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A Woman's Rodeo, Designed by Dior

By Elizabeth Paton

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CHANTILLY, France — The sky was black. Clouds growled overhead. High winds ripped through multicolored ribbons strung up high above the Great Stables of the Domaine de Chantilly. Something spectacular was coming.

The Dior Cruise show was about to begin.

"The weather, oh god, what will happen with the weather," Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior's artistic director for women's wear, said as she paced nervously backstage Friday night. "I can't go outside, I can't look. I am too worried now about what I might see."

Just moments before the first models hit the circular, open-air set the rain arrived, splattering the floorboards of the catwalk and soaking many of the 700 guests who had been waiting for over an hour in their finery. Suddenly eight white horses pounded into the ring, each ridden sidesaddle by a Mexican escaramuza wearing an embroidered black-and-white dress.

Sporting wide-brimmed hats and thick leather Dior emblazoned belts, the daredevils performed crisscross maneuvers at breakneck pace as torrents of water thundered down around them. The crowd whooped. The Diorodeo had begun.

Ms. Chiuri said she had been particularly inspired the season by the escaramuzas because they were women who refused to compromise their femininity while working in a male-dominated arena. It was a creative evolution of her approach to the house, which attempts to use fashion to explore what it means to be an empowered woman today.

Dozens of models with sleek, mane-like ponytails strode down the rain-soaked runway.
Thibault Camus/Associated Press

"Sometimes, women think that to make it in a man's world, then they have to change themselves somehow in order to fit in," she said. "The escaramuzas show that doesn't always have to be true. Usually, the female role in rodeo culture is to be there to support their husbands and sons. But these are women who have decided they want to do it themselves."

So does Ms. Chiuri. For inspiration, she also looked to the Adelitas, female soldiers who fought in the Mexican revolution of 1910-20 and favored red lips, belted waist coats, layered silver jewelry and voluminous embroidered skirts atop starched petticoat ruffles.

Dozens of models with sleek, mane-like ponytails strode down the rain-soaked runway in cotton lace gowns with cinched waists and extravagantly full skirts, paired with fitted jackets, leather saddlebags and lace-up rubber rain boots. Gowns were threaded with intricate embroidery, either strapless with metallic threads of gold or silver, or with puffed sleeves and kaleidoscopic combinations of pinks, reds and purples. Collared jackets and cloudlike skirts — many worn with a crisp white shirt — were created from toile de Jouy, with a wild animal lurking along the hemlines.

Aside from its stables, Chantilly is also known for its lace production, and lashings appeared throughout the collection as graphic inlays, dense ruffles and skirt pleats. Also ubiquitous were slim black men's ties, worn with tan canvas trouser suits, pleated or tiered flamenco skirts, and

one all-white skirt and shirt combination, tucked into a leather corset belt with exaggerated curves.

The clothes were beautiful — perhaps some of Ms. Chiuri's most appealing to date — with the sort of detail and extensive range required to keep a cruise collection fizzing for the four to five months it remains in stores. By the end, the only cloud that remained over the event was the jarring exit of Paris Jackson, who had pranced in puddles barefoot for the photographers before the show, but stalked out in a rage as the first model made her way down the runway.

Yet as guests made their way to a champagne-soaked after-party Ms. Chiuri looked downcast. It is true the elements well and truly rained on her parade. But for all the preshow drama and wet weather, it was her most galloping collection to date. Here's hoping she will get back in the saddle soon.