Dressing Modern Frenchwomen

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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

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Chapter Nine

The Gender of the Modern

In the 1920s, many articles appeared in French journals about a new kind of woman wearing a new kind of dress with a low waistline, straight lines, and high—meaning mid-calf—hemline. Some critics drew disturbing conclusions from these modern women and styles. In an important book entitled *This Civilization Has No Sexes*—a phrase borrowed from one of these critics—Mary Louise Roberts shows how many male critics correlated the disappearance of the wasp-waist popular on Belle Epoque dresses (along with the popularity of short hair) with an apparent dwindling of sexual differences in post–World War I France. She attributed this discourse to postwar despair about the “ruin of civilization itself” and pronatalist anxieties about depopulation, which included angst about the large number of single women following the loss of 1,300,000 Frenchmen in the war.  

Roberts did not explore fashion magazines to see how influential fashion arbiters defined the chemise dress and the new woman for their readers. She eschewed any effort to determine how individual Frenchwomen incorporated the image of the modern woman into their identities.  

By focusing on fashion arbiters and fashionable women’s attitudes about the gender of modernity, in this chapter I address some of the lacunae in our knowledge of what the chemise and new styles meant to Frenchwomen. I explore how designers, textile manufacturers, the fashion press, and bourgeois women diluted the impact of reputedly masculine styles by “feminizing” straight and “sober” lines with bright colors, soft fabrics, decorative details, and accessories, so that ladies could put together a “tasteful look” that mildly “disrupted” but ultimately reaffirmed the class and gender order.
Cut and Color

Compared to the uproar about partial cross-dressing, cultural criticism of the straight lines of chemise dresses as masculine was muted. It rested on a misreading of vestimentary history as invariably curvilinear for women and rectilinear for men. As A. B. Young documented more than a generation ago, there had been a previous era of straight lines for women, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. And as Claudia Brush Kidwell demonstrated in the 1980s, the cut and padding of men’s clothes in the 1840s had limned a figure-eight shape. Still, the disappearance of the cinched waist—called by one student of dress “the appendage of Occidentalism” and by most other students of dress a potent marker of sexual difference—did evoke commentary.

Instead of seeking distant historical precedents, fashion arbiters traced the chemise dress back to styles developed during the First World War for volunteer nurses and simply noted the loss of a defined waistline as the nurses’ uniform moved into general usage. Many journalists associated the popularity of the chemise with the increased number of women working outside the home, and they attributed shorter hemlines to the increased number of women who used public transport. Most of them agreed with cultural critics that the straight line looked masculine and that it emancipated women. Rather than lambaste the tubular look or lament its masculinizing effects, most fashion reporters described the new look as boyish, simple, and practical and defined emancipation as enabling bourgeois women to mount streetcars and walk city streets. These adjectives and activities were not as threatening to the existing gender system as the terms masculine or emancipating implied. Boys were not yet men; and they were young at a time, after the massive loss of life during the war, when youth was prized. Simple and practical remained in the fashion magazine lexicon through the interwar years and took on new importance during the Vichy regime. Mobility, a leitmotif of modernity, recurred in fashion reporting. Surely these themes would not have dominated the magazines if they had no resonance with the readers of fashion magazines.

In fact, fashion arbiters’ reporting captured the spirit of the times. In 1923, Au Printemps department store conducted a poll among female customers about the new chemise style in the form of a contest with prizes of 500 francs for customers who answered the following questions: “What is the ideal fashion for woman of our day? Have you adopted the straight dress? Do you regret short skirts?” According to the public notice about the poll results, 203,351 customers responded,
and the majority liked the new slim, straight dresses and shorter, pleated, skirts. All department store catalogs showed large numbers of straight-lined dresses and pleated skirts during the 1920s, and their captions shared descriptors like “practical” and “youthful” with fashion magazines. Department stores would have reduced their stock of chemises and changed the captions if mail-order customers had not bought these items.

One of the mild flurries of criticism about the chemise occurred when Chanel showed her first “little black dress” in 1926, but some of the criticism was about the color, which had disquieting overtones. For many decades, black had signified mourning. During and after the war, the French observed stricter mourning customs than the British or Americans did. Immediate family members practiced deep mourning, with widows wearing black; more distant relatives practiced demi-mourning, with female family members donning gray-colored clothing. In Jeanne Galzy’s novel La Cavalière, the heroine, visiting Paris during the Great War, notices how many women in church are wearing gray, as if mourning distant relatives fallen in the war. In addition, there were stages of mourning, with different sartorial rules. For a year, widows wore “austere” matte black dresses with thick English crepe veils and opaque black stockings. After a year, they could add discreet trim and a substitute a thinner black veil.

Because there were approximately 600,500 war widows and because they assembled on the many days memorializing the war dead, people, and young war widows in particular, found the landscape of black costumes bleak and depressing. Partly in response, the rules for deep mourning were relaxed in the early 1920s. Stockings could be transparent; lighter crepes and georgettes replaced English crepe; white collars and discreet jewelry could be worn. Chanel introduced the little black dress with white cuffs at this propitious conjuncture. These innovations contributed to the trend of urban provincials donning less severe mourning attire. They also adopted less dour and monotonous attire because the cult of remembrance of the war dead had become increasingly “incompatible with modern life.” Nevertheless, the ideal of widows wearing “austere cut” dresses made of black matte fabric, with a short veil and smoky gray stockings, lingered through the 1930s. In small villages, widows and elderly women were still expected to wear black.

Black had also been the color of men’s suits, and as such, signified masculine authority, and since the 1890s, black had been associated with naughty underwear and the demimonde, which unambiguously signaled sexual impropriety.
Chanel neatly sidestepped sex and gender controversies by adding white collars and trim. Raised as an orphan in a convent, Chanel was inspired by nuns’ habits, and she publicized the sisters’ influence on her design, thereby eliding masculine and immoral connotations yet rendering her dresses mildly transgressive in Catholic-raised but largely secular urban circles. Over the next five years, black dresses with white trim became “the uniform of elegant ladies and entered the wardrobes of all but the most conservative bourgeois ladies.”

Cultural critics were not incensed about ladies’ suits, which had hung in ladies’ closets since the fin de siècle and had loose jackets and full skirts in the Après Guerre. As designers made slimmer, straighter suits in the mid-1920s, many critics found their tailoring and cut masculine and, when accessorized with shirts and bowties, deviant. Some critics, like Eugene Marsan, who called suits “virile,” were being humorous. Marsan surely recognized that no one could fail to notice the gender of women wearing suits. Fashion reporters offered more serious commentary. They insisted that suits were versatile and made from durable fabrics, hence practical, but also that they were “pretty” and “chic”—hence, feminine. They reported that well-cut suits in sturdy dark-hued woolens were the preferred city costume for spring and autumn walks in the park, shopping, and visiting. Society and women’s magazines alike recommended “morning suits” for travel on trains. The color range extended from black in 1918, to black with white or beige trim in the early 1920s, to gray in the 1930s. Long before that, a gray suit was de rigueur in the provinces. When the American Kay Boyle arrived at Le Havre in 1923, her French mother-in-law and two sisters-in-law wore identical gray suits. In the customs office, her mother-in-law inquired whether Boyle had a gray suit that she had, perhaps, forgotten to put on. Even though the family would be traveling in a private car, not a public conveyance, her mother-in-law felt that she should wear a gray suit because they would be eating in restaurants and sightseeing on the way home. Boyle seems to have been unaware of the mourning customs that informed this question.

By the mid-1920s, some fashion arbiters simply recorded without further comment that many ladies were wearing “mannish cut” suits. Those who remarked on the emancipatory implications of the suit insisted on its “coquetry” and reminded readers that coquetry in costume “is one of the most exquisite feminine qualities.” As the general-interest press welcomed the return of fitted bodices, natural waistlines, and fuller skirts, fashion writers pronounced the curvilinear line of the new dresses feminine and romantic. Suit jackets were more

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fitted than previously, but the silhouette did not change as dramatically as it did in dresses. Yet *La Mode Illustrée* reported that women still favored suits because they were “easy and pleasant to wear [and] adaptable to many circumstances, thanks to substituting accessories, changing their appearance and character.” As a male fashion columnist dryly observed, “the universal basis of the feminine wardrobe remains suits and sports dresses.”

The sartorial reaction of the 1930s was not as definitive as cultural commentators and fashion historians have claimed. When journalists described straight-cut ladies’ jackets as masculine in the 1930s, they queried any direct links between ladies’ and men’s suits. Even Schiaparelli’s padded shoulders on suit jackets in the early 1930s and military-looking double-breasted jackets with epaulets on the shoulders in the mid-1930s aroused little controversy. In 1932, *La Mode Pratique* welcomed any accentuation of the shoulders that visually enhanced the slender waist. Unusually, society magazines were slower to hail these innovations. A year later *Femina* condescendingly called the “geometrical mode, square shoulders, very straight skirts... an amusing adaptation from certain modern statues that only such a talented artist could carry off.”

*Vogue* waited until Schiaparelli showed rounded shoulders, then welcomed “the end of the T-form silhouette.” As other designers took up the military look, *Vogue* praised it for being “well cut and rich in decoration.” The term *cut* referenced claims that the Parisian look was based upon a good cut; *decorative* implied feminine. The never intense debate over the gender of suits had dissipated.

Most fashion arbiters assumed that their readers were bourgeois women who did not normally work outside the home. Those who acknowledged that readers might work for pay explained that they or their daughters held jobs as clerks or typists in offices and retail clerks in shops. Wardrobe advice for these women tacitly acknowledged that office and retail workers did not earn enough to buy couture clothes but rather employed local dressmakers or sewed themselves. One of a handful of columns on proper attire for these occupations recommended either a “simple and practical” dress known as the “go-everywhere” or dresses made of solid tweed or jersey in a neutral color, such as navy blue or dark brown. In the 1930s, columnists promoted black dresses with collars and cuffs in a white or light-colored linen or lace, as long as the collars and cuffs were detachable and could be washed regularly. English columnists also counseled office workers to wear detachable collars and cuffs. This counsel accords with the number of “practical little dresses” in department store catalogs and the absence of the category of women’s work clothes in all catalogs (women’s work clothes were...
subsumed under generic work clothes, a category composed primarily of men’s work clothes, in the Belle Jardinière catalog). This counsel also accounts for regular ads in stenographers’ magazines for department stores and general clothing stores, both of which were much less expensive than ladies’ wear shops. Long-running ads for sewing lessons in this organ are further proof of cost concerns among stenographers.\(^{37}\)

Fashion arbiters’ recommendation of sturdy fabrics in navy blue or black with lightweight, pale-colored collars for work clothing reminded contemporaries of the colors used in the uniforms of the armed forces during the war and the color combinations of the habits of the Sisters of Charity and other women’s religious orders.\(^{38}\) Both the military and the religious provenance indicate the importance of conformity and obedience. Lightweight and light-colored collars over plain dark dresses sent messages about sisterly chastity, messages that some fashion arbiters felt they had to spell out for readers.\(^{39}\) In the shop and office, work clothes were not supposed to draw attention to women’s presence in the newly integrated workplace, to imply gender equality, or to exacerbate sexual tensions.

Although fashion and society magazines were slow to include a suit in their wardrobes for employed women, some professional women were already wearing suits. In her 1929 book *Women of Today*, Colette Yver described a lady engineer on the worksite wearing a gray suit, black felt hat, and black leather shoes.\(^{40}\) Today we might interpret her sartorial choice as adopting a uniform, or a “clothing metaphor to project an image of a social status or position.”\(^{41}\) As Yver described professional women, many in masculine professions followed dicta about durable fabrics in dark and neutral colors, though one lawyer had a cubist cravat—which she carefully tucked under her robes in the courtroom. A few women in more feminized professions, like civil servants, wore lighter- or brighter-colored silk dresses.\(^{42}\)

Literary evidence suggest that many women who wore sober outfits at work to fit into the workplace liked to don more cheerful apparel in their domestic space. In her novel *Possession*, Raymonde Machard (editor of *Journal de la Femme*) described the scientist Claude Ambroise as “quietly dressed and restrained in manner.” Ambroise changed from the tailored dress she wore at work into a colorful and “gracious” dress after work.\(^ {43}\) Schiaparelli exploited the daytime-nighttime dichotomy. She argued that workingwomen (really professional and business women, since service workers could not afford her clothes) needed to wear uniforms during the workday to protect themselves from the sexual advances of co-workers. In the evening, a woman became more seductive. If her
women were defensively asexual by day, they were seductive at night. Schiaparelli’s opinion must have been skewed by experience with her customers, who were hardly introverts, and by the fact that presenting dichotomous looks was good for business. But her opinion echoes other observations that workingwomen relieved some of the gender ambiguities of their position in the workforce by reverting to more traditionally feminine attire after work. Her opinion resembles the hypothesis of contemporary psychoanalyst Joan Rivière: new women engaged in professional work assumed the mask of femininity, at least insofar as the hypothesis discusses personal appearance.44

**Fabrics and Femininity**

Because fashion “is ultimately determined by its materials,”45 the texture, weight, colors, and motifs of fabrics are constituent parts of gender messages conveyed by any ensemble. Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick argue that materials “may be seen as embodiments of two distinct, albeit interacting, types of space: the smooth, as the locus of fluidity, fusion and boundlessness, and the striated, as that of order, classification and categorization.” They submit that smooth fabric has a feminine inflection, ribbed fabric a masculine inflection.46 In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes contends that all fabrics are classified by weight and that people who wear lightweight fabrics are imbued with a light, fine, and frivolous identity, while those in heavyweight fabrics are imbued with a heavy, authoritative, and solemn identity.47 Although he did not impute gender differences to the weight of fabrics, interwar fashion arbiters did.

Initially, haute couture’s flirtation with elements of menswear involved materials associated with lower-class men’s clothing. Inspired by the striped jersey pullovers of English sailors, Chanel introduced very similar pullovers before the First World War, thereby leaping class and gender style barriers. Without denying her boldness, it is worth noting that sportswomen had already donned jersey tops and that sports or casual wear was more open to class and gender crossovers. Previously, jersey knits had been deemed too plebian and disreputable for ladies’ outerwear, because of their use by sailors and in underwear. Jersey was also considered too clingy. When intrepid sportswomen donned jersey tops for sports activities, moralists deplored the public exposure of women’s upper body (presumably the contours of their bosoms). Censure about revealing clothing was accompanied by condemnation of sportswomen as ugly and masculine—as with bloomers, condemning ladies’ sport attire as overly feminine and therefore im-
proper, yet simultaneously masculine and therefore ugly. Something more than simple gender logic about feminine clothing and bodies was operating here. Nervousness about bourgeois women stepping out of their prescribed passivity and domestic confinement surely underlay this confused criticism. Using tightly knit jersey for pullovers, Chanel removed the cling and with it much of the stigma from jersey tops. During and after the war, she made the stripped-down sheaths and suits that became her signature styles in jerseys that neither sagged nor hugged the body. By the mid-1920s, tightly knit jerseys figured in many ladies’ dresses.

Stripes were also considered outré. Bold stripes had long been associated with convicts’ uniforms. Discreet light-colored stripes on a white or pastel background had only recently become acceptable for underwear. In 1921, striped woolen tops worn by women were still considered “very sportsmanlike,” though light-colored striped cottons were acceptable for women’s summer dresses. Presumably the different receptions occurred because cotton, unlike woollens, did not cling and because dresses had skirts. By the mid-1920s, the gender-bending innovation that attracted media attention was using the fine pale striped cottons initially used for men’s shirts in women’s sports costumes. The direct relationships with men’s shirts and the practice of sports, also coded masculine, made these stripes more vulnerable to criticism than stripes in cotton frocks. By 1930, stripes combined with more obviously feminine motifs, like flowers, were appropriate in silk fabrics for formal wear.

As commentators Henri Algoud, of *La Soierie de Lyon,* and Colette pointed out, plaids were based on geometric principles. Although the two authors remarked that plaids were now being used for ladies’ coats and suits, neither discerned any masculine implications in these straight lines and sharp angles. Why? At the end of the war, plaid woolens were commonly used in women’s riding skirts, which were coded feminine —part of a well-developed system of “split signals” in women’s sportswear, with masculine attire permitted above the waist and feminine attire prescribed below. By the mid-1920s, textile manufacturers introduced more exotic plaids, such as a red “Chinese” plaid. Textile firms and couture houses sold muted plaids as backdrops for floral motifs for dresses, suits, and coats. In addition to bright and soft colors being coded feminine, “plant life, with its eternal curves, its flowers, its leaves,” had been considered feminine at least since the introduction of art nouveau. By the 1930s, when plaids made a comeback, they were “comme il faut,” even in the provinces.

In 1927, several designers adopted the homespun tweeds used in Englishmen’s...
hunting jackets for suits. Chanel took credit for this, as for other innovations. Her personality, according to Cecil Beaton, was “a mingling of the masculine and the intensely feminine,” and her designs were simultaneously elitist and democratic. She delighted in trespassing into masculine vestimentary territory and in publicizing her liaison with the duke of Westminster, from whom she borrowed the tweed jacket. Photographs of Chanel with the duke, both dressed in tweeds, added an aristocratic cachet to her suits. In actuality, several designers encroached on two foreign sartorial realms by transferring traditionally thick and rough materials from men’s into ladies’ wear and by employing materials associated with sportswear in formal wear. Previously, homespun had been dismissed as too heavy and coarse for ladies’ wear.

Concurrently, French manufacturers were producing lighter and smoother tweeds and using softer colors, such as peach, apricot, or turquoise, to appeal to female consumers. They also made solid-colored fabrics in subdued complementary colors to coordinate with brightly colored checks and plaids. Provincial women committed to “harmonious and respectable” ensembles appreciated the opportunity to tone down the “loudness” of tweeds and plaids. In less than a decade, fashion arbiters and fashionable women in Paris and the provinces no longer considered tweeds and plaids masculine.

In a reaction against wartime conventions of dark monotonal dress materials, textile producers took advantage of new dying processes to introduce lively new colors and expand production of prints. They introduced bright new shades of green and purple and named new colors after fruits and vegetables, for example, “apricot” and “eggplant.” They also produced many new floral prints set in far-away places and named them appropriately: “Persian Gardens,” “Norwegian Flowers,” “Harlem Tulips.” During the Egyptian craze that followed the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb, many fabrics set ancient Egyptian-style figures against floral prints. Textile manufacturers and couturiers understood “a well-known principle in the fashion world: every era of simple and straight forms corresponds to an era of fantasy fabrics.”

A few years after the war, fashion arbiters reveled in the pleasure of colorful dress material and welcomed the drop in the high postwar price of textiles. Fashion reporters raved about unexpected colors and original prints, which brought “a new note to our wardrobes.” As the controversy over masculine styles came to a boil in the early 1920s, fashion arbiters labeled the new array of colors “exquisitely feminine.” These astute women not only acknowledged that color
evoked a multitude of meanings but also rescued chemises and other clothing from their detractors’ attempts to label them masculine. Conversely, when the waistline returned to its natural place in the early 1930s and was hailed by fashion arbiters as a revival of the feminine line, silk magnates added more checks and geometric designs to their repertoire of flowery prints. Even though the silhouette signaled femininity, silk manufacturers obscured the masculinity of angular motifs by printing them on feminine materials like taffeta and on flowery backgrounds. La Soierie de Lyon publicized these fabrics as charming and “exquisitely feminine.”

Couturiers also tempered masculine-coded features by using light, soft, smooth, and supple materials for chemises and suits. As couturiers, dressmakers, savvy consumers, and home sewers understood, the body of material can ruin the fall of a relatively unfitted dress like a chemise. Jeanne Ramon Fernandez reported as early as 1917 that the new straight-cut dress could “outline the shape of the body and free the body.” The couturier who created that early chemise explained that the “fabric weds the contours of the body, not because of a . . . clingy quality, but because of the movement of the body.” Ramon Fernandez drew further conclusions: “Supple attire, close to the body, allows a maximum liberty of movement and increases equality between the sexes.” In the aftermath of the war, designers made afternoon dresses for tea or cocktail parties out of silk crepe and silk georgette, materials that the fashion press described as “delicious to wear, light, fresh, and feminine.” Lightweight silks swayed with the movement of the body, revealing its curves. One fashion columnist found the light, delicate, and vaporous materials “excessively feminine.”

In the early 1930s, an advertising expert analyzed the language used in contemporary textile advertisements. In addition to appeals about good prices, selection, and novelty (“the latest thing”), Professor Klein discovered that the “principal argument was quality” and the secondary argument, practicality. Some typical adjectives and phrases were “pure,” “fine,” “supple,” “easily cut,” and “durable.” With regard to clothing material, Klein identified a “psychological” pitch tapping into social insecurity, such as “one must be chic to be considered.” Because he did not focus on dress fabrics, he did not notice the prevalence of descriptors such as “smooth,” “soft,” and “delicate,” usually in conjunction with “graceful,” “elegant,” and “feminine.” Nor did he analyze the visual content of textile advertisements, including the frequent use of feminine figures to advertise dress and ladies suit fabrics (fig. 12).
Figure 12. Advertisement for Les Reps woolens in *Vogue*, 1923. Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
Accessorizing Femininity

The gradual acceptance of supposedly masculine features in women’s wardrobes was also due to reinterpretations of these features as essentially feminine and redirection of the gaze to more feminine features. Reinterpreting entailed more than critics becoming accustomed to women’s wearing tubular dresses and tailored suits. Fashion arbiters accomplished this rhetorically. As early as 1917, one columnist argued that straight, slim skirts prevented “the overly masculine walk that wide skirts encourage.” Soon consumer interest in mobility persuaded designers to show finely pleated skirts, or skirts with pleats sewn together to the hips and opening below the hips, which maintained an impression of slimness while allowing longer strides. Improvements in pleating machinery made new kinds of pleats possible. Le Jardin des Modes offered home sewers the use of a mechanical pleating service that made simple pleats less than a centimeter wide, different-sized pleats, and clusters of four pleats alternating with a single layer of material. By the mid-1920s, pleats were popular on the skirts of thin woolen and silk dresses, inserted in spirals around the skirt or in panels at the side or front. Journalists welcomed the sway of pleats as practical, gracious, modern, and feminine. A 1923 Vogue feature on Chanel claimed that she “expresses the very soul of the modern woman. Coats with straight lines cover loose-fitting dresses with a youthful look. . . . The dresses are feminine in their details, often composed of very thin pleats, with draped panels falling from the shoulder or the hips, making walking seem like gracious flight.” Journalists asserted that pleated skirts as part of a suit feminized these otherwise strict and severe outfits. As the survey of Au Printemps customers revealed, customers agreed. Based on the number of pleated skirts and suits with pleated skirts in other department store catalogs, customers of other department stores concurred.

Couturiers’ devotion to detail could divert attention from masculine features of chemises, suits, and slacks. Design details distinguished haute couture models from otherwise similar ready-made items. Though the details were subtle, fashion arbiters ensured that socialites recognized them. Employed by a fashion reporter in the mid-1920s, when the silhouette did not vary significantly, Elizabeth Hayes was instructed to “concentrate on details” such as newly fashionable pleats and floating panels. While a few designers pursued the burgeoning number of copy houses in court, most incorporated details that distinguished haute couture from cheap copies, and the fashion press promoted the doctrine that real distinction

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meant combining the details and accessories into a “look.” In his 1979 work on the importance of social and symbolic capital, Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated how making fine distinctions between similar items signals social distinction. In her ethnography of the French bourgeoisie in the 1980s, Beatrix La Wita applied Bourdieu’s insights to bourgeois women’s clothing, identifying the importance of subtle details to establish the wearer’s taste and social standing. Bourdieu and La Wita’s insights certainly applied to ladies’ wear in the 1920s and 1930s, when brand names and logos were not emblazoned on clothing.

Designers obscured masculine elements in their models through “finishing touches”—embroidery and lace collars, cuffs, and trim. While these touches had been decorative elements for both men and women’s clothing well into the eighteenth century, they were all considered feminine by the twentieth century. Embroidering was a stereotypically feminine activity. In the difficult postwar years, even society magazines advised readers to embroider to update a dress. As lace became lighter and more delicate in the nineteenth century, it took on a feminine inflection. One fashion weekly called lace “femininity incarnate . . . It evokes . . . the vision of light, gracious, delicate things that we touch carefully with one finger.” Generally, fashion writers contended that all the trimmings known as “fanfreluches”—embroidery, lace, linen cuffs and collars, bows, inserts, etc.—“soften the sharpness of the chemise line and, indeed, represent femininity itself.”

Accessories played a pivotal role in the redefinition of masculine attire as feminine. One way of feminizing masculine-coded features like a suit made of sturdy, dark-colored material was adding soft-textured and bright-colored scarves or shawls. In 1924, La Soierie proclaimed that colorful silk scarves and shawls had never been more popular “to brighten up a plain tailored suit or a khaki coat.” Similarly, one could cancel out the masculine connotations of severe, dark suits by wearing frilly blouses in a bright hue and arranging for the frills to spill out over the jacket lapels. In 1930, Excelsior-Modes described this effect as “femininity refound.” Chanel showed her collection of “slightly masculine” tailored suits with brightly dyed print blouses. Multihued silk print scarves added a flamboyant note to ski or tennis outfits made of practical fabrics like wool or cotton. A sewing magazine explained that “these happy accessories” gave the sport silhouette “an entirely feminine grace.”

Some accessories mediated the simplicity and severity of chemise dresses without any fanfare about their femininity. In 1922, Jenny and Chanel added fichus to
their chemises. Fichus were squares of silk muslin with borders in different colors that were draped around the shoulders, tied in front, and fell in a point down the upper back. Journalists did not need to proclaim the fichu feminine because it had traditionally been part of feminine costume and because it pulled the viewer’s eyes to the upper body, away from the low waistline that evoked so much controversy. 88

Columnists and couturiers also redefined masculine features as feminine by insisting that womanly gestures reasserted their essential femininity and bodily charms peeked through straight lines. Juliette Lancret noted “a feminine gesture”—a woman putting her hands on her hips—that revealed waist and hip curvature despite the straight line of chemise dresses. 89 In an article entitled “The Dress and the Woman,” Pierre Drecoll of the House of Drecoll wrote: “Dressing up is a primordial instinct for women. . . . To create a dress for today, one must know the era, feel its acute modernism, and understand the evolution of women, who have become sportier. . . . Her body is transformed, its lines are leaner, neater, virile some say, and yet her charm has never been more perfectly feminine.” 90 Speakers at fashion galas, where many couturiers displayed their designs, spoke of a “renewal” of coquetry. 91

Finally, couturiers counterbalanced their understated morning or sports dress with fancier afternoon (tea and cocktail) frocks and evening gowns. Immediately after the war, many designers compensated for the penury of the war years by showing evening gowns of shiny lamé glittering with sequins and embellished with braid, ribbons, and fringes. 92 Following a brief vogue for evening sheaths in the mid-1920s, gathered or flared skirts, flounces, and floating panels reappeared on evening gowns. In 1929, Martine Rénier asserted that “in the evening, women are truly feminine, truly themselves.” 93

Gender and Fashion

Comparing fashion commentary by Frenchmen and Frenchwomen exposes not only differences but also similarities in attitudes toward new styles and modern women. Comparing trends in men’s and ladies’ wear modifies the impression that women’s fashion was the only kind of clothing undergoing change.

During the war, both men and women wrote favorably about dramatic changes in ladies’ wear. A 1917 L’Opinion article subtitled “The Little Amazons” described Parisiennes “successively appropriating” elements of military uniforms, meaning belts, metal buttons, and pockets with visible stitching on jackets, rather than the cut of the jackets. Gustave Fréjeville conceded that these “encroachments” might
be evidence of women’s emancipation or their pursuit of “forbidden fruit,” but he interpreted them, condescendingly and reassuringly, as touching demonstrations that “our weak and gracious companions” encourage “the regeneration of virile virtues, notably courage and daring.” In the “Women’s Words” column of the daily newspaper Figaro, Camille Duguet found the number of pockets on women’s clothing “vaguely masculine,” but more definitively boyish. The shift from the adjective “masculine” to “boyish” would be a staple in fashion reporting. The following year, Jeanne Farmant and Claire de Monclos of Fémina ignored the fact that the chemise dress had been named after its collar, borrowed from men’s shirts, and focused on its having been modeled on nurses’ uniforms. They noted that the new slim-line skirts “gave the impression one was wearing trousers” but did not draw any masculine implications from that impression. Rather than extolling women’s tribute to virility or military virtues, the two journalists explained that the new styles were sober and pragmatic responses to women’s wartime exigencies. Although adjectives like “sober” would soon lose appeal, “pragmatic,” like “practical,” would become staples in fashion magazine reporting on the new styles.

What does a historian make of these observations? A glance at fashion illustrations in the latter years of the war confirms that military details were present in the uniforms of women tram conductors, taxi drivers, and postal workers, but only the ubiquitous blue color of these uniforms was widely adopted by nonworking women. (The textile industry, largely converted to wartime production, produced mainly blue-colored fabrics for military personnel.) Conversely, nurse’s uniforms, a loose chemise dress, buttoned up the front down to the upper hips, and belted, had already influenced ladies’ dress. Although collars, buttons, and belts would nearly disappear from chemise dresses in the 1920s, the term chemise would continue to be used for simple, straight-lined dresses.

During the pinnacle of the straight silhouette in the mid-1920s, not all men who wrote about fashion fixated on gender dissonance. In 1927, a special issue of Les Cahiers de la République des lettres, des sciences et des arts called On Fashion: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow presented opinion pieces by men of letters and interviews with seven designers. Although many of the literati agreed that fashion was irrational and impractical, one insisted that modern styles were rational and pragmatic. Paul Reboux, who often wrote about women’s issues, claimed that the new “restrained” styles harmonized with the necessities of modern life. He repeated feminist claims about the bob hairdo as being “the clearest symbol of feminine enfranchisement” and looser dresses signifying bodily comfort, a
necessary complement to “the age that liberated the individual.” To the extent that designers addressed the meaning of new styles (they mainly used the occasion to promote their latest creations), they used buzzwords like “simple,” “practical,” and “youthful.”

Two new men’s magazines, Monsieur (1920–25) and Adam (1925–40), fall in the genre of society magazines. Like Vogue and Fémina, they were semiglossy monthlies, hired art deco illustrators, cross-promoted fine clothing, textiles, the theater, and the races. Adam added automobiles to the marketing mix. Following art deco conventions for drawing figures, the silhouettes of male figures on their covers look almost as slim and asexual as those of female figures on women’s fashion magazines. Of course, Adam and Monsieur also differed from Vogue and Fémina. They claimed to be councilors of “men of taste” and they collaborated with “the principal tailors [and] shirt makers . . . of Paris,” rather than with couturiers. They had a defensive tone, which was their response to prejudices that fashion-consciousness was effeminate, and the most frequent descriptors in advertisements and article were “quality” and “durability,” not “elegant” or “chic.”

Ever since the 1860s, when the plain dark lounge suit and white or striped shirt became a virtual uniform for bourgeois men, men had had few opportunities for sartorial display, and then primarily through bright colors and exuberant and exotic patterns in ties, vests, and (in the privacy of the home or club) dressing gowns. Ten years before the Great War, there had been a break with the monotonous profile of the waistless “sack” suit of 1900, as more form-fitting jackets with high but defined waistlines came into fashion. In his History of Men’s Fashion, Farid Chenouine notes the similarity between these jackets and the new high waistline introduced by Paul Poiret. In 1920, Monsieur commented on the “femininity” of the prewar and immediate postwar jackets, remarking that they had been replaced by longer, looser jackets “that pay homage to our muscular system.” Conversely, Adam and Monsieur welcomed the adoption both of colors like mauve and rose from the palette of ladies’ dress materials and of the lighter wools used in ladies’ wear into men’s casual wear. In men’s as in ladies’ clothing lines, casual wear and sportswear were more open to gender crossovers than formal wear. When Adam and Monsieur lauded women for accepting artificial silk, they urged men to consider artificial woolens—and soon added artificial silk for men’s dressing gowns. Adam also published pieces on women adopting masculine sports pants, suits, and ties that were dispassionate, even positive, about “reciprocal influences” between masculine and feminine fashion.
of observation, *Monsieur* and *Adam* were unconcerned about women cross-dressing, which was, in any case, only partial cross-dressing or androgynous attire. They were far more anxious about competition from British tailors and shirtmakers (all the while advertising British woolens and cottons for suits and shirts). They worried that French suits and shirts did not have the cachet of their English counterparts, even in France.

In the postwar period, when all fashion magazines supported the revival of French fashion, Fernand Gregh wrote in *Monsieur* that elegance was “a bastion against barbarism” that “implies reflection, will power, refinement, morality almost.”

A decade later, a staff writer for *Adam* praised the French woolen industry for developing more supple woolens, “the primordial element of our elegance.” As the depression unfolded, *Adam* exorted Frenchmen to dress well and made exorbitant claims about the meaning of sartorial display. The president of the Shirtmakers’ Syndicate urged Frenchmen to raise themselves to the vestimentary level of Frenchwomen, who are “envied by the entire world for their elegance and distinction.” André de Fouquières argued that being well dressed was “an expression of optimism, a courageous way to fight against the crisis . . . . Façade, you say?—but of the kind to give confidence to others, to brighten and embellish the atmosphere.”

Aside from the occasional article proclaiming the elegant Frenchwomen the representative of “the soul of France . . . . all harmony and grace,” ladies’ fashion magazines did not make grandiose claims about the meaning of ladies’ fashion. These magazines avoided sweeping statements about ladies’ wear as expressions of morality because the subject was fraught with religious, sexual, antifamily, and even more implausibly, racist and anti-Semitic implications. Catholic critics published diatribes about low décolletage and bared calves undermining decency and new styles encouraging feminine independence, removing women from their homes, and destroying the family and social order. They railed against the dance craze, indicting body-hugging dresses as well as “the invasion of lascivious . . . African” dances. Their real targets were general moral decline or “that revolutionary error, individualism.” Mlle. De Saint-Seine, a member of the Christian Association for the Protection of the Young Girl, called fashion “merely an episode or chapter in the great drama of the dechristianization of the women and through her, Society.” Already “perverted women” who recoiled from “the maternal burden” and practiced birth control had become “the playthings of foreign and Jewish couturiers and of an entire international underground.” The remedy was not raising necklines or lowering hemlines but “remaking consciences.”
While individual fashion columnists criticized low décolletage, high hemlines, or sheer fabrics, only one woman’s magazine publicized any moralistic clothing campaign. In 1920, La Mode Illustrée, which supported the Maison de la Vie Sociale (an organization similar to the YWCA), ran an appeal from the Women’s Social Action group to departments stores, tailors, lingerie stores, and couturiers and couturières to “help end the inconvenience and immodesty of present-day fashion . . . by abolishing the use of misplaced décolleté and exaggeratedly short and narrow skirts, and by prohibiting the abusive use of transparent textiles.” The appeal put “young women on guard against the grave danger of displeasing their husbands” by wearing scandalous attire. La Mode Illustrée was not very sympathetic to the crusade, for they never again referred to it. Otherwise, most fashion writers ignored moralistic reactions to modern style. The editor of Chiffons, Mme. Guilbert, joined general-interest journalists in mocking “anathemas and threats of interdiction” issued by the Church.

Instead, ladies’ fashion journalists wrote about how ladies’ fashion reflected bourgeois women’s lifestyles. In 1920, Henri Bidou contended that “all the life of a woman is reflected in the outfits they wear. A fashion magazine is the hourly history of women’s lives.” However, the custom of changing many times a day was contested. On the one hand, Chiffons ran articles with titles like “The Transformation of the Parisienne According to the Hour” and “How We Dress Hour by Hour” until its demise in 1932. These articles suggested three or four changes per day for activities like a morning walk, a luncheon, a tea, and a play. On the other hand, many fashion arbiters acknowledged that so many changes of clothing were costly in the difficult years of the early 1920s or that modern women were too busy for “fastidious changes of costume.” These reporters recommended simple dresses, suits, or ensembles (three color-coordinated pieces, including a coat) that could be worn for several daytime activities. They agreed that “modern Parisiennes” always changed for evening events. Even modest fashion magazines like La Mode Pratique, which encouraged a reduction in the wardrobe for budgetary reasons and promoted coat-dresses “for all day,” felt that that a plain day dress, suit, or ensemble was unacceptable for afternoon tea or cocktails.

Designers and marketers maintained the fundamental divisions of ladies’ wardrobes by time of day: morning dresses and suits, late-afternoon frocks and ensembles, and evening gowns and suits. As Jeanne Ramon Fernandez explained, women of the world, “obliged to dress three or four times a day, are not satisfied with a suit, even a very elegant one; they need a suite of dresses, . . .

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we have even revived the ‘five o’clock toilette’ to receive guests, a style that has been completely abandoned since the war.” \(^{120}\) In addition, designers created new genres of dresses for new activities, such as the glamorous cocktail dress in chiffon or satin, sometimes with beading, embroidery, and lace trim. \(^{121}\) One columnist wrote about different silhouettes for different hours of the day, with straighter lines in the daytime, curvier ones in the evening. Even women’s magazines and pattern books accepted some further subdivision of the basic day and night categories of clothing. \(^{122}\)

Neither marketers nor journalists were prepared to abandon the lucrative nineteenth-century custom of organizing ladies’ wardrobes on “temporal and spatial oppositions (night/day, morning/evening, winter/summer, interior/exterior, town/country).” \(^{123}\) Seasonal variations were central to the system of quarterly collections, but the essential dichotomy was winter/summer, which overlapped with the city/country dichotomy. The most obvious differences were the materials used, with cottons, linens, and prints in white, pale, or bright colors more common in the summer and in the countryside. Suits and dress styles did not vary as much, though sporty versions were preferred in the summer. Slacks were more prevalent in the summer, albeit more on the beach than in the country house. \(^{124}\) We have already discussed many internal/external variations in ladies’ wear. \(^{125}\) Vogue noted another variation in 1930, when it distinguished day dresses for outdoor sports activities like golf, which were made of wool or cotton and had pleated skirts, from day dresses for indoor leisure activities like bridge, which were made of silk and had gathered skirts.

One salutary correction to the recent scholarly attention to the cultural commotion about the straight silhouette is more knowledge of developments in and reactions to developments in menswear. While military uniforms were universally acclaimed as masculine, wartime trends in civilian menswear, such as trousers suggesting rounded hips, raised doubts about the gender of their wearers, especially in conjunction with the trend toward a rectilinear line in women’s wear. It was with some relief that fashion magazines welcomed the revival of more masculine lines after the war. \(^{126}\) A mildly androgynous style in the mid-1920s, in the form of simpler, slimmer jackets, was followed by a hypermasculine style epitomized by exaggerated shoulders in the 1930s. Broad pleated trousers, similar to women’s slacks, and softer-colored glen plaids, like those used in ladies’ gar-

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ments, were innovative features of interwar menswear. The futurist avant-garde proposed and donned colors as bright, and even brighter, than those of women’s dress fabrics.\textsuperscript{127} Men’s fashion magazines became comfortable noting the “reciprocal influences of feminine and masculine fashion.”\textsuperscript{128} Perhaps the interwar era should be regarded as one of experimentation in men’s and women’s clothing, not of women adopting elements of menswear or of ladies’ fashion undermining the gender order.