro decided to leave the Courrèges space-ship and move on alone. Three years previously, he had met a dark-haired German-Swiss girl called Sonja Knapp. She was studying art at a school in Zurich, and he was living in Montparnasse. Their ideas and talents harmonised and they formed a team of two. She moved to Paris, and together they faced the formidable prospect of opening a couture house without financial backing. They took a small apartment on the second floor of a recently built house in the Avenue MacMahon, near the Etoile. Its interior was modern and cool, with walls and toile curtains of white, and sapphire blue carpets, but it was only half the size of the Courrèges premises in the Avenue Kléber. With six helpers they went to work on their first collection, to be shown during the winter openings that July.

Until then, Ungaro was completely unknown, as he had remained in the background at Courrèges, but the fashion Press, which was in a state of consternation over the Garbo inclinations of their favourite, learnt of his enterprise, and was soon knocking on his door for interviews. One of the stories which appeared about him was headlined 'Mystery Man', and the question uppermost in fashion circles at that time was: Will thirty-two-year-old Ungaro be the new Courrèges? He received the journalists charmingly, for he is at all times a most considerate and, above all, sincere man. 'They all expect me to be another Balenciaga, another Courrèges', he said uncomplainingly. 'Well, Balenciaga is Balenciaga, and everything at Courrèges was Courrèges. I just want to work and find my own niche.' On another occasion he added: 'A pupil of Botticelli cannot paint a Picasso the next day.'

The first collection of twenty models – 'you can't call it a collection', he said modestly – was cut, sewn and fitted by Ungaro, almost single-handedly. 'I don't want to be called an haute couturier', he told one interviewer. 'It is old-fashioned. I am a plain couturier', meaning it the French way – a dressmaker. 'I am a man of this age, and I will design clothes for the women of this age. I won't be showing any evening dresses. This place isn't big enough for evening dresses, but even if I had three million francs I wouldn't do them. They are not my style. I don't want any fuss, and I hope people will not be disappointed. I am not a believer in producing theatrical shocks. It would be easy to stun everyone by sending on the girls in transparent plastic, but that's not the point. Clothes should evolve from season to season as everything else in life evolves.'

A fashion writer who attended his first Press show in his tiny white cubicle of a salon described how, 'In silence, white, hot and tense, shattered by the rip of Velcro fastenings, the tread of thin-soled, flat-heeled boots . . . and finally the short, sharp burst of applause – fashion took another leap into space.'

Ungaro fitting a model garment for Princess Ira de Furstenburg, one of his regular clients.



*right*  
A typical Pierre Cardin evening dress, from the mid-sixties. The couturier sometimes includes such an uncharacteristic romantic style among his space-age creations.





The little group of daytime clothes was well received by Press and buyers, and also by private clients who followed swiftly after his opening, although he did nothing himself about publicising his business. They all liked his short-skirted, sharp-edged silhouette that was still very much following Courrèges' lead and was to remain so for a few more seasons. Just as Courrèges had taken time to shake off the shadow of Balenciaga, so Ungaro needed time to establish his own signature.

For those first few seasons, Ungaro did most of the work himself, the cutting and the fitting (even today he does not neglect this side of the business) and sometimes even seeing to the deliveries. Sonja Knapp was working on the fabrics, which made a sharp impact in his second collection of forty models shown in January 1966. This was the dawning of a rare fusion of two talents, which has since developed, until the fabrics she designs today for the Ungaro collections are hailed as masterpieces of modernity, and by far the best in Paris.

For that January collection, his first group of spring clothes, short and triangular in silhouette, with narrow tops, widening to flared hems, showing a glimpse of tight shorts, proved his sure handling of vivid, clashing colours. Awning stripes in sharp blue and red on green, or turquoise and purple on citron, alternated with equally vivid triangles and broken checks. They were combined with plain fabrics which picked up one of the colours and appeared as a top, a skirt, a yoke, a hem or a border. Brief boleros took the place of jackets and several outfits were shown as a striptease, the outer garments peeling off to reveal shorts and briefest-ever bra tops. Ungaro the man was certainly soft-spoken and modest, but with his clothes, Ungaro the designer made a loud and definite statement. Ernestine Carter wrote in the *Sunday Times* of that collection: 'This is impact fashion. It must kill the boys who have to turn out two hundred and fourteen models to have Ungaro make it with forty.'

Others have hailed 'Ungaro's girl' as the female version of Superman. She was tall, athletic, muscular, sun-bronzed, and slightly terrifying. For that second collection she wore a slanted Vidal Sassoon haircut. I once asked Ungaro what he looked for particularly when he was choosing his mannequins. His answer: 'To be very careful to choose girls who do not look like mannequins.' A favourite in those days was a girl called Maulis, who had graduated from the Sorbonne and was modelling to make money and pass the time before landing a more permanent job. Her description of life in the maison Ungaro was: 'It's like working with friends, not bosses. The atmosphere is very relaxed.'

When the time approached for him to show his third collection, Ungaro was sufficiently sure of himself to announce, in spite of the hem-line beginning to drop elsewhere. 'I want dresses short enough to seduce all the men in the world'.

The hallmark of this show was silver. It was as if his mannequins had been newly minted before they stepped in front of the audience. They



Separates from Ungaro's couture collection, spring 1971, showing his subtle mixing of striking print patterns.

*left*  
Revolutionary concepts in women's clothing came from Cardin in the late 'sixties.



glinted from the crowns of their silver-wigged heads to the soles of their silver boots. Silver details rippled over them in the form of silver buttons, silver collars, silver stripes on their mini-length coats and tunics. And they wore silver mesh stockings. As he had promised, their skirts were incredibly short. Although his designing at this stage may sound more as if it were science-fiction than reality, his public took Ungaro seriously, and each collection proved to be progressively more successful with the three vital elements, Press, buyers and private clients.

By this time he was feeling the restrictions of the tiny apartment in the Avenue MacMahon, where only about twenty-five people could be accommodated in his minute salon. For his next showing, held in January 1967, he rented a photographer's studio and seated his audience in cardboard chairs, rather like hip-baths, arranged in semi-circles around the catwalk. His Supergirls marched out from behind screens which resembled the alabaster baths in a hydropathic establishment. This time, his short, flared silhouette seemed softer, and as always, his blending of fabrics and colours, playing stripes and jacquards against plain materials, delighted his public. He showed bermuda shorts for day and bloomers for evening. His 'baby' coat, double-breasted and flared from a high waistline marked with a belt, was a huge success with the buyers. White, orange, lime and lemon were his favourite colours that spring.

The collection put Ungaro into the First League. *Women's Wear Daily* hailed it with: 'This season, Ungaro's buffeted talent finally opened up like a flower. . . . The clothes have a harmonious richness, rightness of detail and line in which nothing is gratuitous.'

His acclaim was attracting the rich and the famous; people such as actress Jean Seberg and socialite Princess Radziwill were dressing at Ungaro. He realised that the moment had arrived to expand into bigger, more impressive premises, and in the spring of 1967 he found what he needed, the ground and first floors of 2 Avenue Montaigne, a few doors away from Dior, and a five-minute walk from the all-white space-ship in the rue François Premier where Courrèges had just staged his come-back.

While he prepared his next collection, to be shown that July, the carpenters and decorators moved in to transform his new surroundings. A charming little garden was planted at the entrance. The interior, which has remained much the same, began with a foyer, which is now the boutique. From it, white tiled screens (which critics have likened to a public lavatory) lead into the showroom, where the mannequins come out from behind a tiled screen to stand nonchalantly on a circular raised white stage in front of the audience, who are seated on little white toadstool chairs. Upstairs are offices, workrooms, and Ungaro's white-painted office, ablaze with flowers, some of them growing in a circular brick tub in the middle of the floor. The labyrinth effect of the tiled screens leading inwards gives one at first a slight shock, and then a little thrill of excitement.

To prepare the new premises and the collection in time for that July opening was a nightmare. 'Sonja Knapp and I and even the mannequins sewed throughout the last three nights to get everything done', Ungaro recalled.

He was richly rewarded, the collection was a total success, and newspaper headlines proclaimed him *The New Star*, praising him for the nuances of shape, the tailoring, and the brash, bright effect of the clothes. The silhouette was still high-shaped, with seams curving close to the bosom and then flaring to a wide hem. The length was very short. Ungaro's triumph was, in his own words, a journey out of hell. He had staked his career on this collection, assembled while the carpenters hammered and sawed in his new quarters, in which he had invested everything he possessed.

He has never sought outside backing for his business, preferring to let it develop slowly out of its own resources. Four years later, when Courrèges was well entrenched, with the business rolling along nicely, though still far smaller than most of the big names with which he ranks, I was to ask him whether he would not find life easier with outside financial support. Courrèges, after all, had found it vital for the realisation of his dreams. He replied: 'My house is entirely free from any financial pressure. I have no outside backing and I don't want it. I've paid too much for my freedom to lose it.'

For his first few collections, the very special fabrics designed by Sonja Knapp were made by the famous fabric house of Nattier. But when problems developed in the Nattier factory, Ungaro and Sonja switched to an Italian fabric firm called Helita, which has since made all the fabulous prints and the incredible weaves they dream up in subtle or vivid colourings, some of which look positively three-dimensional.

Since that important collection in 1967, Ungaro has continued his process of gradual evolution, each season developing naturally out of the one before. In the following year, he introduced a ready-to-wear line which he called 'Parallèle'. Four years later it accounted for 55% of his turnover, with his couture clothes bringing in the remaining 45%.

The ready-to-wear, like the fabrics, is made in Italy, in a factory in Turin. Although Ungaro was born in France, his background is, after all, Italian, and he understands the Italian mentality. 'I prefer working with the Italians to working with the French', he says, 'because at first the French found it difficult to understand what we wanted. They were afraid. But in Italy everything is easy, the people understand very quickly. Nothing is impossible.' In spite of ready-to-wear taking over the major part of his turnover, Ungaro, like Courrèges, believes passionately in the need to continue haute couture.

Ungaro says: 'It costs so much to produce a couture dress that the relation between the first cost (the cost to the house minus profit) and the price the customer pays for the dress is very very little. But – we live off the couture. It makes money. I need the couture – I need this freedom to do things.' It would be a pity indeed if he was ever to cease producing the

ideas, the fabrics and the colour mixtures which make his couture collections a joy to witness each season.

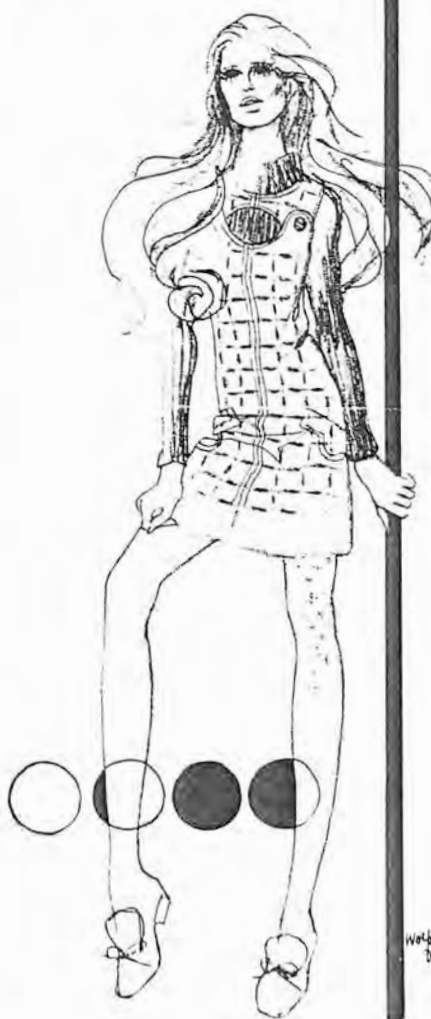
I have always been a fan of Ungaro and I love the way he injects a dash of craziness into his collections: such as the metal sculptures which were shown at the end of one of his collections – aluminium necklaces-cum-bras teamed with aluminium hip-belts on see-through flower-appliquéd trousers. There was once a transparent silver-grey cape covered with tiny metal cylinders, and on another occasion a group of futuristic, metal, evening fantasies; one a gilded metal birdcage and matching metal skirt worn by a bare-breasted girl. Some fashion writers who tend to take his whimsies too seriously and to concentrate only on this side of his creativity are inclined to scold him. 'But I don't mind now,' he smiles. 'I used to get terribly upset, but now they don't bother me.'

With his small, devoted staff of sixty, his sparkling modern premises and a glittering clientèle which includes Lauren Bacall, Melina Mercouri, Catherine Deneuve, Jeanne Moreau, Bettina, Nan Kempner, Mrs Carter Burden, Princess Radziwill, Mrs Aristotle Onassis and her daughter

Ungaro's cape and separates for the 'Parallèle' range, 1970.



IM UNGARO FORTNUM U  
ON UNGARO & MASON U



left and above right  
Styles made by Ungaro for Fortnum and Mason, the London store and sold exclusively through this outlet: a flowered blazer and trousers (summer 1972), and a beautiful short pinafore dress with toning jumper (1972).

far left  
A perfect blending of geometric patterns which is characteristic of Ungaro's work: autumn 1971 collection.



Caroline Kennedy, Madame Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the Duchess of Windsor, Princess Pahlévi, Baronne Guy de Rothschild, Jane Birkin and Mrs Yul Brynner, he has indeed found success. 'I enjoy dressing women who lead an international sort of life, because by wearing my clothes all over the world they help me spread my work everywhere', he acknowledged. Of his designing, he says: 'I am obsessed by the same woman, always the same image in my mind. It is not important, the dress or the coat. The woman inside is important. The way she walks, talks, looks, eats.'

How does he manage to keep not only contemporary but out ahead, in outer space as it were? 'If you live in a contemporary way, you don't change. I don't live with my past. Most important is to have a vision of the future.'

Ungaro the man is slim, with Latin good looks, and almost always dressed in black. With Sonja Knapp, he lives in an apartment in Montparnasse, 'with very very little furniture. Because I need the calm. I need to be free of any distractions. When I relax, I read a lot and I play chess.' He also has a house in Klosters, Switzerland, where he goes 'to rest and to think, to prepare my collections. I have lots of friends there - Irwin Shaw, Deborah Kerr . . . very interesting people live there.'

And what of his dreams? He has a new contract with Japan for the design, strangely enough, of home furnishings. 'Sheets, wallpaper, curtains, fabrics for walls, that sort of thing. I had the opportunity to introduce our designs there in this way. They are doing very very well. Maybe we will develop this idea for Europe soon.'

'I hate to be shut in. I must open my mind. I'd love to have a team around me to do a lot of things. I believe in a team. A perfume and menswear will come soon to complete our image and identity. And furniture, certainly. I would love to design furniture - if I could find the time.'

Talking to Ungaro, one is left with the impression of a man well aware of his own potentialities, of a man with a strong degree of humility, who is at the same time contented, who knows where he is going. Challenge him with this, and he replies with a Latin Shrug: 'I am looking for the serenity.'

Cardin, seated at his electronically operated, colour-changing desk, directs his many operations.

