Dressing Modern Frenchwomen
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Recent studies of the modern girl in the 1920s represent her as a young, single, urban woman. As depicted in the media, she spent little time in the home, because she had a job and a full leisure life going to cafes, movies, and dances. As Birgitte Soland underscores, her slender and agile body was a primary site for displaying her modernity. She wore the new, straight-lined chemise with hemlines at mid-calf, higher than ever before, and she cut her hair in a bob, shorter than ever before. Only a minority of women could aspire to the full package. Modern clothing, salon haircuts, automobiles, and most leisure activities—except dancing and the movies—were too expensive for working-class or petit bourgeois women to indulge in regularly. The more complicated question is whether middle-class women were seduced by this media representation.

French fashion magazines and marketers present a contradictory view of modern femininity and modern girls. For instance, media and public alike considered smoking cigarettes in public to be a sign of a modern woman. The one survey about why women smoked, conducted by a fashion columnist for *L’Echo du Nord*, found that all the respondents associated women smoking with modernity. One reader compared smoking to short hair as a signifier of feminine modernity. She explained that, being “a bit coquette,” she liked how smoking “permits me to adopt poses.” Another who smoked as a “convinced feminist” claimed smoking as a right. Yet only 5 of 240 female figures on *Vogue* and *Femina* covers held cigarettes, and barely 3 percent of the hundreds of photographs of *les élégantes* at showcase fashion events between 1920 and 1936 held cigarettes. Even ads for and articles about cigarettes
were diffident; most cigarette ads did not display women smoking and most articles stressed that smoking showed off “your beautiful hands and graceful gestures” or “marvelous cigarette case,” rather than any physiological gratification. Recommendations that women only smoke in the privacy of their home, especially in studio rooms (informal rooms that accommodated a few intimate friends) was another sign of uneasiness about women smoking. Journalists were not worried about health risks, which were mainly unidentified at that time, but about women trying out new behaviors in public. Here, as elsewhere, they compromised on hybrid modernity.

Other representations of modern femininity were equally qualified. Cover drawings exhibit dozens of automobiles, but few women drivers. Inside issues, journalists informed readers that Parisiennes, role models in modernity, were driving, initially as sportswomen and later for everyday activities. As the closed sedan became more popular, fashion columnists abandoned the idea of wearing special clothing, especially veils to protect women’s complexion from the wind. (In general, veils were fading from public sight; only widows and older provincial women wore them.)

Femina continued to engage in cross-promotion of automobiles and clothes by cosponsoring an annual contest to select the most elegantly dressed women driver and lauded women drivers and passengers who coordinated their clothes with the upholstery in their cars. Here too, there were limits to the modernity of the women promoted by fashion magazines. The emphasis was on their appearance, not their activity.

While magazine covers, fashion spreads, and advertisements were full of images of youthful women, articles and advertising texts paid more attention to the modern woman (femme moderne) than the modern girl (fille moderne or grande jeune fille moderne). Journalists did not specify the age of the modern woman, only her activities, her slim and supple physique, and, of course, the products and services “needed” for her to be, to seem to be, modern. Systematic reading of magazine contents leaves the impression that many readers were not young, agile, and slender, though they must have wanted to be, to subscribe to magazines that glorified youth, agility, and thinness. Although these magazines were swayed by the infinite marketing possibilities of products to help women stay young and slim, their position was also an expression of a new cultural preference for youthful, lean, and limber female bodies. This preference survived the clamor about the return of the natural waistline, tighter bodices, and fuller skirts in 1929–30, indicating that the penchant for youthful-looking women was more than...
a response to new clothing or to the loss of so many young men during the Great War.

Young and Single?

Because French fashion magazines rarely specified the age, marital status, or occupations of modern women, we must guess their age, status, and pastimes. On the rare occasion that these magazines focused on the modern girl as opposed to the modern woman, they defined *jeunes filles* as single women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, with a subcategory of *grandes jeunes filles*, aged twenty to twenty-five years. Only the subcategory of *grandes jeunes filles* was labeled modern.⁸

Most *grandes jeunes filles* had finished their schooling. Although an increasing number of young bourgeois attended university after 1924 (when a decree making the baccalaureate identical in boys and girls *lycées* facilitated young women’s access to university), this privileged minority attracted far less attention from *Vogue* Paris than *Vogue* New York paid to coeds in the United States. A *Vogue* Paris contributor complained that there were “too many young women, young girls, who think of nothing but amusing themselves.”⁹ *Fémima* was more interested and positive. An article entitled “The Young Woman of 1930” praised her as “studious, simple in appearance, yet quite elegant. She is enrolled at the [Ecole des Hautes Etudes en] Sciences Politiques but does not neglect dancing or bridge.”¹⁰ Fashion weeklies took a position closer to *Vogue*’s. When monthlies arranged social or charitable events other than balls, they chose golf or bridge tournaments, which attracted few young women.¹¹ One reason for these editorial choices was that these magazines did not target young women as opposed to their mothers. Most were interested only in young single women who remained at home until marriage.

Although the message about staying home until marriage was moral, magazines had a material interest in promoting wedding apparel and accessories. In the 1920s, *La Mode, La Mode Illustrée*, and *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* advised mothers to keep their daughters at school and safely in the family setting past the age of sixteen, so that they could protect their “innocence” and teach them to manage a household. One article acknowledged that this period of time together developed strong mother-daughter bonds and warned that the marriage of an only daughter or of the last daughter in the family was emotionally wrenching for a mother, leaving her in “an empty void.”¹² Materially, entire issues on weddings were devoted to mothers’ preparations for their daughters’ weddings. Reading
between the lines, one can infer that these preparations diverted maternal attention from the impending departure of the daughters.

In 1926, the “Spring Weddings” issue of *La Mode Pratique* began with compiling the trousseau. Another article describing the seating plan, courses, and attire for the dinner party hosted by the parents of the new fiancée after the marriage contract had been signed. This article devoted as many lines to the afternoon dress of the mother of the bride as it did to the afternoon dress worn by the bride-to-be. For family gatherings preceding the wedding, mothers could wear dresses they had previously worn; for the ceremony, they needed a new afternoon dress in a neutral gray or even black, which was “not the least sad for a wedding.” Not incidentally, given a middle-class readership, this dress could serve for other extended family dinners. The bride-to-be should have at least one new afternoon frock for these preliminaries and a new white gown for the wedding.\(^{13}\) The clothes worn by the bride, the mother of the bride, and the female attendants displayed the bride’s family’s social capital. If bridal gowns served a constant social purpose, styles varied. In the early 1920s, they were not supposed to be “too fashionable” or “too modern,” but by mid-decade, they had become modern, which is to say that they were simpler, straighter, and sometimes shorter than earlier in the decade. By 1930, one could purchase bridal attire consisting of white pleated skirts and white silk pullovers with racquets embroidered on them, accessorized with a headband made famous by the tennis diva Suzanne Lenglen. Even in the countryside, brides wore modern gowns.\(^{14}\) In the 1930s, bridal gowns reverted to longer, full-skirted styles.\(^{15}\)

When these magazines acknowledged that some young women had to study or work away from home in the 1920s, they expressed admiration and sympathy for them, because “young women are made for family life.”\(^ {16}\) Although society magazines virtually ignored husbands, they did not, in compensation, validate single women. For a few years after the armistice, women’s magazines worried about the large number of war widows and daughters of bourgeois families that could no longer afford to provide a dowry.\(^ {17}\) The spiritual columnist in *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* urged readers to show kindness to spinsters, but only Aline Raymond, director of *La Mode Illustrée*, condemned negative attitudes toward them and advocated retiring the term *spinster*.\(^ {18}\) Given societal concern about the surplus of young women and the phenomenon of 40 percent of war widows remarrying, surprisingly few articles dealt with the marriages of war widows—evidence that fashion magazines “avoided” some real situations in women’s lives that caused discomfort. One article strongly recommended that widows not marry in white.\(^ {19}\) The phrase

*The Modern Woman?* 203
“white widows” referred to war widows who did not remarry. The color-coded message about the desirability of remarriage of war widows was unmistakable.\(^{20}\)

Fashion magazines dealt with young women’s and girls’ clothing in occasional features and annual issues on these topics.\(^{21}\) Some spring issues considered children’s beach or country clothing; fall issues provided guides to shopping for the rentrée, or return to school after the summer vacation. Rentrée issues concentrated on mothers’ wardrobes, partly because children’s school clothes changed less than women’s wear and some students wore school uniforms, but mainly because editors knew who subscribed to their magazines.\(^{22}\) Despite a small but growing number of French girl-guide troops, there were no articles like *Vogue* New York’s “Outfitting the Modern Girl for Camp” in *Vogue* Paris.\(^{23}\) Instead, French society and fashion magazines promoted a few couturiers’ lines for “mademoiselle” and Lanvin’s mother-daughter outfits. Women’s weeklies explained to their middle-class readers how to “turn last year’s coat into a coat for your daughter.”\(^{24}\)

From the first, society magazines gushed that young Parisiennes “adored” modern costumes and that the new simple styles and floral and geometric print fabrics suited their slim bodies.\(^{25}\) Fashion magazines were slower to accept that young women wore chemise dresses. Initially, they thought young single women ought to have higher necklines and fewer accessories than young married women and that young singles should avoid black, gray, bright violet, or shiny green colors. Although they explained that these bright, shiny colors were not flattering to young women, their attitude reflected disdain for gaudy clothing and bold fashion statements in general and for young women in particular.\(^{26}\) These magazines, and presumably their readers, had anxieties about young single women “flaunting” themselves. Nevertheless, fashion writers did not uphold the stringent pre-war distinctions between clothing for young single women and young married women whereby single women wore looser-fitting dresses in pastel-colored material. Prim styles and muted colors signaled purity and chastity, which were valuable qualities in a potential bride before the war. After the license of wartime, these qualities were less obsessively broadcast in young women’s clothing.\(^{27}\)

Once fitted clothing reappeared in the 1930s, society magazine features “Fashion for Those under Twenty” and “For Twenty-Year-Olds” recommended dresses with large collars, floppy bow ties, and bouffant sleeves, which they now found “suitable for their slender figures.” Because there were fewer articles on young women’s clothing, these articles most clearly exhibit what Roland Barthes calls the rhetoric of fashion, or setting up “arbitrary oppositions between what is to
be approved and what is not, while appearing to make this sound natural.”

At the beginning of the 1930s, the fashion columnist for La Mode du Jour expressed a nostalgic desire for young women to resume wearing traditional white or pale-colored evening frocks, but neither she nor her successor repeated that wish as the decade unfolded. Photo collections show very few women wearing white or pastel frocks, except at the seashore. Even those who wanted a revival of prewar styles accepted that any revival should be selective, not all-encompassing.

In the course of the 1930s, fashion and women’s magazines recognized that young bourgeois women would work. They approved of suits for young working women, even though suits were “severe.” Many columnists noted that young women expressed their new independence in “strict” and sober outfits for daytime and more exuberant cocktail dresses—or black dinner dresses “softened by lace trim or flowers”—in the evening. So, we have seen, did older bourgeois women.

Compared to the Belle Epoque, when society magazines addressed older women, postwar society magazines ran few articles openly intended for women past the age of forty. Most of these articles appeared in the 1920s, when the admiration of youth was at its apogee. Not surprisingly, their attitude toward aging was negative. Titles like “When Youth Leaves” and “For Women Who Are No Longer Young” express discomfort with aging, and the contents contend that the aging body—being fat, sagging, and unattractive—should be camouflaged by straight dresses to conceal thickened waists and tummies, long sleeves to cover arm flab, and scarves to hide wrinkled necks. Fashion arbiters further prohibited tight sweaters, which revealed drooping bosoms and rolls of upper body fat, any skirt that accentuated hefty hips, and bright colors and loud patterns, which drew attention to corpulent or curvy torsos. At least Claire Lausnay of Fémina recognized that some “mothers nearing their forties” and “grandmothers with white hair” liked “modern dresses, so svelte, so supple and so elegantly simple.” Ten pages later in that issue, a fashion spread was entitled “To Remain Young.” As always in the fashion press, looking like something was conflated with being something. Ultimately, the appeal about looking and acting young prevailed because it generated more advertising revenue.

Fashion and women’s weeklies did publish articles on sartorial strategies for older women, presumably because their middle-class readership wanted this. After being reproached by a reader for ignoring “older women who also like to be elegant,” Alice de Linières penned a column subtitled “Fashion for the Good Mother.” Her recommendation of hemlines down to the ankles, at a time when...
hemlines were rising to mid-calf, was another sign of aversion to almost all parts of matronly bodies. Although columnists initially referred to prewar notions of matronly styles, they soon refocused on how to look younger and slimmer by donning “an outfit that lengthens and slims the body, makes the neck and arms appear longer and leaner, the waist seem supple.” They liked bias-cut skirts, which “effaced” the hips, and abhorred wide belts, which “cut horizontally across a dress, thickening the waist disagreeably.” Soon titles of articles, for example, “Women who are no longer twenty years old,” only indirectly referred to aging.

Ads in the fashion media promised to prevent or conceal signs of aging. Ads for facial creams had simultaneously the most demeaning and most consoling messages. Slogans for Tokalon, a cosmetics company that claimed to exploit “An Astonishing Discovery by a Doctor That Restores Youth to Old and Wrinkled Skin,” claimed that their cream would “bring back youth” and that faithful users would “have a youthful air at forty.” Some of Tokalon’s advertising was more age-inclusive, in order to expand its market. Thus, Tokalon informed readers that “it is not age that causes wrinkles but the skin’s lack of nourishment,” a claim intended to appeal to younger women who feared the onset of wrinkles. By comparison, there were few ads intended for girls and young women, such as potions to stop pimples and blackheads, in the fashion press. Even without demographic data, advertisers knew who read these magazines.

Although society magazines and columnists extended fashion-type marketing to young women, another tendency prevailed in the 1930s. The marketing catchphrase “young woman’s dress” gave way to pitches about clothing with “a young effect” or young-looking features. In the same decade, society and fashion magazines began to incorporate advice for older women in general articles, although they did not abandon the theme of concealing thickening figures. Journalists revived the honorific “Madame,” which signified a mature, not simply a married, women. These developments were part of what would become known as age-compression advertising. Department store catalogs also made less distinction between young women’s and older women’s attire. In the 1920s, these catalogs had separate sections for dresses for jeunes filles and for dames. In the 1930s, dresses in the two sections began to resemble one another, and sections of dresses for dames et jeunes filles appeared. A Galeries Lafayette date book declared that modern mothers looked as young as their daughters. The concept of a separate wardrobe for young single women was fading as youthful-looking garments became the norm.
Do these marketing trends reflect changes in the readership and buying public, a decline in the proportion of young women, or developments in advertising? The answer is not simple. In the absence of circulation breakdowns, we have to rely upon population statistics, which are suggestive but hardly conclusive. In 1921, the largest cohort of women was twenty to twenty-four years of age; in 1931 the largest cohort was twenty-five to thirty years of age. (In 1936, teenagers formed the largest cohort.) However, the difference between the number of women in their twenties and in their thirties was never great. A more significant change occurred in the percentage of women in their forties and fifties: both of these cohorts were larger in the 1930s than in the 1920s. In short, there was an aging of the adult female population. The proportion of young women in employment—and therefore able to buy magazines—also changed. Between 1921 and 1936, the percentage of twenty- to twenty-four-year-old women in employment fell from 60.6 to 55.

While fashion arbiters likely responded to these demographic changes, they certainly responded to changing attitudes toward youth. The concept of the youth of modern women was as adaptable and commercial a concept as that of modernity itself. Don Slater argues that modernity was transformed into a commodity and an advertising slogan in this era. Fashion and cosmetics publicity commodified youthfulness, using and reusing it as an adjective to sell products. Simultaneously, women’s self-gratifying consumption of fashion, cosmetics, sports, and entertainments was promoted. In France, as in America, marketers discovered the youth and female market in the 1920s but did not restrict themselves to youth or youthful rebellion, as marketers in the 1960s did. Like the famous “Pepsi generation” campaigns of the 1960s, their promotions encouraged the emergence of a new market segment. As far as this study can ascertain, the new demographic was only feminine, though the subject of masculine consumption deserves more attention. As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, fashion magazines promoted more and more products to keep women looking—and, as always in fashion lingo, being—youthful. Active?

French fashion magazines defined the modern woman by behaviors that implied a youthful vitality, agility, and appearance. Covers portrayed the ideal modern woman as active, and between the covers, journalists described her typical activities as sports, visiting, and other leisure pursuits. Surprisingly few journalists wrote about the dancing fad in the 1920s, which may reflect their discomfort with new, sensuous dances. Columnists who did notice remarked on young women’s
desire for freer movement and young people’s pleasure in the dynamic movements of African-American dances like the Blackbottom.\textsuperscript{47}

After early warnings that women should not “abuse” sports on the grounds that they would lose too much weight and age too rapidly, most fashion magazines became more positive about women’s sports.\textsuperscript{48} Even \textit{Le Petit Echo de la Mode} agreed that being in good physical condition facilitated doing “one’s virtuous activities,” though sports were not to distract women from domestic duties.\textsuperscript{49} Almost all society and fashion magazines interviewed famous sportswomen, though few covered their sports events (likely because it made little sense in weeklies and monthlies). \textit{Femina}, which had approved of sports before the war, funded a women’s golf trophy between the wars. Department stores advertised tennis rackets and equipment for other socially approved sports, such as skiing, in \textit{Femina} and the daily newspapers.\textsuperscript{50}

One reason for changing attitudes toward women’s sports was the popularity of certain sports. As early as 1921, Alice de Linière informed readers about the multiplication of women’s tennis, golf, grass hockey, and soccer clubs. Her attitude toward these sports wavered between the old anxiety about the deleterious effect of excessive exertion on women’s reproductive organs and the new ideal of a flexible, youthful body. She resolved the conflict by concluding that “only rationally practiced sports can develop and maintain the suppleness and elegance of the figure and the youth of the body.” Four years later, Juliette Lancret reported that “the intensified practice of sports” accounted for “the prolonged youth of the modern woman. . . . Hardly fifty years ago, a coquette past the age of thirty would in effect be relegated to the rank of old woman. Today, at forty, she is still considered a young woman! And even better, she has all the appearance of youth: her waist is svelte, her leg supple, her silhouette has an adolescent’s smooth curves.”\textsuperscript{51}

There were dissenting voices. In 1920, the fashion correspondent for \textit{Le Progrès de Lyon} rightly questioned generalizations about all women playing sports, noting that horseback riding and automobile driving were only for “the privileged.” But even this columnist agreed that most women were interested in sports because they knew people who played them. “Additionally, sports have their fashions, their specialized, slightly boyish fashion.”\textsuperscript{52} The addendum identifies the main reason for fashion magazines’ interest in women’s sports: haute couture and confection were promoting a whole new line of women’s clothing called sports clothes.

Some sports clothes migrated directly from sports activities. Like their counterparts in other countries, French gymnasts sought looser apparel for easier move-
By 1920, French girls had won the right to wear tunics (loose shifts) in gym classes and gym fêtes. At the same time, long overblouses known as tunics entered haute couture, to be worn over the new chemise dresses or evening pajamas.

Professional tennis player Suzanne Lenglen (1899–1938) affected clothing styles. Lenglen is widely recognized as “the best woman tennis player ever.” She won several Wimbledon championships between 1919 and 1926 and became a professional in 1927. Her international success brought her national recognition as a “Sports Diva,” because she had a forceful forehand and accurate backhand and because she beat the English on their own turf.

Yet all reporters paid as much attention to her chic as to her techniques. Women’s magazines in particular commented upon her mid-calf and short-sleeved outfits and her collaboration with the couturier Jean Patou. When ladies took up tennis after 1874, they wore garden-party frocks with long, full skirts and big, floppy hats. Until Suzanne Lenglen arrived at Wimbledon after the Great War, the major innovations in ladies’ tennis wear had been the elimination of bustles and hats. Lenglen’s appearance at Wimbledon in a Patou chemise dress, without a corset or petticoat, “influenced all future tennis fashion.” As director of the sports department at Patou’s house, Lenglen proposed a knee-length, pleated tennis skirt, which became the prototype for sports skirts. Another well-known tennis player, Jane Regny, opened a couture house dedicated to sports and travel outfits. Four other sports-women followed in their footsteps. Other women without sports experience specialized in sports attire that was actually smart casual wear (not sweat suits).

Ads for sports clothes featured drawings and later photographs of the most active female figures in fashion magazines. Captions interpreted the illustrations: “All movements are possible thanks to the Olympic skirt created by Amy Linker.”

Older sports clothes, such as “the classic Amazon” jacket, were intended for specific sports. Couturiers and couturières initially made sports clothes because “each sport was the pretext for an adequate toilette, made to serve coquetry, elegance, and comfort.” Realizing that the market for any particular type of sports clothing was limited, designers soon developed generic sportswear, which we would call casual wear. *Vogue* extolled Chanel’s “charming” knit woolen tops of many colors paired with short, slim skirts. It lauded sports tunics and pleated skirts designed by Jean Patou and Jenny. By 1925, Patou, Premet, Lucien Lelong, and two other couture houses had developed special sports lines. Although Patou was subsequently associated with dresses with natural waistlines, fuller skirts, and longer hemlines, he opened the first sports boutique. Similarly, Lanvin,
Lecomte, Vionnet, and Schiaparelli, remembered today for other kinds of clothing, showed many sports outfits in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The couturières best known for their sportswear—Amy Linker, Jenny, and Jane Regny—are less well known today. One reason is that the American garment industry became the industry leader in casual clothing.

As couturiers began to show simple sports dresses, arbiters explained that one did not need to engage in sports to wear them. Initially, society magazines argued that sports costumes were ideal for spectators but soon added that they were ideal for country or beach vacations and then maintained that they were practical for walking and other urban activities. In the late 1920s, Rosine reported that wearing sports dress for breakfast was now “very chic”; by 1934, she contended that “distinguished and discrete” sports dresses were now acceptable for daytime social activities, and one year later, she added that some sports dresses functioned as “transitional” dresses, passing from day into evening wear and eliminating tiresome changes of costume. Another Figaro fashion columnist wrote that all day dresses were conceived for “sports, comfort, and liberty.” Loose bodices and pleated skirts permitted “all the coming and goings and various movements of an alert sportswoman.”

Women’s weeklies were slower to welcome sports clothing into general usage, perhaps because their readers did not take country or beach vacations. When these weeklies did accept sportswear as everyday wear, they stressed its practicality for errands, with no mention of saving the wearer from frequent changes of costume—suggesting that they never had changed costume that often. By 1937, Lucy called sports outfits “the most practical and chic solution for doing everything. There is no need to be an outdoor sports specialist to wear clothing of this type, which is admitted everywhere when it is correct and elegant.” Her Mode du Jour column explained that there were two categories of sports apparel: one for sports themselves and another for the city. The latter were “simple and proper models comfortable for walking, driving, and shopping.”

The best evidence that fashion reporting on sportswear was generally realistic is that department stores opened sportswear departments that sold casual wear and vacation clothing as well as actual sports clothes and gear.

**Sportive?**

As simple, loose day dresses became known as sports dresses, fashion journalists credited their introduction to the influence of sports. As a student of dress be-
havior, Agatha Youn d did not privilege sports per se in her interpretation of the second cycle of tubular silhouettes. She pointed to developments in technology, such as the invention of pneumatic tires, and accordingly in women’s lives, as bicycles enabled greater mobility for women and required reduction of big, billowy skirts. Her approach is an antidote to the literature focusing exclusively on the “genius” of individual couturiers or on the impact of sports divas to explain sports clothing. However, technological and sports determinism underestimates cultural influences, such as the modernist predilection for clean lines and mobility. A more convincing approach examines the wider phenomenon of more women engaging in physical activity, not just sports, and the impact of artistic and fashionable partiality to thin, taut bodies.

To understand the significance of physical activity for women, it is necessary to understand that numerous obstacles stood in the way of women being physically active. One obstacle was biomedical and popular opinion about women’s bodily weakness, especially the vulnerability of their reproductive organs; another was the association of exercise with the vigorous and some said virile movements of acrobatics. Lingering beliefs that women’s reproductive organs could easily be dislocated resulted in parental objections to schoolgirls straddling or doing routines on the wooden horse. This antiquated kind of thinking kept certain kinds of gymnastics and all acrobatics out of girls physical education programs. In the 1890s, the public school system adopted a type of Swedish gymnastics, a set of repetitive exercises devised to isolate and strengthen muscles, which bored girls and ensured that they did not continue these exercises as adults. After curricular revisions in 1908, girls’ schools added rhythmic gymnastics—dancelike movements to music—that schoolgirls and their parents found more engaging. After the war, an International Physical Education Congress convened to advise on physical training approved a mix of aerobics, acrobatics, and orthopedic gymnastics for girls’ physical education. When the Ministry of Education adopted new rules in 1929, it still did not include most acrobatics, athletics, and sports in the girls program. While authorizing short-term suspensions from bars, two-handed fencing, and racket ball, the physical education manual prohibited all contact sports as dangerous to the uterus. Public girls schools used this manual, with minor modifications, until the end of the Third Republic.

In the 1920s and 1930s, French advocates of women’s sports tried to define racket ball and field hockey as feminine to persuade girls and women to play these sports. When postwar anxiety about low birth rates revitalized aversion to women
in competitive sports, feminist sports enthusiasts, including Nellie Roussel, responded that non-competitive sports prepared women for their dual role as mothers and paid workers. In *Sports and Women* (1931), Dr. Yvonne Legrand of Femina-Sport catalogued the benefits of noncompetitive sports and tracked the effect of playing sports on her own pregnancy and those of twenty-four other sportswomen. All twenty-five subjects reported that toned abdominal muscles facilitated normal deliveries, postpartum recoveries, and a rapid return to flatter stomachs. Only Dr. Marie Houdré-Boursin, president of Fémina Sports, encouraged women to play sports because they would enjoy them. The medical and maternal arguments no doubt appealed to policy-makers; appeals to pleasure, had they prevailed, might have persuaded more women to exercise.

Frenchwomen had little access to competitive sports and little support if they did compete, except in tennis, skating, and other “gender-appropriate” athletic activities. Acquiring practice and playing space was a serious problem. In 1929, just one of the eight stadiums in the Paris region was open to Femina-Sport to hold track meets. Only 10 percent of state support for amateur gymnastics and sports went to feminine societies, and most of this went to gym societies. With 565 affiliates and 25,000 members in the mid-1930s, the Federation of Feminine Gym and Physical Education Societies was the largest of the women’s federations in France. This federation, which was dominated by male enthusiasts, was ambivalent about women’s sports. Several affiliates that wanted to play mixed sports seceded in the mid-1920s; thereafter the federation only sponsored single-sex track and field meets. After disappointing results at the Women’s Olympic Games of 1928, the federation eliminated several track and field events from their meets.

Some non-team sports became more accessible to middle-class women. In 1934, the fashion columnist for *La Mode du Jour* insisted that winter sports were no longer “distractions reserved for the elite. . . . Not in our era of movement and desire to live and to profit from all that is good.” Lucy mentioned new skiing packages that included bus fares to ski sites as well as the cost of accommodations in ski chalets. While these packages hardly compare to the development of mass vacations after the Popular Front’s law on paid vacations in June 1936, they did represent a modest democratization of sports vacations. These ski packages offered greater accessibility with some exclusiveness, a sense of “social distinction and cultural difference.”

In the late 1930s, the biomedical and the wider community remained divided

272 *Modern Women*
on the subject of women in competitive sports. After summarizing research on women’s pulmonary capacity, bone density, and muscle elasticity, Dr. Martinie-Doubousquet concluded that athletic events requiring intense or prolonged effort, like sprints or long-distance running, exceeded women’s respiratory capacities. “Normal” women who engaged in competitive sports lost subcutaneous fat; their shoulders enlarged, and their breasts and hips shrunken. In a typical rhetorical shift from verifiable physical tests to psychological speculation, Martinie-Doubousquet claimed that sportswomen “too often forget the condition of their sex. The ambiance in which they live is charged with an extreme masculinisme.” Some were lesbians. At the Congress on Medicine Applied to Physical Education and Sports, Robert Jeudon retorted that sports did not alter biotypes and had good gynecological effects. He did not respond to the accusation—for it was an accusation—about lesbianism. Not surprisingly, public opinion was mixed. An article in a 1933 *Figaro* supplement, “Today’s Women,” admired women in sports “that are less tests of strength and prowess than ceremonies” (e.g., rhythmic gym displays). Asserting that sports encouraged a new camaraderie between the sexes, *Vogue* editor Jeanne Ramon Fernandez warned that a sportswoman “risks a lot. By adopting men’s ways, she will find herself without defenses when the other woman, the one they call eternal, resumes her rights.” The other woman, apparently a femme fatale, was “distant, mysterious, supine.” A year later, a Catholic newspaper reported that girls and woman’s “special functions . . . are incompatible with intense muscular efforts.”

Meanwhile, private physical fitness programs proliferated. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Feminine League for Physical Culture’ founded by a militant suffragist, Caroline Kauffmann, favored Swedish gymnastics. This rigorous exercise regimen did not attract many adult women, but the public continued to link women’s physical exercise and sports clothes to feminism. *Vogue*’s Jeanne Ramon-Fernandez associated masculine elements in ladies’ sportswear with modernity and ease of movement and hence, indirectly, with feminism. During the transition to more fitted, “feminine” sports dresses, Ramon-Fernandez replaced adjectives like “boyish” and “active” with claims that the new styles expressed modern femininity and individuality—the latter, in conjunction with the former, a feminist quality. Recall that the terms “individuality” and “individualism” were so loaded that women’s weeklies avoided them.

After the Great War, Naval Lieutenant Georges Hébert slightly adapted his system of fresh-air aerobics for young men to suit young women. Outdoor acet-
bics attracted many young women to his colleges. 83 Graduates went into the public school system and set up private physical education programs. A popular health and beauty manual prescribed a variant of the Hébert system: daily walks and exercise outdoors or by an open window. 84 Irene Popard and other women held rhythmic gymnastics courses for adult women that fashion and women’s magazines promoted. Magazines engaged in cross-promotions of sports and physical culture institutes. An article on how sports made one svelte, supple, and “perfectly equilibrated” concluded with a plug for an institute that “offered scientific means to combat generalized or localized obesity.” 85

By the late 1920s, fashion magazine promotion was shifting from sports signifying youth to sports keeping one youthful looking—and, being fashion magazines, sports clothes making one seem youthful. Lucie Neumeyer averred that “there are no longer old women, no more women of a certain age, not even women of an uncertain age. All women are . . . thirty years old, in the splendid summer of life.” Sports “has rejuvenated, harmonized, fortified, and made the body flexible.” But fashion was “the good fairy that sprinkled a source of youth on modern femininity, and along with sports has made the miracle of eternal charm and durable beauty.” 86 Articles in society and fashion magazines asserted that straight lines, soft fabrics, and bright colors made the wearer appear to be young and vital. 87 As natural waistlines reappeared, hemlines fell and decorative touches multiplied, journalists replaced adjectives like “simple” and “boyish” with “individuality” and “femininity.” 88 Longer, fuller skirts were redefined as sporty—because they allowed longer strides—and modern women were still described as active and youthful looking. 89

Slim and Supple?

Analysis of more than six hundred cover drawings of female figures on Femina, Vogue, Chiffons, La Mode Pratique, La Mode, and C'est la Mode found that almost every one was slender and many were skinny (though not one was as emaciated as “top models” in the 1970s). In the 1920s, cover and internal drawings privileged nearly straight figures, and after 1930, the tall, slim figures took on a subtle, smooth curvature. Botanic metaphors like “string bean” or “vine” replaced the geometric terms used to describe these images in the 1920s. While photographs of famous women presented a greater variety of body types, the overall message was that the ideal reader was lanky. Photos of women athletes and the discourse about sports clothes implied that the modern woman was also limber.
Internally, articles and advertisements reinforced the messages about the desirability of being slim and flexible.

Department store mannequins repeated the messages. In 1922, the administrator of Galeries Lafayette, Jerome Le Marchal, asked mannequin makers to sculpt, not from living models, but from drawings by art deco artists. At the 1925 international exhibition, another firm introduced extremely tall and thin mannequins, and afterward their popularity spread rapidly throughout France. The major supplier, Victor-Napoleon Siegel, owned sixty-seven plants and employed more than two thousand workers in 1927. In the language of a contemporary fashion reviewer, his mannequins represented “Dianas in love with fresh air and with sport.” In other words, they combined ancient and modern ideals of feminine physique. Another example of artistic influence can be seen in the “style moderne” mannequins of the 1930s. In its ultimate expression at the international exhibition of 1937, this fad produced display models all in white, with blank eyes, resembling ancient Greek statues. According to Tag Gronberg, the effacement of display models displaces desire from the female body to the commodity on display.90 But surely these display models conveyed something about the desirability of the slender body under the clothing?

Given the ubiquity and uniformity of art deco representations of women’s bodies on the covers of fashion magazines, mail-order catalogs, department store flyers, department store and ladies’ wear shop window and floor displays, they must have influenced bodily aspirations among their subscribers and customers. Moreover, the art deco predilection for bodies without bulges merely exaggerated earlier ideals of feminine beauty. Nineteenth-century French artists depicted little fat on female nudes. With the exception of the Courbet’s painting The Source, French nudes were not pear-shaped. In her study of the female nude, Linda Nead posits that the fleshiness and fuzzy outlines of Toulouse-Lautrec’s paintings of prostitutes’ bodies reflect a fear of fat as excess, a false boundary, in the artistic aesthetic.91 Modern fashion design and plates exhibited a similar aversion toward fleshy, flabby bodies. Both clothing and illustrations communicated this aversion to consumers of fashion.

In turn, physical fitness advocates who promised to deliver the small breasts, flat stomachs, and slightly rounded hips of the Venus de Milo evoked artistic ideals. When naval lieutenant Georges Hébert advertised feminine aerobics, he argued that his natural program enhanced true beauty, defined classically as harmonious proportions and graceful movements. His illustration was a photo of the moder-
ately curved torso of an ancient statue. Into the 1930s, purveyors of physical culture claimed that they could sculpt women’s bodies to meet the classical canons for beauty.

**Corsets?**

Fashion discourse about foundation garments demonstrates that the switch from a curvilinear to a rectilinear line in women’s apparel altered assumptions about the ideal shape of the female body. From the mid 1880s through 1908, the fashion press linked the desired hourglass figure with a stayed and laced corset (fig. 13). After 1908, Poiret and Vionnet claimed to have “liberated” women from the corset. Poiret ridiculed the undergarment for dividing women’s body “into two lobes, like tugboats pulling barges.” More positively, if equally imperially, Vionnet told an interviewer that she “wanted to impose on my clients a respect for their bodies, the practice of exercise and rigorous hygiene that would forever rid them of the artificial armor that had deformed them.” Criticisms of cinched waists and overflowing breasts and hips and praise for thin, taut, and straight bodies were common in women’s magazines.

Discarding or reforming corsets was part of a larger process of streamlining ladies underwear in tandem with their outerwear. Under the new, slimmer dresses, women could not wear cumbersome items of underwear, such as crinolines, which survived only for robes de style and other full-skirted evening gowns. With encouragement from the lingerie industry, women replaced full-length slips with combination panty-slips, which molded to the body. Other changes included the substitution of cheaper, more easily washed fabrics, like thin cotton or rayon for linen and silk, which improved personal hygiene as well as reducing costs and easing maintenance. Note the familiar modernist litany of sleeker lines, greater mobility, and practicality combined with an equally modernist quality: hygiene. Although magazine and catalog descriptions praised the delicate fabrics and lace insets, they did not mention the possibilities of women enjoying the sensual pleasure of silky material sliding over the skin or of women feeling feminine and respectably—because quite privately—seductive.

Although fashion arbiters seldom cited medical criticism about corsets, their disdain for corsets built upon a century-long hygienic campaign against corsets. By the Belle Epoque, medical popularizers had accepted that mature—meaning portly—women refused to abandon corsets, which these hygienists attributed more to coquetry than to the medically acceptable reason of stabilizing internal...
organs. Hygienists targeted metal stays and tight lacing for adolescent girls and pregnant women. Without presenting any evidence of debility from corsets or stays, they raised doubts about corsets’ deforming girls and fetuses. \(^9\) In the prewar decade, the number of adolescent girls and pregnant women wearing stiff, back-laced corsets fell. Many girls and young women turned to garter belts to hold up

Figure 13. Corset, Fourreau Berthe Sauvigny, 1905. C1. Photograph by Françoise Rivière. Courtesy, Archives de Paris.
stockings. As they matured, they were unaccustomed to corsets and averse to wearing them as long as their figures remained acceptably lean. Pregnant women wore expandable pregnancy belts to support their distended abdomens; physicians and midwives endorsed these as “rational” girdles.

Even before the war, enterprising doctors responded to condemnations of corsets by inventing and marketing “reformed”—meaning pliant—corsets. After the war, corset manufacturers, often in concert with doctors, produced wide rubberized and later elasticized sports bands to protect the pelvic organs, which, they cautioned, would otherwise be jostled when modern girls played sports. At least one sports corset with flexible stays and several sports girdles—rubberized or elasticized garments similar to corsets, but without stays—were manufactured through the 1930s.

In the 1920s, some fashion commentators declared the corset “passé” except for “older . . . no-longer svelte” women, either because low-waisted styles hid the waist or because women’s employment and sports made corsets impractical. Others complained that couturiers treated the female body as putty to be molded and that women responded by using formidable will power, even sickening themselves, to trim their bodies. Articles in upscale magazines claimed that “trained, slender bodies . . . fit the scheme of life led by active society women.” Such claims are exaggerated. Only a minority of young women engaged in gymnastics or sports and only mannequins took pills to stay thin.

Although ordinary women dieted to lose weight, dieting was seldom effective. At the turn of the century, some so-called experts revised diets to reflect new concerns about fat and carbohydrates, but as many prescribed alarmingly high doses of thyroid extracts and iodine for weight loss. These experts made contact with the home economics movement led by Mme. Moll-Weiss, author of several books on home economics and, under the pseudonym Lucie-Laure, a columnist in women’s magazines. New and questionable techniques for reducing weight infiltrated women’s health manuals and medical advice columns in women’s magazines. Women’s health manuals denounced thyroid extracts but endorsed dubious techniques like fasting and cold showers. The number of ads for slimming bath salts, creams, and thyroid and iodine pills soared. Unlike most ads, diet ads shunned graphics for text promising that the product would produce “the silhouette of a vine, without apparent contours” required for “la mode.” By the 1930s, a book entitled Stay Slim advocated dieting primarily for aesthetic reasons. The author approved herbal and iodine compresses to spot reduce and wear-
ing “very tight corsets in the daytime, and an elastic belt around the stomach at night.”

The probability of these diets or devices having anything but temporary results is very tiny.

In addition to and often instead of exercising, playing sports, and dieting, most Frenchwomen kept their foundation garments. In the 1920s, shopping guides for Americans visiting Paris explained that Frenchwomen endorsed “the fundamental art of corseting . . . in spite of the simplification of line in clothes.” Couturiers and couturières demand “an elasticized girdle if nothing else. Even chez Vionnet, who advocates freedom in movement and unrestrained lines . . . you might be told to go to a corsetière.” Guides gave addresses for ten to twelve corset shops and telephone numbers for corsetières who brought samples to hotels to fit customers privately. Fitting was a problem because women indoctrinated about the value of lithe bodies tended to “underestimate” their measurements. Mme. Coulaud-Minier, president of the Corset Employers Syndicate, who taught courses for corset salesclerks, recommended ignoring customers’ orders: “If she says she takes a little size 66, bring her a size 68.”

Frenchwomen may have preferred made-to-measure corsets, but corset manufacturers had developed and marketed standard-sized corsets and girdles. One of Colette’s vignettes reveals the progress made by foundation garments. In it, a corsetière warns the protagonist that women who wear ready-made corsets, like her, will end up with flabby stomachs. She would rearrange the flab into “a divine silhouette; no more hips, stomach, or rear than a bottle of Rhine wine, and especially, the chest of a youth.”

The corset industry reacted to changes in silhouette. For a few years, the Corset Employers Syndicate and American companies like Lily of France waged war on chemise dresses with loose-fitting skirts. When tighter skirts returned around 1924, there was a rapprochement. Many designers now reported that they expected their customers to wear girdles. Later in the decade, leading manufacturers welcomed the reappearance of the natural waistline. Meanwhile, most corset makers adapted their products. Technical changes like knitting rayon with rubber and later with elastic produced lighter and washable corsets and girdles, which were therefore more comfortable and easier to clean. Because the new, slimmer skirts revealed the contours of the hips and upper thighs, manufacturers developed girdles that molded the torso from the bust down the thighs (fig. 14). Corset companies also adapted sales pitches to the new reality. Dr. Clarins marketed a girdle “without stays, straps, or buckles[;] it adds no thickness, causes no dis-
comfort.” With the advertising slogan “To be beautiful with pleasure, follow fashion with ease,” Claverie Company launched its “Thousandth Creation, the Easter Flowers Corset.” Ads for corsets appealed directly to the modern woman, who “will not accept losing her habits of suppleness, well-being, and sinuous grace.”

Far from falling, corset and girdle production and retailing rose. In 1926, Paris counted forty wholesale corset firms, most of which also sold girdles, as well as thirty made-to-measure corset shops. Even then, when the waistline was low, seven firms specialized in stays for corsets. By 1933, there were sixty-nine corset companies in the capital. Claverie, a large company founded in 1880, had two large

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**Figure 14.** Cadolle girdle, 1934. Photographed and reproduced by kind permission of the Archives de Paris.
factories and three provincial branches that together employed eight hundred work-
ners. In the winter of 1918–19, the Au Printemps catalog offered seven corsets costing between 12 and 33 francs; in 1925–26, the same catalog carried twice as many corsets and girdles priced from 14 to 95 francs. Stretchy corsets (with stays) and girdles (without stays) helped most bourgeoises adapt to new body standards; silk stockings were not as widely adopted. Corsets and girdles were the most expensive items of lingerie in catalogs, but silk stockings came a close second. Prices for stockings reached 55 francs for “our Printemps brand stockings in pure silk from the Cevennes, our most elegant and solid stocking.” At a special hosiery shop in Paris, the prices were higher, topping 100 francs for hand-sewn, fine mesh, flesh-colored silk stockings. Cotton, woolen, and rayon stockings cost between 2.95 to 19.50 in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Belle Jardinière catalog sold cotton, woolen, and rayon stockings at slightly lower prices.

Fashion magazines themselves reveal the fallacy of premature announcements of the demise of the corset. In 1921, La Mode Pratique explained that the new lightweight dress fabrics clung to the body, so even gathered skirts required a long foundation garment to constrict the hips and thighs. Questioned by readers who thought they were rid of corsets, the editors answered that the “new undergarment gave the silhouette a . . . purity of line that 99 women out of 100 cannot attain without it.” In 1922, La Mode Illustrée reported that low-waisted dress styles meant “nearly flat and unadorned bodices, which are not attractive without a corset of impeccable cut.” Captions for the illustrations that accompanied this article indicated pattern numbers so that readers could make the corsets. Other women’s magazines also published and publicized corset patterns through the 1920s.

No doubt the cost of ready-made corsets encouraged home production. Society magazines also insisted on a corset under the new line. Regular columns on corsets in L’Officiel de la Couture praised luxury items “that give the silhouette the extreme slenderness and suppleness without which there can be no real elegance.” Journalists explained that the return of the natural waistline in the late 1920s meant a return to corsets, complete with stays and laces (though the laces might be on the sides of the garment and hooks and eyes played as important a role as laces did).

Of course there were back shots of women in corsets with partly undone laces trailing down their backs, looking like voluptuous presents being opened, as in Horst P. Horst’s photograph entitled “Mainbocher Corset.” There were also famous shots of woman in partly unlaced corsets reclining seductively, like Bras-
sai’s photograph of a black-lace corset. These iconic photographs resemble the nostalgic and erotic representations of corsets in Victoria’s Secret today. Generally, fashion photographers, journalists, advertisers, and consumers promoted reformed corsets and girdles and associated them with the smooth lines of modernity.

Although French fashion marketers paid homage to the modern girl, their notion of who she was deviated from the widespread image of the young, single, lean, and limber woman. Their ideal readers were clearly mature, married women, many of them mothers, who wanted to look young, slim, and active. After some flirtation with the modern girl in the 1920s, these magazines addressed adult women whose numbers were growing and whose disposable income attracted advertisers. Their relentless promotion of products to look and (they implied) stay young, thin, and agile expressed more than advertisers’ desires. Attention to youthful appearance echoed a postwar disposition to value youth, a disposition that lasted for at least two decades and more. Illustrations and articles alike articulated an aversion toward aging and especially thickening bodies or sagging body parts. As magazines and marketers worked out the particulars of this repugnance, they replaced entire categories like “young women’s dresses” with dresses with “a young effect” or “young-looking features.”

Although fashion arbiters expressed some anxieties about women’s sports, they approved of ladies’ sports, that is to say, a limited number of single and team sports with little bodily contact. Their stated reason for approval was that sports kept women youthful and agile; their unstated reason was profit from sports or casual clothes advertising. Moving quickly beyond promoting sports clothes designed for particular sports, fashion arbiters followed haute couture and confection in publicizing sports clothes for spectators at sports events, then for walking or shopping, and finally for almost all daytime activities. By the late 1920s, fashion magazine slogans had shifted from sports and sports clothes that signified youth to sports and sports clothes that made the wearer look youthful.

The penchant for tall, straight physiques can be traced to the ubiquitous art deco representations of women’s bodies on the covers of fashion magazines, mail-order catalogs, department store flyers, department store and ladies’ wear shop window and floor displays. Ridicule of the cinched waists with bulging breasts and hips of earlier generations of women and acclaim for slimmer, firmer bodies were
leitmotifs in women’s magazines. Reading between the lines or perusing advertisements undermines these leitmotifs. Despite proclaiming the corset dead—except for older, plumper women—fashion columnists and advertisers recommended expandable corsets or elasticized girdles, albeit to compress the hips and thighs, rather than the waist. Corset and girdle production and retailing expanded, rather than shrank. On this subject, the press both misrepresented and accurately represented the realities of women’s bodies and activities.