I created my first dress a mere month ago, but something captured me about the process of hand sewing. It was the same feeling that I had when painting or editing film or complex doodling in my notebook, but the reward of finishing the piece was different. Though the dress I first created was a little ratty, I pushed myself to create another piece for the presentation of it. With a painting, I am usually content to leave a piece in an unfinished state (to my perfectionist standards) and go back to it later. But to create a dress I was unhappy with was sort of like not wanting to claim my work—not wanting to call it *mine*; to put that first dress on a mannequin and call it "done" just felt wrong. So, that night I began to sew. A lot. And I ended with a result I was happy presenting. What I like about a handmade dress is that you can see the time and effort that was put into making one. I was pushing myself, forcing my time and effort to convey the product I wanted. Changing habit is hard, moving from a state of unfocus to focus, hiding to showing up, half-sewn to stitched together and strong. For some reason, sewing is a way I force myself to follow through; and that shows a strength…the credibility I've been hoping to earn by my own standards.

I am drawn to haute couture clothing because of the presentation of the work, and the inner workings behind why I see clothing as a genuine art-form. Haute couture translates from French to "high sewing" and has the meaning of "high fashion," but what makes it different than other clothing is that it is custom fit—not just to your body, but to the artist creating it. It can be a silhouette, tailored, and structured; or it can be billowing, dramatic, and colorful. I am interested in the idea that clothing is a protective layer—not literally, but metaphorically. By altering our protective layer, we can change our skin like a chameleon. Haute couture allows us to alter the perception of our forms and, therefore, our beings.

Haute couture started with French court fashion in the 1850's. France was the place to look to for the newest fashion trends. Charles Fredrick Worth, known as the "father" of haute couture was an Englishman living in Paris and working as a sales assistant in Gagelin Opigez et Cie, a famous fabric store. He convinced his employers to let him open a new department, and by combining his extensive knowledge of fabric and garment construction with his few dressmakers, he soon established himself as the only male dressmaker in Paris. Before Worth, conventional dressmakers would craft with the costumers to design the fabric; they worked only as technicians. Worth created the craft of the dress, and therefore distinguished himself from the rest by being the first to recognize the relationship between fabric and design. In 1858, Worth created his own couture house with a partner named Gustav Bobergh; they were the first to establish a "house style," create a collection of seasonal clothing, and show them on live models. This gained him patronage with Empress Eugenie who was one of the most important fashion icons of the time (and all time).   The fashion trend that pleased Charles Worth the most was called "the aesthetic movement" which was the changing of the silhouette, from the caged hoop skirt to more relaxed dresses worn without corsets. Because of him backing this trend, it took flight. However, when the Franco-Prussian War toppled the Second Empire in 1870, Worth lost his most important client, Empress Eugenie, when she went into exile. He began to lose his notoriety in the fashion world. Paris, however, survived and remains the international center of high fashion.

Haute couture hit its peak in the 1950's as Christian Dior hit the scene with his first collection in 1947. Dior is said to have brought femininity back from the uniform

during the postwar boom. After studying political science and serving in the military, he fell into designing in 1935 by selling sketches in Paris. He was then hired in 1938 by a designer, Robert Piguet. During World War II, he served for the south of France and returned to Paris in 1941 and began working in a much larger design house. After working there for six years, he opened his own house in 1946 and showed his first collection, called "The New Look" in 1947. This collection focused on full shoulders, clinched waists and extremely full skirts. Christian Dior is said to have given Paris not only a new look, but a new outlook as his designs served to restore Paris to the capital of fashion once more by focusing on the femininity of designs and ridding Paris of the years of military and civilian uniforms and the shortages of the war.

Couture today is a dying art. Reaching its peak in the 1950's, what used to be a sedate affair held in a couture salon has become a theatrical extravaganza produced with light and loud music, designed to generate publicity for the designers…a sort of advertisement for the ready to wear. Alexander McQueen made it his mission to change the face of couture once again. A self-proclaimed kick-starter of the 21st century, he was originally deemed "beer-bellied, snaggletoothed, foul-mouthed"—someone who "seemed every inch the cockney thug." But this harsh criticism only brought him on the map. His clothing began to elicit emotions in a way fashion had never seen before, whether it be disturbing or enchanting, you could not leave a McQueen show without feeling something. Suddenly, the theatrical extravaganza of lights and sound became show stopping and gut wrenching narrative. Alexander McQueen is known as a designer who likes to evoke the dark and deconstructed throughout his work, instead of focusing on female vulnerability. This is why he has received so many accolades; because this is the first time that clothes were dark—that distinction changed our perception of the fashion industry. McQueen states, "I want to empower women, I want people to be afraid of the women I dress." This got me thinking. What if I could put my strength on the outside and my vulnerability on the inside to build an article of clothing as full-bodied armor.

This summer, I saw a Jean Paul Gaultier exhibit in the de Young Museum in San Francisco. The exhibition itself included 140 haute couture designs, as well as a dynamic presentation to match. I found myself looking, room after room, studying every garment and taking note of the construction. I studied the build and the weight of things, trying to capture each detail. I felt like I was watching a performance. It had been a summer of shedding my skin, a summer I spent re-defining myself. Gaultier uses his designs to bend gender and explore the body as a sexless object. In one triptych of outfits, he created three nude bodysuits: one with bones, one with muscles, and one with veins. I became enthralled with the ambiguity of the designs and was particularly drawn to the attention to detail which I had never seen on clothing before. Upon looking further into his interviews on the subject, I found this quote: "You know you can do many things with the clothing, so through that, the importance of clothes is not only to cover yourself—to make you more warm or whatever—it's that, but it's also not only a protection, but at the same time physical and also mental." This jogged my personal interest; for me, clothing has always been a structure in which I could create the perfect presentation, the perfect façade to appear however I choose to alter myself. Clothing is a filter, the lens of perception in which we view strangers on the street; clothing is society's idea of beautiful. Fashion is a place where we recreate ourselves to face our daily battle—throw on our garments and our face-paint and walk into our lifestyle!

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