



THE ILLUSTRATED  
WORLD OF

# OUTFITTER

*Megan Hess*

THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD OF

*Couture*

THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD OF

# Couture

*Megan Hess*

Hardie Grant  
BOOKS



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For Martina Granolic

Couture is utterly original and  
truly inspiring, just like you.

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## INTRODUCTION

It was a single dress that kindled my interest in the world of haute couture. I was young at the time, maybe eleven or twelve, and I knew nothing of the designers, seasons and runway shows of high fashion. But as I sat watching the opening scenes of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, I was transfixed by Audrey Hepburn. I knew instinctively that the black gown she was wearing, with its chic high neck and elegant but unusual back perfectly cut away at the shoulder blades, must have been made by someone special.

It was the first time I'd even considered who actually made the clothes I saw every day, and the realisation lit a spark. When I discovered it was the inimitable couturier Hubert Givenchy who had designed the iconic look, and that the dress had been created specifically for Hepburn herself, I was captivated. I knew that somehow I wanted gorgeous, hand-stitched, custom-designed clothes to feature in my life too.

Fast forward to now, and I am lucky enough to work in the rarefied world I once marvelled at as a girl. My illustrations have given me access to places only a few ever get to see. I've visited invitation-only ateliers and attended fashion shows that have given me shivers. Never in a million years did I think I'd ever get to sketch couture at Cannes Film Festival or see the Chanel métiers d'arts up close. But ever since that first time I gazed in awe at that simple but exquisite dress worn by Hepburn as Holly Golightly, I've well and truly fallen in love with fashion's premier artform.

This book is my celebration of everything haute couture. It is part collection of my favourite couture moments and part exploration of the most fascinating facets of couture. Most of all it is my love letter to this fairytale industry.

Yes, couture is an exclusive world, hard to gain entry into and filled with unspoken rules and secret languages. But appreciating it is definitely not out of reach. One of the true joys of fashion is getting swept up in couture's creativity, its luxury, its unyielding commitment to excellence, and of course its impossible beauty.

In this book, we'll discover that couture is about so much more than the clothes. It is about the theatre of the runway shows, the age-old techniques and craftsmanship, the fantasies created from the most surprising inspirations, and the people who design, make and wear it. We will learn about the skills developed in couture ateliers over the last century: the hours of painstaking beading, the rare feathers, the intricate embroidery and delicate pleats made by hand. We will journey to my favourite fashion cities and encounter some of the collectors of couture pieces. And throughout the book, I'll introduce you to some of couture's most-loved designers and show you how they became master couturiers.

The world of couture, once you start to look, is endlessly enchanting. By the time you've made it through these pages, I am sure you will agree.

Enjoy!

*Megan Hess*





FOR *every dress*  
SENT DOWN THE  
RUNWAY, THERE  
ARE A HUNDRED  
*behind-the-scenes*  
ELEMENTS  
COMING  
TOGETHER WITH  
*precision-perfect*  
HARMONY.



# HAUTE COUTURE

NOUN, FRENCH: 'HIGH FASHION'

The couture collection for any design house is its premier offering. Shown just twice a year, Spring-Summer and Autumn-Winter, these collections represent the pinnacle of fashion.

Technically, to be couture is to be one-of-a-kind, made by hand and to measure for an individual client. It is in contrast to pret-a-porter, or ready-to-wear, which can be reproduced multiple times in standard sizes and purchased off the rack.

True haute couture, though, is more than just intricate clothes made to measure by hand. It is actually an exclusive designation protected by law and regulated by a governing body in the home of fashion, France.

In order to receive certification and call their work haute couture, a house must be officially invited onto the schedule at Paris Fashion Week by the couture arm of the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode: the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture. There are only two dozen or so designers invited each year and half of those are there only as guests. Full members must have an atelier in France, but correspondent membership is offered to some foreign houses.

The Chambre Syndicale has strict rules for what constitutes haute couture. To even be considered, a house must create two made-to-measure collections a year, each with a minimum number of looks. They must have a certain number of staff and maintain an atelier in Paris where they offer private fittings for clients.

The full set of rules have never been made public, but the Chambre Syndicale did once release a delightfully mysterious list of five requirements such as 'excellence in handmade and tailor-made production' and 'participation in parades of the profession'. The final requirement? *Permanence de ces engagements* – 'permanence of these commitments'. Couture is made to last a lifetime, or maybe many lifetimes, so it seems fitting that there is an expectation for couture houses to uphold standards season after season.

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## CHAMBRE SYNDICALE *de la* HAUTE COUTURE

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01

*Conception de la collection par un créateur permanent*  
Collection design by a permanent designer

02

*Excellence de la réalisation fait main et sur mesure au sein de l'entreprise*  
Excellence in handmade and tailor-made production within the company

03

*Taille minimale de l'entreprise*  
Minimum business size

04

*Participation aux défilés de la profession*  
Participation in parades of the profession

05

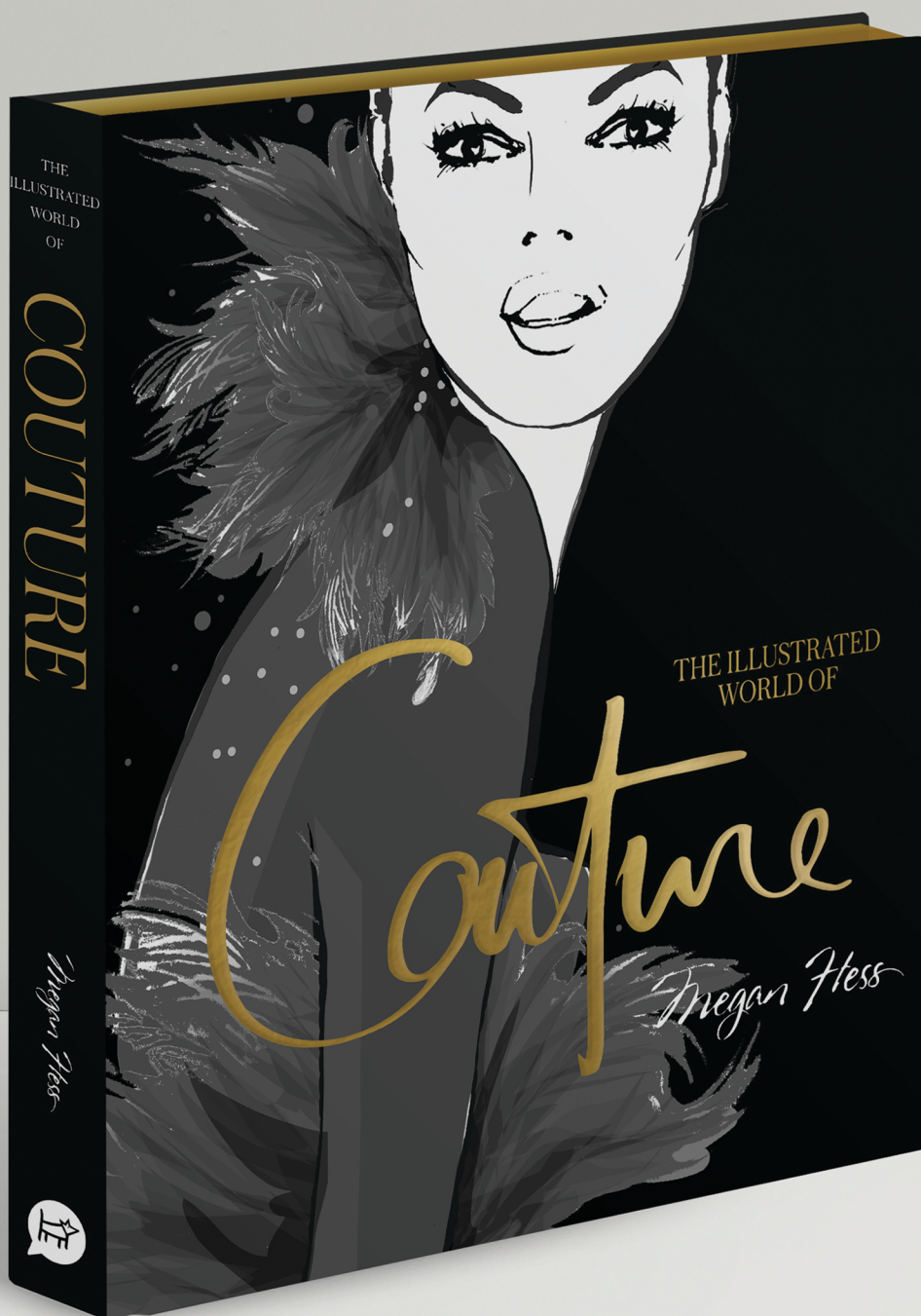
*Permanence de ces engagements*  
Permanence of these commitments

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