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*Christian Dior's* enduring legacy is a fashion house with a heritage enriched by its inextricable bonds to Britain. Now, creative director *Maria Grazia Chiuri* is bringing the maison's *latest creations to Harrods*, where the couturier first showcased his designs *nearly 70 years ago*

By Grace Cain

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“The *Autumn 2021* collection is full of *eye-popping* clothes served with a side order of *pop glam*”

*This page: The AW21 catwalk show. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: A close-up from the Autumn/Winter 2021 show; the striking new Mizsa leopard print; Christian Dior (far right) puts the finishing touches on a collection in 1956; a dress fitting; modelling Dior in Harrods in the early '50s; the Lady Dior bag; Christian Dior in his atelier circa 1940; behind the scenes for the latest collection*



If there's one thing we're all looking for right now, it's a good reason to dress up. Maria Grazia Chiuri gets it. Her Autumn 2021 collection for Dior is full of eye-popping hyper-colourful clothes infused with sportswear spirit and served with a healthy side order of pop glam. Her inspiration? A woman who needed no excuse to look her best (although she frequently found one): the inimitable Mitzah 'Mizza' Bricard. As part of Christian Dior's elegant entourage in the 1950s, Bricard was rarely spotted in anything but her favourite pearls and bold animal prints. Legend has it she was so dedicated to having a good time, she hardly ever left her bed before noon: a worthy inspiration for us all in 2021.

Chiuri has channelled this daringly glamorous energy into the maison's latest It-print, a bold leopard spot based on Bricard's signature look and fondly titled Mizza. Available in various unexpected colours (think raspberry pink and lime green), the Lady Dior bag in Mizza unites multiple house codes in one standout accessory – and it's about to touch down in London with a statement-animal-print pop-up that Bricard definitely would have adored. Alongside the latest versions of the iconic Lady Dior (which will also be available in red, exclusive to Harrods), you can also expect to find the rest of Dior's greatest handbag hits: from the ubiquitous Book Tote to the cult-favourite Saddle bag; and the Dior Caro to the 30 Montaigne.

Of course, this isn't the first time Dior has brought its distinctive Parisian savoir-faire to our Knightsbridge home. More than half a century ago, the maison would regularly host showcases of its latest London-made designs at the store. The first of these events, held in the spring of 1953, attracted more than 10,000 of the city's most style-conscious inhabitants to Harrods' Fashion Theatre in the opening week alone. A special Dior Room had to be opened on the First Floor to allow chic young clients to admire the latest collections.

## “The bag became so synonymous with *Princess Diana* that it was officially renamed the *Lady Dior* in her honour”

Christian Dior himself always enjoyed a close relationship with Britain, and particularly London. “I dote on Yorkshire pudding, mince pies, stuffed chicken and, above all, I worship the English breakfast of tea, porridge, eggs and bacon,” he enthused in his aptly named memoir *Dior by Dior*. A lifelong Anglophile, the couturier's love of Britain was (thankfully for him) not limited to the cuisine. Inspired by the English flowerbed that his beloved mother had nurtured during his youth, Dior's passion for English gardens and stately homes would become a key influence on his collections, as well as on the locations he chose to stage his shows. He even dedicated an entire chapter of *Dior by Dior* to London, where he had lived for a few months as a young man looking to perfect his English. He fondly associated this time (and all of his subsequent visits to the city) with “a sensation of happiness and great personal freedom”.

Dior was particularly enamoured with the world of the English aristocracy, which he always viewed through a distinctly romantic and joyful lens. He also loved to surround himself with women of formidable talents, and so it will come as no surprise that the House of Dior counted some of British society's most notable names among its first clients. Celebrated author and socialite Nancy Mitford was an early adopter of Dior's New Look, as was Britain's prima ballerina Margot Fonteyn. Hordes of fresh-faced debutantes coveted the fairy-tale gowns conjured up in Dior's atelier – and so did their mothers.

The love between the couturier and his British clients was certainly mutual, but Dior must have been particularly thrilled to have won the approval of one person in particular: Princess Margaret. Unlike her older sister (who tended to favour British designers), the younger and more

glamorous royal embraced the new Parisian fashions. The couturier famously described her as “a real fairy-tale princess; delicate, graceful, exquisite”. She was a regular attendee of Dior shows over the years, and by all accounts the princess and the designer built a solid rapport. Indeed, Dior designed the cream off-the-shoulder chiffon concoction that Princess Margaret wore for her 21st birthday celebration and portrait, famously captured by Cecil Beaton. Later, the princess would reportedly refer to this creation as her “favourite dress of all”.

In the decades following Christian Dior's untimely passing in 1957, the maison quietly maintained its links with Britain. In recent years, it has hosted a show at Blenheim Palace (an echo of an event Dior himself held in the same place 62 years previously) and recruited a British designer, Kim Jones, as its menswear creative director. However, this unique cross-channel relationship takes on a new power in the Lady Dior.

When it comes to fashion, words like ‘classic’ and ‘elegant’ get thrown around a great deal – often undeservedly. However, in the case of the Lady Dior, such terms are certainly apt. Designed by Gianfranco Ferré in 1994, the softly architectural handbag was originally given the unofficial name of ‘Chouchou’ (meaning ‘favourite’ in French); and, happily for the House of Dior, it would soon become the favourite of the most photographed woman in the world. Bernadette Chirac, the first lady of France at the time, gifted an early version of the bag to Princess Diana when she arrived in Paris on a royal tour. Chirac was evidently an excellent gift-giver. In the months that followed, the bag shot to icon status as the princess was regularly snapped with various iterations of the design swinging from her hand. Indeed, the bag became so synonymous with Princess Diana that it was officially renamed the Lady Dior in her honour.

If Christian Dior could have seen one of the many photos of Diana with her favourite accessory, it would surely have brought a smile to his face. The fact that a Dior bag had been used as a symbolic gift from his own nation to another that he loved so much – and via a stylish young princess – felt like an appropriate continuation of the couturier's legacy.

Although almost three decades have passed since the Lady Dior first exploded into our collective consciousness, its popularity has shown no sign of waning. And while classic neutral-hued ‘cannage’ quilt styles possess timeless appeal, the Lady Dior oeuvre has now expanded to include statement prints and eye-catching colours. From sequin iterations to the now-iconic Toile de Jouy Reverse Embroidery, there's a Lady Dior to suit any wardrobe.

Whichever style or colour you prefer, aspects of the maison's heritage can always be found in the Lady Dior's design. The instantly recognisable cannage quilt, for instance, is inspired by the Napoleon III rattan chairs on which guests would have sat to watch Dior's very first show in 1947. And the D-I-O-R letter charms that adorn the handle are a knowing nod to the lucky talismans that the superstitious Christian Dior carried with him everywhere.

In a time when the world is undergoing unprecedented levels of change, there is some comfort to be found in the rich and expansive heritage of a house like Dior – and hope to be taken from the dialogue that Maria Grazia Chiuri is building between a fondly remembered history and an even more joyful future. □

The Dior pop-up will take place from 4th to 29th August in the Exhibition Windows, Ground Floor