Dressing Modern Frenchwomen

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In September 1939, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany and, after several months of “phony war,” Germany invaded and occupied northern and eastern France. The remnants of the French government that had retreated to Vichy capitulated. From June of 1940 through June of 1944, France was divided into a successively enlarged occupied zone in northern France and a shrinking free zone in the south. The war, the Occupation, and the collaborationist Vichy regime had deleterious consequences for haute couture, clothing, and textiles, as well as for other industrial sectors. Christian Dior and Pierre Balmain, young couturiers, were called up, and Vionnet’s, Schiaparelli’s, and other long-established houses closed or ceased part of their operations. Some did not reopen until the Liberation, and Vionnet never reopened her atelier. Chanel shut down her couture house and handed her perfume company over to the Wertheimer brothers, who had invested heavily in her brand. When the laws to eliminate Jews from business were promulgated, she tried, with German support, to regain her perfume company. Supplies dwindled, due to the diversion of material to the Third Reich and shrinking allotments of stock by German and Vichy officials. In 1941, rationing cards issued to Frenchwomen only allowed them to buy two dresses, two aprons or overalls, a raincoat, a winter coat, two slips, three pairs of panties, six pairs of stockings, and two pairs of winter gloves. As reported by the eminent historian of fashion under the Occupation, Dominique Veillon, the Third Reich “wanted to appropriate French fashion arts” and “crush its rival.”

Although the Nazi regime
abandoned its plan to move couture to Vienna and Berlin, it tried to forbid the forty-seven houses still operating in 1943 to engage in any publicity.

But, as demonstrated in Veillon’s germinal book *Fashion under the Occupation*, haute couture and fashion survived, albeit in attenuated forms. Lucien Lelong, president of the Syndical Chamber, assumed leadership of the couture group within the new corporative structure imposed on clothing. He and Daniel Gorin, secretary of the Syndical Chamber, used their administrative and promotional skills (discussed in chap. 6) to negotiate with Nazi officials for the continued existence of haute couture in Paris. Aside from their commonsensical case that skilled workers would not respond well to removal from their families, they made the classic argument that “luxury and quality are national industries. They bring millions of foreign currency into state coffers.” Lelong, who evaded proscriptions on advertising by publishing albums in Monte Carlo, later persuaded German authorities in Paris to allow some advertising. The Nazis failed to decimate French couture. On the contrary, the Holocaust essentially destroyed the German fashion industry through the closure of important Jewish garment and textile businesses and the persecution of Jews in these sectors.

Individual couturiers actually opened new houses during the Occupation. Several designers who had worked as premières in the interwar period, notably in Vionnet’s house, established their own houses, initially in the Free Zone but ultimately in Paris. Mme. Grès exasperated the Occupation officials with her red, white, and blue patriotic dresses and her indifference to restrictions. After her house was shut down, it was reopened on condition that she abandon her signature style. A few new couturiers, like Jacques Fath, who started his house in 1939, cooperated with the Occupiers to build their businesses. Other couturiers cooperated with the Nazis to save as much as possible of the threatened industry. The notable example is Lucien Lelong. Nevertheless, charges that he collaborated with the Nazis—arising from his participation in luncheons with Nazi and Vichy officials—were dismissed during the Liberation. As in other industries, there were degrees of accommodation to the Nazi occupiers and degrees of punishment during the Liberation.

In textiles, German and Vichy officials promoted development of artificial fibers and fabrics. Bianchini-Férier and nineteen silk industrialists who had already invested in rayon production formed a cartel to produce rayon. Beginning in 1941, ersatz fabrics became fashionable. In silk and woolens, the leading producers,
Rodier and Coudurier, Fructus et Descher, produced more of the woolen and silk blends that they had introduced in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Germans continued to publish fashion magazines that brazenly plagiarized French styles. A system of press permissions reduced the number of French society, fashion, and women’s magazines to eleven, including *L’Officiel de la Couture*, *La Mode du Jour*, *Le Petit Echo de la Mode*, and *Modes et Travaux*.\(^5\) *L’Officiel de la Couture* and other high-end magazines were suspended two or more times. Even the usually anodyne *Modes et Travaux* experienced routine persecution. A few magazines, though none of those analyzed in this book, came under direct German control.

As for fashionable Parisiennes, they still dressed up, especially when the Auteuil races resumed in October 1940. Nearly twenty thousand ration cards for couture were in circulation in 1943, the same number as the average number of subscribers to *Vogue* or *Femina* in the interwar decades. If these coupons were distributed to some of the remaining *élégantes*, including rich foreigners, they were also allocated to new style setters: wives of collaborators and businessmen who profited from the Vichy regime and the Occupation. Curiously, given Nazi interest in haute couture, wives of Nazi officials were not numerous among the cardholders. Some Parisiennes wore the red, white, and blue dress styles that were understood to be manifestations of continued loyalty to republican France. More wore elaborate hats that defied the restrictions on clothing or scarves celebrating the glories of France. But most Frenchwomen had to make do with fewer items of clothing made of artificial fabrics and less comfortable accoutrements, like wooden shoes, than they had been accustomed to, even at the lowest points of the Great Depression.\(^6\)

Although Veillon is persuasive about the survival of fashion under Vichy, she emphasizes the gulf between fashion, fashion magazines, marketing, and clothing behavior in the Third Republic and in the Vichy regime. In addition to the rationing of material and clothing and the closures of couture houses and fashion magazines, she mentions the introduction of French regional costumes—the very costumes resisted by consumers in the aftermath of World War I—and short peasant skirts—fuller than the short, looser skirts donned during the Great War and far removed from the long, slightly flared skirts of the 1930s. She records that some Vichy officials (briefly) forbade women to wear masculine apparel, notably slacks. She contrasts fashion magazines’ new ideals of women as maternal, serious, and ready to sacrifice to the frivolous and leisurely image of women in interwar fashion magazines.\(^7\)
Of course, Veillon had no serious study of the relationships between haute couture, fashion, and women between the two world wars to which to compare the situation in the 1940s. The present study suggests that there were parallels between fashion trends and feminine behaviors under Vichy and in the preceding thirty years.

The parallels begin with reactions of haute couture and textiles during the First and Second World War and the Occupation. Military features, for example, navy blue colors in both periods and airplane gray in the latter period, were added to women’s apparel. In both periods, couture adopted and adapted more plebian materials, although both the heavier and lighter materials introduced during the First World War had a more lasting impact on haute couture in the 1920s than the artificial fabrics of the 1940s had on haute couture in the 1950s. A related parallel is that French textile magnates increased investment in technological innovation to circumvent the loss of supplies and advance the production of artificial fabrics during both world wars.

Other responses to the phony war and the Occupation resemble responses to privation in the waning days and immediate aftermath of World War I. In the 1940s, couture spokesmen and fashion arbiters argued that wearing couture and fashionable clothing was a contribution to the war effort and economic recovery after the debacle of the Occupation and that dressing stylishly was a form of propaganda for the industry and the nation. Between 1917 and 1919, fashion magazines made the same kind of appeal to hard-pressed bourgeois women: dress up as their contribution to the war effort; to be well dressed was “homage publicly rendered to the courage and heroism of our soldiers.” Women wore black outfits, decorated with embroidery, in the early 1920s and again in the early 1940s. Just as fashion magazines ran columns on how to mend silk stocking in 1917, 1918, and 1919, shops that mended laddered stockings operated in the mid 1940s. Furthermore, fashion magazines supported the campaigns of haute couture and French textiles to reclaim the international market in the early 1920s and again in the Great Depression, just as fashion arbiters did during the Occupation and the Liberation. These campaigns had serious implications, not only for a few hundred couturiers/couturières and textile manufacturers but also for a major export sector and hundreds of thousands of workers employed in the garment and textile sector. Finally, there are parallels between the reception of Christian Dior’s “New Look” in 1947 and of the garçonne look in the 1920s, including women’s desire to move beyond the drabness of wartime clothing, and the controversy, though the latter controversy focused on extravagance, the former on gender implications.
Fashion under the Occupation is very critical of the trivial and unrealistic quality of fashion discourse in the late 1930s, although it cites only one society magazine, Votre Beauté, in support of this position. Veillon is more positive about the practical tips on fashion in magazines that survived German closures in 1940 and 1941. Wider reading of interwar fashion magazines, over a longer span of years, would have modified her judgments. As I show in chapter 3, even society magazines offered practical advice, such as maintaining a limited wardrobe, mixing and matching individual outfits, and building a wardrobe around a basic piece. Magazines ostensibly devoted to leisurely and aesthetic pleasures offered useful advice about how to get neighborhood dressmakers to copy couture styles. Society monthlies offered tips on how to resist the blandishments of couture salesladies, which may seem unimportant but which nonetheless met the needs of their privileged readership. Attention to interwar fashion and women’s weeklies, which were service magazines, alter any lingering assumptions that all fashion magazines were relentlessly frivolous. Although these weeklies covered haute couture, which most of their readers could not afford, they also ran columns about how dressmakers and home sewers might replicate couture styles. The prevalence of sewing advice and services in interwar magazines and other publications suggest that more attention might be paid to home sewing during the Vichy regime—and the difficult years of the postwar period—as well.

Comparing fashion discourse in the two periods identifies continuities worthy of study. For instance, the argument that elegant ladies no longer had the time to change dresses three or four times a day was hardly new to Vichy. This line of argument had been a mainstay in fashion magazines representing the modern woman as busy and active. Another example is how many of the interwar fashion and women’s weeklies advertised new styles as practical and comfortable, enabling movement and mobility. Although the Vichy fashion press put more emphasis on unostentatious and pragmatic fashions, it built upon interwar designers and fashion arbiters’ claims of simple and practical attire and how it facilitated mobility.

Veillon’s statement, “Whereas the misogynous discourse current in the interwar period depicted women as capricious children, Vichy wanted France to be populated by women who were rational, serious, and ready to make every sacrifice” exaggerates the rupture between the rhetoric about Frenchwomen in the fashion press of the two regimes. As my study indicates, the interwar fashion press did not treat Frenchwomen like capricious children. Quite the contrary! The fashion press flattered Parisiennes and Frenchwomen as more tasteful and tactful, as
having more discretion and distinction, than other women. If society magazines depicted their ideal readers as leisured women pursuing pleasures, they also insisted that these readers were independent and active. *Femina* and several women’s magazines suggested that readers were devoted to charity work. Conversely, fashion and women’s weeklies were aware that their readers had familial and housekeeping duties and that many of them worked for pay. Both types of magazine assumed that readers wanted rational advice about clothing for social events and social display, whether of individual style (in society monthlies) or of family or work status (in women’s weeklies). Readiness to sacrifice was not a consistent theme in the interwar decades, but it certainly appeared in all these magazines in years of economic privation, such as the immediate post–World War I period and the low points of the Depression.

Two misconceptions about interwar fashion and femininity explain why historians of Vichy fashion and representations of women overstate the contrast between fashions and images of femininity in the interwar years and under Vichy. One misconception derives from underestimating the democratization of haute couture styles in the interwar decades; the other involves ignorance about the modern woman throughout that period.

Until now, no scholarly study of the connections among interwar haute couture, confection, and textiles has been available. As several of my chapters document, confection and their major outlets, department stores, imitated haute couture styles and marketing, while textile producers supplied both branches of clothing and department stores. Textile producers therefore had an interest in marketing luxury fabrics and less expensive variations of them to a broader market. They facilitated democratization by remanidering returned “exclusive” couture fabrics and marketing shadow brand fabrics similar to exclusive fabrics at lower prices. Chapter 6 demonstrates that couturiers and couturières facilitated democratization through the simplification of styles and the development of sports lines that favored copying. Even before the Great Depression, they established ready-to-wear outlets, and during the depression, some leading designers made limited-edition dresses and sold dresses made after few fittings at drastically lower prices than true couture dresses.

Studies of the modern woman have focused on the image of the young, slim, and athletic icon projected by the popular press and condemned by cultural critics in the 1920s. By tracking the transmission of the image of modern women to women through the fashion press, this book has complicated the notion of “the
modern woman” and extended the chronological scope of its sway. Although there were certainly monolithic elements in representations of modern women as active and slim, there were also variations that reflected the social status of readers and changes over time. If society magazines briefly celebrated a transgressive version of modernity, popular magazines advocated a more moderate version for their modest middle-class readership. One disparity was between encouraging dressing and acting as individuals in society monthlies versus older prescriptions about dressing and acting as representatives of one’s family. Another disparity was between the monthlies’ stress on leisure versus the weeklies’ growing recognition that middle-class women had household obligations that had to be fulfilled before they found time for leisure activities. Although labeling clothing “modern” and “youthful” remained in the couture-marketing lexicon throughout the 1930s, the term “youthful” was more often (and more realistically) applied as an adjective in the phrase “youthful-looking,” as the population and the readership of fashion magazines aged. In this as in many other instances, haute couture promotion introduced a marketing tool that had a widespread and enduring market appeal.

The treatment of allegedly masculine features of the new styles differed less in the two types of magazine than they differed from Vichy attitudes. Both interwar monthlies and weeklies were hostile to the extreme manifestations of masculine attire and behavior, such as trousers worn in the city. But neither set of fashion arbiters proscribed slacks or culottes, as Vichy officials tried to do. Instead, society and fashion magazines described how to “feminize” putatively masculine features by adding feminine touches, such as softly textured, brightly colored blouses and scarves. The process rescripted new styles to reaffirm the existing social and gender order. This combination of new and old, masculine and feminine features into a socially and sexually acceptable ensemble was one of many ways that interwar couture—and Frenchwomen—blended the modern and the traditional.

Hybrid modern is the term I use to describe the ways that clothing manufacturers, marketers, and advertisers sold haute couture styles (if not necessarily haute couture models) to Frenchwomen. This kind of hybridity was expressed in designers’ artistic influences, which drew upon the statues of antiquity in the Louvre and modern, though not necessarily avant-garde, artistic movements; in the equally eclectic mixture of traditional and modern architecture and décor in interwar couture houses; and in the joint efforts of couturiers/couturières and other designers to gain recognition as artists, or creators, culminating in the International Exhibition of the Decorative Arts in 1925. Common to these creators’
products was a commitment to straighter lines, greater simplicity, and less ornamentation. If couturiers/couturières revived curves and decorative details in 1930s dresses, they did not revert to the S-shaped silhouette, flowing skirts, elaborate bodices, and ostentatious display of Belle Epoque couture. “Simple” and “practical” remained bywords for modern women. But the term hybrid modern has also been applied to the phenomenon of the new woman or, more appropriately, to modern women. Haute couture’s advertising strategies, and notably their appeals to modernity, activity, and youthfulness, would not have been so successful without customer receptivity. As several chapters indicate, Frenchwomen did buy the new styles, albeit selectively, and they developed a taste for modern, meaning simpler and more comfortable clothing, as the long resistance to the return of the natural waistline and longer, fuller skirts revealed in the late 1920s and the insistence on shorter hems and slimmer skirts confirmed in the early 1930s.

Moreover, the often-maligned interwar fashion press included references to hybrid feminism. Although much of this feminism was coded as “practical” or “liberated,” these words were understood to mean that women engaged in paid labor and enjoyed greater mobility. Of course, it is difficult to extrapolate from fashion writing to experience, given fashion arbiters’ habit of conflating appearance with experience. However, independent evidence cited throughout my final chapters substantiates the idea that Frenchwomen were more frequently employed outside the home than most Western women.

Two elements of the Vichy message in fashion magazines, but also in official propaganda, differed dramatically from fashion discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. One was the appeal to naturalness, which was not present in interwar fashion discourse, though it was occasionally mentioned in cosmetics advertisements. The other was the relentless exhortation to become mothers, which was largely absent from interwar fashion magazines other than the Catholic organ, Le Petit Echo de la Mode. At most, interwar women’s magazines occasionally proffered advice on maternity clothes and child rearing. Interwar fashion discourse did not define or confine women to their biological, maternal role. Once again, independent evidence, in this case demographic statistics, verify that this accorded with bourgeois and other Frenchwomen’s avoidance of repeated pregnancies and lifelong maternal devotion. Surely this is not a frivolous or trivial observation of the realities of interwar French society.
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