

Australian wool helped launch the celebrated career of Christian Dior who used it in his haute couture, writes The Paris Prize author **Tania Blanchard**

Dyed-in-the-wool fan

Thrifting is a concept that has been around for many years. Who doesn't love a bargain buy, the finding of a diamond in the rough? But scouring the op shops for quality second-hand clothing has made a resurgence especially with eco conscious millennials and gen Z, making thrifting a popular trend.

As a historical fiction novelist, I understand the concept of what was old becomes new again. Vintage is the new chic. We all know the influence of the 1940s modernist interior design style from TV shows such as *The Block* and *Grand Design*, as an aesthetic nod to the past.

The influence of war created design that promoted clean lines, was functional, minimalist and organic. But what if I told you the same philosophy drove post-war fashion design and women have been trying to recreate that style ever since.

War changed women forever.

Not only did they want to feel feminine and beautiful once again, but they wanted to wear clothing that suited their lifestyle, environment and were comfortable too.

And Australia was on the forefront of that change.

The most famous name to come from the rise of the post-war haute couture scene was Christian Dior. His New Look of 1947 triggered the golden age of fashion and his name is still synonymous with style, elegance, luxury and femininity.

Princess Margaret, Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth were avid devotees of the early Dior look, and Grace Kelly and Ava Gardner took Hollywood glamour to new heights.

In this modern day, Natalie Portman, Charlize Theron, Rihanna and Jennifer Lawrence have all represented not only the face of Dior but have showcased recreations of the original Dior designs including the iconic Bar Suit. Sabrina Carpenter too has embodied the classic elegance and femininity of the Dior signature.

But what has any of this to do with Australia? While researching my new book, *The Paris Prize*, I discovered that French wool merchants settled on our shores in the late 19th century to buy Australian wool for their high-end fashion garments. French ardour for our wool continued into the 20th century as the haute couture fashion industry grew.

The French connection doesn't end there. Christian Dior saw Australia as a young, optimistic nation, receptive to new ideas and largely untouched by the destruction of the European war. His new



Christian Dior Bar Suit, above; Charlize Theron, right, in Dior at the 2006 Academy Awards; and author Tania Blanchard, below. Pictures: Ian West, supplied

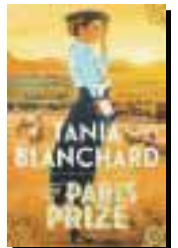


opulent designs, accentuating the feminine curves, were enthusiastically received here and he chose Australia to showcase his 1948 collection before anywhere else outside of Paris. His partnership with David Jones endured through the 1950s and led to David Jones adopting the Dior black-and-white houndstooth check as their brand.

Perhaps our love affair with Dior was influenced by the Australian sense of practicality. Dior understood the different climate and environment of our country and adapted his designs to suit the figures and needs of Australian

Tania Blanchard's *The Paris Prize*, published by HarperCollins, is out now, RRP\$34.99.

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women. His ready-to-wear lines were licenced and made in Australia, which made his designs more affordable and accessible to the ordinary woman.

This association goes even deeper. Dior loved our wool, used it in his designs and garments and was involved in the

International Wool Secretariat design competition, promoting southern hemisphere wool. In 1954 Yves Saint Laurent and Karl Lagerfeld won first prize in a Paris ceremony, launching their careers as celebrated fashion designers.

Today in the age of fast fashion and the concerns about synthetics and plastics, many of us want to turn back to simpler times when natural fibres and fabrics were used in beautifully made, timeless, enduring garments. Dior and his contemporaries knew the value of wool, just as Australian wool farmers always have.

Thrifting can only continue to rise in popularity as celebrity reinventions of original Dior designs and TikTok influencers inspire a new generation of vintage fashion lovers. After all, history is cyclic and it's no surprise that mid-century style becomes the New Look again.

Honestly, I think Dior would be proud.

