





CAPTURING COUTURE

The artist behind our exclusive cover, **David Downton**, has drawn the world's best fashion and top models for 21 years

Words **Marianka Swain**

"It was the thrill of making a mark: black crayon on white," recalls fashion illustrator David Downton. "Growing up in rural Kent, [England,] I always had that skill of translating what I saw onto paper, but I had no idea it was anything special. I rather liked that it didn't involve other people or going somewhere."

Now, there's plenty of both these aspects to his job, but Downton is grateful for the balance he's able to strike. "Everybody has two lives – work and home – and in my case it's more exaggerated: East Sussex, or a full-on week of couture commissions and parties." Model Carmen Dell'Orefice put it wonderfully, he says: "I live quietly between events!"

As an illustrator, Downton was doing "everything from cookbooks to romantic fiction", when he got a call asking if he wanted to go to Paris for couture. "Up to that point there wasn't much shape to my work; fashion changed everything."

Downton wasn't too intimidated: "I was experienced – I knew how to meet a deadline. But starting with

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"I fell in love with couture – it's been 21 years, 42 seasons and I've never missed one. Ready-to-wear is the business side, while couture is the dream. It's not clothes so much as passion, heritage, artistry and theatre," he explains.

Downton had his first solo exhibition in 1998, two years after his couture debut. "Working with the *Financial Times*, I had extraordinary access: fittings with John Galliano, Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Christian Lacroix," he says.

"[Model] Marie Helvin came to the exhibition, and I found myself asking if I could draw her. Suddenly this world of portraiture opened up: she made a postcard of my drawing and sent it to Jerry Hall, Iman, Joan Collins, Elizabeth Hurley, saying I should draw them, and they all said yes!



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“Illustration is very individual, whereas a photo shoot involves dozens of people. I’m capturing that moment and the story around it; not being specific, but distilling. I’ve just drawn Anjelica Huston and Marisa Berenson – of course, I’m aware of the imagery they’ve created over the years, but it’s equally about this one encounter.

“I’m a travelling minstrel: I usually go to them, taking just half a dozen very soft Conté pencils and a big sketchbook. I absorb as much as possible – that’s the raw material – and then go home and redraft. The person dictates what’s important.”

Downton has recently rediscovered charcoal; its “sharpness and softness, sweep and smudginess” suits his “controlled spontaneity. Often people talk about what I’ve eliminated, or think I’ve done a drawing very quickly. Actually each one is a battle, but should look effortless.” He didn’t think he had a “style” until he saw others attempting it, and believes it’s really about “your personal response”.



David Downton’s “reports from shows” have appeared in the likes of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*

Downton’s style icons include renowned Italian editor Anna Piaggi. “She was her own work of art – she made everyone else look underdressed. In contrast, Catherine Baba has perfect pared-down French style. I love how Julian Schnabel wears a dressing gown to events! And Picasso had the greatest male style of all.”

Among his sitters, he cites “my great friend Erin O’Connor, and Dita Von Teese – she’s the best architect of that modern-as-vintage glamour, and she dresses the same at home; it’s not for me or you, but for herself.”

Downton is currently artist-in-residence at Claridge’s, which has “a very special atmosphere. We outgrew the original space, so we’re rehangng portraits this autumn.” He’s also opening an online store, with his illustrations adorning stationery, and producing a limited-edition book celebrating his 21 years in couture. As for who’s still on his portraiture wish list? “I’m dying to draw Tilda Swinton!” daviddownton.com