

Fashion week

On Wednesday the final curtain came down on the biannual global merry-go-round of New York, London, Milan and Paris Fashion week. The clothes in the 300 or so catwalk collections shown over this four-week period will be in shops from August 2013 until January 2014.

These are the bland facts that underpin the premise of fashion weeks. Show it, make it, sell it, make more. Before the economic depression settled over Europe, its fashion weeks were also about excitement, drama, young designers pushing crazy new ideas and challenging women to express themselves in inventive ways.

But the autumn/winter 2013 collections were not pulling punches, as most brands focused their attention on doing very nice clothes they know their customer will buy, in the best possible way they know how. At Chanel it was all about techno tweeds; at Céline fantastic fluffy coats and knits; Valentino focused on exquisite dresses inspired by Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*; Vuitton's handbags were as luxurious as possible.

For some editors this is not the way forward. "Fashion needs radical concepts, people who are doing new and exciting things," says Sarah Mower, contributing editor of *American Vogue* and the British Fashion Council's ambassador for emerging talent.

For others, the commercial approach is a quiet revolution. "This season has been about designers and brands returning to their core values," says *Grazia's* fashion director Susannah Frankel. "I don't think this is boring. If anything, it gives the customer something she can rely on. It is a backlash against the fastness of recent years. What I saw on the catwalks was individual designers at their most authentic, and that to me is exciting."

Chanel's 'techno tweeds' at Paris fashion week. "In difficult times commercial is good," says Emma Elwick Bates, *British Vogue's* style editor. "From a *Vogue* point of view the autumn/winter season has seen the return of real womanly dressing in a Hitchcockian way; all clavicles and cleavage – lots of breast action. But in essence what we have seen is designers focusing on the greatest hits

and in turn building a desire for a shopping list of classic winter basics. It sounds obvious but next winter will be about a really great coat, and boots."

Indeed the designer's designer, Miuccia Prada, easily the most revered working today (if you don't count Phoebe Philo of Céline) described her collection as "a lot of things I really like".

Hardly revolutionary, but it's not a bad starting point to consider what fashion can be for: namely clothes to be worn and loved.

Paula Reed, the former fashion editor and recently appointed fashion director of Harvey Nichols, has seen the fashion weeks from an entirely new perspective this season. "On a magazine you can talk about ideas – but as a buyer you have to commit to the idea and sell it to a customer. It's a challenge," she says. "London and Paris were the cities with the best ideas, they crackled with energy and excitement. What young London designers can do on a shoestring is aweinspiring, and if you are looking for innovation, Christopher Kane radiates it."

But Reed summarises that for the new season "You'll want 10 coats. But will have to settle for one, and if you haven't got a polo-neck you're stuffed. Polo-necks underpin everything," she says. Street style, though, is playing an increasingly important role in the fashion weeks; the proliferation in street-style blogs, and those fashion eccentrics who dress to the nines in order to be photographed have spawned their own trends and their own labels. "When you get to the showrooms, you see that each collection is offering a bomber jacket, a duffel coat and sweatshirts. It's all about reaching those younger customers," adds Reed.