Dressing Modern Frenchwomen

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Dressing Modern Frenchwomen: Marketing Haute Couture, 1919–1939. 


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Chapter One

Couturiers/Couturières

Since the seventeenth century, French manufacturers and exporters have traded on their reputation for tasteful luxury products and have represented the French as having a more refined taste than citizens of other nations. According to Leora Auslander, taste was contrasted to the more transitory, historically specific notion of style. Until the twentieth century, taste was largely an expression of bourgeois class formation and consolidation, guided by a burgeoning number of “taste professionals,” who distinguished between tasteful and merely fashionable products. By the mid-nineteenth century, Whitney Walton demonstrates, bourgeois Frenchwomen were being held up as bastions of taste. In the furniture business, this meant large numbers of copies of royal styles. Rather than exact reproductions, manufacturers produced historical pastiches such as Louis XVI–style furniture. Claiming ownership of these products was difficult, even under the copyright law of 1902, which protected industrial models. One consequence was the wide-scale production and consumption of historical pastiche furniture.

Since the emergence of a gendered fashion culture in the eighteenth century, critics had denounced women’s taste as a response to worries about “the effeminacy of French art and the weakening of French culture.” One response to such critics was to proclaim the superiority of the taste of Frenchwomen. Interwar fashion arbiters employed rhetoric about the supremacy of the taste (variously and vaguely defined as discretion, distinction, finesse, grace, or tact) of Parisiennes or Frenchwomen, especially after the disruptions of international trade during and after the First World War and the Great Depression. While fashion arbiters
drew distinctions between good taste (le bon ton) and style (le dernier cri), they did not discount new styles, as long as all items of clothing were assembled into an elegant look and adapted to a personal style. One consequence was that interwar fashion, which drew upon historical styles and “borrowed” from other cultures, was characterized not by historical or cross-cultural pastiche but by a mix of modern and traditional elements that I call hybrid modern, and others call art deco.

Instead, the logic of fashion was “based on the tension between originality and reproduction,” much like the logic of contemporary modern art. In *Couture Culture*, Nancy Troy argues that Paul Poiret (1879–1944) constructed himself as an artist to employ high culture and its discourses to sell his clothing to wealthy clients while following the seemingly opposite course of enhancing the popular appeal of his work. Troy compares the signature label on designer dresses and the signature of modern artists on their works, such as Marcel Duchamps’s signature on art objects that fell between unique works of art and mass-produced commodities. But signature styles were only one of an array of marketing practices, and Paul Poiret only one of a remarkable group of designers, male and female, who introduced new styles and new marketing practices.

**Couturiers, 1860s–1920**

The transplanted Englishman Charles Worth (1825–95) launched modern haute couture in the 1860s, when he broke with the prevailing system, in which dressmakers filled individual customers’ orders for styles in fabrics that customers chose. Instead, Worth insisted that the couturier was a “creator,” who presented finished designs, known as models, to affluent customers and imposed his taste on customers. He elevated the status of dressmakers and introduced a house, or signature, style, two essential ingredients in haute couture. Beginning as a silk salesman in a dry goods establishment specializing in Lyonnais silks that also offered customers clothing made from their fabrics, Worth first made dresses for his employers, then in 1857 set up his own business, known as the House of Worth and Bobergh (his Swedish partner for several years). He introduced the bustle and back-swept skirts, which facilitated movement by comparison to the huge and awkward bell-shaped skirts that had preceded them. He also displayed princess dresses with low waistlines and empire-style dresses with high waistlines and low necklines.

But Worth’s designs are less distinctive for their lines than for their rich silk material, especially new purple and magenta printed silks made possible by recently discovered aniline dyes and printing techniques. Most of his designs had lavish

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*Gender, Genius, and Publicity*
embroidery, beading, or lace trim. Worth, who opined that “we live by and for luxury,” inaugurated the “opulent era” of dress design. The houses of Doucet (1822–1924) and Pingat (1860s–1896) carried on this tradition, with their own design specialties: Doucet’s less-structured dresses in more delicate fabrics suited the art nouveau aesthetic, while Pingat was the master of wraps and outerwear.

These three men were part of a mid-nineteenth-century trend of men reentering the dressmaking business. The gender history of dressmakers is not unilinear, for men had dominated facets of dressmaking in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Clare Haru Crowston has demonstrated that the link between dressmaking and allegedly feminine skills was forged in the eighteenth century. The term couturier (as opposed to couturière) had nearly disappeared in the eighteenth century, when the usual designation for men in the clothing trades was tailleur, which implied the more skilled aspect of the trade, cutting, and fitting. As late as the interwar decades, many men in the clothing trades preferred the designation tailor or ladies’ tailor. After a decline in the number of men in the field in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, haute couture, and the coupled concept of the couturier as creator, was associated with male designers for fifty years.

The familiar identification of creativity with masculinity is one reason that many fashion historians call Paul Poiret the preeminent modern couturier. A related reason is that many art historians consider cut or form to be the essence of modern art. Poiret himself claimed responsibility for the early-twentieth-century transformation of women’s dress silhouette from S–curved to straight-lined. Art historian Richard Martin sees his use of geometric forms and flat profiles in dresses as reflections of “the culture of Cubism.” Poiret began his career as a designer for the couturière Mme. Cheruit and then for the House of Doucet before he opened his own couture house in 1904. Two years later, he introduced high-waisted, empire-style dresses and interpreted this innovation in the cut of women’s dress as a revolution that freed their bodies. In one of his autobiographies, En Habillent l’époque, he contended that his tubular dresses rid women of the corset and thereby “liberated” their midriff. More objective commentators, notably the doyenne of fashion historians, Valerie Steele, and the long-time editor of Vogue, Diana Vreeland, observe that Poiret mainly designed for his slender wife without theorizing about liberating women’s bodies and vacillated in his dedication to bodily liberty when he introduced hobble skirts, which severely constrained mobility.

Although no one doubts that Poiret was the most imaginative prewar designer, biographers are skeptical of some of his self-serving claims. Alice Mackrell treats
Poiré’s prewar alterations in the silhouette less as a revolution than as a revival of the high-waisted designs of the Directory and the Empire (1796–1815). Her approach is not only based on an admirable skepticism about the hyperbolic quality of designers’ promotional material and of fashion discourse more generally; she also takes a broader perspective on the chronology of modern European women’s silhouettes, one initially developed by A. B. Young, who discerned two tubular cycles, the first from 1796 to 1829 and the second beginning in 1900 and lasting to 1937. Because seventy years of fuller skirts, subdivided into a “bell-shaped cycle” (1830–67) and a “back-fullness cycle” (1868–99), separated these two tubular eras, the lapse of time explains why a revival might be received as a revolution. Mackrell notes that Poiré admitted that he had been influenced by his studies of the sculptures of Antiquity. In Poiré’s other autobiography, My First Fifty Years, he wrote of learning “to use one point of support—the shoulder, where before me it had been the waist. All my gowns flowed from that point of support at the extremity of the shoulders and were never fastened at the waist. This new basic principle caused fashion to evolve toward classical antiquity.” My examination of fashion modernism extends this line of argument by suggesting that modern style was based upon a combination of new and classical elements.

Mackrell demonstrates that Poiré fluctuated between Western and Eastern influences. He borrowed Far Eastern designs like the Japanese kimono, which he encountered during world travel; cultural visitors to Paris, such as the Ballets Russes, which triggered an Oriental “craze,” prompted other “exotic” innovations. His continuing commitment to rich Orientalism in line and fabric reflects his specialization in leisure wear for the wealthy. As Herbert Blau suggests, his highly ornamental attire was to be “worn uniquely, as if beyond the gaze, and certainly not on the street, or even at the opera or ostentatiously at a ball.” A mélange of classical and “exotic” features would define fashion modernism—although exoticism included Eastern Europe and colonial Africa as well as the Orient, and fashion modernism would more often imply exotic fabrics than radically different dress styles.

Poiré’s immediate postwar silhouette, with an ample bodice, pagoda sleeves, and long, flared skirt in the manner of Breton peasants, hardly enhanced women’s bodily freedom, and customers simply did not buy these folkloric costumes. Poiré slowly resigned himself to shorter hemlines and straighter skirts. Despite a final hurrah at the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in 1925, Poiré ceased to have an impact on style. His elaborate designs, extravagant lifestyle, and managerial style resulted in bankruptcies and reduced him to designing ready-to-wear clothing.
for Au Printemps department store and models for a couture house that legally could not carry his name (though aficionados knew he was the house designer).  

Couturières, 1906–1939

Poiret’s claims to have single-handedly smoothed the silhouette and liberated women’s midriffs clash with evidence that couturières made similar alterations to the silhouette. When Poiret first showed empire styles in his collection, in 1906, the leading designer of the era, Jeanne Paquin (1859–1938), also showed an empire line. After the death of Charles Worth in 1894, Jeanne Paquin was the best-known designer of ball gowns and other sumptuous apparel. Since her start as an apprentice to a “little,” or neighborhood, dressmaker, she had worked as a seamstress and a designer in a couture house before she and her husband, Isadore Paquin, built her own house up to the point that it employed more than two thousand workers in 1900. That same year she was elected president of the fashion section at the Universal Exhibition in Paris, and she designed the clothing for the huge statue of La Parisienne, which loomed over the entrance to the exhibition. In 1913, she was awarded the Legion of Honor, and during the war she became the first female president of the Couture Syndicate. In the first two decades of the century, Paquin conducted a legal campaign to control representations of her models in the fashion press and to use laws on artistic and industrial property rights to stop reproduction of her models by competitors in haute couture. As an early-twentieth-century couturier, Poiret has overshadowed Paquin because Paquin introduced fewer major changes than he did and because she took issue with some of the gender-bending changes that have been enshrined in the pantheon of precursors of modern design. In the fracas over Poiret’s harem pants in 1911, Paquin criticized them as “unaesthetic,” and she threw her support behind fuller skirts in the quarrel over the slim skirts introduced by Callot Soeurs in 1912. Another reason for her relative neglect is that, like most couturières, hers was a circumspect lifestyle.

During the Belle Epoque, women designers moved into haute couture, and by the interwar period, there were more couturières of distinction than at any time before or since that period. Women’s access to the world of haute couture differed in some particulars from that of couturiers. Some, like Worth, began their careers in commercial establishments selling fabrics and clothing; many, like Poiret, had previously designed for other couturiers. Textile firms, department stores, and other suppliers partially financed both couturiers and couturières. Family con-
nections played a role in both groups’ ascent, though men usually got financial assistance from fathers or fathers-in-law, while women were more likely to get start-up money from husbands or sisters. For instance, the Callot sisters began with a fancy goods shop in 1888. After Marie, whose married name was Gerber, acquired skills and clients designing for another couture house, she relocated the sisters’ shop to the couture district and changed it into a couture house. Reopened in the heart of the haute couture district after a wartime closure, the firm operated under her and her husband’s direction until her death in 1927, when first her sons and then her widower took over. Other couturières began as milliners; several others built up a devoted clientele as première, or head, seamstresses at established couture houses and took their clientele with them when they set up their own houses. At least two couturières got much of their initial funding—and encouragement—from wealthy customers.24

The most innovative and influential designers of the interwar decades were couturières, not couturiers. In the 1920s, Madeleine Vionnet (1876–1975) and Coco Chanel (1873–1971) launched the shift toward looser, more comfortable women’s dresses. Elsa Schiaparelli (1890–1973) added touches of whimsy and color to the more sober designs of the 1930s. A fourth couturier, Sonja Delaunay (1885–1979), innovated in fabric and color mixes, but she was not as influential as the other three.

Although Madeleine Vionnet is now less well known than Chanel, she was very highly regarded in the 1920s. Vionnet began as a laundress, worked in London as première at Paquin’s outlet there and at Kate Reilly’s shop selling Paris models. When she returned to Paris, she designed for Doucet from 1907 to 1911 and set up her own house in 1912. In 1908, Vionnet’s contribution to the Doucet collections included dresses draped from the shoulders. Inspired by Ancient Greek apparel on statues in the Louvre, she cut material on the bias to fall in soft folds, or tiny pleats, from the shoulder or breast to mold to and move with the body. Aside from flagging her modernist attention to cut and line, art and fashion historians discern other artistic and design influences. Richard Martin detects the influence of cubist art and Japanese design in her emphasis on form and construction rather than ornamentation. Betty Kirke also argues that Vionnet drew inspiration from Japanese designs, notably cutting her flowing tubular dresses in rectangular pieces, like patterns for kimonos, in order to increase their “fluidity.”25 Although the contemporary fashion press lauded her “cutting expertise,”26 it was taciturn about avant-garde artistic and non-Western influences on her designs. Instead, fashion journalists paid tribute to her combination of antique and
modern design: “All the sympathy of her logical spirit, her artist’s imagination, remains resolutely turned toward these two points: responding to the needs of the modern woman while resting on the great Greek and Roman traditions.”

One reason Vionnet is less famous today than Poiret or Chanel is that she did less self-promotion. (Another reason is her retirement in 1940. Unlike Chanel, she did not reopen her house after World War II.) Far from contending that she invented the tubular line, Vionnet insisted that she was uninterested in fashion “insofar as it is unstable and changeable.” Unlike Poiret, her style did not vary significantly over the next thirty years (although it became slightly more fitted in the 1930s). When praised for inventing the bias cut, Vionnet modestly maintained that she only extended the bias cut from skirts to full-length dresses. In several published interviews, she did claim to have freed women’s bodies from corsets, tight bodices, and heavy skirts.

Believing in as many styles as there were types of women, she claimed that her purpose was to enhance the beauty of every kind of woman. In actuality, she designed for women whose physical beauty inspired her and although—or perhaps because—she was squat, she admired tall, slender women. Contemporaries connected her style with greater respect for the contours of the female body. Fashion photographer Cecil Beaton wrote that “everything Vionnet created had a cling or a flow, and women dressed by her were like moving sculptures. Through her use of materials she exposed the anatomy of women for the first time,” and Diana Vreeland of Vogue described how a Vionnet dress could be slipped over the head to reveal the body’s contours without any side or back opening. Her dresses were showcases for well-shaped bodies.

Although Coco Chanel championed the simplification of women’s attire, she and her hagiographers have exaggerated her singularity in this regard. In addition to making ladies’ wear less complicated and less decorative, like other couturières, she made it more androgynous, which was less common. Financed by one of a series of well-heeled lovers, Gabrielle Chanel rented a suite at a hotel in the posh Atlantic seaside resort of Deauville in 1913. Initially Chanel sold hats, but soon she introduced striped turtleneck sweaters borrowed from sailors’ uniforms into ladies’ wardrobes. Because she began in sportswear, a type of clothing that should enable bodily movement, she developed loose apparel that required no corsets. By the time she arrived in Paris shortly before the outbreak of war, she specialized in sports or, more appropriately, leisure clothing. Slender, with a boyish figure, she created straight-lined dresses and suits suitable only for slim, androgynous bodies like her own. Later she added pleated inserts to allow longer strides.
If these innovations were not unique, her experimentation with fabrics was unusual. Chanel’s use of wool jersey changed assumptions that knits were too limp for dresses. By 1927, jerseys were ubiquitous in couture collections and within two years, in ready-to-wear apparel. Chanel was never very interested in trimmings other than braid on jackets or white or ecru collars and cuffs on black dresses. This kind of trim became very popular. She eschewed padding, preferring to have clothing fall naturally. In her own words, even a “suit only looks good when the woman who wears it seems to have nothing on underneath.” When wearing skirts, she felt, “you should be able to see the thigh and everything that goes on, and it should be comfortable to wear.” One of her objectives was to design sleeves that allowed full arm movement without distorting the bodice. On the subject of the sleeve, she said: “It just has to follow the body of the wearer, not be all over the place. It is meant to fall straight over the shoulder-blades, not bulge out.”

Contemporaries in the fashion world rated Chanel’s innovations essential to the triumph of modern women’s clothing and to the emergence of the modern woman. In the October 1923 review of the fall collections, Vogue magazine set the tone: “No collection reflects as much as Chanel’s the thought of her creator and is as completely identified with the tastes of the present day. She knows how to give modern women the same expression of her spirit and realize a harmony in the diverse parts of her outfits. Chanel expresses the entire soul of the modern woman.” Decades later, the contemporary fashion photographer Cecil Beaton contended that “Chanel had literally pole-vaulted women’s fashions from the nineteenth into the twentieth century” by stripping it of its frills before accessorizing with long strands of beads and “cascades of huge pearls.” He described the look as “chic poverty.” Like many others, he noted her focus on overall appearance and her interest in fashion (some said uniforms) for the many, rather than style for elegant individuals. “As a dress designer, she was virtually nihilistic, for behind her clothes was an implied but unexpressed philosophy: the clothes do not really matter at all, it is the way you look.”

Following the lead of Gilles Lipovetsky, recent fashion theorists have identified Chanel with the nineteenth-century dandy. Carolyn Evans and Minna Thornton argue that Chanel drew upon the tradition of the dandy, an “essentially masculine cult of distinction mediated through style and dress” that signified personal independence. Unlike most couturières, Chanel reveled in publicity and infused her personality into her designs so thoroughly that “wearing a Chanel” became “wearing Chanel.” Like Beau Brummel and other dandies, she simplified the
profile, dismantled social distinctions, and promoted a more androgynous look. It is less clear that her look signified independence. 39

The third influential couturière between the two world wars differed dramatically from Chanel and Vionnet. Italian-born Elsa Schiaparelli was widely traveled when she arrived on the Paris fashion scene in the late 1920s. Like Chanel but unlike Vionnet, she was “hampered by none of the dressmaking traditions. Most of her designing was done in her head, often while walking to work, alone in the countryside, driving.” 40 Like the other two couturières, she claimed to respect the female body, but she did not mean the undulating curves of many women’s bodies as much as the skeletal structure beneath the curves. More of an architect of clothing than Chanel or Vionnet, she considered the skeleton the frame for her clothing. 41 Although she designed leisure wear that left women’s bodies free to move, her leisure wear was distinctive. Starting with sports clothes in 1927, she designed hand-knit cardigans with “amusing” patterns (fig. 1). Her skeleton sweater hit newspapers that took little notice of fashion. White lines on the sweater outlined a rib cage so that the woman wearing it “gave the appearance of being seen through an x-ray.” 42

Schiaparelli’s cosmopolitanism made her more open to colonial influences than Chanel or Vionnet. Schiaparelli literally appended West African masks on sweaters and capes and appropriated other West African symbols for her designs. This appropriation occurred at the same time that dress designers “borrowed” liberally from other cultures, but primarily from the Balkans, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. 43 Schiaparelli guilelessly described the exploitative process as adding “Negro-like designs . . . and strange scrawls from the Congo.” In this, she was not unlike the School of Paris artists who, “indifferent to the myriad ethnographic discoveries concerning the meaning and use of the artifacts within their source culture, attended strictly to the physical characteristics of the objects. While this attitude may have granted the objects a respect . . . it also insured that appreciation could manifest itself only according to the precepts of a fashionable . . . primitivizing aesthetic of purely Occidental origins.” 44 An example of this process can be found in the fashion press, where masks from “primitive” cultures were compared to the old European tradition of masks for carnival or Mardi Gras. 45

Schiaparelli transgressed in other ways as well. Evans and Thornton interpret her outrageous clothes as “a discourse of perversity and play,” offering the women who wore them an opportunity to thumb their noses at the decorum of most ladies’ wear. They also construe her more outré garments as spectacle, a

Courtesy, Archives de Paris.
way to disguise the women inside the garments.46 Her hats, in particular, were playful (fig. 2). Gaining fame in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when many women and designers were tiring of reductive straight-lined styles, and when many couture houses were curtailing their production of sportswear, she participated in the allegedly conservative trend toward natural waistlines and longer skirts.47 Yet she also applied eye-catching decorative details like large, hand-carved wooden buttons and incorporated military features like shoulder pads and epaulets in her suit jackets. One of the best fashion journalists, Martine Rénier, called her square shoulders and narrow skirts a “geometric mode” and “an amusing adaptation of contemporary statuary.”48 Schiaparelli’s dominance in the 1930s undermines trite arguments that this decade’s fashion was significantly more conservative than 1920s styles.

When Chanel and Schiaparelli showed black gowns with white trim, Schiaparelli added “unexpectedly” bright colored scarves and gloves. She is, of course, known for introducing “shocking pink” and other vibrant colors into the spectrum for women’s wear. Despite art historians’ and fashion arbiters’ predilection for cut as a marker of modernity, prominent interwar couturiers, including Pierre Gerber, co-director of Callot Soeurs and director of the Couture Syndicate in 1931, praised color. A painter himself, Gerber contended that color gave dresses more individuality, especially in the long period of the “standardized” chemise dresses of the 1920s.49 Authors of articles on fabrics and sewing agreed that color was important, although they also held that the texture of textile was another marker of personality and distinction.50

A fourth couturière, Sonia Delaunay, was a painter before, during, and after her foray into clothing design from 1923 to 1931 and her longer venture in fabric design. Her couture experiments with startling color and texture contrasts grew out of her prewar experience with the “gay colors” of her homeland, her status as a founding member of the group of early abstract painters known as Orphists, and her and her husband Robert Delaunay’s simultaneous color theory about bright and unexpected color combinations giving an impression of life and movement. Her bold geometric patterns expressed her interest in and knowledge about geometry (fig. 3). One of her technical inventions was an embroidery stitch that enhanced the motility of dresses. Her commitment to fluid fabrics meant that she treated dresses as a form of moving painting and expressed the modern agenda of greater mobility for women—an agenda that Delaunay, like other designers, attributed to changes in the lifestyle of modern women.51
Figure 2. Schiaparelli suit and hat, circa 1935.
Copyright Lipnitzki/Roger-Viollet.
However imaginative and exciting her art and fashion, Delaunay, like many women artists, has been dismissed by art historians for operating between the realms of high art and mass culture. Because she made no significant alteration to the line, or cut, she has been accorded less scholarly attention than Chanel or Vionnet. Of course, fixating on cut ignores the fact that Delaunay had no need to alter the basic structure of dresses, because straight lines and flat surfaces, without complicated seaming or construction, served her artistic agenda. Indeed, her agenda was too avant-garde for haute couture and major fashion magazines in the allegedly groundbreaking 1920s. Her experiments with color and texture contributed to the bankruptcy of her couture house in 1931. The return to highly constructed garments in 1929–30 and the Great Depression also hastened her bankruptcy.

Despite the innovations of Chanel, Vionnet, Schiaparelli, and Delaunay, Va-
lerie Steele concluded her study of interwar couturières with an admission that attempts to correlate the less complicated and more comfortable cut of women’s clothing with the special genius of women designers fail. Certainly other couturières, for example, Jenny, whose house operated from 1908 until 1938, and Jane Regny, who opened her house in 1922 and operated through the 1930s, made simple and supple clothing for sportswear and leisure wear. Both popularized pleated skirts and sweaters for sports and outdoor leisure activities (fig. 4). But Jean Patou (1880–1936) was the first couturier to open a sportswear department—in the early 1920s—and he advanced the trend toward more practical styles. Like Poiret’s, his claim to modernize and mobilize women is complicated by contradictory designs, because he was also the first advocate of the natural waistline in 1924 and he kept showing natural waistlines until they were accepted in 1929–30. The revival of the natural waistline, accompanied by fitted bodices and longer, fuller skirts, was welcomed as a return to femininity. Fashion arbiters criticized the revival for hindering women’s mobility—critiques that led to slightly shorter hemlines and less bulky skirts.

A more serious objection to an argument about the special genius of women designers being responsible for the new sports line is the variety of couturières’ approaches to design. Compare Chanel and Vionnet, who shared some personal traits but had quite different signature styles. Both had humble beginnings, a strong desire for independence, and interest in freeing women’s bodies from “false shackles.” However, Chanel barely knew how to sew, whereas Vionnet was a trained seamstress. Chanel, who did not know how to draw, only designed on living mannequins. Vionnet cut and fitted on wooden dolls before approaching the living body. Chanel displayed her designs on her own boyish body; Vionnet preferred to wear androgynous outfits with a Trilby hat rather than her flowing, sculptural designs. Today, Chanel is best known for the little black dress and boxy tweed suits that she introduced in the 1920s. If these fashion statements are now clichés, they were initially controversial. For instance, her tweed suits trespassed on masculine territory, because tweeds had been used for Englishmen’s casual wear. A major element of her success was her pared-down, essentially cross-dressing style. Conversely, Vionnet preferred indubitably feminine silks, notably crepes de chine, satins, and tulles, which were supple enough for the draping effect she sought, and she loved beaded fabrics. Chanel defended the homogeneity of her ensembles, insisting that however homogeneous, they enhanced individual beauty. Vionnet’s credo was clothing to express the body’s singularity, though...
few woman without a svelte body dared to express their bodies’ singularity in her subtly revealing styles.

While almost all couturières produced leisure clothes, all but Amy Linder, Jenny, and Jane Regny built their reputations upon other styles. Nicole Groult (Poiret’s sister) developed two complimentary styles: simple black dresses with a discreet...
touch of color and afternoon—tea or bridge—dresses embroidered with colorful flowers. Louise Boulanger, whose house operated from 1922 to 1938, was known for dresses with sashes, bows, and even trains; her penchant for sashes and bows on the hips was emblazoned in her advertising: “Louiseboulanger authorizes woman to have hips” (fig. 5). She introduced a studio dress made of “sumptuous” fabrics intended “uniquely for the interior—specifically for the studio, a new “semi-intimate room where we like to receive friends at tea time or to have a cigarette”—which fashion commentators considered a feminine alternative to evening pajamas. Both of these couturières emphasized the skilled needlework involved in intricate finishing, a feature that contemporary customers appreciated. Articles in the fashion press more often used descriptors like “habillée,” or “dressy,” than “simple” or “modern,” to describe their models. These women have attracted less historical attention than Chanel, Vionnet, and Schiaparelli because they stressed decorative details, which Cubists and other modern artists dismissed as feminine and passé. Their dedication to decorative detail and fine sewing also clashed with the fashion journalists’ tenet that cut was “the essence of chic Parisianism.” No doubt their subdued personalities also played a role in their historical neglect.

Something similar happened to Jeanne Lanvin (1867–1946), who was best known for her “romantic” mother-daughter outfits (fig. 6), bridge dresses for card parties, and “robes de style,” full-skirted long gowns reminiscent of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evening gowns. She was prescient in opening children’s clothing and sportswear departments and was the first couturier to introduce menswear lines. Like many other couturières, she began as a seamstress and, in her case, opened a house specializing in girls’ dresses that was so successful she soon added ladies’ wear. She designed herself, drawing inspiration from the styles of Antiquity, which she strove “to adapt . . . to our modern taste and give a constantly new face to the things that are eternally beautiful.” In a 1929 interview, and later as head of the fashion section of the international exhibition of 1937, she defined a kind of hybrid modernism in fashion. Couturier Karl Lagerfeld considers her “a great, great, designer” who has been almost forgotten because she was mature by the 1920s and was never a “fashion personality like Chanel.” Valerie Steele adds that Lanvin has been neglected because motherhood is “the one aspect of female sexuality that has not played a significant role in twentieth-century fashion.”
of clothing for baby nurses, babies, or children. One of the paradoxes of interwar design history is that haute couture avoided the maternal body and babies precisely when government, lobbies, and media other than fashion magazines were promoting maternity and natality. One reason for this curious neglect is that agents promoting natality showed little regard for, and made few improvements
in, the actual conditions of pregnancy, birth, and nursing. Fashion magazines shared their disregard for the conditions of maternity and their distaste for the pregnant body. Only women’s weeklies ran articles about “clothes for future mothers,” and they never showed an obviously pregnant body. But fashion media reflected Frenchwomen’s resistance to the constant campaigns to increase the birth rate. Cer-

Figure 6. Lanvin mother and daughter outfits. Séeberger Frères collection, Etampes, box 12, M158259. Courtesy, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
tainly, the French birth rate—notably among the bourgeoisie—rose only briefly immediately after the war, then stabilized in the mid-1920s, and fell in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{76}

One explanation of fashion magazines’ avoidance of maternity—and a partial explanation of Frenchwomen’s decisions to limit pregnancies—was the obsession with youth and slenderness, an obsession that transcended couture.

**Branding and Spectacle**

To entice customers to buy their expensive and innovative designs, couturiers and couturières engaged in a kind of branding based on name recognition and personality. The nearly universal expression of this practice was naming businesses after themselves (Louiseboulanger and Augustabernard ran their first and last names together, perhaps because their last names were very common). As their personal name brands became known, they marked products with their initials, notably on accessories like purses and belt buckles (when belts reappeared on women’s dresses in the early 1930s).\textsuperscript{77} By comparison to today, external labels remained the exception, because people who mattered could distinguish haute couture apparel by subtler means, such as the quality of the fabrics used. Fashion magazines endeavored to teach their readers precisely how to discern telltale details.

Another technique was developing and publicizing a persona as an artist. Nancy Troy demonstrates that Poiret “self-consciously staged his performance as a couturier, designer, art collector, etc.” His theatrical approach included establishing a small theater in his couture house before the war and another one on the grounds of his couture house after the war. His extravagant and exotic costume parties are more evidence of his penchant for spectacle. Indeed, Poiret believed that designing was not his greatest “service to my époque . . . because what I did in this order, another might have been able to do. It was in inspiring artists, in costuming plays . . . that I served the public of my time.”\textsuperscript{78} Poiret imported theatrical elements into the couture business. He presented his models in a “first-night” party, with live mannequins mingling with the guests, showed his collections in his theaters, and directed mannequins on the runway, much like directors treat actors on the stage.\textsuperscript{79} Subsequently, many couturiers presented models on mannequins at evening parties and had mannequins mingle with the guests; they also “directed” their mannequin parades.

However, a Canadian, Lady Duff-Gordon in her guise as the couturière Lucile, first adopted theatrical elements in fashion shows held at her London and Paris shops. Having dressed the “Gaity Girls” on and off stage in 1890s London,
she had live mannequins saunter down a runway to music in the early 1900s, making her fashion shows forerunners of today’s fashion shows. Lucile also held themed fashion shows and replaced the numbers on models with seductive names like “Passion’s Thrall.” Lucile’s techniques and shops being resounding successes, Poiret imitated and surpassed her.  

So did other designers. Consider the names two of the understated couture houses gave their dress models in 1926 and 1930. Augustabernard and Boué Soeurs bestowed mildly erotic, exotic, and sinister nomenclature like “Seduction,” “Ali Baba,” and “Fleurs de Mal” on evening gowns. For day dresses, they favored floral or arboreal designations like “Cornflower” and “Under the Foliage,” based on the colors of the fabrics or the motifs in the prints used in these garments. More imaginatively, they called daytime suits “Stadium” and “Clear Morning,” to evoke such activities as attending sports events or taking morning constitutualons, and they named afternoon dresses after the elegant places they might be worn, such as “Café de Paris” or “Chateau d’Amboise.” Most of these designations appeal to a desire for pleasure and status. A fourth category of sobriquets, attached to more dignified styles, evoked mythical or biblical characters, such as Pénélope or Esther. A fifth category was familiar or facetious feminine names—“Jeanette” or “Frivolenc” (a pseudonym adopted by more than one fashion journalist). While most of these names were French, very few evoked national symbols, for example, “Joan of Arc.” Finally, dress names evoked attractive types of modern women—“Gamine,” “Sportive,” or “Parisienne.” This kind of nomenclature is part and parcel of a marketing technique known as “fashion typing,” whereby styles are associated with glamorous types of women, such as modern young women or sportswomen, and the names subtly suggest that women who wear such styles are equally glamorous.

Textile firms often named fabrics after flora and fauna in their designs, the color of the material, or a distinguishing quality of the fabric (e.g., “Undulating”). They also applied historical names like “Directory” or “Empress,” women’s names like “Arlette,” and fashion-type names like “Sportive.” In the 1930s, when much attention was accorded to dress fabrics, textile manufacturers often used motifs and names from distant lands, which textile reporter Françoise Arnoux thought inspired those who wore clothes made of the fabric, and those who viewed them, to dream of foreign travel (though not, significantly, to travel abroad). I return to the issue of imaginary versus practical uses of fashion magazines in subsequent chapters; here suffice it to say that the magazines offered visions of faraway places.
and fantastic lifestyles and practical advice on how to experience some of the pleasures of both.

Predecessors and competitors of Poiret also allied themselves with the theater. Charles Frederick Worth, who initially relied upon prominent court women to wear and thereby publicize his designs, soon added famous actresses to his bevy of mannequins. Many of his successors counted more on dressing leading actresses on and off stage than on grand dames to publicize their designs. Ads on theater programs, usually showing actresses in designer attire, routinely announced that a particular designer dressed the female star on and off stage. Similar ads appeared in fashion magazines.\(^87\) Femina had a regular column called “Fashion in the Theatre.” The great director Sasha Guitry often chose Paquin designs for the actresses in his plays, notably for Jacqueline Delubac, dubbed by Paris Match “the best-dressed women in Paris.” Costumed in Paquin models, Delubac played “La Parisienne” in a theater tour of South America that stimulated demand for French fashion there.\(^88\) In April 1922 alone, Poiret and three other couturiers designed costumes for several plays running in Paris.\(^89\) Cultural critics considered stage actresses wearing couture outfits to be the couturier’s best agents. Some, like Arletty, had been models for fashion illustrators before stage and film careers. Once famous as a performer, Arletty employed leading couturiers—Poiret, Patou, Schiaparelli—and she continued to pose for fashion shots of designer models.\(^90\)

Famous stage actress Cecile Sorel and musical performer Mistinguette gave interviews that pointedly mentioned their favorite couturier or couturière.\(^91\) Although society magazine writers were skeptical about the example set by stage actresses, arguing that only maids and nouveaux riches followed their “bad example,” their very warning implies that some of their readers tried to imitate these stars.\(^92\) Dramatists who intended to offend bourgeois sensibilities were also disturbing to conservative fashion arbiters. Sonja Delaunay, who comes closest to Poiret in her commitment to the performing arts, designed costumes for a notoriously avant-garde Surrealist performance with music by Stravinsky and Satie, a film by Man Ray, and poems by Cocteau. Along with Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Brancus, and Leger, she participated in the famous 1924 costume ball held by the Union of Russian Artists. She designed a gown for this ball that inspired the Dada poet Blaise Cendrars to write his famous poem “On Her Dress, She Had a Body.”\(^93\) Most interwar designers contented themselves with displaying their designs on style setters at opening nights at major theaters and the Opera.

Designers grew disenchanted with stage actresses, who had lost some allure
since being “at the heart of bourgeois society between 1890 and 1910.” Designers noticed that film actresses were likelier to have the slim and boyish figures that best displayed their straight silhouettes. Milliners also began to employ film stars in their publicity, presumably owing to their popularity rather than their figures, which were not on display in millenary advertisements. The fashion press began to print photographs of movie stars alongside the older staples: photos of baronesses, countesses, and other socially prominent style setters. They ran photo essays of French and American movie stars wearing outfits designed by French couturiers. These essays rarely described how to replicate star styles, a genre of article common in American fan magazines but rare in French movie magazines. Yet French fashion magazines celebrated the cinema as “the school for women” and Hollywood star Jeanette MacDonald as “the ambassador of “French chic,” and they chided French film stars for being less glamorous than Hollywood stars. Literary evidence suggests that many young women did try to emulate movie stars. Both Hollywood and French films included fashion shows, which may have assisted viewers’ efforts to look like style setters.

As cinema became popular, Chanel realized that cinema “was how fashion can be imposed today.” Another master of fashion promotion, Lucien Lelong, believed that “we . . . can no longer live without the cinema.” Poiré designed costumes for seven French films between 1912 and 1927, and Schiaparelli was almost as active costuming French films between 1933 and 1937. At least four other couturières collaborated on four French films apiece between 1927 and 1938. Chanel’s distinguished collaborators included Cocteau (“Le Sang d’un poète,” 1930) and Renoir (“La Marseillaise,” 1939, and “La Regle du jeu,” 1940). Couturiers and couturières also lent their talents to Hollywood films. Chanel’s first two Hollywood films were “vestimentary checks,” insofar as she was ignorant about what was photogenic in the cinema, and her “little dresses” and “poor style” did not show well on the screen. However, her two years as a Hollywood designer improved her finances and enhanced her prestige at home. As the costume designer for six Hollywood films between 1934 and 1939, Schiaparelli had a greater impact in Hollywood. One of her collaborations, “Artists and Models,” was essentially a parade of haute couture. Her broad-shouldered designs, introduced in the 1930–31 collections, corrected a cinematographic problem with the fuller-skirted clothes of the 1930s. Without broad shoulders, these outfits made almost all actresses appear pear-shaped. Her stylistic playfulness and use of exaggerated details also showed well on the screen.

24. Gender, Genins, and Publicity
The gender history of the productive end of haute couture has been circular. Whereas male designers dominated in its first half-century, 1860s–1910s, women played key roles in the 1920s and 1930s. Even the familiar identification of modern art and design with cut or line does not privilege couturier Paul Poiret over couturière Madeleine Vionnet. If Poiret has attracted the most attention and acclaim for “liberating women’s midriff” before the First World War, Jeanne Paquin and Madeleine Vionnet were equally responsible for the high waists of 1908. Like most couturières, these two simply did not engage in as much self-promotion as Poiret did. Coco Chanel, who had no inhibitions about publicity, made as many claims about modernizing—meaning simplifying and streamlining—women’s clothing as Poiret. While her innovations in stripped-down dresses and suits were important and lasting, they were hardly unique; Vionnet’s draped bias dresses contributed as much to the shift toward looser, more comfortable clothing. So, too, did couturières Jane Regny, Amy Linker, and Jenny, who specialized in sports, otherwise known as smart casual clothing. Finally, Elsa Schiaparelli enlivened the sober designs of the 1930s with bright color, humor, and exoticism. All participated, to a greater or lesser extent, in the marketing methods of branding, spectacle, and other forms of publicity that marked couture’s emergence as a model of modern business practices.