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Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years

Christian Dior

PARIS

VIE EN ROSE DAY COAT



1961 Spring/Summer Collection, pink linen day coat; A-line design with three-quarter length sleeves, large buttons and martingale, n° 152.6.9.

The apricot-color version was worn by Jacqueline Kennedy during her State visit to Venezuela in December 1961.







**Jacqueline Kennedy in Venezuela in December 1961, during her official visit to South America.
Photo credit: Cecil Stoughton, The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.**

Known as the “vie en rose” model, the present coat can be compared to the apricot-color version worn by Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961 during her official visit to Latin America. Designed and created by Christian Dior, it is the perfect expression of Jacqueline Kennedy’s style and can be quite rightly considered one of the emblematic pieces of her wardrobe. Simple and graceful, the model itself is representative of the new American elegance that Jacqueline Kennedy established upon her arrival at the White House.

1961, the year the present coat was created, also marked the height of fashion at the White House. Proclaimed the world’s best ambassador for women’s fashion, Jacqueline Kennedy initiated the years of elegance that were to follow. Already in January 1961, during her husband’s inaugural ceremony, the First Lady wore the greige coat by Oleg Cassini with the famous pillbox hat. It was in this

manner that her understated style, with its refined and sober lines, defined her era forever, and that, well beyond America's frontiers. In France, her first official visit was highlighted by the receptions given by General Charles de Gaulle at the Elysée Palace and Versailles, where she wore a long evening dress in pink-and-white raffia lace with matching kerchief stole designed by Oleg Cassini. In June 1961, she impressed Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna with her pink chiffon evening dress embroidered entirely with sequins. In December of the same year, the Kennedy's made their first official visit to Latin America (Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Columbia). For this occasion the First Lady chose to wear an apricot-colored version of the Christian Dior outfit known as the "vie en rose" model, comprising a matching dress, coat and hat (fig.1). This ensemble, perfect in its cut and sober lines, was displayed at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2001 and then at the Paris Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 2003 as part of the travelling exhibition *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years* (see exhibition catalogue, pages 158-159).



Fig.1. Christian Dior "vie en rose" dress worn by Jacqueline Kennedy along with matching coat. Exhibited at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001.

More elegant and gracious than ever in her Dior coat, she was greeted with a triumphal reception at the Caracas airport by 300,000 people shouting “Viva Miss América.”



Jacqueline Kennedy arriving at Caracas airport wearing her Christian Dior coat. Venezuela, December 16, 1961. Department of State photograph in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.

In selecting this coat as part of her official attire, Jacqueline Kennedy paid homage to the great French designer, Christian Dior. He himself had made a triumphal visit to the United States in 1957 to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the Dior fashion house, making the cover of *Time* magazine for the occasion.



Dior was spotted ten years earlier by the American press; Carmel Snow, editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*, coined the phrase "New Look" for his first collection. Having become the most influential designer of his time, Christian Dior expanded his market opening branches worldwide, most notably in the United States, England and South America. Dior also organized private showings of his collections for great Hollywood actresses like Lauren Bacall, Marlena Dietrich, Jane Russell, Jennifer Jones, Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner, as well as the world's great aristocratic women including the Duchess of Windsor and Barbara Hutton, all faithful clients of the Avenue Montaigne.



Carmel Snow (left), editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar* and Louise Dahl-Wolfe (right) at a Dior fashion show



Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart in 1952, at a Dior fashion show.

In her book, *Christian Dior 1905-1957*, Françoise Giroux reveals the great couturier's wealth of inspirational sources, as well as the successive stages of his creative method:

“He loved his dresses like one would love people, they were his children until the day they left the house, and then there was nothing else to do but start over. His work began with what was easiest, choosing fabrics among a selection proposed by the manufactures, and sometimes – but rarely – making his own suggestions to them. Mrs. Brossin de Méré, who produced remarkable textiles in Switzerland, created two famous fabric designs for Dior: *Saintes-gallettes* and *Papillons*. In the first design he requested that the harmony of the St. Gallen rooftops be reproduced; in the second it was a certain lighting that Dior asked her to capture. Textiles in hand, he would leave for the countryside, or go on vacation, to find inspiration from within. Then he would begin to draw, filling his small sketchpads with miniscule figurines. He would sketch wherever he was: in his bed or bath, while dining or in the car, capturing a feeling, a movement, or a line. Suddenly, one figure among the others would capture his attention – an idea to retain and develop. The next day he would take another silhouette, one that he had envisioned during the night, for a ‘spin’. The drawings became larger, more defined until he stopped “like the pastry chef who lets his well-kneaded dough rest.” After a week he would return to work, examining and eliminating designs, and in two or three days would work up several hundred drawings around a dozen ideas. The next step took place at the Avenue Montaigne studio, a large bright room where he always worked in a white smock. There he was joined by his studio staff: Madame Marguerite already mentioned, Madame Raymonde and Madame Bricard. The famous trio.” (Françoise Giroud, *Christian Dior 1905 -1957*, Paris 1987, Editions du Regard, pages 65-67).

Reference Bibliography:

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