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# French Fashion during the First World War

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The First World War is a critical period for fashion history; it was during these years that fashion moved into the modern era. Fashion was closely linked with extensive involvement of women in the war economy. Out of practical necessity, women became emancipated from nineteenth century fashion. Major changes in everyday life produced major changes in clothes (particularly their construction): the end of the corset, new hemlines, and widespread adoption of the tailored suit. Nevertheless, the scarcity of textile industry supplies for civilian consumption was so influential that we may ask, "how could fashion resist?" In fact, I hypothesize that fashion's strength during the war was in being creative enough to build new trends out of these constraints. The mainstay of dynamic forces carrying out changes in clothes, come what may, is not the only paradox of war fashion. Women's emancipation and the corresponding changes in clothes took place in a traditionally conservative wartime context. This explains the ambiguities surrounding the discourse on dress, the fashion business, and the importance of fashion during the war, making the history of fashion during the First World War as emotional a subject as the relationship between battlefront and home front.

The First World War years remain a little-explored period of fashion history. Although this may seem a paradoxical subject, the lack of interest is all the more surprising given that it was during this period that fashion moved into the modern era.

First World War fashion is closely linked to the extensive involvement of women in the war economy. Out of practical necessity, women became emancipated from nineteenth-century fashion. Major changes in everyday life produced major changes in clothes, particularly in their construction. To an extent, the war accelerated the widespread adoption of dress innovations already introduced by progressive designers and adopted by the upper-classes. This process has kept alive the myth of fashion's role in breaking down social barriers. However, this would be an

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over-simple theory for clothes changes. Fashion during the war built up a specific system with new actors such as Gabrielle Chanel, and new ways of circulation that had less to do with social status than with a need for greater functionality and economy in clothing.

Nevertheless, the scarcity of supply within the textile industry for civilian consumption had such an influence that we may raise the question of "non-fashionable" changes in dress during the war (as happens for regional costumes, for instance). In fact, I believe that the strength of fashion during the war is to be creative enough to build new trends out of these constraints.

The permanence of dynamic forces that produce changes in clothes come what may is not the only paradox of fashion during the war. Women's emancipation and the corresponding changes in clothes took place in a traditionally conservative context: wartime. This situation explains the ambiguities surrounding the discourse on dress, the fashion business, and the importance of fashion during the war. For these reasons, the subject of the history of fashion during the First World War is as emotional a subject as the relationship between battlefront and home front.

#### The Emergence of a New Silhouette

During the First World War, fashion underwent drastic changes that led to the emergence of the contemporary silhouette we still know. Almost overnight, fashion magazines rejected the pre-1914 styles as incoherent, exaggerated, ridiculous, and so on. Fashion should be rational, practical, and simple; it should return to French good taste: classical. The major development that became apparent was not a mere change in trends but a thoroughly different lifestyle reflected in clothing. Comparing pre-1914 and post-1918 looks reveals the magnitude of these changes.

Women's Expectations and Their Influence on Clothing. The constraints introduced by wartime on women's everyday lives bring about changes in dress code, construction of clothes, as well as their spread throughout society. The three main consequences of these emerging expectations were the end of the corset, a new hemline, and adoption of the suit as women's uniform on the home front. Such changes were in keeping with women's longing for more comfort, healthier outfits, and an easier-to-wear approach to clothing.

The omnipresent and emblematic nurse icon embodies these developments. A nurse's uniform must allow her to move freely and be easy to wash. Fashion magazines provided advice and recommendations regarding how to make such outfits.

Clearly, high society "ladies" will order their uniforms from the best Couture houses as evidenced by this Jeanne Lanvin creation with redcross armband.<sup>1</sup> However, this demand for freedom of movement, comfort, and simple lines runs through all social classes, and it would have an overwhelming influence on fashion henceforth.

In testimony gathered by The Imperial War Museum for a temporary exhibition devoted to Women and War, nurses recalled how they decided to cut off their cumbersome and unhygienic trailing skirts despite their obligation to respect the imposed uniform. "We are going to cut them off at the length we want so that they can't make us let the hems down."<sup>2</sup>

Even before the war, the medical profession denounced long trains as unhygienic. In the pre-1914 period, dress lengths made it necessary for women to elegantly tuck up their skirts. With the necessity of being always on the move, of taking the tram, the subway, and so forth, women found them increasingly uncomfortable to wear.

Following the interruption of the 1914 autumn-winter season, fashion came back in the spring of 1915 with wide yet drastically shortened skirts which reveal ankles tightly encased in buttoned or laced half boots. These flared skirts were often double layered to compensate for the length. The bell shaped skirts, favored by Jeanne Lanvin, were named "war crinolines."

The demand for freedom of movement also led to the end of the corset that had remained the rule despite the criticism of hygienists, the demonstrations of suffragists, and the attempts of some designers. The exaggerated S-bend shape resulting from the tyranny of the corset, with protruding chest and strangled waist remained triumphant.<sup>3</sup> As evidence consider either the department store undergarment section catalogues or the pre-1914 advertising campaigns in fashion magazines for summer collections of corsets that stay fresh in all temperatures! The increasing popularity of outdoor activities had already introduced a more relaxed way of dressing, but it was only with the war and its upsetting of everyday life that the corset really fell out of fashion. With women's massive involvement during the First World War, how could they have cared for the wounded, worked in factories, driven trams, or cultivated the soil, while confined in a corset? Through the pages of magazines, we can see how advertising for the first bra progressively takes the place of that for the corset.

The perfect war uniform for women is the suit. It comes from leisurewear, and the taste for outdoor activities, but wearing a suit is also a

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Fountain and Laurie Milner, "Women at War, Voices from the Twentieth Century from the Imperial War Museum," Ruby Ord's interview, 35-36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Model kept at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Jean Cocteau in a humoristic tone describes in almost military terms the Belle Époque women's undergarments: "Armures, cuirasses, corsets, collerettes de perles... Penser déshabiller l'une de ces dames était une entreprise difficile qu'il convenait d'organiser d'avance, comme s'il se fût agi d'un déménagement."

political symbol for the suffragists struggling for the vote for women. With the war, it becomes the essential element of the feminine wardrobe. Wearing a suit is a way to simplify rigid dress codes because it can be adapted to every event of the day: shopping in the morning, strolling during the afternoon, and for teatime the only thing you have to do is to take off the jacket to reveal a nice blouse. With the same aim for simplification, another version of the suit features a formal dress worn under a low-jacket, which one takes off to be suitably attired for dinner. Frequent traveling, for the upper-classes heading for their holiday resort, and for all those fleeing the bombing of Paris, also explain the success of the suit.

The changes in fashion trends were slower during the war, and those of the suit were mainly seasonal: short jacket, short skirt jacket, bolero for the summer collections, and a fitted coat or a low jacket, covering the whole skirt and serving as a coat for the winter collections. Nevertheless, we can note that for winter 1916, the suit was less strict and turned more feminine with a Russian-style blouse, inspired by the *roubachka*, the moujiks' belted blouse. From 1917, the straight-line skirts were a response to fabric restrictions. At the end of the war, the 1918 winter collection shows took place in a bombed-out Paris, and the suit went back to a plainer and stricter look, closer to the men's version.

For the same reasons, French women involved in the labor force, looking for a simple and sober outfit, gave the suit its functional turn as they overwhelmingly chose it as their working uniform. In the pre-war period, the percentage of working women in France was already quite significant, and the major change with the war was the introduction of women into male-dominated professions such as munitions workers, field workers, drivers, and postal workers.<sup>4</sup> As they took the place of the men who were serving in the war, women inevitably borrowed their dress codes from men's clothing. Some jobs made it necessary to wear specific clothes or uniforms. There are many pictures of working women among the war iconography, including the first ones wearing trousers, especially in the fields.

A More Rapid Spread of Pre-War Innovations? To a great extent, some of the major designers had already introduced these developments pre-war. As evidence, see the latest models from the studios on Rue de la Paix presented by the French artistic review "La Gazette du Bon Ton." In early 1906, Paul Poiret inspired by the short-lived Directoire fashion, introduced the first modern straight-line dress, abolishing the corset, and developed new undergarments. The dress was maintained by a high boned underbelt on which are fixed suspenders that hold

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Georges Duby, Michelle Perrot *Histoire des femmes en Occident: Le XXème siècle, sous la direction de Françoise Thebaud* (Tempus, 2002).

up the new flesh-colored stockings that have taken the place of the traditional black ones. In 1908, the artistic illustrations by Paul Iribe, "Les robes de Paul Poiret" became famous throughout the upper-class. In 1907, Madeleine Vionnet who was at the time head seamstress at the Soeurs Callot house also designed simple fitted dresses, which led to the demise of the corset. Nevertheless, this evolution, which constituted a revolution in costume history (the corset had been an essential element of fashionable dress for about 400 years), remained a privilege of Couture and did not seem to be ready for democratization. Jeanne Paquin, who was also involved in modernity, designed in 1909 a tailored suit for "the metro civilization," as she put it, and for summer 1914 the famous "Tango" dress, umbrella shaped, with an ankle-length skirt. In fact, war accelerated the spread of trends already introduced by some "avant garde" couturiers for a privileged few. This fashion process is in keeping with Roland Barthes' analysis of the fashion system; according to Barthes, only "violent historical episodes (war, exoduses, revolutions) can rapidly smash a system." Only in these cases is the "historical explanation" of clothes and fashion a valid one.

"Poiret s'éloigne, Chanel Arrive." Nevertheless, this movement is not the only explanation for the major changes in clothes during the war. As evidence, consider the sudden rise of Gabrielle Chanel who had only two modest hat shops in 1914, and during the same period, the falling off of Paul Poiret's fashion business. These changes were linked; Jean Cocteau illustrated them with a lithography titled "Poiret s'éloigne, Chanel arrive." War was an opportunity for Gabrielle Chanel. The young Jean Patou, who could have been a competitor, and the famous Paul Poiret who represented a style she was intent on driving out of fashion, were both drafted into the military. While Paul Poiret, as a military tailor, worked on a new design for a military overcoat saving 4 hours of labor and nearly a yard of fabric, his house was obliged to close.<sup>6</sup> Returning from the front in 1919, he never managed to restore his name or pre-War success, although some of his most beautiful creations date from that very period. In fact, he did not change his style and continued to produce orientalist-inspired fashion. This tactic was bound to fail, because he did not understand how women had changed. Paul Poiret's mischance sounds incredible because just before the war he was so popular that he was called "le Magnifique" (King of Fashion), organizing extravagant parties such as the Ball of Thousand and Second Night in 1911. Above all, he was part of the avantgarde, introducing the first modern fashion designs. From the start he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1993), 1:749.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Paul Poiret, En habillant l'époque (Paris, 1931).

demonstrated support and enthusiasm for Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes that caused a scandal in 1913 with The Rite of Spring, and he also collaborated with painters such as Raoul Dufy on printed textiles. During the war new personalities appeared and in the 1920s the names of Jeanne Lanvin, Madeleine Vionnet, and of course Coco Chanel sounded more popular than those of the "old masters" still representing the French couture industry at the International Exposition of San Francisco in 1915: Worth, Doucet, Chéruit, Doeuillet, Callot Soeurs, and Premet. For the first time, a woman, Jeanne Paquin, became President of the Parisian Chambre syndicale de la couture. Chanel's fantastic success was not just a chance occurrence. Her lifestyle as well as her fashion designs embodied the emergence of the independent, uninhibited woman. As James Laver remarked it in his analysis of historical rhythms in fashion: "The designers are not their own masters. They can only introduce an innovation if it happens to be in accordance with the spirit of the age."7 This is exactly what happened to Gabrielle Chanel during the war. Her simple style reflected the general wartime sobriety. Poiret's brilliant clashing colors disappeared, opportunely replaced by Chanel's natural appeal for neutral tones, her "biscuit" jersey as well as her will to impose black as a fashion color. The instinctive strictness she inherited from her education at the convent orphanage in Aubazine drove her to get rid of all frills in her clothes. Her experience as an accomplished horse-rider influenced her design of easy-to-wear clothes. This freedom of movement met the requirements of women heavily involved in war efforts. The loose-fitting chemise dresses belted at the hip, her tailored suits made with an abovethe-ankle skirt and three-quarter length loosely-belted coats, her unfitted redingote, are her most emblematic designs of the war period. Her first design published in a fashion magazine in 1916, Harper's Bazaar, one of those chemise dresses, was so deceptively simple that the journalist only described it as a "charming little dress." Also mentioned in Vogue, her fame was spreading, and in 1917, Harper's Bazaar said "Chanel's name is on the lips of every buyer." In France, Femina first mentioned Chanel in its June 1917 issue, but among the sport clothes; while presenting the 1917 autumn-winter collections, the magazine mentioned Chanel's chemise In a 1918 issue, another design, an unfitted dress as a new classic. redingote reaching halfway down an ankle-length long skirt, both made out of jersey, is pictured on a woman driving a scooter—in those times of scarce petrol!

As a milliner, her workroom at 21 rue Cambon opened in 1910, her designs were extraordinarily simple, far from the extra wide brimmed hats of the era. With these first successes (Gabrielle Dorziat was pictured with her creations in "Les Modes" in 1912) and Arthur Capel behind her, she

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> James Laver, "Triumph of Time," in *Contemporary Essays*, ed., Sylvia Norman, (London, 1933), 133.

opened a store in the fashionable resort of Deauville in 1913. In the autumn of 1914, fleeing from the rapid advance of the German army, her customers came back in such a rush that they did not have time to pack. Gabrielle Chanel took advantage of this and, as her shop was almost the only one left open, improvised as a fashion designer. She made dresses out of jersey, a wool fabric generally used for gentlemen's underwear, that she had already been using to make sweaters since the 1913 summer collection. She did not miss the opportunity to dress her customers as she dressed herself, in a plain and relaxed fashion, inspired by menswear and sport clothes. Aware of the harmony of her fashion with the era, in 1915, she established in Biarritz, another very fashionable resort, a real Maison de Couture. In Biarritz she had a great success selling long jersey sweaters and skirt-jackets as well as black evening dresses in lace or jetembroidered tulle to society ladies, and above all to the elegant and aristocratic women from San Sebastian, Bilbao, Madrid who bought dresses by the dozen.

Whether from Deauville, Biarritz, or Paris, with 300 hundred people working for her, by 1916 she became "the exterminating angel of the nineteenth century style," as Paul Morand called her. Some fashion reporters of the era did not mention the omnipresent chemise dress as Chanel's innovation but more as a model inspired by nurse's garments. That was not the issue. The important thing was that she was intelligent enough to perceive the tendencies of the time; paradoxically, the constraints imposed by the war seemed to encourage her creativity. This kind of paradox is one answer the to question how could fashion resist the war?

# **Fashion Resistance Strategy During the War**

Fashion changed during the war, becoming more functional and practical to adapt to women's new expectations. It also managed to remain creative, putting in place a strategy to resist the constraints imposed by the textile industry.

A Martial Vocabulary. Couturiers' inspiration during war is a problem. Fashion designers are obviously influenced by soldier's uniforms, but such references during the First World War need to be made with caution. Thus, in 1915, martial references are taken from history: the pioneering days, the revolution, and the 1st empire, which are mentioned by couturiers. Jeanne Lanvin has in her library a complete collection of plates of military uniforms. In her 1916 collection, she showed the "Quatre vingt treize" dress and "En avant" coat. She also created the "Gouraud" coat, to pay homage to the general commanding the Oriental French forces and later the IVth army in Champagne.

At the beginning of the war, the "col officier" vogue coincided with the return of the stand-up neckline, giving the outfit more austerity. Later, jackets recall the gored Cossack tunic. The military vocabulary found its best expression in the trimmings initially reduced to a minimum: piping underlining the stitching, braids, stripes or chain stitches, binding-like, colored plaited cords, and brandeburg. The omnipresent pockets, always visible, also became a genuine ornament. Sometime oversized, square, or rectangular, patch pockets, or stitched on the bias, they were genuinely functional, and proved very practical when women needed to take shelter quickly, carrying personal items while holding a torch.

Supply constraints, and the influence on production of the priority orders from the army, could also prompt borrowing directly from military uniforms, notably for fabric and color schemes. In a 1915 spring issue of L'Art et la Mode, a pictured khaki coat is made of the same fabric as that used for English soldiers, probably to take advantage of available.9 The many women who were knitters complained about the choice of knitting wool, available in only blue or khaki. Woolen serge, the slanting ribbed material, omnipresent in La Belle Jardinière or Burberry's collections, was used to make officer's uniforms, as well as most of the tailored suits. The Textile Determinism. In addition to the sociological reasons already discussed, these examples provide evidence of the influence of the textile supply in explaining fashion changes during the war. Wool, and particularly worsted wool, which is made into the finest fabrics, was scarcest. As soon as the war started, the occupation of the North and East regions deprived France of two thirds of its wool production. mobilization of the workforce, the difficulty in obtaining raw materials, the dearth of coal, the drop in global wool production, the scarcity of merchant ships, and the intense submarine war beginning in 1917, all had a huge impact on the textile industry in France as well as on prices. 10 Between the summers of 1915 and 1916, the average price for a suit in a department store catalog went from 79 to 131 francs, a 60 percent increase. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jérôme Picon, Jeanne Lanvin (Paris, 2002), 122.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> L'Art et la Mode, samedi 6 mars 1915.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> On that subject see, Albert Aftalion, *L'Industrie textile pendant la guerre, Fondation Carnegie*, (Paris, 1920).

woolen velvet sold for 5.75 francs per meter in the 1915-1916 Grand Magasins du Louvre winter catalog, sold for 8.50 francs the following winter and 10.50 francs in the winter of 1916-1917<sup>11</sup> However, between the winters of 1915 and 1916, the price of silk remained almost stable, or increased only slightly. Inflation, reinforced by the effect of restrictions, led fashion magazines to develop, like a *leitmotiv*, the idea that "we can find everything but everything is expensive." In this context, producers do not forget to increase their prices. Many "nouveaux riches" made a lot of money during the war.

The big business of the textile industry during the conflict was obviously the production of cloth for army uniforms, a thick cloth, produced in the old declining centers of carded wool, such as Elbeuf and Louviers in Normandie, or little centers throughout the Parisian area that were again operating full blast during the hostilities. While production capacity seriously dropped, the expanded needs of the army increased the demand.

Orders from the Supply Corps, which absorbed a huge amount of the fabric, influenced all production, and even imposed the color schemes: dark blue or gunmetal grey.<sup>12</sup> While most chemical coloring had been imported from Germany, what little remained in France was requisitioned by the Powder Department because explosives and dyes use the same raw material. Thus, one had to accept fewer choices in the variety of color shades and lower quality.

The tensions affecting the wool cloth market made the business so profitable that some of the silk-weaving activity in the Lyons area was converted for production of light woolen garments, gabardines, cavalry twill, and spun articles that were less suited to the needs of the armed forces and more to those of civilians.

It was probably this conversion of part of the textile industry and the purchase of fabric made before the beginning of the war that allowed for the vogue and the excesses of the wide skirts that Parisian women discovered in the first war collection in the spring of 1915. Conversely, the vogue of the barrel line and especially the straight line that started with the spring 1917 collections coincided precisely with the growing difficulties in obtaining raw materials. These new shapes allowed for savings on precious fabric, and day dresses using less material began to compete with suits. A tax on wool fabric was imposed and appeals were also made for voluntary restrictions and patriotism. At the government's request, the Syndicat de la Couture agreed to reduce the amount of cloth used for dresses. This led to the famous 4 meters 50 dress. In 1915, when the bell skirt was in fashion, 8 meters were required. This fell to 5 meters 50 in

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Claude Daumas, *Les territoires de la laine: Eléments pour une histoire de l'industrie lainière en France aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Au Bon Marché and Aux Galeries Lafayette winter catalogues.

1916-1917, and 4 meters 50 in 1917-1918. Starting in 1917, the new trends inspired all sorts of ruses that women could use to remain elegant despite the restrictions and the rising fabric prices. Dresses were less and less frequently made from only one type of fabric. The very new cuts of these dresses, sometimes made in 3 or 4 parts—open skirt on an apron, chiffon scarf draped on a sheath—allowed for the recycling of out-of-fashion dresses from which the cloth was carefully removed. This mixture of several types of cloth formed wide alternating strips while panels made dresses freer fitting, countering the trend towards narrowing to save on fabric.

Other alternatives were offered by the growing number of women's magazine articles with suggestions for making clothing yourself, for recycling out-of-fashion dresses, knitting for the soldiers, and so on, alongside advertisements for Singer sewing machines. The disappearance of the corset meant that more thinking had to go into cuts, and the simplicity of straight dresses, which could practically be worn back-tofront, was obvious. These cuts increased fashion inequalities to some extent: with a distinction between homemade and professionally-made dresses!

The restrictions and the new supply and production conditions stimulated the creativity of the textile industry and of fashion designers. Women and designers were encouraged to substitute silk for wool, with the increase in exports from Japan maintaining the supply. In the 1918 October issue of Femina we find the following startling but nonetheless accurate statement: "It will soon be more of a luxury to wear monk's cloth than to wear brocade." This was true to such an extent that, against all tradition, silk was trimmed with wool, and satin dresses with knitted or embroidered wool fur fabric. Lace and embroidery were also very common. The Russian revolution brought many refugees to Paris whose traditional expertise enriched the fashion houses' embroidery shops. This type of ornamentation also offered the advantage of providing body to lower-quality fabric. It was this same necessity that led fur tailors to alter their art during the war. As fur became very rare and costly, it was mixed with other fabrics or reserved for collars. The new coats were reversible, often made of various types of fur: woodchuck, civet, beaver, and miniver, which were not the most prestigious materials. For women with enough money, monkey was the latest fashion. For the others, manufacturers were inventive, offering new materials to replace fur: grey wool astrakhan, grey plush, "lion" fabric, a thick and hairy material reminiscent of sheep skin, "oisella," a light and soft material like a bird's down ...People also wore raincoats of rubberized materials such as those from Burberry's. The cotton spinning mills, mostly located in the Vosges, were not occupied and their consumption was encouraged, especially for summer fabrics, offered in a greater variety of colors starting with the 1917 collections: pink, lemon, cherry, and capucine.

The Ministry of War closely followed German experiments to produce textile substitutes from cellulose. In March 1918, samples of aluminum silicate used for shoe uppers were carefully considered. At the same time, the spring 1918 collections offered dresses made of airplane fabric! However, the jersey was the great success of wartime fashion. Troyes, with knitwear its great specialty, was outside of the combat zone. Cotton jersey replaced wool fabric. Tissages Rodier developed new jersey varieties, giving them legitimacy. In 1916, Rodier patented kasha, an exclusive woven fabric made from cashmere wool. Gabrielle Chanel made Rodier one of her main suppliers, opening the doors of the fashion design world. In 1916, Jacques Rodier offered Chanel, who was looking for a new fabric, a jersey stock, a mechanical knit made before the war with a rough feel and beige color that had discouraged buyers. Chanel, who was already familiar with this material, which was popular with athletes, and which she had used to make the famous sweaters of the Deauville boutique, jumped at this opportunity. She used this jersey material to make her first suits and the chemise dress that brought her fame. Perhaps this new fashion concept, "le misérabilisme de luxe" (luxury poverty) in the acerbic words of Paul Poiret, started with this stock of unsold fabric providentially sold by Jacques Rodier to Gabrielle Chanel? This fabric, which is not easy to work with, guided Gabrielle Chanel's creations with their simple shapes, and allowed for all sorts of audacity. The way it fell eliminated the need for interlining jackets and improved freedom of movement, while the impossibility of making darts erased the waist of the chemise dress. The jersey, an industrial fabric borrowed from the world of sporting goods and male undergarments, ideally met the new needs of women seeking flexibility by allowing for freedom of movement.

The Failure of the National Standard Suit. Not only was fashion totally transformed during the war, it was also resistant to attempts to standardize that were initiated by the government to attempt to control production in order to economize on raw materials and to meet the essential needs of the population despite the rising cost of living.

In August 1917, the State began to sell a national standard shoe and in December 1917, it began to appear in fashion magazines, alongside the clog, another wartime shoe. <sup>13</sup> The feminine version was sold at 23 francs and presented as a bargain.

Starting in August 1918, the State planned to do the same for clothes. A national clothes commission was appointed August 19, 1918 within the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Great Britain had already taken an initiative, coordinated by Wool Textile Production, which estimated that since the beginning of the war the price of clothes for men's had increased by 160 percent and those for women by 265 percent. In France, this operation was a failure, in particular because the army refused

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> *Femina*, Dec. 1917

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Archives nationales, série F12

to lower its level of orders and also very likely because of the mediocre quality of the material used, which was composed of 25 percent cotton scraps, 50 percent re-used wool and only 25 percent new wool. L'Illustration of 13 July 1918, the caricaturist Henriot, in his biting weekly drawing, took aim at the national standard suit, calling it "a single model for fathers, mothers, and children. For the first time, all French people will be equal!"

## The Ambiguities of Fashion During the War

Patriotic Fashions. With the shock of the summer of 1914 and the beginning of the war unanticipated by the carefree society of the Belle Époque, fashion temporarily came to a halt. For the 1914 Autumn-Winter season, the dresses of winter 1913 were reused and women's magazines even advised their readers to cover their dresses with tulle or chiffon of black, African brown, or navy blue silk to make them look more serious. 15. However, at the end of spring 1915, the fashion houses once again opened their doors. At an extraordinary general meeting on December 21, 1914, the members of the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture, the official trade association, confirmed in a circular intended for buyers their decision to "display models on the same date and in the same conditions as for the preceding seasons."16

In many respects, patriotic justifications were found for the maintaining of fashion activities during the war. As with the theatres, music halls, and other entertainments that progressively resumed for the pleasure of soldiers on leave, Parisian women also had to be elegant so that the soldiers would return to the front with this vision of hope. The Chambre syndicale had a hospital its members supported. Jeanne Paquin used her house in Saint Cloud as a military hospital. As a benefactor of the 74th division, she let the army make one of her delivery vehicles into an ambulance.

The patriotism of the luxury industries was also seen in maintaining employment for the thousands of women who worked in their shops and who were often the sole breadwinners for their households. Was this an alibi or a real contribution to the war effort? We may wonder about the sincerity of this commitment when we consider the demands of the female fashion industry workers during the strikes of spring 1917: the application of the English work week system for working women, but also the readjustment of salaries that were decreased at the beginning of the war with the business slowdown, and not increased when business improved!

Haute Couture was a strategic economic activity, especially for foreign trade. By continuing its exports, it brought in foreign currency at a time when the needs of the Supply Corps led to more imports. There was

<sup>15</sup> La mode illustrée, Sunday 30 Aug. 1914.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Archives de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture.

also a nationalistic argument: the market must not be left to foreign competitors. The protection of models, development of a syndicate label, fighting against infringement in America, and tracking down enemy capital invested in Parisian companies, were all real concerns of a business that felt threatened by the events of the time. A report of the *Chambre syndicale de la Couture* mentioned at the end of 1914 a campaign orchestrated by the fashion magazine *Collier's weekly* against Parisian Couture to benefit of American fashion houses. This pushed the profession to take part in the Universal Exhibition of 1915 in San Francisco, and to increase the number of exhibitions abroad such as the "Fête parisienne" held the same year in New York, then in Madrid, Zurich, and so on.

The Delicate Issue of Fashion. Although the watchwords were austerity and simplicity, fashion seemed omnipresent during the war. It was a subject of concern in a time of shortages, but also one of the few authorized distractions, maybe the only way to dream. The status of fashion in wartime is something of a paradox. The connotation of frivolity that it carries is diametrically opposed to the notions of seriousness and abstention.

The situation of the fashion world during the war crystallized the ambiguities in relations between the warfront and the home-front. These ambiguities appear to be inescapable. As the conflict sank into trench warfare, ending the myth of a brief, regenerating war, life started to return to normal. The emancipation of women through their massive commitment to the war effort came at a time when both the battlefront and the home-front agreed on a patriotic representation of the wife of the devoted soldier. The conservative war reinforced the separation of the roles between the sexes at a time when women were gaining new liberty. The evolution in the world of fashion, which reflected a new relationship with the body, was at the center of these contradictions.

These ambiguities put a heavy responsibility on women, often accompanied by guilt. Should women's efforts to remain elegant in this special context be seen as frivolity or, rather, dignity? With the first leaves in the spring of 1915, the least negligence in terms of appearance could be seen as defeatism. This is the image that the soldiers take back with them from their leave, the yellowing photo that they show in the trenches to boost their morale! When they came on leave from the front, however, some soldiers were shocked by these new fashions with low-cut and short dresses that raised doubts about women and suspicions of adultery, which was seen as a moral crime not only in the private sphere but also as a form of treason.

There were also ambiguities in terms of consumption. On the one hand, Maurice Barrès, in eloquent terms called on feminine patriotism,

asking women to voluntarily limit their purchases of clothing, hats, and boots to limit imports of raw materials.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, women were encouraged to return to department stores to support the economy! Designers and department stores were well aware of the need to remove guilt from the act of shopping. At *Printemps*, starting in 1917, a window of lead soldiers showed passers by the position of the armies at the front. The department stores, once they got over the surprise of the declaration of war and the first months of confusion, did not appear to suffer. Aux Galeries Lafayette profits increased threefold between the financial year ended on July 31, 1914 and July 31, 1918.18 Fashion designers, with the support of fashion magazines, played a hazardous game as a prelude to the presentation of their new collections: distinguishing among the models "those suitable for war time or not, those that are to be left to foreigners of neutral countries, and on the contrary those that are for us, ours, for our obligations and the austerity that we must demonstrate."19

The magazines took the approach of trying to define fashion standards. With a tone close to edification, they decided what must be done and not done; worn and not worn. This debate reached a paroxysm with the issue of mourning clothes. It is clear that dress codes remained the most rigid with this type of clothing. These are outfits did not tend to be simplified, and that were among the most costly, as all of the accessories must be black: gloves, umbrellas, purses, and handbags. As at the beginning of the war, the issue of mourning appeared in women's magazines with reminders that "in accordance with etiquette and custom, major mourning is divided into three periods."20 Each period was associated with certain authorized clothes and fabrics, hats, sizes, and veils, with suits being allowed for the first time because of their practical advantages. Black was de rigueur for charity sales or charity work and was also adopted by women who had not suffered a personal loss as a sign of mourning for the nation. Many young women who would never find a husband continued to wear these black clothes after the war. While women were reproached for putting a simple black veil over a too-stylish dress, the editorials asked, "Can war widows remarry?"21

However, there was another ambiguity that accompanied these issues; in addition to the advice columns and pages devoted to nurses and other "heroines" of the war, most magazines also had a section devoted to the performing arts. The theatre, the cinema, and their actresses, the reviews, the ballets, and their dancers, Sarah Bernhardt, Mademoiselle Pierry, Mistinguett, Cécile Sorel, and Denise Grey were used as alibis for the fashion designers and magazines to present their latest creations in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> L'art et la Mode Journal de la vie mondaine, 9 Feb. 1918.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Archives Galeries Lafayette, board of directors' reports.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> *Femina*, June 1917.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> La mode illustrée, 31 Jan. 1915.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> *Femina*, Sept. 1917.

"theatre fashions" column of *Femina* or in the evocatively titled weekly, L'Art et la Mode. Journal de la vie mondaine.

The challenge to these restricting tensions on women, who had achieved a certain independence, was expressed just after the war in the ephemeral and scandalous tomboy fashion, la garçonne. androgynous appearance, with hair cut short, transgressing the sexual polarity in dress, shook the image of the eternal feminine. However, what can we to say about a fashion that, in seeking to make women the equals of men, merely took on masculine dress characteristics?

In many respects, it probably was not easy for women to find their place during the First World War. While fashion did emancipate women's bodies, and in becoming more functional, it allowed them to escape from the boudoir in which the Belle Époque had kept them confined, we must not stop at mere appearances. Fashion changed radically during the war, but that is probably because it crystallized the economic, patriotic, and commercial factors at stake and because it had to adapt to extreme production conditions. While faithful to its forward-looking approach, it took a stand in the present. Its evolution accompanied the emergence of the modern woman without ambiguity.