

KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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8.2 Women's haute couture and the modernization of fashion. Art, marketing and visual culture in the early twentieth century

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A b s t r a c t

Drawing on a tactic of rapprochement with art, French couture, presenting itself as a new type of avant-garde, promoted a transformation of women's fashion in the early twentieth century, which affected the dressing of users in different parts of the world. This relationship between fashion, art and clothing renewal was successfully operated by the women of the haute couture, who obtained great professional recognition at the time. The purpose of this reflection is to discuss aspects of this change, having as reference some exemplary cases, of male stylists and female stylists, who had a remarkable performance in this period.

Keywords: *Women's Haute Couture, modernization of fashion, art and fashion, marketing and visual culture, gender.*



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1. French haute couture

Until the middle of the 19th Century, the influence of French high fashion was very slight and restricted and mainly disseminated by its customers, and standardized pictures in sales catalogues or fashion magazines which until then were of a literary nature (Mallarme and Wilde, 1997). However, at the beginning of the 20th Century, with the modernization of transport systems and means of communication, there was a considerable expansion of channels for spreading fashion which was accompanied by the parallel development of the French fashion industry.

Following these trends in the field of fashion at the beginning of the 20th Century, a new kind of highly successful entrepreneur and professional emerged – the fashion designer. Distinct from seamstresses and tailors who remain tied to their workshops, they emerged as new arbiters of taste and managers of the fashion industry. While working at the desks of their offices, they made key decisions about style and how to sell the goods which were manufactured by employees who operated in the workshops of their companies. In 1911, the fashion designers were exporting 65% (and taking orders for 15%) of the total volume of French exports (Simon, 1931), and emerged as new capitalist millionaires who enjoyed a social status equivalent to that of bankers and other industrialists.

This new type of professional that appeared, achieved an unprecedented position of social and economic prestige among a group of women originating from the petty bourgeoisie and working class at a time, when the condition of women confined them to their home, and they were subject to political and professional restrictions. Unlike the situation in other more established sectors – such as the plastic arts (Trasforini, 2009), politics and the liberal professions – there was a predominance of women at the forefront of the fashion industry in the first decades of the 20th Century since they surpassed their male counterparts in terms of economic and social recognition (Bueno, 2012). In a period characterized by radical social change, the presence of professional fashion designers was linked to the mastery of two new skills: 1) the capacity to understand the nature of the requirements for innovation and the prospects of attracting a new clientele; 2) a talent for finding one's way in the complex world of the new visual culture and making use of it to design one's own work and give legitimacy to one's authority as a creator.

2. Fashion and gender

When analyzing *haute couture* fashion in the first half of the 20th Century, the question of gender emerges as a crucial explanatory factor since the relationship between male and female costume-designers is an essential feature for understanding the changes that took place in that period. The international expansion of French *haute couture* cannot be separated from the modernization of women's fashions. Although there were radical changes in male garments at the end of the 18th Century as the middle-classes became increasingly more urbanized, in France women's clothes remained tied to the conventions of the "*ancien regime*". This anachronism was accentuated even further in the second half of the century when the segregation of the genders in the sphere of cultural appearances plunged depths never seen before. (Harvey, 1995, Souza, 1987).

Let us address the question of fashion and gender as a case in point, by following the careers of female *haute couture* businesswomen. They played a key role in making the necessary adjustments for modernizing the female clothing industry. This consolidation resulted in a partial revolution within the field of fashion and enabled them to achieve an unprecedented position of social and professional prestige in the social sector where operation was controlled. They produced a kind of fashion suited to wealthy, modern women, as was imagined by women from poor backgrounds or *self-made women* who had achieved economic and social success through their own efforts (Crane, 2000; Picon, 2002; Kirke, 1997; Macrell, 1992; Sirop, 1989).

They adapted experiences taken from their personal lives as women and workers, in a process that involved transposing them as a means of renewing the fashion of the elite (Crane, 2000). In doing this, they brought practices and styles to the world of fashion that were inspired by the everyday lives of female employees in general, and the working class in particular. Thus they advocated a new lifestyle in the form of an aesthetic innovation that transformed personal styles and experiences into social experiences.

Through the act of wearing clothes, women altered the manner in which they were regarded and the way they were able to shape their own physical identity. They took advantage of the seasonal fluctuations (that are typical of the fashion system and until then had been random) to introduce definitive changes in the culture of appearances that affect both wealthy women and those from the lower classes. What had seemed to be only a trend became a break with convention and a revolution in female clothing. The symbolic importance of fashion and haute couture in particular, in creating new styles that reflected the changes in the role of women in the first decades of the 20th Century, is still an area that has not been explored to any great extent by gender studies, which generally concentrate on negative factors.

With the growth of urban patterns of living of an ever-increasing intensity, life-styles have been transformed and made female fashions an aberration that needs to be corrected as a matter of urgency. Several answers to this problem have been made, including those of artists, male fashion designers and women themselves. The suggestion made by the women was the most successful because it addressed three requirements: i) it met the expectations of the customers, ii) it responded to the need to restructure the fashion industry and expand the sector and iii) it was in tune with the readjustments that took place in the domain of the visual arts, architecture and design. The simplification of clothing allowed the public to be broadened in a significant way. The research carried out by the sociologist Philippe Simon, in the archives of the *Chambre Syndical* [Trade Association for Haute Couture] in 1930, makes clear that it was the simplification of the clothes that allowed them to be reproduced in foreign companies and was responsible for the international expansion of the *haute couture* business (Simon, 1931). In the 1920s, the most commercially successful fashion houses, such as those run by Jeanne Lavin and Gabrielle Chanel, usually concentrated on two fashion lines in their collection – more sophisticated clothes for private customers and clothes of a simple kind which catered for the needs of foreign purchasers (Garnier, 1987).

Let us examine the sector in the period 1900-1939 and trace the evolving pattern of women by mentioning some particular cases: Jeanne Paquin (1869-1936), Jeanne Lanvin (1866-1946), Gabrielle Chanel (1883-1971) and Madeline Vionnet (1876-1975). The choice of these people was made in the light of

the importance of their practices and companies in establishing a field of international fashion in the first decades of the 20th Century. Paquin paved the way through his first successful attempts to modernize fashion, even during an aristocratic and conservative period, by introducing dresses such as the *desabille* and First Empire clothes which began to free the female body from the crinoline, bustles and corsets which constrained any possible movement. Chanel and Vionnet were linked to a more radical and avant-garde type of fashion which emerged during the First World War and gave priority to functional features by breaking away from an “ornamental culture”. Lanvin operated somewhere between the two trends but always sought to combine a sophisticated outline with the life-style of the modern woman.

3. Ornaments and ostentation in the haute couture of the 19th Century

Art nouveau fashion was an expression of ornamental culture and the life-style of aristocratic women. Thus it was a class fashion supported by a society that was characterized by strictly defined social class barriers both in the physical and social sense.

Charles Frederick Worth, a pioneer in the introduction of haute couture, defined the basic principles of female fashion in the latter half of the 19th Century (Marly, 1990). Inspired by the “strategies of distinction” that characterized the royal courts of 17th Century (Elias, 1983), he sought to strengthen the waning power of the dominant French aristocracy by means of “appearance”. However, he made a misogynistic interpretation of aristocratic fashion which, by adopting a number of clichés, satisfied the social whims of the bourgeois ‘arrivistes’. He developed a style which was later dubbed *Tapissier*, [upholstered]. This involved sculpting the female body by draping it with overlapping materials, ornaments, lace and trimmings, brocade and fringes in a way that allowed the fashion to be displayed over the width and height of the torso region in an inspired medley of eclectic designs.

Decoration, which until then had been regarded as a feature of appropriateness and propriety (Gombrich, 2004), reached extreme levels of lavishness and explicit ostentation as a means of turning women into ornamental objects for men. At the same time, these female garments, which restricted the movements of those who wore them in an unprecedented way, became the ideal symbolic expression of the idle classes (Veblen, 1899). The *haute couture* fashion houses catered for the official ceremonial functions of the European courts and *salons* but their main clients were the wealthy visitors from North and South America. Hence, a change in the lifestyle of the customers from America had direct repercussions on the business of French fashion.

4. The new world of fashion

At the end of the first decade of the 20th Century, a new elite entered the international stage, bolstered by economic capital, consumer practices and a taste for innovation. This social class began to occupy the space formerly allotted to the aristocracy, the legitimacy of which was grounded on tradition (Rouvillois, 2008; Davis, 2006). There were increasing numbers of millionaire *nouveau riche* from different parts of the world who increasingly congregated in Paris, where they boosted the artistic and cultural life, expanded the market

for luxury goods and introduced significant changes to the prevailing patterns of taste. Prominent among the wealthy of the new world were the Americans and in particular, the South Americans.

Between 1910 and 1914 a new fashion model for women was found in the Parisian scene which was distinguished by making the body more lively and modeled on sports activities and ballroom dancing. Running counter to the immobility and sense of confinement that characterized the women of the aristocracy, North-American dancers such as Isadora Duncan and Irene Castle, and the interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe, began to reinvent themselves in visual terms and served as an inspiration for many *haute couture* fashion houses by modernizing female fashion. They broke with the convention of ornamental and ostentatious French fashion and began to be emulated as a benchmark of innovation (Simon, 1931), by dominating the market and industrial world of fashion until the beginning of the Second World War when Paris was occupied by the Germans.

With regard to gender, the social changes in the world of the international elites are caused by analogous alterations in life-style that are linked to changes in those who comprise the elites, through a process of social distinction. Before anything else, stress should be laid on the importance of the role played by the middle-class and the influence of money in forming this group. In the next section, we take note of the changes in the dynamics of the class system with regard to social distinction and trace the evolution of a mundane form of snobbery which was modelled on a particular social group (the aristocracy), and led to a snobbery based on fashion, aesthetic principles and innovative lifestyles (Rouvillois, 2008). There were also changes in the age of the leading figures in this new world scene. While in the aristocratic culture which was dominated by conventions, emphasis was laid on prestige and the respectability of an older generation, in the fashion culture that was established, the driving-force in society was audacity and youth. This change was also reflected in the avant-garde art market and the modernization of female fashion in the French haute couture. At the beginning of the 20th Century, there was already a movement in high fashion to devise strategies to meet the constant demand for renewal and modernization. These strategies can be divided into two key groups: those formulated by men that offered temporary solutions; and those planned by women which had more long-lasting effects on the evolution of female clothing.

5. Female dressmakers and the modernization of fashion

From the end of the 19th Century, there began to be strong criticisms of the anachronism of female fashion and its incompatibility with modern life. However, these reactions did not resonate at the time and were not enough to encourage any intervention to be made in the dominant culture of female clothing. In the first place, this was because they emerged as strategies among a group of people who had little influence or decision-making powers – generally upper-middle class women linked to the Suffragette Movement. Added to this, it was because they were outside the fashion system where the changes were centered on change in the way of wearing garments.

The modernization of clothing became a feasible proposition in *haute couture* for three reasons: 1) there arose a demand for it among a large section

of the clientele, 2) it became a matter of debate among key sectors of society including doctors, hygienists, architects and avant-garde artists; and 3) within the realm of *haute couture*, there was a group of professionals who were able to put it into effect - namely the female fashion designers. What ensured the success of their undertaking was not the practice of handicraft (since most of them did not have these skills), but their familiarity with the inner world of luxury goods and their knowledge of what the French sociologist Bourdieu called the "habitus" of the clientele and a sophisticated fashion culture (Bourdieu, 1979). Thus an *avant-garde* innovative movement was introduced which broke down barriers of gender while preserving the distinctions between the classes in this new framework.

Among the examples chosen here, it is worth drawing attention to two different action strategies which correspond to two distinct periods in the modernization of fashion. The first which was more of an intuitive and modest undertaking, was carried out by Jeanne Paquin and Jeanne Lanvin in the period 1900-14. Gabrielle Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet played a more striking and calculated role and achieved more radical effects during the more drawn out period of renewal from 1913 to 1939. However, the most extreme radical departures took place between 1913 and 1925.

Jeanne Paquin and Jeanne Lanvin removed the excessive amount of ornaments and gradually dispensed with features that restrict movement such as the corset. They sought some inspiration in the "French Empire" style, which was responsible for a considerable modernization of French clothing soon after the French Revolution. However, many of the ideas were taken from everyday experiences and observations with regard to the effect of ongoing changes on current life-styles. Paquin took himself as a benchmark when putting the changes into effect, while Lanvin used his daughter as a model. Both were obsessed by the innovative ways of dressing women which could be found in the elegant French salons. The kind of reception accorded to their creations, as well as those of other female costume designers, forced their male counterparts to quickly renew their own collections.

6. Male fashion designers when faced with the modernization of fashion

French fashion designers like Paul Poiret (1879-1944) and Jacques Doucet (1853-1929), who had an "ornamental" conception of women and female fashion, believed that designs in clothing were the result of artistic movements. Coming from different generations, although close friends, both were great art collectors and became costume designers because of the failure of their ambition to be artists. Doucet, who was a collector of paintings, furniture and decorative objects from the 18th Century, was guided in his decisions about fashion by the same rococo atmosphere that permeated his collections, in which a romantic style was enhanced by a profusion of lacework and delicate embroidery (Chapon, 1984). His clothes at the turn of the century, were equally successful among those who lived in the *demi-monde*, actresses from the theatre and socialites. It has been noted that the clothes of Doucet had the power to make respectable women worldly and turn the wives of military officers into glamorous courtesans. In 1912, under the influence of Poiret, he sold his collection of antiques, changed the way his house was decorated and then bought modernist works of art and furniture. However, he kept the same

atmosphere of the 18th Century in his fashion collections. From 1910 onwards, he was compelled to adapt his clothes designs to a more modern outline. Jacques Doucet found a solution to this problem by employing Madelaine Vionnet as a stylist; she was then known for her audacious ideas which had been put into effect in the Maison Callot Souers.

Paul Poiret saw himself as an artist who created clothes as works of art (Koda, 2007; Troy, 2002; Palmer White, 1986). From the beginning of the century, he had taken note of the ongoing changes taking place. However, in his interpretation of them, aesthetic questions were given priority – to the detriment of those regarding life-styles. He thought as an artist and not as a stylist. In his view, women should preserve and simply renew the ornamental role they had exercised until then. Innovation was able to replace ostentation through audacity and originality. Poiret's modern woman was distinguished by the originality and daring of her *avant-garde* garments. The purpose of her extravagant attempts to break with all the aesthetic conventions in force was to make an impact and scandalize people. Functionality and ordinary women were not of the slightest importance. His main clientele was made up of *avant-garde* artists and millionaires. Although he managed to capture the interest of the press media he completely lacked a pragmatic approach, and thus failed to spread his ideas about style to the public; in fact he seemed to be in opposition to current public trends. Denise Poiret, his wife and leading model in 1911 and 1912, had to abandon the walkways of Paris when her baggy trousers and oriental turbans led to passersby attacking her.

7. The successful strategy of women

Diametrically opposed to this, each of the stylists mentioned above in her own distinct manner, based her creations on two guiding principles: respect for the body and an awareness of the requirements of the life-style in the modern world. The center of fashion was no longer the garment but the person who wore it.

Paquin and Lanvin are also well known for their art collections, particularly their Impressionist paintings. However, the managers of the manufacturing companies supplying goods to the fashion houses were more concerned with following the changes in the life-styles of the women. Those who watched the changes in the streets automatically avoided the kind of extravagant items that could hamper the movements of the customers. In this way they were able to sanction striking forms of modernization in fashion without completely breaking away from conventional styles. In the first decades of the 20th Century, most women over the age of 30 had a body that was deformed as a result of having to wear a corset and for this reason were unable to do without it. Paquin, Lanvin and other innovative stylists in the period 1900-1910, took account of this fact when they gradually introduced changes in the outline of women. A common strategy among them was to replace the traditional corset with more comfortable elastic straps.

Paul Poiret on the same occasion eliminated the accessory overnight, creating clothes that could only be worn by slim young women. For this reason, these dresses were criticized and attracted sarcastic comments from middle-class women, and the women's magazines in France, where they were the targets of caricature.



Figure 8.2.1 - Caricature about Paul Poiret's maison

Source: *La Grande Revue*, may, 1909.

8. Fashion and the War

Gabrielle Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet took more radical measures and completely broke away from the conventional patterns of fashion that had existed until then. They shifted away from the “axis of innovation” that sought to provide ornamental designs for a fashionable cut, and as a result managed to bring about a partial revolution within the field of *haute couture*. From that time onwards, the body and lifestyles began to determine the style of the clothes – the opposite of what had previously been the case. Unlike Paquin and Lanvin, Chanel and Vionnet created their own collections and for this reason were able to make structural changes. Both kept a watchful eye on what occurred in the streets and on social events and then used fashion as a basis to recreate the styles of wealthy women’s dresses.

The inspiration of Chanel was men’s fashion which was based on the cut and the quality of the fabric. From the beginning of the first decade of the 20th Century, she built up her own wardrobe by adapting men’s clothes. After 1914 she designed her first collections which were well received and appeared in the North American magazines (*Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*) but were deliberately ignored or treated with sarcasm by the French magazines.

The First World War buried the life-style of *La Belle Époque* and paved the way for the development of a new culture of fashion. This was a challenge that Chanel and Vionnet managed to rise to. They blurred the barriers between the sexes and in the advertisements that they produced, they sought to emphasize this fact by combining innovation and gender issues. They created a fashion that was easier to reproduce and was hence more “democratic”. However, by carrying on with the luxury goods sector, they maintained the barriers between the social classes in other areas, although new factors such as the cutting, fabric and finishing’s, made their work more nuanced.

9. Marketing fashion and visual culture

Despite their social origins, all these women experienced economic hardship in their childhood and began to work in activities linked to fashion when they were very young. Almost all of them were given training within the most reputable fashion houses selling luxury goods, where they had the opportunity to acquire a considerable understanding of culture, a refined taste, and a deep knowledge of the processes involved in the creation of fashion, as well as an understanding of the life-styles of the elite. They regarded the relationship between fashion and the arts as a key factor, since it was able to confer prestige on the figure of the costume-designer and give symbolic legitimacy to the fashion industry. They attempted to encourage the more renowned visual artists to plan their ideas and devise advertising strategies that could combine innovation in fashion with innovation in art.

The Paquin Fashion House was the first business to make a serious attempt to bring about a renewal of fashion by finding solutions of a modest kind through more pragmatic and peripheral measures. In other words, they reduced the excessive amount of material and ornaments and freed women from the constraints to their movement imposed by corsets. They also sought inspiration in the first empire style, which was responsible for a considerable modernization of female clothing soon after the French Revolution. Jeanne Paquin used herself as a benchmark for the transformations she put into effect. But she was also inspired by the innovative styles that could be found in the elegant French milieu, many worn by North-Americans¹⁹⁴.

In 1907, when launching her "Empire" dress, Jeanne Paquin published a double-page advertisement in *Les Modes* magazine which reproduced a painting by Henri Gervex (1852-1929), an academic artist who achieved wide social and institutional recognition and who chose as his subject an afternoon in the salons of the Paquin Fashion House.



Figure 8.2.2 - Henri Gervex, *Paquin à cinq heures*

Source: *Les Modes*, april, 1907.

194 I should particularly like to mention three who exerted a strong influence on the milieu of Paris between 1906 and 1914. The socialite Rita Lydig (1875-1929), who lived in Paris, designed her own clothes and commissioned them to be carried out in the haute couture houses. Elsie Wolff (1895-1950), a North-American actress, fashion reporter for Harper's Bazaar and the precursor of interior design in the United States. And finally, Irene Castle (1893-1916), who together with her husband Vernon, is considered to be among the people who introduced ballroom dancing into Paris and the United States.

The costume-designer featured prominently in the center of the work carrying her new model in the midst of her clientele who were dressed in a more conservative manner. In 1924, Madeleine Vionnet made use of the fashion magazine *Gazette Du Bon Ton* [Journal of Good Taste] to publicize her summer collection. This had been commissioned by the Italian futurist Ernest Thyah (1893-1959) who was at that time responsible for the visual programming of the brand. This was a step towards showing a fashion parade of her collection in her fashion house in Biarritz.

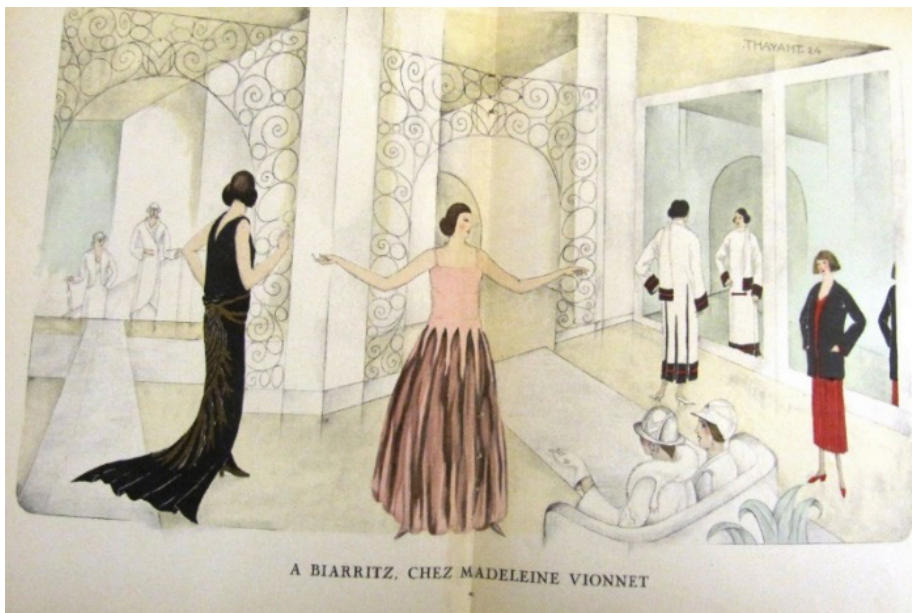


Figure 8.2.3 - Ernest Thyath. A Biarritz chez Madeleine Vionnet
Source: *Gazette du Bon du Ton*, 1924.

Between 1911 and 1912 Paul Nadar revamped the photography of fashion in the pages of *Les Modes*, with more spontaneous images and narratives which were especially created for Jeanne Lanvin. This was so that she could publicize a line of fashion for children and teenagers, inspired by her daughter. In 1916, the graphic artist, Paul Iribe (1883-1935), designed the logo of the Fashion House which included a photo taken in 1907 of Madame Lanvin and her daughter wearing ball gowns.



Figure 8.2.4 - Paul Iribe, Advertising Maison Lanvin,
Source: *Vogue Paris* 1923.

After 1914, several cartoons highlighting the innovative style of Chanel and signed by Sem (Georges Goursat, 1863-1934), a French artist renowned as a caricaturist in *La Belle Epoque*, appeared in the French press. This was a positive payback for the business of the stylist who contracted the cartoonist in 1923 to produce images to advertise her first perfume, Chanel No.5.



Figure 8.2.5 - Sem, advertising Chanel No. 5

Source: De La Haye, Tobin, 1994.

In the years between the two World Wars there was an even greater expansion of French *haute couture* in which female stylists predominated much more than in the previous period. The case of female costume designers is an example of upward mobility in every social sphere which began by establishing fashion as a new cultural and aesthetic field and which from the beginning of the 20th Century, brought France considerable financial dividends.

The changes in haute couture rapidly took place through a process of modernity and reflexivity (Giddens, 1999). First of all, some designers introduced a number of innovations inspired by a wide range of sources such as the arts, history and also the streets. The successful strategies in the fashion market were soon being emulated by other costume designers who then went out in the streets where they became popular. As the German sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out, the basis for fashion dynamics is the imitation-distinction relationship. As a result, new styles quickly emerged in the next collections that replaced the previous ones. These quickly became popular but were shortly afterwards overtaken by others – in other words, they were soon out of fashion.

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Fashion Magazines

Gazette du Bon-Ton (1912-1925)

La grande revue (1909)

Les Modes (1901- 1919)

Vogues Paris (1920-1939)