

Margot Fonteyn and Fashion Designers in the 1940s

By ROSEMARY HARDEN

This paper examines the role that ballerina Dame Margot Fonteyn played as an advocate for British fashion in the 1940s, with particular reference to the Sadler's Wells tour of the USA after the Second World War. The article draws on surviving ensembles from Dame Margot's wardrobe in the collection at the Fashion Museum (formerly the Museum of Costume) in Bath as well as material in the Theatre Museum Archive in London.

INTRODUCTION

TO THIS DAY, some forty years after her retirement from the stage, Dame Margot Fonteyn (1919–1991) is still one of the most famous ballerinas in the world. Throughout her dancing career she was revered by those who knew about ballet, and loved by those who did not but who read about her in the newspapers. She captivated the popular imagination as the definitive ballerina, not only giving the finest performances of her generation, but also summing up to many people, both now and then, what a ballerina should be like.

There was, however, another aspect to Margot Fonteyn; it can be argued that she was, if not a fashion model, then certainly an advocate for the work of particular fashion designers from the 1940s to the end of her dancing life. In a photograph by Cecil Beaton (1904–1990) published in British *Vogue* in October 1949, Margot Fonteyn is pictured wearing a dress by Bianca Mosca (Figure 1). She looks beautiful and is, at one and the same time, presenting herself as a ballerina as well as showing off the black tiered evening dress, by this now little-known British fashion designer, to its best advantage.

Through the clothes that Margot Fonteyn wore off the stage, such as Bianca Mosca's striking evening dress, the prima ballerina was as much performing a role as when she was wearing her stage costumes. The role that she was knowingly assuming was that of an ambassador for British fashion in the 1940s. That experience and other 'modelling' roles for British designers during that decade showed her the power of fashion. Throughout the rest of her life, she wore clothes in public appearances off the stage principally by just two designers, Christian Dior (1905–1957) and Yves Saint Laurent (1936–2008).

The article is based on more than sixty objects that belonged to Margot Fonteyn, and which are now part of the collection at the Fashion Museum in Bath. The majority are couture and ready-to-wear fashions and hats by Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent. However, there are a smaller number of pieces by British designers of the 1940s, many of whom were members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, and it is these that the article will concentrate on.



FIGURE I. Cecil Beaton, photograph of Margot Fonteyn wearing an evening dress by Bianca Mosca, 1949
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EARLY 1940S: BRITISH HAT DESIGNERS

In the early 1940s both the British fashion industry and the British ballet were in their infancy. It was only during the later 1920s that Ninette de Valois (1898–2008), a dancer, choreographer and entrepreneur, assembled a small company and school, the Vic-Wells ballet.¹ The company's original principal ballerina was Alicia Markova (1910–2004). She danced the lead role in *The Nutcracker* in 1934, and it was during this production that the fifteen-year-old Margot Fontes (Margot's first stage name) made her debut, as a snowflake. Soon after, Alicia Markova left the company and Margot was thrust into the limelight dancing the lead role in *Giselle*, partnered by Robert Helpmann (1909–1996).

Margot Fonteyn was thus created the prima ballerina of the Vic-Wells ballet at a very young age, and very suddenly. It was a deliberate act by Ninette de Valois, who also harnessed the talents of other extraordinary people: Frederick Ashton (1904–1988) as choreographer and Constant Lambert (1905–1951) as musical director. A home-grown British ballet star was crucial to Ninette de Valois's vision; in Margot Fonteyn, with her characteristic discipline, Madame (as de Valois was known by the company) had found the perfect embodiment of the new ballet company.

By the early 1940s Margot Fonteyn had danced the lead role more times in more performances of all the ballets in the Vic-Wells repertoire. The company spent the war years touring the country giving performances night after night in regional towns and cities, as well as in London. By performing for war-time audiences Margot Fonteyn assumed an extra role: 'As with the contralto Kathleen Ferrier, the war years made Fonteyn a British idol; like Ferrier she expressed a beauty, a quality of heart, a state of grace and a devotion to her art that were, for all those who packed the theatres to see her, an oasis'.² And, just as tiaras and tutus helped her to create her role on-stage, so the smart clothes designed by British fashion designers which she wore off-stage sustained this additional role. During the early 1940s Margot Fonteyn appeared in fashion features in British magazines.³ With her growing fame and identity as a British war-time idol, coupled with her poise and elegance, it is not perhaps surprising that the ballerina should appear, particularly in *Vogue*, with details of her clothes. It is notable, too, how often, in the absence of fashion information from Paris, figures from the arts are featured in the magazine during the war years.

In September 1944 Margot Fonteyn was featured in *Vogue* wearing hats 'designed especially for her by Aage Thaarup'. The dramatically lit photographs, with part of the ballerina's face in shadow, are by Lee Miller (1907–1977).

Margot Fonteyn draws her dark hair severely off her brow in the ballerina style which so well suits the pale oval of her face. Aage Thaarup designed these black felt Chinese hats especially for her. 'Daughter of Tranquillity', tiered like a temple and bearing a beautiful gold ornament. 'Jasmin Jade', worn very straight on the head, slotted in front with green ribbon and tipped with a small black tassel.⁴

They are strong black-and-white portrait shots, and the ballerina's elfin features and set of her head make her a natural model. The collection in Bath includes four hats, though not the Chinese hats, by Aage Thaarup, worn by Margot Fonteyn, including a matelot style hat of black wool felt and black grosgrain ribbon.⁵ Danish-born

Aage Thaarup (1906–1987) was one of the most fashionable milliners in London in the mid-1930s. By 1944, after an early war years' failure, he was again producing stylish hats for the beau-monde of London, including some worn by the Queen and the Princess Elizabeth in the 1945 Victory parade. There was clearly a connection between Aage Thaarup and Margot Fonteyn: not only did the ballerina model these hats for him, but there is also a reference to the fact that she and fellow ballerina Pamela May (1917–2005) went to see Thaarup just before the Vic-Wells post-war tour to Brussels in spring 1945 to see if he could block the military-style caps with which they had been issued into a more chic shape.⁶

Creativity in British fashion was limited at this period because of scarcity of resources, regulations on the fashion industry and rationing. Hats, however, were exempt from the most stringent restrictions and it could be argued that British milliners had a relatively free rein during the war years. *Vogue* includes many details of hats at this date; and indeed in another feature in 1944 there is a double-page spread showing work by a range of milliners then working in Britain: Erik, Przeworska, High Beresford, Helena Geffers, Pissot and Pavy.⁷

During the Second World War there was a definite connection between the British ballet star and the British fashion industry, as evidenced in these photographs and features in *Vogue*. In the early 1940s, the fashion industry was encouraged by the Board of Trade and the Department of Overseas Trade to organize fashion shows and tours to both North and South America so as to stimulate export and earn much needed cash for a war-impooverished Britain. Using her fame and her elegance to 'sell' British fashion, Margot Fonteyn was an economic advocate for British exports.

1947: CHRISTIAN DIOR

In 1946 Margot Fonteyn was given leave of absence from the Vic-Wells ballet and went to France to join Roland Petit (born 1924), a young dancer who had set up his own company, and whom she had met again when the Vic-Wells ballet toured to Brussels and to Paris in spring 1945.⁸ She had left London for a change of scene in her personal life; one aspect of her life changed for ever during her trips to Paris in the late 1940s for Roland Petit introduced her to the House of Dior:

Roland was going to take me to an opera premiere at the Theatre des Champs Elysees. No doubt he was justifiably nervous about what I might wear. He said, 'There's a marvellous new couturier who has just shown his first collection. It's a sensational success. He's called Christian Dior'. He took me to Dior where they lent me a striking dress to wear that evening. Everyone complimented me on the gown, and I have never felt so elegant in my life.⁹

Margot bought one of the model ensembles, a black wool suit called 'Daisy', from the New Look collection shown in February 1947 at the end of the season, and now in the Fashion Museum.¹⁰ Although no images of the ballerina wearing 'Daisy' have come to light, she was photographed in Paris wearing other ensembles by Dior in 1948. Already she was a 'poster girl' for the new couture house: 'Her narrow waist and long legs make Margot an ideal subject for this dark blue day dress by Christian Dior, the New Look creator'.¹¹

'Daisy' was the beginning of a ten-year association between Margot Fonteyn and Christian Dior. It is interesting to speculate on the exact relationship between the designer and the ballerina. Margot mentions that he lent her an evening dress, but it seems likely, too, that she actually bought sample garments at the end of the season. These were known as model garments and were used to show to clients before they placed an order.¹² Following her first purchase in 1947, she then acquired a coat called 'Goemon' from Dior's second collection, and a straw hat decorated with petersham ribbon.¹³ Margot Fonteyn continued to acquire her dresses from Dior throughout the 1950s, and the collection in Bath includes a number of evening dresses and hats by him. After Dior's death in 1957, she went instead to Yves Saint Laurent.¹⁴

LATE 1940S: BRITISH FASHION DESIGNERS

By October 1949 when the Sadler's Wells ballet set off for their first tour of the United States of America, Margot Fonteyn had returned to the company after her stay in Paris. The opening ballet, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on 9 October 1949, was Frederick Ashton's *The Sleeping Beauty*, and Margot was to dance the leading role of Aurora. However, despite her standing as prima ballerina of the company, Margot was not that well known in America. It was Moira Shearer (1926–2006), who had played the lead role in the film *The Red Shoes* released the previous year, whom American audiences thought of as the ballet star.¹⁵ Margot Fonteyn, and indeed the Sadler's Wells company itself, went to America as relative unknowns.

There was a lot riding on the American tour, for not only was the British ballet on display, but so too was the work of British fashion designers. In August 1949 British *Vogue* published a three-page feature (with photographs by Cecil Beaton) about the four principal ballerinas of the company — Pamela May, Moira Shearer, Beryl Grey (born 1927) and Margot Fonteyn — and the ensembles that they had been given to showcase British fashion during the tour. 'The Sadler's Wells Ballet is starting its first tour of America this month. Four ballerinas have been presented with late-day and travel clothes by the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers — a gesture of interest to our export drive.'¹⁶ 'For Margot Fonteyn, Bianca Mosca has designed a brocaded silk satin evening gown with a small carnation design. The skirt is very full — three tiered and raised to show the left ankle.'¹⁷ This dress is now part of the collection at the Fashion Museum (Figure 2).¹⁸

The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, which had been formed in 1942 with the support of the Board of Trade, was an amalgamation of London's leading couturiers. The aim of bringing all the designers together in one organization was to maximize the capacity to generate export sales and earn much-needed money for the country and the war effort. By the late 1940s, the need was just as great: the British Government was forced to devalue the pound in September 1949.¹⁹ The Incorporated Society had been involved in a number of initiatives to spearhead the export drive in the British fashion industry, from the *Britain Can Make It* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1946 to the film *Maytime in Mayfair* in 1949.²⁰ The British fashions that the Sadler's Wells ballerinas were



FIGURE 2. Bianca Mosca, evening dress, 1949. Figured silk mix. Bath: Fashion Museum, BATMC I.09.898, Gift of Dame Margot Fonteyn

© Bath and North East Somerset Council, Fashion Museum

taking to the United States for the first tour in 1949 was another measure to actively promote British fashion in America:

London's leading dressmakers will be busy making clothes for London's leading ballerinas. These elegant English made clothes — typical of the best we can do — will be worn by the principal dancers of the Sadler's Wells Company in their forthcoming American tour. These lucky girls — their brains and beauty backed by eleven leading London dressmakers — will act as official ambassadors of fashion to the USA.²¹

The opening night performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* was received with rapturous applause by the American audience, and Margot Fonteyn was the star of the evening. She wore the black evening dress by Bianca Mosca to a reception given for the Sadler's Wells Company later on that evening:

Unimaginable success. It was unlike anything we had ever experienced before [...]. The excitement wasn't over. I put on the tiered, black brocade ball gown given me by Bianca Mosca and, with my arms full of roses, boarded the chartered bus in which the company was rushed, with wailing police siren escort to Gracie Mansion for the Mayor's reception.²²

The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers had also supplied the four ballerinas with travelling clothes:

When the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company leave for the US and Canada in a dollar-making tour the four prima ballerinas will wear travelling outfits given them by ten members of the Incorporated Society. Miss Margot Fonteyn is here making her choice — 'Snuggle', an Irish tweed ensemble. Hardy Amies who designed the outfit looks on.²³

Margot Fonteyn is pictured, wearing a grey tailored suit with a knife-pleat skirt, making her selection. Another account gives a further description of 'Snuggle': 'For Miss Fonteyn, Hardy Amies has designed a short full jacket in black Irish tweed with high pointed collar, wide rounded shoulder and big cuffed sleeves'.²⁴

However, when Margot Fonteyn actually left for New York in late September 1949 she did not appear to be wearing 'Snuggle'. Instead, she chose an ensemble by Michael Sherard (1910–1998), another of the Incorporated Society designers:

When Margot Fonteyn left for New York by air last week with an advance party of the Sadler's Wells Company she was wearing this smart black and white outfit by Michael Sherard, a white reefer lined with black seal Coney which our prima ballerina wore over a black tailored suit.²⁵

Margot Fonteyn seems to have favoured this Sherard outfit as her 'travelling clothes' for the tour. Photographs of the ballerina when she returned to England in December 1949 after a triumphant tour show her wearing this loose-fitting, long-length jacket.²⁶ Many photographs of Margot Fonteyn in the British press at the time of the tour were taken at the bottom of aircraft steps. An outer garment, therefore, rather than an indoor suit such as 'Snuggle', was much more appropriate for the chill of the airfield tarmac. Nonetheless, these photographs and newspaper accounts do suggest that the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers gave Margot Fonteyn two sets of day clothes for the American tour in 1949.

Margot Fonteyn took at least one further suit designed by a member of the Incorporated Society with her when she went to the United States of America in September 1949. However, this suit pre-dated the tour, and was therefore not provided for her as part of this promotional exercise. In at least two photographs taken in America, Margot is wearing the grey worsted suit with the knife-pleat skirt by Hardy Amies (1909–2003) (Figure 3). She wore this for the photo shoot making the selection of 'Snuggle' before the company left for the United States.²⁷ This suit is part of the Fashion Museum collection, and is dated to 1948 (Figure 4).²⁸

Did the American tour in 1949 have the desired effect and both raise the profile of British fashion overseas in the late 1940s and generate exports? Possibly. There are reports that the export of fashion and textiles significantly increased throughout the 1940s.²⁹ From the point of view of the British ballet, too, the tour was a success: an American tour soon became an established part of the company's repertoire. From the point of view of British fashion, it is more difficult to quantify the effect of the Incorporated Society's support of the tour. What we do know, however, is that the 'patronage' scheme was extended for the next American tour to include not only fashion, but also accessories designers, with shoes by Rayne and stockings by Aristoc, for the ballerinas. This would suggest that the exercise had some value, whether from the point of generating sales or of raising awareness of British fashion overseas.

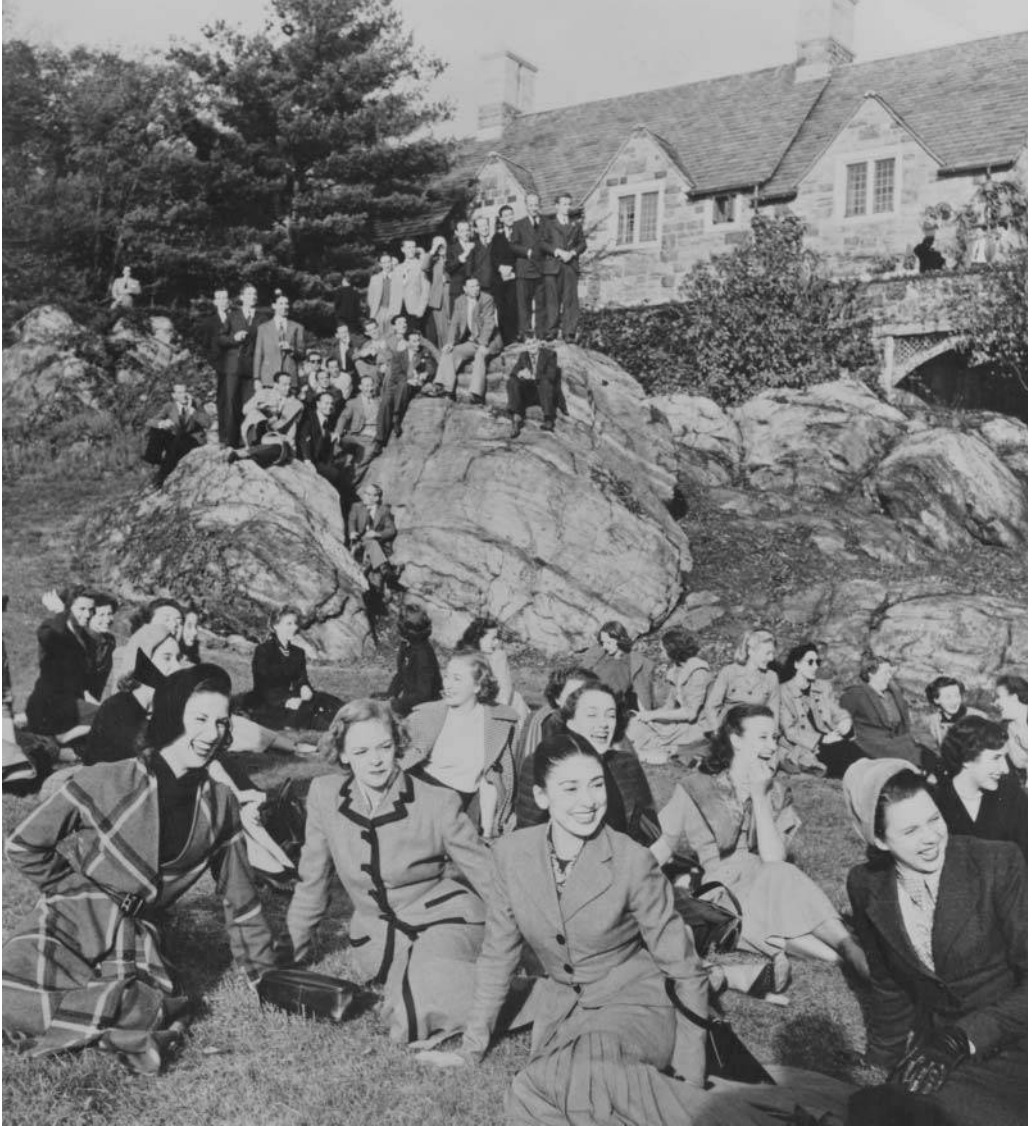


FIGURE 3. Photograph of Sadler's Wells Ballet Company at a picnic at the mansion of New York socialite, J. Alden Talbot, 1949

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CONCLUSION

Throughout the 1940s, when Britain was impoverished, two relatively new organizations, the Vic-Wells/Sadler's Wells ballet and the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, came together in a unique partnership to attempt to generate export sales of British 'goods'. In Margot Fonteyn, the British fashion industry



FIGURE 4. Hardy Amies, suit, 1948. Worsted. Bath: Fashion Museum, BATMC I.24.43 & A, Gift of Dame Margot Fonteyn
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had more than a model, not quite a muse, but without doubt an advocate and an ambassadress for British fashion in a time of nationwide economic uncertainty.

Acknowledgements

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REFERENCES

- ¹The original homes of the company were the Old Vic theatre in south London and the Sadler's Wells theatre in north London. The company became known as the Sadler's Wells ballet in the mid-1940s, and in 1956 the name was changed to The Royal Ballet, when the company was granted a Royal Charter.
- ²Alastair Macaulay, *Margot Fonteyn* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p. 38.
- ³*Tatler*, 29 April 1943, and *Vogue* (UK), 2 June 1944, Theatre Museum Archive (now called The V&A Theatre and Performance Collections).
- ⁴*Vogue* (UK), September 1944, p. 40.
- ⁵The matelot style hat [BATMC I.12.494] was on display in *Maritime Chic* at the National Maritime Museum, London, 2007.
- ⁶Margot Fonteyn, *Autobiography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975), p. 104.
- ⁷*Vogue* (UK), May 1944, pp. 46–47.
- ⁸There is speculation that Margot Fonteyn, run down after the strain of touring throughout the war, left London because of the break-up of her long-standing relationship with Constant Lambert.
- ⁹Margot Fonteyn, *Autobiography* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975), p. 115.
- ¹⁰Brigid Keenan, *Dior in Vogue* (London: Octopus Books Ltd, 1981), Foreword. The suit 'Daisy' [BATMC I.24.100 & A] has been displayed many times at the Fashion Museum/Museum of Costume, Bath.
- ¹¹*Illustrated News*, July 1948, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ¹²There is one skirt [BATMC I.19.151] and one jacket top [BATMC I.13.102] by Christian Dior, which belonged to Margot Fonteyn, in the collection at the Fashion Museum in Bath that look like sample or model garments.
- ¹³The coat 'Goemon' [BATMC I.06.127] was displayed in *Couture: The Golden Age of Paris Couture 1947–1957* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2007. The straw hat [BATMC I.12.285] was displayed in *Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2009.
- ¹⁴There are twenty pieces by Christian Dior and thirteen by Yves Saint Laurent, worn by Margot Fonteyn, in the collection at the Fashion Museum in Bath.
- ¹⁵*The Red Shoes* (1948), directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, became one of the highest-earning British films.
- ¹⁶*Vogue*, October 1949.
- ¹⁷*The Star*, September 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ¹⁸The Bianca Mosca evening dress [BATMC I.09.898] was on display in *Performance to Camera* at the Fashion Museum in Bath, 2008.
- ¹⁹David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945–1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
- ²⁰*Britain Can Make It* was an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1946, organized by the Council of Industrial Design to showcase British goods available for export. The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers designed costumes shown in the film *Maytime in Mayfair*.
- ²¹*The Star*, September 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ²²Fonteyn, *Autobiography*, p. 135.
- ²³*The Daily Graphic*, 10 August 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ²⁴*The Star*, September 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ²⁵*The Evening Standard*, 3 October 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ²⁶Unattributed newspaper cutting, 'They Danced for Dollars', December 1949, Theatre Museum Archive.
- ²⁷A second photograph shows Margot Fonteyn with the American ballerina Nora Kaye, Robert Helpmann and Frederick Ashton in New York wearing the Hardy Amies suit.
- ²⁸*The Sphere*, December 1948, Theatre Museum Archive. The photograph shows Margot Fonteyn wearing the grey Hardy Amies suit. She has her leg in plaster following an injury on stage during a performance of *Don Juan*.
- ²⁹Figures quoted in *Utility Furniture and Fashion 1941–1951* (London: ILEA, 1974) suggest that the export of fashion and textiles brought in £507,000 in 1946 against £98,000 in 1938.

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