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POIRET, PAUL

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Before Paul Poiret (1879–1944), there was the couture: clothing whose *raison d'être* was beauty as well as the display of wealth and taste. Paul Poiret brought a new element of fashion to the couture; thanks to him fashion can be a mirror of the times, an art form, and a grand entertainment. Poiret, in the opinion of many, was fashion's first genius.

Born into a solidly bourgeois Parisian family (his father, Auguste Poiret, was a respectable cloth merchant), Poiret attended a Catholic *lycée*, finishing as was typical in his early teens. Following school came an apprenticeship to an umbrella maker, a *métier* that did not suit him. At the time, it was possible to begin a couture career by shopping around one's drawings of original fashion designs. Couture houses purchased these to use as inspiration. Poiret's first encouragement came when Mme. Chéruit, a good but minor *couturière*, bought a dozen of his designs. He was still a teenager when, in 1896, he began working for Jacques Doucet, one of Paris's most prominent couturiers.

Auspiciously, Doucet sold four hundred copies of one of Poiret's first designs, a simple red cape with gray lining and revers. And in four years there, the novice designer rose up in the ranks to become head of the tailoring department. His greatest coup was making an evening coat to be worn by the great actress Réjane in a play called *Zaza*. The biggest splash fashion could make in those days was on the stage, and Poiret made sure to design something attention-worthy: a mantle of black tulle over black taffeta painted with large-scale iris by a well-known fan painter. Next came the custom of more actresses, and then, while working on the play *L'Algon* starring Sarah Bernhardt, Poiret snuck into a dress rehearsal where his scathing critique of the sets and costumes were overheard by the playwright, costing him his job. (The remarks could not have alienated Madame Bernhardt, as he would dress her for several 1912 films.) He fulfilled his military service during the next year and then joined Worth, the top couture house as an assistant designer in 1901. There he was given a *sous chef* job of creating what Jean Worth (grandson of the founder) called the "fried potatoes," meaning the side dish to Worth's main course of lavish evening and reception gowns. Poiret was responsible for the kind of serviceable, simple clothes needed by women who took the bus as opposed to languishing in a carriage, and while he felt himself to be looked down on by his fellow workers, his designs were commercial successes.

In September 1903 he opened his own couture house on the avenue Auber (corner of the rue Scribe). There he quickly attracted the custom of such former clients as the actress Réjane. In 1905 he married Denise Boulet, the daughter of a textile manufacturer, whose waiflike figure and nonconventional looks would change the way he designed. In 1906 Poiret moved into 37, rue Pasquier, and by 1909 he was able to relocate to quite grand quarters: a large eighteenth-century *hôtel particulier* at 9 avenue d'Antin (perpendicular to the Faubourg Saint-Honoré and since World War II known as Avenue Franklin-Roosevelt). The architect Louis Süë oversaw the renovations; the spectacular open grounds included a *parterre* garden. Poiret also purchased two adjoining buildings on the Faubourg St. Honore, which he later established as Martine and Rosine.

Les Robes of Paul Poiret

Until the October 1908 publication of *Les Robes de Paul Poiret*, Poiret was merely an up-and-coming couturier, likely to assume a place in the hierarchy as secure as that of Doucet or Worth. However, the limited edition deluxe album of Poiret designs as envisioned and exquisitely rendered by new artist Paul Iribe would have far-reaching impact, placing Poiret in a new uncharted position, that of daringly inventive designer and arbiter of taste. Fashion presentation up to then had been quite straightforward: magazines showed clothes in a variety of media, based on what was possible technically: black-and-white sketches, hand-colored woodblock prints, or colored lithographs, and, in the case of the French magazine *Les Modes*, black- and-white photographs or pastel-tinted black-and-white photographs. The poses were typical photographer's studio ones, carefully posed models against a muted ground, vaguely landscape or interior in feeling.

Using the *pochoir* method of printing, resulting in brilliantly saturated areas of color, Paul Iribe juxtaposed Poiret's graphically striking clothes against stylishly arranged backgrounds including pieces of antique furniture, decorative works of art, and old master paintings. The dresses, depicted in color, popped out from the black-and-white backgrounds. This inventive approach was tremendously influential, not only affecting future fashion illustration and photography, but cementing the relationship between art and fashion and probably inspiring the launch of such exquisitely conceived publications as the *Gazette du Bon Ton*.

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The Poiret Rose

While there are some designers associated with specific flowers (Chanel and the camellia, Dior and the lily-of-the-valley) no one can claim the achievement of having reinvented a flower in such a way as to have it always identified with them. The Poiret rose (reduced to its simplest elements of overlapping curving lines) may have appeared for the first time in the form of a three-dimensional silk chiffon flower sewn to the empire bodice of Josephine, one of the 1907 dresses featured in the 1908 album *Les Robes de Paul Poiret*. Flat versions of the Poiret rose, embroidered in beads, appeared on the minaret tunic of the well-known dress Sorbet, 1913. Poiret's characteristically large and showy label also featured a rose.

The dresses were no less newsworthy and influential. When Poiret introduced his lean, high-waisted silhouette of 1908, it was the first time (but hardly the last) that a radically new fashion would be based fairly literally on the past. The dresses, primarily for evening, feature narrow lines, high waists, covered arms, low décolletés. Their inspiration is both *Directoire* and medieval. In abandoning the bifurcated figure of the turn of the twentieth century, Poiret looked back to a time when revolutionary dress itself was referencing ancient times. Suddenly the hourglass silhouette was passé.

Poiret, Bakst, and Orientalism

Poiret had an affinity with all things Eastern, claiming to have been a Persian prince in a previous life. Significantly, the first Asian-inspired piece he ever designed, while still at Worth, was controversial. A simple Chinese-style cloak called *Confucius*, it offended the occidental sensibilities of an important client, a Russian princess. To her grand eyes it seemed shockingly simple, the kind of thing a peasant might wear; when Poiret opened his own establishment such mandarin-robe-style cloaks would be best-sellers.

The year 1910 was a watershed for orientalism in fashion and the arts. In June, the Ballet Russe performed *Scheherazade* at the Paris Opera, with sets and costumes by Leon Bakst. Its effect on the world of design was immediate. Those who saw the production or Bakst's watercolor sketches reproduced in such luxurious journals as *Art et Decoration* (in 1911) were dazzled by the daring color combinations and swirling profusion of patterns. Since the belle époque could be said to have been defined by the delicate, subtle tints of the impressionists, such a use of color would be seen as groundbreaking.

Although color and pattern were what people talked about, they serve to obscure the most daring aspect of the Ballet Russe costumes: the sheerness (not to mention scantiness) of the materials. Even in the drawings published in 1911, nipples can be seen through sheer silk bodices, and not just legs, but thighs in harem trousers. Midriffs, male and female, were bare altogether. Whether inspired or reinforced by Bakst, certain near-Eastern effects: the softly ballooning legs, turbans, and the surplice neckline and tunic effect became Poiret signatures.

The cover of *Les Modes* for April 1912 featured a Georges Barbier illustration of two Poiret enchantresses in a moonlit garden, one dressed in the sort of boldly patterned cocoon wraps for which Poiret would be known throughout his career, the other in a soft evening dress with high waist, below-the-knee-length overskirt, narrow trailing underskirt, the bodice sheer enough to reveal the nipples.

While Poiret's claim to have single-handedly banished the Edwardian palette of swooning mauves can be viewed as egotistical, given Bakst's tremendous influence, his assertions about doing away with the corset have more validity. In each of the numerous photographs of Denise Poiret she is dressed in a fluid slide of fabric; there is no evidence of the lumps and bumps of corsets and other underpinnings. Corsetry and sheerness are hardly compatible and boning would interrupt Poiret's narrow lines.

The Jupe-Culotte

In the course of producing his (hugely successful) second album of designs *Les Choses de Paul Poiret* (1911), Poiret asked his latest discovery, the artist Georges Lepape, to come up with an idea for a new look. It was Mme. Lepape who sketched her idea of a modern costume and put it in her husband's pocket. When Poiret asked where the new idea was, Lepape had to be reminded to fish it out. The next time they met, Poiret surprised the couple with a mannequin wearing his version of their design: a long tunic with boat neck and high waist worn over dark pants gathered into cuffs at the ankle. And so, at the end of the album under the heading: Tomorrow's Fashions, there appeared several dress/trouser hybrids, which would become known as *jupe-culottes*.

The jupe-culotte caused an international sensation. The Victorian age had left the sexes cemented in rigid roles easily visible in their dress—men in the drab yet freeing uniform of business, and women in an almost literal gilded cage of whalebone and steel, brocade and lace. While Poiret's impulse seems to have been primarily aesthetic, the fact that it coincided with the crusade of suffragists taking up where Amelia Bloomer had left off, served to bring about a real change in how women dressed. For months anything relating to the jupe-culotte was major news. In its most common incarnation, a kind of high-waisted evening dress with tunic lines revealing soft chiffon harem pants, the jupe-culotte was wildly unmodern, requiring the help of a maid to get in and out of and utterly impractical for anything other than looking au courant. Poiret did design numerous more tailored versions, however, often featuring military details and his favorite checked or striped materials; these do look ahead (about fifty years) to the high-fashion trouser suit.

Martine

In the space of five years, Poiret had become a world-renown success. Now came another influential act. Martine, named after one of Poiret's daughters, opened 1 April 1911 as a school of decorative art. Poiret admitted to being inspired by his 1910 visit to the Wiener Werkstätte, but his idea for Martine entailed a place where imagination could flourish as opposed to being disciplined in a certain style. Young girls, who, in their early teens had finished their traditional schooling, became the pupils. Their assignment was to visit zoos, gardens, the aquarium, and markets and make rough sketches. Their sketches were then developed into decorative motifs. Once a wall full of studies had been completed, Poiret would invite artist colleagues and wallpaper, textile, or embroidery specialists for a kind of critique. The students were rewarded for selected designs, but also got to see their work turned into such Martine wares as rugs, china, pottery, wallpaper, textiles for interiors, and fashions. The Salon d'Automne of 1912 displayed many such items made after designs of the École Martine and Poiret opened a Martine store at 107, Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

Within a few years, a typical Martine style of interior had been developed, juxtaposing spare, simple shapes with large-scale native designs inspired in the main from nature. A 1914 bathroom featured micro-mosaic tiles turning the floor, sink case, and tub into a continuous smooth expanse punctuated by murals or tile panels patterned with stylized grapes on the vine. There were Martine departments in shops all over Europe; although more decorative than what would become known as art deco and art moderne, Martine deserves an early place in the chronology of modern furniture and interior design.

Also in 1911 Poiret inaugurated a perfume concern, naming it after another daughter, Rosine, and locating it at the same address as Martine. Poiret's visionary aesthetic was perfectly suited to the world of scents and he was involved in every aspect of the bottle design, packaging, and advertising, including the Rosine advertising fans. He was also interested in new developments of synthetic scents and in expanding the idea of what is a fragrance by adding lotions, cosmetics, and soaps. Fellow couturiers like Babani, the Callot Soeurs, Chanel, and Patou were among the first to follow suit; thanks to Poiret, perfumes continue to be an integral part of the image (and business) of a fashion house.

Poiret the Showman

At a time when the runway had yet to be invented and clothes were shown on models in intimate settings in couture houses, Poiret's 1911 and 1914 promotional tours of Europe with models wearing his latest designs made a tremendous splash.

On 24 June 1911 the renowned 1,002-night ball was held in the avenue d'Antin garden featuring Paul Poiret as sultan and Denise Poiret as the sultan's favorite in a combination of two of Poiret's greatest hits, a jupe-culotte with a minaret tunic. The invitations specified how the guests should dress: Dunoyer de Segonzac was told to come as Champagne, His Majesty's Valet and Raoul Dufy as The King's Fool. If one of the 300 guests showed up in Chinese (or, worse, conventional evening) dress, he or she was sent to a wardrobe room to be decked out in Persian taste. Although fancy dress balls had been all the rage for several decades, this one seems to have struck a chord; perhaps it was the first hugely luxurious (champagne, oysters, and other delicacies flowed freely) event staged by a creative person (in trade no less) rather than an aristocrat. Future fêtes, each with a carefully thought-out theme, failed to achieve the same level of excitement. After the war, Poiret's thoughts had turned toward increasingly zany moneymaking ventures. The nightclub was the latest diversion after World War I and Poiret turned his garden first into a nightclub, and then in 1921 it

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His last truly notable bit of showmanship was his display at the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels. Rather than set up a display in an approved location in an official building, Poiret installed three barges on the Seine. Decorated in patriotic French colors, *Delices* was a restaurant decorated with red anemones; *Amours* was decorated with blue Martine carnations; and *Orgues* was white featuring fourteen canvases by Dufy depicting regattas at Le Havre, Ile de France, Deauville; and races at Longchamps, showing some of Poiret's last dress designs under his own label. It was clear that his zest for ideas was being directed elsewhere other than fashion. Typically over the top, he also commissioned a merry-go-round on which one could ride figures of Parisian life, including him and his *midinettes*, or shop-girls.

The Poiret Milieu

Poiret's interest in the fine, contemporary arts of the day began while he was still quite young. His artist friends included Francis Picabia and André Derain, who painted his portrait when they were both serving in the French army in 1914. His sisters were Nicole Groult, married to Andre Groult, the modern furniture designer; and Mme. Boivin, the jeweler; another was a poet. Besides discovering Paul Iribe and Georges Barbier, he reinvigorated the career of Raoul Dufy by commissioning woodcut-based fabric designs from him and starting him off on a long career in textile design and giving new life to his paintings as well. Bernard Boutet de Monvel worked on numerous early projects for Poiret, including, curiously, writing catalog copy for his perfume brochures. While quite young, Erté saw (and sketched) Poiret's mannequins in Russia in 1911; after emigrating to Paris he worked as an assistant designer to Poiret from the beginning of 1913 to the outbreak of war in 1914. His illustrations accompanied articles about Poiret fashion in *Harper's Bazaar* and reveal a signature Erté style that might not have developed without the inspiration of Poiret. He also launched the careers of Madeleine Panizon, a Martine student who became a milliner, and discovered shoemaker Andre Perugia, whom he helped establish in business after World War I.

Poiret's Clientele

Not surprisingly, Poiret's clients were more than professional beauties, clotheshorses, or socialites. Besides the very top actresses of his time, Réjane and Sarah Bernhardt, the entertainer Josephine Baker, and the celebrated Liane de Pougy, one of the last of the grandes horizontales, there were: the Countess Grefulhe, muse of Marcel Proust, and Margot Asquith, wife of the English prime minister, who invited him to show his styles in London, creating a political furor for her (and her husband's) disloyalty to British designers. Nancy Cunard, ivory bracelet-clad icon of early twentieth-century style, recalled that she had been wearing a gold-panniered Poiret dress in 1922 at a ball where she was bored dancing with the Prince of Wales but thrilled to meet and chat with T. S. Eliot.

The international cosmetics entrepreneur Helena Rubinstein met Poiret while he was a young design assistant at Worth and followed him as he struck out on his own. She was photographed in one of his daring jupeculottes in 1913 and wore a Poiret Egyptian style dress in her advertisements in 1924. The quintessentially French author Colette was a client. Boldini painted the Marchesa Casati in a chic swirl of Poiret and greyhounds. The American art patrons Peggy Guggenheim and Gertrude Whitney dressed in high bohemian Poiret and Natasha Hudnut Rambova, herself a designer and the exotic wife of the matinee idol Rudolf Valentino, went to Poiret for her trousseau.

Postwar Poiret

Poiret was involved for the duration of the war as a military tailor, and although he occasionally made news with a design or article, when he was demobilized in 1919 he had to relaunch his fashion, decorating, and perfume businesses. His first collection after the war, shown in the summer of 1919, was enthusiastically received and fashion magazines like *Harper's Bazaar* continued to regularly feature his luxurious creations, typically made in vivid colors, lush-patterned fabrics, and trimmed lavishly with fur. Poiret's work perfectly suited the first part of the 1920s. The dominant silhouette was tubular, and fairly long, and most coats were cut on the full side with kimono or dolman sleeves. Such silhouettes were perfect for displaying the marvelous Poiret decorations, either Martine-inspired or borrowed from native clothing around the world. He continued to occasionally show such previous greatest hits as jupe-culottes and dresses with minaret tunics. In 1924 he left his grand quarters in the avenue d'Antin, moving to the Rond Point in 1925. He would leave that business in 1929.

Obscurity

By 1925 Poiret had begun to sound like a curmudgeon, holding forth against chemise dresses, short skirts, flesh-colored hose, and thick ankles with the same kind of ranting tone once used by M. Worth to criticize Poiret's trouser skirt. Financially, he did poorly too, and he sold his business in 1929.

In 1931, *Women's Wear Daily* announced that Paul Poiret was reentering the couture, using as a business name his telephone number "Passy Ten Seventeen." Prevented from using his own name by a legal arrangement, he told the paper that he planned to print his photograph on his stationery, since presumably he still owned the rights to his face. This venture closed in 1932. After designing some for department stores such as Liberty in London in 1933, he turned his attention to an assortment of endeavors including writing (an autobiography called *King of Fashion*) and painting. He succumbed to Parkinson's disease on 28 April 1944.

While Gabrielle Chanel is credited with being the first woman to live the modern life of the twentieth century (designing accordingly), it is Poiret who created the contemporary idea of a couturier as wide-reaching arbiter. His specific fashion contributions aside, Poiret was the first to make fashion front-page news; to collaborate with fine artists; develop lines of fragrances; expand into interior decoration; and to be known for his lavish lifestyle. Poignantly he was also the first to lose the rights to his own name.

Poiret's earliest styles were radically simple; these would give way to increasingly lavish "artistic" designs and showman-like behavior. By 1913 *Harper's Bazaar* was already looking back at his notable achievements: originating the narrow silhouette, starting the fashion for the uncorseted figure, doing away with the petticoat, being the first to show the jupe-culotte and the minaret tunic. That the fashion world was already nostalgic about his achievements proved oddly prescient: his ability to transform how women dressed would pass with World War I.

See also Doucet, Jacques; [Fashion Designer](#); [Orientalism](#); Paris Fashion; [Worth, Charles Frederick](#).

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