



# LALALAND

All's well in the realm of haute couture, where questions of wearability are hardly the most pressing. January's reality-suspending spring/summer 2025 collections combined out-of-this-world techniques to push the boundaries of the handmade even further. *Prestige* reports from the front row.

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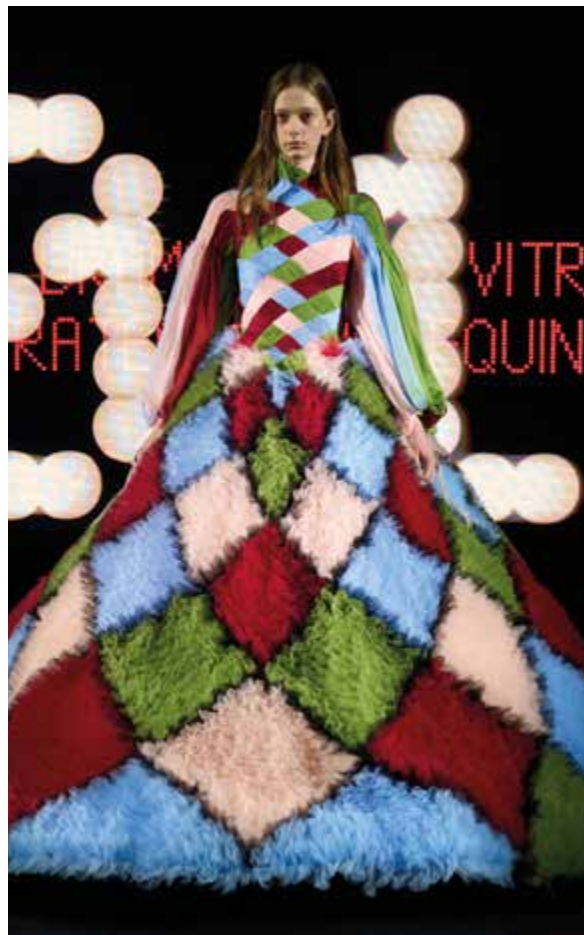


## CHANEL

Chanel's president of fashion, Bruno Pavlovsky, was jovially greeting guests as they arrived at the Grand Palais ahead of the Chanel spring/summer 2025 Haute Couture show. Although there aren't many fashion executives with such a sunny disposition right now, as economic headwinds continue to cast a dark shadow over the industry, Pavlovsky has reason to be cheerful. Despite Chanel lacking a creative director since the departure of Virginie Viard last June, it's been business as usual for the French *maison*, whose couture operation celebrates its 110th anniversary this year. While for some brands the absence of a creative leader might represent a sorry state of limbo, choosing

presentations over shows or holding off on the execution of grand ideas, Chanel has been on a winning streak, presenting some of its best collections for years, even as it awaits Matthieu Blazy's arrival next month. And speaking of grand, scenographer-designer Willo Perron created a curved white stage formed of two interlocking Cs whose centres were raised to create a sloped runway, reflecting the collection's starting point: the chromatic scale. Paying tribute to the "great colourist", Gabrielle Chanel herself, all 55 looks followed the progression of hues from day to night, starting with white, yellows, gold and pastels before bright tones, midnight blue and black. Unexpected combinations, such as violet and light pink or fuchsia and champagne, felt new and youthful, as did the short hemlines and frothy

cuffs. Standouts included a dramatic blue satin opera cape, a couture iteration of the pastel feathered number from September's ready-to-wear show, which global ambassador Jennie Kim wore to the show, and a shimmery champagne floor-length coat with a golden yellow lining. The all-star cast of models, which included Alex Cosani and Mona Tougaard, even rivalled the high-wattage front-row guests Pamela Anderson and Kylie Jenner. And this season's Chanel bride was American supermodel Lulu Tenney, who closed the show in a drop-waisted skirt and train worn under a sequined jacket. The mesmerising collection had all the precision, discipline and exceptional craftsmanship you'd expect of Chanel, but with greater lightness, airiness and youthful appeal than seen previously. But there's always room for magic. That's where Blazy comes in. His first collection is in October. The industry awaits with bated breath.



## VALENTINO

If you were to hazard a guess as to what Alessandro Michele's first-ever couture collection might look like, you'd probably be right on the money. If there were ever a likelihood that Michele's new gig at Valentino, or indeed his entrance into the rarefied world of haute couture, would shake off his reputation as the industry's great freewheeling maximalist, that certainly wasn't the case. But just how bonkers and outlandish – even by Michele's elevated standards – the show turned out to be took everyone by surprise. Named *Vertigineux*, the collection, which references Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, is inspired by humankind's "fascination with lists" aiming "not to tame the chaos, [but] rather to contemplate it". Michele also compared exploring the infinite Valentino archives to the feeling of vertigo. Held at the Palais Brongniart, the show's 48 looks were each accompanied by a list of bright red words that moved across the digital backwall at speed. From eras – Middle Ages and Baroque – to people – Henry James, Emily Dickinson and Aristotle – to colours, techniques, fabrics, the words showcased the infinite references that make up a couture gown. The upshot of such imaginative free-flow was an era-traversing collection that melded Michele's passion for historical costume with the Valentino

archives. Marie Antoinette-style crinolines, panniers and 17th-century ruff collars met Valentino signatures such as red, ruffles and frills. Looks ran the gamut from a multicoloured harlequin pattern ruched-tulle gown with billowing sleeves to an antique-floral chiffon robe *à la française*. The dizzying variety of adornments came in the forms of couture Venetian masks, dramatic feathered headdresses, and tights embellished with gems and pearls. Although by default haute couture is worlds away from reality – and even the realm of luxury ready-to-wear – it's hard to see the collection's outré pieces being taken up by even the most flamboyant of red-carpet dressers, where most couture gowns end up. After all, couture is couture, and costume is costume. Michele would do well to learn the difference.



## TAMARA RALPH

Tamara Ralph has been back in the mix of the couture calendar for four seasons now, and things are going from strength to strength for the Monaco-based designer. Last month she dressed Renée Zellweger for a premiere of the latest *Bridget Jones* instalment, *All About a Boy*, and in November she opened the brand's first by-appointment couture salon in the French capital. For spring/summer 2025, Ralph was inspired by "delicate harmonies and intricate layers of orchestral compositions", likening a couture show to a musical masterpiece. Held at the American Cathedral in Paris on Avenue Georges V, the collection, named



Poétique Symphony, opened with a female soloist on a grand piano. The flow of fabrics – duchess satin, silks and velvet – referenced the "undulating notes" of a symphony, while volumes of moiré silk formed huge bows on the backs of gowns or off-the-shoulder evening coats. Colours such as baby yellow, fresh mints, and raspberry pinks suggested contrasting notes shown alongside Ralph's signature blacks and pearls. Feathered shawls and enamel flowers decorated dresses; accessories came in the forms of sheer stocking gloves and berets in silk, leather and velvet. In one look a skirt was fashioned entirely of pearls, worn underneath a black velvet corset; another satin gown in pastel yellow featured a draped taffeta top complete with a crystal floral breastplate. The serene collection had all the romance, femininity and breath-snatching beauty that Ralph is known for and is sure to strike a chord with her burgeoning worldwide clientele.



## SCHIAPARELLI

For spring/summer 2025, Schiaparelli creative director Daniel Roseberry set out to redefine modernity. "I realised what I wanted to do: create something that feels new because it's old," read the show notes. "I'm so tired of everyone constantly equating modernity with simplicity. Can't the new also be worked, be baroque, be extravagant? Has our fixation on what looks or feels modern become a limitation? Has it cost us our imagination?" The designer was inspired after discovering in an antique shop a box of pre-World War II Lyon ribbons, whose colours formed the collection's starting point. They prompted Roseberry to study the great couturiers of the past – Madame Grès, Charles Frederick Worth and Paul Poiret, Yves Saint Laurent and Azzedine Alaïa – in order to challenge the notion that antiquity and modernity can't coexist. The collection's 33 looks focused almost excessively on the waist – breadth-defying corsets contrasted with exaggerated padded hips and drop-waisted hemlines. Silhouettes referenced the "liquid deco" shapes of the 1920s or "second golden age of couture" in the '50s. This season the atelier experimented with new techniques and fabrics, such as creating a signature blazer from Ultrasuede or bathing feathers in glycerine to give them weight as they adorned pieces. The final bustier gown was



## STEPHANE ROLLAND

If the world of luxury fashion has a reputation for being exclusive, then you can bet the realm of haute couture is even more elite. However, in a first, French couturier Stephane Rolland opened up his spring/summer 2025 show to 700 members of the public, with ticket proceeds going towards the Fondation des Hôpitaux, a charity that supports disadvantaged French youth. In the past six months, the designer has also held workshops, inviting teenage girls to come and learn from a French couture house. The charity's president, Brigitte Macron, sat in the show's front row. In the same philanthropic vein, this season Rolland was inspired by the late American singer, dancer and humanitarian Joséphine Baker, who

moved from Saint Louis to France and, during her lifetime, adopted 12 children from around the world. Rolland compared her avant-garde spirit with that of her contemporary, the sculptor and visionary Constantin Brancusi, calling them "two beings [who] conquered the world with their freedom of expression" and adding, "Joséphine dances and sings, Brancusi sculpts and Paris is set ablaze." Named Origines, de Brancusi à Baker, the collection came to life in white porcelain, ivory, ebony, silver and black. Sculpted gowns with broad shoulders and geometric details evoked the forms of the modernist sculptor's oeuvre, while the movement of a flowing long dress with ebony organza leaves suggested Baker's free spirit. A black chiffon draped gown featuring gold cubist-like jewellery referenced Brancusi's most famous work, *Bird in Space*. Supermodel Coco Rocha closed the show in the bridal Joséphine gown in white crepe and white gazar embroidered with a myriad of plumes, moving to the musical backdrop of cellist Mischa Maisky's interpretation of Poulenc's "Les Chemins de l'Amour". It's fitting that the show took place at the grand Salle Pleyel concert hall, because this was pure theatre.

constructed using vintage brown moiré silk ribbon from the box that originally inspired the designer, while a gold strapless column dress made of vertical ribbons shimmered as the model walked. Named Icarus, the collection references the Greek myth about the adolescent who flew too close to the sun. Although the tale is typically a warning on the risks of overambition, Roseberry compared the process of creating a couture collection to the never-ending struggle for perfection and the obligation to push the limits of craft higher each season. "How high can we couturiers go?" he asks. "As high as the sun – and the Gods – allow us."



## VIKTOR&ROLF

*“Trench beige en gazar de soie, chemise blanche en gazar de soie, pantalon bleu en gazar de soie ...”* So went the looped AI soundtrack in the Westin Paris Vendôme grand ballroom at the Viktor&Rolf haute couture spring/summer 2025 show. By the third look, the point of the collection – named Couture Prompt– became clear: the show was based on variations of a beige trench, a white shirt and blue trousers, made solely from silk gazar, the stiff couture fabric invented for Cristóbal Balenciaga himself. The designers’ starting point this season was a 40-year-old quote from Karl Lagerfeld, “I’m like a computer, plugged into Chanel mode,” and aimed to explore “a fashion brand’s heritage as a collection of data, ready for processing”. The 24 looks presented wildly diverse interpretations of the humble wardrobe staples, sculpted into voluminous wavy folds, or adorned with a multitude of bows or baroque-style ruffles. Showing how creativity flourishes under limitations, in one look the shrunken fabric turned the trousers into

teeny shorts; the finale was a five-tier trench ballgown. The Dutch duo are known for incorporating humour into their work, but the fact this playful collection veered towards fatuous at times was exactly the point. They described it as “a whimsical, human clin d’œil to the boundless possibilities of artificial intelligence”, though the rigorous couture techniques on display were no laughing matter. This was serious skill.



## ASHI STUDIO

In 2023 Mohammed Ashi of Ashi Studio was the first designer from the Persian Gulf to be invited by the Chambre Syndicale to show during Couture Week. Since then, the Saudi Arabian has not only become the region’s fashion poster boy – he even designed Riyadh Air’s cabin-crew uniform – but his shows are now among the week’s most anticipated. This season Ashi, who’s been living in the French capital since 2018, explored a lesser-known part of his adopted city’s history: the boudoirs of the Parisian bourgeoisie during the 1960s. In his words, “the secretive, sophisticated women who dreamed of a bourgeois life while remaining the mistresses of their own fate”. Held at the Hotel Solomon de Rothschild, the mesmerising collection, Velvet Underground, took its audience into the clandestine world of hushed curtained rooms lit by candlelight. The opening look, a lingerie-inspired lace corset with horns jutting from its hips, set the dark romantic tone. Other standouts, such as



a beige chinoiserie corset paired with a ruby-red velvet tulip-shaped skirt or a sumptuous white-satin bubble skirt paired with a baroque-style embellished jacket, showed the breadth of Ashi's talents. This season the designer worked with Polish movement director Pat Boguslawski – the man behind the theatricality of last year's Margiela Artisanal show – who explored the push-pull between emancipation and seduction through the models' spellbinding movements and gestures. If Ashi's name is yet to be up there with couture's big dogs, it surely will soon be.



## GAURAV GUPTA

Last summer Indian couturier Gaurav Gupta was involved in a devastating fire that broke out at a party he attended in Delhi. The near-fatal incident left his life partner, Navkirat Sodhi, with half of her body burned. In a double blow, Gupta, who'd just become the second-ever Indian designer to be invited by the Chambre Syndicale as a couture guest designer, was forced to cancel his show in June. Finding strength in vulnerability and light in the darkness was the theme of this deeply personal collection, named *Across the Flame*, which was inspired by Gupta and Sodhi's healing journey. The fact that said journey took a turn towards the spiritual was evident from the collection's live tabla drums and the meditation sound bowl that arrived with each invitation. If at times the show veered towards the intense, well, that's all part of the cathartic act of creation. Sodhi opened the show recounting her experience through a poem and wearing a dress that visibly showed her scars. This season Gupta, who's known for his signature sculpted wave technique, added new colours and materials to his repertoire

that spoke of his experience: gowns in ochre referenced flames, while deep purples and blues alluded to bruises. New metal-casted sculpted details appeared on dresses and even covered half of a model's face, suggesting armour and protection. In one look, named *Twin Flame*, two models joined by jewellery walked side by side, referencing Gupta and Sodhi's bond. In the audience was rapper Megan Thee Stallion, who dazzled in one of Gupta's tribal chainmail creations; only a week before, he was also the designer of choice for Usha Vance, wife of the newly installed US Vice President, for the pre-inauguration candlelit dinner. While his outlook on life may have been forever altered, his designs still carry universal appeal. ■