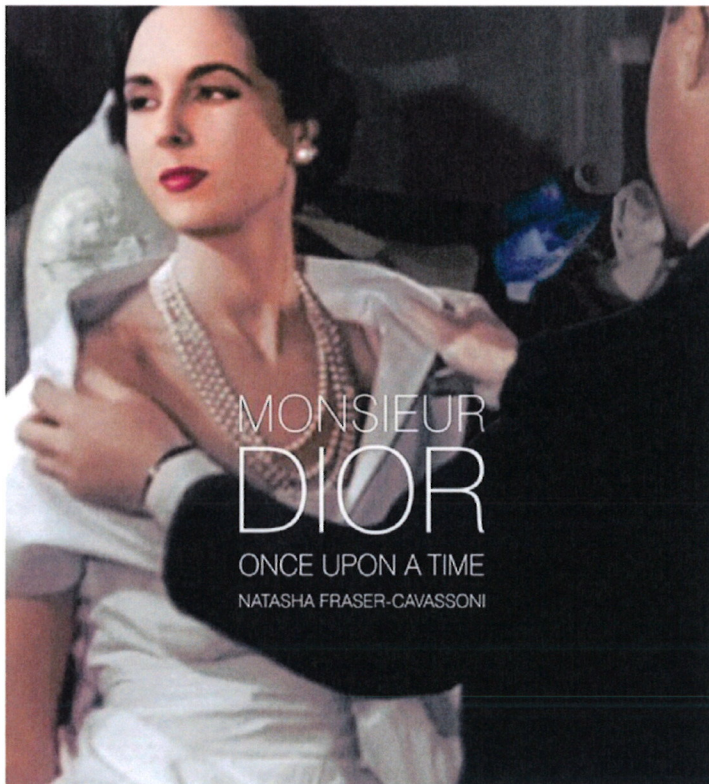


ONCE UPON A TIME

Text by Mitchell Owens | October 31, 2014



Monsieur Dior: Once Upon a Time.

Photo courtesy of Pointed Leaf Press

Modest, plump, and elfin, the French fashion designer Christian Dior only briefly captivated the world, dying in 1957 at age 52, just over a decade after opening his maison de couture amid the ashes of postwar Paris. Writer Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni decided to dive into those ten short years during which Dior ran his celebrated fashion house with *Monsieur Dior: Once Upon a Time* (Pointed Leaf Press, \$70), a limpid book of astonishing intimacy and luminous beauty tucked inside a Dior-gray box like a rare jewel.

At the center of the volume is, of course, Dior, a pink-cheeked marzipan bourgeois born into a well-to-do provincial family who, after having failed as an art dealer, found a foothold in fashion. Eventually Dior cultivated his groundbreaking Corolle collection, a line of extravagant, ultrafeminine, and flowerlike dresses that *Harper's Bazaar* editor in chief Carmel Snow famously labeled the New Look. But Fraser-Cavassoni, a Paris-based British journalist and biographer, digs deep into Dior's limited time as the head of his brand to reanimate the couturier's world, both public and private, conjuring the rustle of silk, the snapping of cigarette cases, and the hunger of clients craving one of the master's extravagant creations.





Dior leaving on vacation, August 1957

Photo © Philippe Le Tellier/Paris-Match Archive/Getty Images

Fascinating, too, is Fraser-Cavassoni's fresh, unsentimental take on Dior's inner circle, a triumvirate of women who alternately adored and exasperated him. There was Raymonde Zehnacker, a solidly built assistant that the couturier called "my second self," yet who struggled to maintain her superiority as new favorites came and went. Marguerite Carré was the queen of quality control, a dictator of the workrooms and terror of the petits mains who churned out Dior's romantic confections. Especially compelling is Fraser-Cavassoni's chapter about Mitzah Bricard, Dior's own personal Maleficent, an orchidaceous beauty of uncertain background whom Fraser-Cavassoni dubs the Dark Queen and who rarely arrived at the fashion house—where she designed millinery and also served as a startlingly confident arbiter of style—before noon and usually then in eyepoppingly deep décolletage freighted with ropes of pearls.

Insights from Dior's friends, associates, models, boyfriends, and clients dapple the pages of *Monsieur Dior*, some of them determinedly praiseworthy. Others are rivetingly indiscreet, even a bit acidic, and thanks to Fraser-Cavassoni, this chorus from the past has been coaxed into reliving one of the most electrifying moments in fashion history.

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