

A century of elegance

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A CENTURY OF ELEGANCE

by J. GAUMONT-LANVIN

President of the «Chambre syndicale de la Couture parisienne»

A century — that takes us back to 1848. How different Europe was, how different was France compared to the France of to-day.

And yet...

And yet, in 1848, she had once again just upset the existing order of things by dethroning her king, Louis-Philippe, and by releasing like waves sweeping over the frontiers, a flood of ideas which some considered noble and others subversive. The dethroning of a king and the setting up of a republic is, as a rule, very bad for elegance since court life is normally the setting for luxury and beauty. This is generally true, but it was not so in 1848. Louis-Philippe's Court was, as a matter of fact, very far from being elegant. The king was old and very bourgeois; he used to go out walking carrying an umbrella under his arm and he disliked all Court ceremonial. The queen would spend the long days in the Tuileries Palace knitting, wearing a little lace cap on her head and mittens on her hands.

In 1848, Chateaubriand had just died, Lamartine was 58 years old and devoting most of his time to politics, Musset was only 38, but already suffering from the ill effects of alcohol; Honoré de Balzac was 49 with only two years to go before his death; tormented by debts, worries and unhappy love-affairs, he was the bitter and precise chronicler of this dull society; Victor Hugo, at 46, was at the height of his literary career; so was Alexandre Dumas, the elder, who saw his son acquiring a fame almost equal to his own. As for the musicians, they were escaping from a world they hated into a dream world of their own. Berlioz was pouring forth the torrent of his sonorous romanticism, Chopin still very young, only 38, but already old since he was to die the next year, was sweeping all Europe with the nostalgic thrill of his delicate art.

Most of the famous painters of the second half of the century were establishing the springtide, by exploding the varnishes and bitumens of the official schools.

Courbet, Boudin, Carpeaux, Stevens, Manet were already adolescents full of creative energy. Ingres was 58, Corot 52, and Delacroix 47, but Monet, Cézanne, Rodin and Renoir were still only children. The society painters of the time were Eugène Lami, the affected and cold Winterhalter, Constantin Guys and Alfred de Dreux.

The dressmakers of the day — we were bound to come to them eventually — were called Alexandrine, Popelin, Ducare and Gagelin.

The dresses they made matched the mentality of this bourgeois society that had only one thought in mind, to follow the precept of Guizot, the statesman: «Get rich».

The women who wore these dresses witnessed the rapid transformation of Parisian society. The reign of boredom was over.

There was the coup d'Etat, the Empire and, most important of all, the marriage of the Emperor in 1853, to the prettiest woman of the day, a young Spanish beauty called Eugénie de Montijo.

The Empress liked to be surrounded by lovely women, the Emperor was very susceptible to their beauty — a little too much perhaps — and that led him to protect the luxury trades and encourage their development.

First of all there was the wedding dress of the Empress, whose trousseau had been entrusted to the two court dressmakers, Madame Palmyre and Madame Vignon.

And then outside the court circle there were the fashionable women of the middle-classes, the theatre and the demi-monde.

The couturiers, Palmyre, Vignon, Gagelin, Mangas, Pingat, Roger and Minette, were all overwhelmed with work; but they were soon to be dethroned, for the man who was to revolutionize dressmaking made his appearance. He was presented to the court by Pauline de Metternich in 1858; his name was Charles-Frédéric Worth...

He had left England while still very young to come to France and had worked as a dress-designer at Gagelin's. There he met the shop-assistant whom he later married.



Together they started up in business and all the creations he designed were for her.

He did away with frills, encouraged the manufacture of machine-made lace, set Lyons to work, wore a moustache, a velvet jacket and beret to match; he introduced sportswear and mannequin parades. And above all, he was the man for the crinoline. The crinoline takes its name from the horsehair (« crin » in French means horsehair) frame which was used to support heavy skirts. Later on this horsehair was replaced by a wire framework but the name crinoline remained.

The crinoline brought about great changes and made life much more complicated. Its popularity continued to increase from 1857 to 1868.

But, subject to the dictate of fashion which requires exaggeration to the point of ridiculousness and then complete oblivion, it died a sudden death. It was revived again later, but only partially, in the form of the bustle.

Before leaving the Second Empire, mention must be made of the great International Exhibitions, which were the steppingstones on the road to elegance.

The invention was English: London, 1851.

Napoleon III wanted France to do even better, and this led to the 1855 Exhibition, a first attempt crowned with success. But most notable of all was the 1867 Exhibition: 42,000 exhibitors, compared with 24,000 in 1855. Great success was met with by the furs from Russia, woollens from Australia, cashmeres from India, silks from China, the Bohemian glassware and the Dresden china, but the greatest triumph of all was that of French industry.

It was the apotheosis of the woman of the Second Empire, and of the crinoline which was to disappear that same year.

The average price of a ball dress was 4,500 francs, nearly a million French francs to-day. The price of a day dress was 1,200 francs.

On July 15th, 1870, war broke out between France and Prussia. It was the end of elegance for the time being.

The year 1870, with the end of the imperial splendour, brought about the break.

The new couturiers then appeared on the scene.

There was Laferrière who started up in the Rue Taitbout in 1869, and Doucet in the Rue de la Paix in 1870.

The way had been paved by Worth. From now on, the

couturiers understood what they could accomplish and what was expected of them. They saw the whole world acclaiming their creations, and saw the return of a period similar to that when the French Court had been the model for the rest of Europe, as in the time of Marie-Antoinette. They were not at all inclined to relinquish this position of leadership.

Internationalism was still only a philosophical problem, and out nationalism was as prevalent among the working classes, as among the middle classes and the aristocracy.

Gradually Paris took up all its old traditions again, this Paris which Haussmann had transformed, had made more spacious and more beautiful and which had grown used to claiming a mission of beauty in the world, of friendliness, of wit and good manners. People were coming out of retirement again. Cautiously dresses began to move away from austerity and, when Mac-Mahon became President of the Republic in 1873, Paris took on all its former glory. This movement continued to increase right up to 1914.

Paris had come to life again.

It was the period of the « bustle », a new version of the « pouf » which had taken the place of the departed crinoline; it was the period of the telephone — 1876 — of the growth of industry, but it was also the period of an art, still only in its infancy, but which was later to conquer the whole world.

It is useless to look for reproductions of this art in the special « Salon » numbers of the periodical *L'Illustration*, they will only appear there much later, for it was disparaged and spurned; its name was Impressionism.

In 1876, nineteen painters gave an exhibition of their work at Durand-Ruel's house in the Rue Le Pelletier. Albert Wolff's comment in the *Figaro* was: « Rue Le Pelletier is out of luck, after the fire which burnt down the old Opera, a new disaster has descended upon it — an exhibition of painting has just been opened there. The passer-by who enters is greeted by a cruel sight. Some lunatics, among them a woman, are holding an exhibition of their work. »

These lunatics included among others, Claude Monet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Renoir, Berthe Morizot; to-day their work appears in the Louvre.

It was the period when Boudin painted the women on the beach at Trouville, protecting their complexions under brightly coloured sunshades.

The period that saw the début of the couturier Raudnitz in 1876, of Beer in 1877, Félix in 1862 and Redfern the same year; Redfern, the elegant, made-up martinet who used to use a Malacca cane to point out to his forewomen the alterations which had to be made to the dresses he had designed.

The fashion was set in Paris by the Rue de la Paix, the Place Vendôme and the Rue de Rivoli.

A very young milliner, she was only 19, started off on her own on the other side of town, over a café in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré where she lived on the first floor. That was in 1886; she was the eldest of a family of ten children towards whose needs she had in part to contribute, her father's only means of subsistence being his friendship with the Victor Hugos and the money he earned working as a hack journalist for the « *Rappel* ». Her name was Jeanne Lanvin. She had just spent two years in Spain, at Barcelona, first of all with employers with whom she was very unhappy, and then with others with whom she became very good friends.

After Lanvin, there was Paquin, Rue de la Paix in 1893; then there was Callot, Rue Taitbout in 1896, followed by Dœuillet in 1899.

Next page: 1912, Dress made by Jeanne Lanvin for Eve Lavallière.

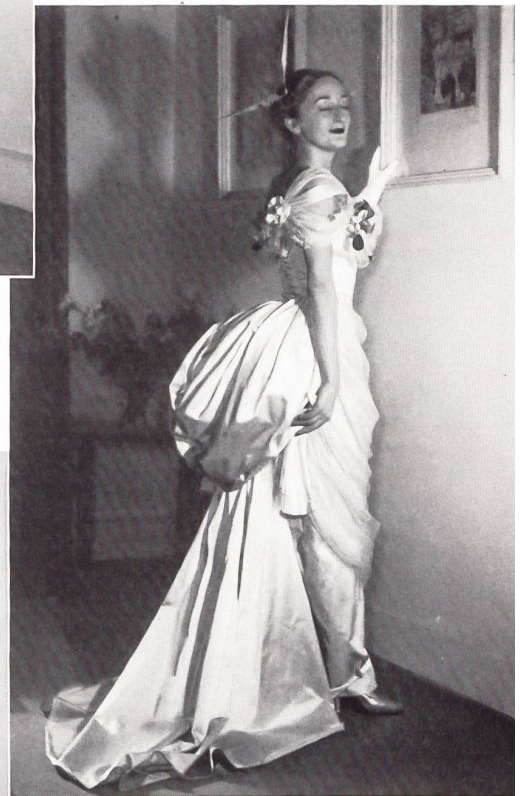
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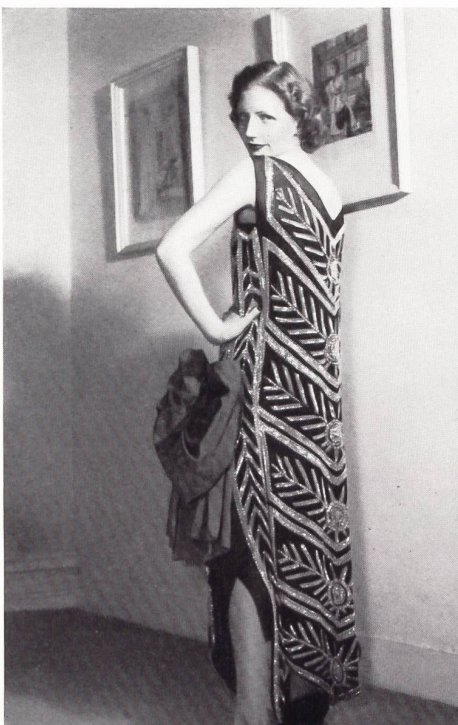
1848



1875



1885



1912



Photo Kicia, Paris

JEANNE LANVIN

«Rose des Neiges», robe en broderie anglaise et organdi blanc.
 «Snow-Rose», a dress of broderie anglaise and white organdie.
 «Rosa de las Nieves», vestido de bordado de punto inglés y de organdí blanco.
 «Schneerose», ein Kleid aus Lochstickerei und weißem Organdi.

And that brings us to 1900.

In order to give a clear picture, I should need to speak of the modern-style furniture, the building on the Avenue Rapp, Maxim's, the entrances to the Underground stations, and those countless works of so-called art, in which bad taste was so evident.

1900 saw the advent of the motor-car.

It was also the year of Chéruit, the new couturier.

Much has been written about 1900 — too much perhaps.

It has become a facile theme for humourless jokes. From the democratic bowler of Monsieur Loubet, to the goatskin coat of the Marquis de Dion who used to ride around on his petrol-driven tricycle; everything was held up to ridicule, everything, except woman.

The statue at the Exhibition, Place de la Concorde, representing the Parisienne, was over 18 feet high. That was how the sculptor Moreau Vauthier wanted it. She raised her head crowned with a diadem; she opened her hands in a gesture of offering. The Parisienne on her pedestal offered herself to the world, but she gave the impression that she would wrap her flowing cloak snugly around her in a gesture of defence if she were to be approached too closely. She was anxious to welcome but it was only as a duty, as soon as the Exhibition was over she would go back to her entresol.

1905 — there was a war going on. But it was at the other end of the world. Russia had just been defeated at Tsushima by the Japanese squadrons; it was all most interesting. The life of Paris was in full swing. People flocked in crowds to the salons of Worth, Chéruit, Dœuillet, Callot, Beer and Paquin. The Parisienne had hardly changed at all since the beginning of the century.

I am anxious now to come to more modern times. Let us jump four years, and come to Poiret. He had just settled in his house in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré where he was to revolutionize dressmaking.

Paul Poiret was an extraordinary personality. This man with his sea-green eyes, with his close-cut Newgate frill, his wide half-belted jackets, and his round-toed shoes, who was insolent and pleasant by turns, both cynical and credulous, played the leading rôle of his day. He had made a curious start in life — mending holes in umbrellas! He soon became disgusted with this dull and uninspiring task. He decided he wanted to design dresses. He was taken on by Doucet, but left him to work for Worth, the Worths of the second generation. But Gaston Worth, accustomed to designing for princesses, did not care for Poiret's designs. « Call that a dress? It's more like a sack! » So Poiret left Worth to start off on his own in the Rue Auber. He had very particular ideas of his own on cut and colour, and in this he was joined by Paul Iribe. He liked contrasting colours, the Munich style which was beginning to supplant that of 1900. He wanted women without corsets, and disguised them in silken shrouds, in lamp-shades or as odalisques in a harem.

His master-stroke was the dress rehearsal of the *Minaret*, that play without literary value which attracted the whole of Paris to come and look at the red trees, the violet flowers and the apple green costumes.

Poiret's was the period of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet which in 1909 revealed the talent of Bakst, Nijinsky and Ida Rubinstein. Who does not remember the enthusiasm aroused by *Schéhérazade*, by *Le Spectre de la Rose*, and *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*?

This riot of brilliant colours, this orgy of iridescent costumes, the extraordinary opulence of this orientalism, contri-



buted something new. It was not until 1925 and the Ballets Nègres that we were to experience such vivid sensations again.

Poiret was the father of the hobble-skirt, which the daughters of the women he designed it for, were to wear again in 1946, '47 and '48 (for nothing is ever really new in fashion).

We have now reached 1912. This was the year of the opening of Auguste Perret's « Théâtre des Champs-Élysées ». It was also the year of the plays by de Flers and Caillavet, the year of Eve Lavallière's triumph. In *L'Habit Vert*, she wore a white dress. She had large brown, startled eyes, the air of a mininette and a very Parisian smile. She was the star of the Variétés. Very soon afterwards she retired from the stage and entered a convent. But, in 1912 she was very full of life, very vivacious and adored by everyone.

The Parisienne of the day had changed little since 1875. She lived in the same artificial way, and did not care for sport. Her lily-white complexion was greatly admired and her form was seductively concealed rather than brutally revealed; when she went bathing, she wore a costume with a skirt; schoolboys dreamed about the glimpse of an ankle revealed; she had been freed from the corset, but she was still very elegant, very feminine.

The war was to change all that.

The men left for the front, the women went to work, they began to dress simply and soberly, they had to do without carriages, by day as well as by night. And the couturier who continued to work during the war adapted himself to the new demands; he launched the short skirt. It was a revolution. In the spring of 1915 women's legs were visible to the world for the first time.

And, when the armistice came, when life began again, it could be seen that the world people had known had gone forever, that everything had changed.

New couturiers came to join the old to dress the new woman.

First of all came Lieutenant Lucien Lelong who had just been demobilised. His house was still quite small, but

he was young, full of ideas, and was soon to meet with the greatest success.

Then there was Jean Patou who created the simple dress and who, after only a few months, took his place among the leaders. There was Gabrielle Chanel, Coco to the smart set, who was unsuccessful as a milliner but showed herself to be a couturière, when she introduced the sweater. Soon after came Madeleine Vionnet, the virtuoso of the skilful cut.

All this in an atmosphere of nervous unrest, of excitement and despair.

The young crowd, full of new enthusiasms, diffident, as yet unknown, gathered around Jean Cocteau every evening. Raymond Radiguet was slowly drinking himself to death, two young designers listening attentively to his every word. We shall meet them again later on, among the leaders of elegance; they were the two Christians: Christian Bérard and Christian Dior.

All Paris was being drawn to the left bank by Jacques Copeau, with his shows at the Vieux-Colombier where an actor-electrician was beginning to attract attention: his name was Louis Jouvet.

What was happening to elegance meanwhile? Looking at it in retrospect, it gave evidence of a most unfortunate taste. The simplification which Patou and Chanel initiated came to such a point that there was a violent reaction against it. But not towards femininity. It was generally accepted that women should have no shape; but one cannot work with what does not exist. The movement was towards the embellishment of the dress itself. Both Patou and Lanvin covered their tunic-dresses and other creations lavishly with pearls and embroidery. The style was simple, the dress being nothing more than a straight decorative panel, but the material was rich. And the waist was going lower and lower.

Fashion has always seemed to delight in playing with women's waistlines, either by having them in their right place or by putting them right up under the bosom as in the time of the Directoire. Now at this particular moment, the waist was no more than a symbol, it was tending down towards the knees, which it almost reached in 1925. It was discretely suggested by a rosette or a bunch of ribbons. I personally do not like this fashion — it corresponded no doubt to the period of greatest prosperity in Parisian Haute Couture, at a time when foreign buyers were ordering their models by the hundred, when Jean Patou had mannequins come over from New York at a salary of 10,000 francs a month, nearly 200,000 french francs to-day (about £200 at the official rate of exchange) — but nevertheless, in my opinion this fashion was ugly, because it was not feminine.

Prosperity was then the rule in fashion for everybody. How many names that are no longer heard to-day: Bernard, Bichoff, David, Premet, Dœuillet, Jenny, Louise Boulanger, Augusta Bernard, and others that I have certainly forgotten.

Fashion changed. Skirts became longer, evening dresses brushed the ankles which they had abandoned, and eventually hid them again (in 1929) with their silky folds.

Dresses rediscovered woman's body, they were never to forget it again.

Couturiers were born and prospered: Alix Grès, Bruyère, Nina Ricci, Maggy Rouff; while, spurred by the desire to succeed in Paris, as Worth had once done, young couturiers and couturières from abroad came to try their luck. Some of them had brilliant success. An Englishman, Molyneux, who immediately imposed his quiet good

taste; an Italian, Elsa Schiaparelli, who played mercilessly with certain skilful contrasts of colour, and filled the spectacular rôle that is always held by anyone new to couture; a Swiss, Robert Piguet, whose models were considered to be particularly Parisian. An American, Mainbocher. A Spaniard, Balenciaga, who transposed the splendours of Velasquez to his Parisian creations...

When the Liberation came, creative Paris was ready to claim its place. Without leather, it had invented elegant shoes, without wool or silk it had clothed the day gracefully, made warm and elegant cocktail gowns for unheated receptions, it had set the fashion for the frivolously decorated chef-style hats, which so exasperated the officials of the Hotel Majestic where the German General Staff had established themselves; the gloves were made of vegetable fibre — I have worn some that were made of nettles. The substitute textile industries had reached an unparalleled virtuosity. Everything was imitation, artificial, everything except talent.

Great difficulties which at first sight seem insuperable, often bring great improvements in their train.

Meanwhile, people in other countries had been busy too, had organised themselves, logically enough, to be able to do without Paris. It was necessary then, during the long period that was to elapse before our visitors could freely come back again, to go and visit them ourselves.

When we were not sending out mannequins near and far on expeditions to Zurich or Rio de Janeiro, Lisbon or Sydney, we would send their graceful little sisters, the dolls of the Théâtre de la Mode, which were to be seen after Paris, in London, Leeds, Copenhagen, Stockholm, New York and San Francisco.

It was an idea which I believe will go down in history. These dolls made of supple wire, lived a much more *real* life with their suggested bodies, in their dream settings, than the precise reconstructions of Madame Tussaud's or of the Musée Grévin. They solved the problem of movement without motion. It must be noted that the finest decorators of the period had collaborated towards this success. Christian Bérard, Emilio Terry, Touchagues, Dignimont, Gefroy, Beaurepaire, St. Martin, Douking, Cocteau, Wakhevitch and J. Denis Malcles.

Just a few words remain to be said about the couturiers. I cannot quote the names of all those who helped to keep things going during the occupation, and contributed so much to the rapid recovery of Paris after the war.

But I should like to call your particular attention to Jacques Fath the whimsical, whose work is full of joy, Pierre Balmain who, in two years, has asserted his mastery, and finally the youngest of these three, Christian Dior who, in spite of his forty-six years, is the brilliant Benjamin of the creators.

Around them, and in their wake, move those who have not yet reached the heights, but who are climbing higher every day. Jeanne Lafaurie, Carven, Raphaël, Marcelle Chaumont, Jean Dessès, Jacques Griffe, Mad Carpentier, and others whom I forget... They all have one thing in common — talent. And yet the great names, those who renew themselves continually and who know to keep their eternal youth, continue to bear the torch, whether it be Lanvin, or my friend Roger Worth.

A fascinating profession, but a difficult one. Every one of us threatens every day to abandon it in face of the difficulties that surround us. But it takes an exceptional case like that of Lelong before one can actually bring oneself to do it.