



# The Dressmakers of France

*Editor's Note: The following article appeared in the August 1932 issue of Fortune magazine (published by Time, Inc.). The author of the article was not named. The article is reprinted here in its entirety. The skirt and coat shown here are by Paul Poiret. The ensemble is owned by the Beverley Birks Couture Collection.*

When Mrs. Adrian Koburg pays \$35 for an afternoon frock marked "Copy of Chanel" instead of paying Macy's regular \$22.70 for an afternoon frock marked "Macy", she is paying tribute to an art. Which she realizes. And she is also paying tribute to an industry. Which she may not realize. The art is obvious. Any woman recognizes it. Any woman knows that there is genius in such and such a hang of the silk and mere doltishness in such and such another. But the industry is obscure. Indeed the industry exists by virtue of obscurity. For the industry is an industry of ideas.

If paintings sold --- and really sold --- and sold to the great world instead of to the dealers, there would be an industry of painting. And it would be run like the industry of *haute couture* which produces the frocks sold in original and in copy to Mrs. Koburg and her likes. That is to say, there would be great *maisons* of painting. And each *maison* would have --- as its priceless goods, as its chief stock in trade and its sole and only capital --- a famous painter. Who would be treated (or who, if he owned the establishment, would treat himself) in some such way as this: he would be paid an enormous salary, he would be lodged in a chic *hotel* on the edge of the Bois, he would be surrounded with adulation and flattery, he would be permitted the whims of Caligula and the vices of Nero. And nothing --- good, bad, or indifferent --- would be expected of him but one single thing: design. So long as his designs sold, which is to say so long as his designs were better than the designs of the painters who competed with him, he would be maintained like the sacred white elephant of the East. And so soon as his designs ceased to sell, which is to say so soon as his designs were less popular than the designs of his competitors, he would be shipped, like the sacred cow whose efficacy had evaporated, to the local *abattoir*.

It is beside the point to remark that no living painter would submit to the regime or survive it if he did. For no living painter will ever be required to face the alternatives. But the great couturiers of Paris face them every day of their lives. From Chanel up and from Chanel down, they exist to produce newness. And newness that will be lovely. And newness that will sell. If they succeed there are no limits to their rewards. If they fail, they achieve overnight, and in one stroke, obscurity.

Other industries employ "artists". Only the *haute couture* depends upon the creation of an art. Only the *haute couture* rests its millions of francs of profit --- to say nothing of the millions of pounds and millions of pesos and millions of dollars of profits of the whole dress industry of the Occident --- upon the artistic fecundity of some thirty to fifty designers, as a beehive rests its whole economy on the fecundity of a single queen. Only the *haute couture* builds the wages of its 300,000 cutters and sewers and its 150,000 embroiderers and glove makers and bag makers and its millions of American and Brazilian and Swedish and Dutch and German copyists, upon the inventiveness of a few British males or Auvergnat peasant girls designing in wax crayon on yellow paper in a Paris shop. And only the *haute couture* could succeed in the manipulation of such a crazy structure.

There have been many and pointless stories of art in industry. The following pages present the history and the personnel and the technique of an art which is an industry. And which retains, even at its industrial zenith, all the wit and unexpectedness and violence of art. Like all the arts, the *haute couture* has its history and its philosophy -- a philosophy of the humanities and a history of dolls. We begin with dolls and a revolution. Paris has set the fashions for the four centuries, ever since France eclipsed, in luxury, the dying oligarchies of Venice, Florence, and Genoa. In the last hundred years' history of Paris as a center of world fashion there have been two revolutions. One was brought about by that amazing Englishman, Charles Frederick Worth; the other by the World War.

### First Worth



To Paris in 1846 journeyed a young Londoner, a penniless draper's assistance named Charles Frederick Worth. His rise was not long delayed. By 1855 he was attracting attention by the dresses he exhibited at the Exposition that year. Three years later he took an apartment at 7 rue de la Paix (where stands the present ten-story House of Worth ---which still flourishes although no longer has it the significance of its 19th century position) and set himself up as a couturier. It was a bold step, like most of Worth's moves, for this was before Baron Haussmann had visited Paris, and the rue de la Paix was still one of the most aristocratic residential streets in the city. His pioneering was successful, as all the world knows, and today the rue de la Paix is as synonymous with French fashions as the Quai d'Orsay is with French foreign policies. Worth's next step was even bolder: he showed his patrons the first 'collection' of models, displayed on the first mannequins.

It was a revolution. Up to that time, ladies used to buy their own materials and carry them to their dressmakers, telling the latter pretty definitely how they wanted to look. The initiative in fashion, if it rested anywhere, was with the celebrities of the day and not with the dressmakers. When Lady Sandwich made her appearance at Versailles as wife of the English Ambassador, headdresses at once were lowered from their inconsiderate height. The actress Rachel found some old material in a trunk and introduced a rage for yellow silk. The dressmaker was no more than a nimble-fingered craftsman. Worth raised him to the level of a creator, an artist. By designing his dresses in advance, he chose the materials and cut them quite independently of his customers.

This 1872 ball gown by Charles Frederick Worth is in made of silk and trimmed with silk fringe. It is in the collection of the Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Worth was able to effect this complete *renversement* of the relations of couturier and client because he was a designer of genius and because he had the masterful personality of a Roman emperor. When he won over the Empress Eugenie, the most fashionable woman in Europe of her day, his success was assured. He became court dressmaker to the Tuileries, and before long all the courts of Europe were coming to his salon to be told what they should wear.

Only once did Eugenie venture to oppose Worth's dictation as to her dresses. The tale is worth telling. Her Majesty was expecting the birth of the Prince Imperial. Wishing to conceal her condition from the public, she invented the crinoline. Worth objected. Eugenie insisted. Rightly holding the crinoline to be a monstrosity, Worth tried to introduce instead a modified form of Persian costume. Sixty years later his Persian robe 'came in,' but at the time Eugenie meant more to the women of Europe than did Worth, and the crinoline began its baleful career.

Jean Philippe Worth designed this in 1912. It is in the Beverley Birks Couture Collection.

Like many a roman emperor, Charles Frederick Worth was superstitious. He was afraid of the tenth of March, firmly believed that the moon influenced money matters, and insisted on not buying his place of business lest it change his luck. He remained faithful to the Empire long after most people had forgotten it, sending his gowns regularly to the exiled Eugenie and, once a year, an imperial bunch of violets. His shop was closed during the siege of Paris (whence he escaped in a balloon), but he returned with the peace to bring out two sad new colours: a deep orange called *Bismark enrage* and a gray, *Cendres de Paris*. Such topicality, however, was rare with Worth. Brilliant innovator though he was, his constant aim in dressing his epoch was to give it the pompousness and quaint dignity of the state portraits of Queen Elizabeth which, as a poor boy, he had dreamed on in London. There was a period quality about a great deal he did and a touch of the masquerade. He was made about court mantles and loved trains five yards long. But he brought into use many new materials (jet, for instance) and revived old ones like satin so vigorously as to set the Lyons silk mills humming.

The House of Worth was ably carried on by the founder's two sons: Gaston, who set it in order financially (for Worth, *pere*, always spent every cent he made -- and more), and Jean Philippe, who inherited his father's designing talents. He was a pupil of Corot, a close friend of Eleonora Duse, for whom he not only designed clothes but also supervised her make-up nightly.

Jeanne Bordeaux tells of a gray afternoon in late fall when Duse asked Jean Worth to make her, almost overnight, some costumes for *Rosmersholm*. "What are they to be like?" he asked, as they stood by the window of her hotel room. "Like that," and she gestured to the dull, almost leafless trees of the Tuileries gardens below in the twilight. Three marvelous costumes in dead autumn shades, completed without further directions or fittings, were delivered at the theatre in time for the opening. Once when Jean Worth lay near death, Duse went to his bedside. She talked of her own ill health and loneliness; she begged him to get well

for her sake, as without his friendship life would be too empty for her. Slowly recovering, he declared: "I owe my life to Eleonora Duse."

For the first forty years of its existence, the House of Worth had the richest and most aristocratic clientele in Europe. Today it is still one of the great houses, but the creative leadership of Paris fashions has long since passed to younger houses. It is run by the third generation, notably Jean Charles Worth, who has been rated as one of the best amateur tennis players in France. The showrooms, appropriately, are in the Empire style. Queens and actresses still buy their clothes at Worth's.

Between Worth and the contemporary school of couturiers there rose and fell an intervening dynasty of fashion leaders. By 1890 there were at least four other important houses: Doucet, Paquin, Rouff, and Redfern. All of these exist today, but their glory has been more or less eclipsed by the ascension of newer stars. A little later came Callot Soeurs and, in the decade just before the War, Paul Poiret. These two came the closest to inheriting the mantle of Worth.

### Next Callot



Callot Soeurs were the three daughters of a minor watercolor painter, one of whom, Mme. Gerber, had something like genius. At once sensuous and erudite, she learned from the painters of the French school, Nattier and Largilliere, how to employ color as no one before had done --- pale tones, like *cuisse de nymphe*, delicate, subdued, and suggestive. She also had the secret of the grand manner, but she used it, as the 18th century had done, in combination with all that was fragile, feminine, and discreetly decadent. The stiff, dignity of the older Worth had been right in his day. Mme. Gerber fitted in perfectly with the revival of Louis XVI interiors which came at the turn of the century.

The Callot Soeurs evening dress (circa 1910-1914) is embellished with a combination of flat and pinwheel sequins and faceted crystals. It is in the collection of The Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

### And Poiret

Paul Poiret is perhaps the purest artist who has ever associated himself with dressmaking. He is certainly the best publicized of modern couturiers. Obstinate and vain, and incorrigibly extravagant, he was a great innovator. There was no end to his ideas, and his energy was so prodigious that besides designing he must fence, invent and sell perfumes, act, lecture, write books and plan illustrations, paint, cook, found a club for epicures, quarrel and found another, inaugurate a new movement in interior decoration, erect an establishment that was something like a night club and more like an Arabian Night, and entertain on a scale that would have ruined Harun-al-Rashid.

He predicted bobbed hair, short skirts, and the trouser-skirt and did all he could to bring them about. He revised the pale colors of Callot Soeurs, whose palette, under the pretext of distinction, had lost vitality. Poiret threw in royal blues, greens, reds and a brilliance of orange and lemon. It is a question how much he owes to Bakst; the truth is that Poiret, after seeing the Russian Ballet, was confirmed in his natural cour-

age with color. If he did not, as he has claimed, dress an epoch, he certainly dyed it. That is his great contribution: Poiret's colors have clashed around the world.



His faults, however, were as enormous as his energies. The son of a little *marchand de draps*, apprenticed in childhood to a mean maker of umbrellas, Poiret retained from his lowly origin an insensate delight in insulting his betters. He called down the Grand Duke Cyril for keeping a hat on in his showrooms, and drove the Baronne de Rothschild home because she didn't like his models. Her should have learned discretion from Doucet and manners from Worth --- for, when young, he had worked for both --- but he didn't. He was entirely independent. A dress for him was a creation, when it was not a costume; he disregarded the woman under it. If he derived certain unforgettable marvels from old Persian miniatures, many of his Eastern imitations were not so happy. Witness his lamp-shade dress. The stage brought him his first success and in the end it was his undoing: he seemed to forget too often that he was not designing for the theatre, or, at the very least, for a *ball costume*. Moreover, he was not popular with Americans who dominated the market in the 1920's. His real decade was that just before the War, and like it, he is gay, undisciplined, and absurdly trustful. Some years ago he sold out his name, withdrew from the house that now bears it. He has lately announced his intention of setting up once more as a couturier in London. Thus the cycle which began when Worth left London for Paris is complete.

Paul Poiret Dinner Dress (1922-1923). The dress is navy blue and red silk faille with gold metallic buttons. It was part of the *Goddess* exhibition at the Costume Institute, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May - August 2003.

## The second revolution

Like almost everything else in the contemporary world, the *haute couture* of today is a product of the War. As Worth carried the torch which ignited the first revolution in the world of Paris fashion, so the War touched off the second upheaval. The immediate effects were far-reaching enough. The War re-shuffled the great couturiers so completely that almost all the dominant modern houses date from after 1918. And is destroyed (whether socially, economically, or physically) most of the ruling grandes dames who had patronized the pre-War houses. Out of the ashes of war, phoenix-like, rose a new dynasty of fashion leaders. These are the women who make a fine art of dressing well, to whom many a couturier looks for new ideas. Their influence on fashion, far-reaching and enormous, will later be discussed.

Even more drastic and considerably more far-reaching were the less definite effects of the War. Before 1914, only the extremely wealthy among American women looked to Paris for their fashions. For the mill foreman's wife or the bond clerk's sweetheart, Worth and Callot were glamorously distant names only vaguely connected with the dresses they could afford. After the War, the couturiers of Paris began, for the first time, to dress the whole Western world. Their ideas, much diluted, but still theirs, filtered down to the cheapest grades of dresses and flowed out over all Europe and both the Americas. Paris became, and has remained, the keystone of the whole arch of international fashion. Of late this supremacy has been challenged by New York, where the American school of *couture*, long held in anonymous subjection by Paris, is fast becoming articulate. But Paris, for awhile at least, is still Paris.



Military style coat made of French blue ribbed silk by Paul Poiret 1917. The turned back cuff are held up with Oriental style silk loops and gilt metal buttons. The collar, cuffs and hem are trimmed with black velvet and gold metallic cord. The collar is trimmed with beaver. The coat was sold by Doyle New York, Auctioneers on May 22, 2002.

The War also expanded the scope of the *haute couture* in another direction. Before the War only queens and demimondaines went to a couturier for their street clothes. The most fashionable *Parisienne* considered some little dressmaker around the corner quite good enough to make her everyday clothes. Only when she wanted a dress for some particularly grand affair did she consult a couturier. Then she bought an elaborate costume, often so stiff with jewels and brocade that it would stand by itself, for which she paid as much as \$1,000. After the War there was no demand for dresses that would stand by themselves, and no money to pay for them. Therefore, a new *couture* came into being. Its exponents set out to supplant the little seamstress around the corner, to make *all* Madame's clothes: street dresses, afternoon frocks, even --- and especially --- sports clothes. They used cheaper materials, designed simpler, more practical gowns, and brought the *haute couture* down from the ballroom to the tennis court. They made it truly international, a focal point of a world industry.

### The haute couture: 1932

The great houses of the Parisian *haute couture* (there is also the *moyenne* and the *petite couture*, but they are not important creatively) are the planets towards which the dress buyers turn their anxious telescopes. They can be divided, roughly and by no means without argument, into three groups.

First, there are the old firms which still have great prestige but which exercise comparatively little creative influence on fashion trends. They must hold to their tradition for fear of alienating a large part of their clientele. Preeminent in this class are Worth, Paquin, Poiret, Redfern, Callot Soeurs, and Cheruit.

Then there are those houses, for the most part fairly young ones, which are distinctly in the fashion and which produce their own variations of it, but which are not at the present moment notably powerful as style leaders. Among these may be mentioned Lelong, Bruyere, Goupy, Louisebolanger, Lyolene, Jane Regny, Martial & Armand, Maggy Rouff, Captain Edward Molyneux.

Finally, there are the houses which are now at or near the peak of their power, which set the taste and alter the mode. In this category, regardless of who else might be included, few style experts would deny that the following houses belong: Vionnet, Lanvin, Chanel, Patou, Augustabernard, Mainbocher, and Schiaparelli.

Of the older houses, Worth is as solid, if not as influential, as ever. It has an enormous sale of models, and it retains the privilege of dressing the remaining Bourbon princesses, as well as ex-Queen Victoria of Spain. Paquin, whose founder died in 1910, set an important vogue several years ago with its fur-trimmed cloth coats. The house is still a factor in coats and still dresses the more conservative *Parisienne*. Directress, owner and head designer of Cheruit is Mme. Julie Wormser, who wears a single large pearl on her left hand, shrinks from personal publicity, and is best known for her evening clothes. Redfern, which Charles Pelling-

ton Poynter started at Cowes, England in the Victorian era, still dresses the more conservative members of the British nobility.

Though Paul Poiret is no longer associated with the house bearing his name, it retains much of the romantic, brilliant use of color which made Poiret so famous in his day.

In the second group, Captain Molyneux is an Irishman who worked with Lucille (a firm headed by Lady Duff Gordon, a sister of Eleanor Glyn), who served in the War and won his Military Cross, and who today does practically all his own designing. In his gray-toned shop his gray-clad *vendeuses* sell wearable, well-bred clothes which have social rather than artistic distinction and which are especially popular with young American and English girls.



This 1930 evening dress and slip by Lucien Lelong is made of silk and embroidered with paillettes. It was included in the *From Paris to Providence* exhibition, Rhode Island School of Design.

Lucien Lelong is another War hero (Croix de Guerre and Legion of Honor). His house is probably the best-organized in Paris from a business stand-point, but it is not correspondingly important in its style influence, perhaps because it has many designers and a reviewing board which must pass on all dresses. Such mass production methods apparently are not adapted to the creation of fashion. Lelong himself is noted for his personal integrity, his sense of publicity, and his perfect English accent. The later is the result of an Oxford education.

At the head of Martial & Armand is Jeanne Vellet, a clever designer who specialized in making women look younger. She has dressed Fanny Ward for twenty years. Maggy Rouff, who is also the Baronne de Besancon, is definitely on the upgrade. She has built up a valuable trade in matrons' gowns. Jane Regny, which is headed by M. and Mme Balouzet Tillard de Tigny, was the first of the couturiers to specialize in sports clothes, and is still a leader in that field. Louiseboulanger, once an associate of Mme Cheruit, is a daringly original designer who creates extreme styles in unusual and exclusive materials. Something of a painter herself, she knows many artists, has some good modern pictures around her shop. Her dresses are especially successful with Parisiennes. On the other hand, the French don't go near the shop which the white-haired Mme Bruyere, once with Lanvin, opened two years ago in the rue de Mondovi. This house, however, has had an enormous success with some Americans and is one of the 'coming' houses. As are Goupy and Lyolene --- which latter, taken up by Macy's, is currently successful in Manhattan shops.

We now come to the handful of houses which are at the moment the dictators of fashion. They have not necessarily the widest popular acceptance, nor are they always the houses patronized most heavily by American buyers. Thus a survey of Paris copies in Manhattan's stores made one day last fall by Amos Parish showed that the first ten designers in order of popularity were: Vionnet, Lanvin, Bruyere, Goupy, Mainbocher, Schiaparelli, Paray, Patou, Lyolene, and Chanel. All the great houses, with the exception of Augustabernard (who came thirteenth, after Molyneux and Maggy Rouff), are represented here, but four houses not generally considered fashion dictators are also well up in the list. It is not only popular appeal which makes a house potent. Creative power and a certain sense of the *Zeitgeist* are also prime considerations. Let us consider the great house one by one.



## Vionnet

Madeline Vionnet is put first for two reasons. The lesser is that, having led the movement back to a more feminine mode, she is at present enormously in vogue. The greater is that she is as surely the dressmaker's dressmaker as Spenser is the poet's poet. Her contemporaries speak of her with respect, indeed with a kind of awe --- even though they go on in the next breath to whisper that she the daughter of a Monte Carlo cocotte. She and Augustabernard, also a consummate technician and also much admired by other designers, are the only ones of the dictators who have come up from picking pins off the floor. Vionnet still works harder and cuts and sews better than anyone in the shop. No one else can do what she can with materials. She made possible the unlined dress by the perfection of her cutting, which created lines geometrical in their intricacy and in their logic. She has a classic feeling for the pure poetry of the body and for line at the expense of color. To make her gowns cling to the figure, she cuts her materials on the bias (i.e., diagonally instead of straight across the weave). She disregards fashion. When Chanel was 'in', Vionnet was 'out'. Today their positions are reversed. But whether she is in or out, her collections retain a classic elegance which is the very pinnacle of the dressmaker's art.

The "Henriette" evening dress designed by Madeleine Vionnet in 1923. It is in the collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute.

## Chanel

In dramatic contrast to Vionnet is Chanel, who prefers a businesslike simplicity to classic elegance any day, who *never* cuts material on the bias, and who can't sew. She dominated the post-War decade because she gave it the straight-lined, well-carpentered clothes it wanted. Gabrielle Chanel came to Paris the year before the War and opened a little millinery shop in the rue Cambon with one employee. Today she occupies practically the entire block on both sides of the street and has more people working for her (some 3,000) than any other couturier. They say that when someone first suggested she make dresses as well as hats, she burst into tears and cried: "But I can't make dresses!" And she couldn't, at least not the dresses that were being worn then.

Chanel is from Auvergne, the harsh hill country of France, and she has a peasant's scorn for the trappings of wealth --- and a peasant's lust for the thing itself. She began to dress the post-War rich in sweaters and scarves such as Paris workmen wear. Only she made them of the most expensive materials. She gave women a freedom they had never known before, ruthlessly cutting down on everything that was merely ornamental. There is not a button on a Chanel dress which is not needed to fasten something, not an ornament. Her favorite color is beige, which is as near as one can get to the natural color of wool and silk. While the other dressmakers go in for sumptuously decorated salons, Chanel's establishment is as brutally simple as her clothes. She is a good friend of Piscasso, Cocteau, Stravinsky, and many other such, and she was



one of the chief backers of Diaghileff's Ballet Russe, but she hates 'Art' and would probably be furious if anyone dared to call her an '*artiste*'. So far as anyone knows she owns her business lock, stock, and barrel. She has amassed a fortune estimated at some \$15,000,000, which makes her one of France's richest women.

## Lanvin

Mme Lanvin began by dressing her own daughter, which she did so charmingly that others came to her to be dressed. Her famous *robe de style* was really the sort of gown a little girl would wear at a fashionable wedding. There was a touch of 1840 about it, for Lanvin must have something to work from --- a *document*, as the French say. She is not original in the sense that Chanel or Schiaparelli is, but whatever she touches becomes her own. She started in business in 1902, and from the very first her shop was a favorite with wealthy Argentines. Because of her inclination toward rather regal designs, she is patronized mostly by South Americans and Europeans, is especially famous for her wedding clothes. She travels widely, reads even more extensively (her designing room is walled with books on costume), and is a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Her technique is superb, and she has a rare sense of the dramatic in dress. Which is why she dresses the three most beautiful actresses in Paris: Yvonne Printemps, Valentine Tessier, and Jane Renourdt.



## Patou

Big, rugged, sunburned, homely of features, Jean Patou looks more like an officer of the Canoe Club of France, which he is, than a couturier, which he also is. He is the great gambler and showman. When several years ago he decided the time had come to restore the natural waistline and to lengthen skirts, he risked his entire collection. Not one of his 350 models showed a compromise. His gamble was successful, and the long skirt swept in triumphantly. So triumphantly, indeed, that sometimes he is appalled by the completion of his success and compares himself to a man he once saw back 'in the heroic age of the bicycle' who had learned how to keep his balance but not how to dismount, and who wheeled on and on crying desperately to passers-by: "Stop me! Stop me!" A master showman, he dresses actresses to make his name known, talks freely and wittily to the press on everything from the American girl ("a new Diana type") to dyed fingernails ("Blood red against white napkins! I think always I am dining with criminals!"). His openings are extremely smart functions, with little tables crowded together as at a night club, butlers moving about with sandwiches and champagne, and Patou lipsticks, in Cartier cases, as favors for the ladies. "We are living in a kingdom of luxury," he shrewdly tells his fellow couturiers. "Let us stay there." Every season he launches a new shade: a Patou red, a Patou green, a Patou blue. His competitors regard the notion dubiously, but it is successful. So is Patou, a Parisian with a perfect grasp for the present.

This afternoon dress by Jean Patou was part of the exhibition, *A Century of Fashion 1900-2000* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, December 2000 - January 2003.

## Augustabernard

Augustabernard began as a copyist and this, plus her notorious temper, has not helped her popularity in the profession. But her worst enemies admit she is a master of the art, with every detail at her fingertips. Her evening gowns, simple and with hand-pleated Grecian folds, especially thrill the connoisseurs. The buyers are less excited, for her dresses tend to be impractical, and they depend too much on expensive materials and workmanship to be effectively copied. For sheer loveliness, however, her gowns are in a class of their own. The perfection of her technique and the promotion of *Vogue* have been her two chief assets. Let it also be said that she is Parisian as only Patou is --- and possibly Paquin, that she dresses some of the smartest women in Paris, and that, like many good Parisians, she comes from Midi.

## Schiaparelli

The dressmaker to whom one hears the word 'genius' applied more than to any other is Schiaparelli. The daughter of an archaeologist, she is the last work in modernism. She is to dressmaking what Leger is to painting or Le Corbusier is to architecture. She makes collars out of china; belts from strands of aluminum, glass rings, and coils of celluloid; uses metal clasps instead of buttons. Where Chanel represents the mechanical age in her hard practicality, Schiaparelli is the esthete of the machine. While Vionnet's line follows the contours of the body, Schiaparelli has discovered a new line which is based on the bony structure, a line that is bold and young with sharp, square 'military' shoulders. Her clothes are as stark, simple, and stylized as her striking black-and-white modernistic home.

Unfortunately, her creative talents are greater than her gifts of organization, and her workshops are not up to their inspirer. Italian by birth, she lived many years in the U.S. Twelve years ago she opened a modest little sweater shop in Paris, about five years ago she came into prominence, and today she is having a *succes fou* here and abroad. Her entire use of materials is new, and she has an Italian prodigality of ideas. She doesn't want to make women pretty, but often gives them a magnificent beauty in spite of herself.

## Mainbocher

The youngest of the currently dominant houses is Mainbocher, which was founded only two years ago. Just as Lanvin and Molyneux --- the one with her *robes de style*, the other with his tea gowns --- catered to the post-War desires for elegance, so Mainbocher presents a distinguished sense of good breeding in his celebrated 'don't dress' frocks for semi-formal wear. Mainbocher ("Main" to his friends) was born in Chicago. He was for several years editor of the Paris *Vogue*, a close relative of the American publication. Three years ago he resigned to go into dressmaking for himself, backed (according to the generally accepted story) by Mrs. Gilbert Miller (daughter of J.S. Bache), Lady Mendl (formerly Elsie de Wolfe), and the Comtesse de Vallambrosa. Though there seems to be some question as to how much of his success is due to steady 'puffing' by the fashion magazines and how much to actual designing talent, Mainbocher is undoubtedly at the present time on the crest of the wave. His dresses are chic, *distingue*, and often highly original.

## Fabrics -- and finances

We have trained our telescope on the individual planets which blaze so brightly in the starry heaven of Parisian fashion. We have seen the liquescent brilliance of this one, the swarm of satellites which surround that one, the curious markings of another. What of the planetary system as a whole? How does it work? Let us lay aside our telescopes and look for an answer to the question of how the couturiers go about selling their wares.

To begin at the beginning, the *primum mobile* of the system, the force which keeps the planets serenely revolving in their appointed orbits, is the manufacturer of dress materials. As Kuhn, Loeb and Morgan are to various railroads, Rodier and Bianchini are to sundry dress houses. There are those, indeed, who see even the grandest of the couturiers' establishments as little more than exhibition rooms for dress fabrics. They point out that the big money is not in selling dresses but in selling materials.



The afternoon dress by Madeline Vionnet came out in 1933, just 6 months after this article appeared in *Fortune*. The dress is made of white silk chiffon with a red and yellow shaded print. It is cut on the bias. The long sash is twisted, crossed in front, then sewn onto the neckline creating a collar. The dress is in the collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute.

A manufacturer will buy only one model of the dress he intends to copy, but he must buy material for as many reproductions as he makes. And if he likes the original material well enough to use it in his copies, this means a big order to the maker of this material. Thus the couturier is not only a customer of the fabric maker: he is a star salesman as well. A material used by Lanvin or Molyneux in a popular model is "made" so far as sales go. This community of interest has resulted in exceedingly close business relations. There is talk of considerable loans made various dress houses by the big textile firms. But there is a stronger and more obvious link.

This link is the generous, not to say lavish, credit given the couturiers by the fabric houses. About two months before the spring and fall openings the textile salesmen make the rounds of the shops. The couturier orders a little more of each material than he thinks he can possibly use. He doesn't pay for it then, nor does he pay on receipt of the cloth. Once a month the manufacturer's agent comes and measures each bolt, and the couturier pays only for what has been used. The system is necessary because out of the average collection of from 100 to 350 models, perhaps fifteen may be successful. Since no one knows which fifteen they will be, material for all must be kept on hand. Even after the cloth has been used, the couturier gets liberal credit and plenty of time to pay. So generous has this

credit been, indeed, and so sorely have the dress houses been harassed by the depression that today many a leading exponent of *haute couture* is said to be deep in debt to the textile people. Because of the latter's greater size and financial stability this influence is growing more pronounced every year. There are even some who see Rodier and Bianchini, the two leading material houses, as the twin pillars of the *haute couture*, whose support alone keeps the whole brilliant but unsubstantial structure from crashing into financial ruin.

### **The collection**

The stock in trade of a couturier is his "collection", the group of new models he puts on sale twice a year. The first step in its creation is the arrival of the material salesmen. The materials chosen, the couturier begins to design. (His designs depend more on the materials, by the way, than many a mass-production copyist realizes. A gown may be stunning in its original materials, but quite ineffective when made up in cheaper goods.) He works in one of three ways: from a sketch, from a muslin model, or direct from the material, which he cuts and drapes on the living mannequin who is to show it. The sketch may be his own, or he may have bought it from a freelance artist. In any case, he will have a muslin model made from the sketch.

Muslin is to the dressmaker what clay is to the sculptor. Generally he makes his preliminary design and his first changes in this cheap and manageable material. Suggestions from the workers in the atelier come to him in the form of models in muslin, from which, he may retain a detail or two, at the most a suggestion. Four or five muslin models may be necessary before the couturier is ready to proceed to the model in its final material. And even this last may be destroyed many times before the gown is put into the collection. Chanel has been known to have such a model, executed in high-priced materials, destroyed twenty times before she was satisfied.

The big gun in the couturier's arsenal is The Opening. This is usually a theatrical affair. It is frequently at night; the guests, admitted only on much sought-after cards, are most of them gentlemen (and ladies) of the press, plus such Parisian first-nighters as Cole Porter, Sem, the Baronne de Rothschild, Elsa Maxwell, the Comte and Comtesse de Robilant; the models are named and numbered in a program. There is a copious pouring of champagne, of which not a little gets into the cable reports sent out before morning. Jean Patou is the most skillful at staging an opening, Schiaparelli probably the most indifferent to her openings. The autumn collections is "opened" toward the first of August, the spring collection early in February; mid-season in April and November.

After the press, come the commercial buyers, first the Americans, then, in order of their importance, the Belgian, German, Italian, and South American. They do not come alone. Each is accompanied by an *accompagneur* whose function is to accompany. His other duties are to counsel the buyer in his selections and to take care of all the details of packing, shipping, insuring, and getting through the customs the models bought. His boss is the *commissionnaire*, who acts as moral and financial guarantor for foreign buyers. Just as the fabric maker helps out with credit and loans, so the *commissionnaire* relieves the couturier of all the dreary details of credits, deliveries, cancellations, collections, and so on. For these services he receives a thumping commission. The couturier pays this, but passes it on, via a 20 per cent surcharge on his base price, to the buyers. Certain American stores, however, have gotten around the *commissionnaire* by forming buying agencies in Paris which combine the functions of buyer and commissionnaire.

The couturier has three prices up his sleeve. The highest, naturally, is for the commercial buyer. The next, 20 per cent less, is for the casual shopper who drops in to buy a dress or two. The lowest (the *prix d'am*), 10 per cent less than the preceding, is for the regular customers of the house, with a further concession for those fortunate ladies whose figure or social position makes them especially desirable as customers. The top, or buyers' price, averaged \$500 several years ago. Current prices are so demoralized that no one knows just how they run today, but certainly a third and possibly half of the 1928 price has been lopped off by hard times. Whatever the price, it is all the couturier receives for his work. Since there are no international copyright laws applying to dress designs, he is paid only for the single model he sells, is not a penny the richer for all the thousands of copies.

Something less than 25 per cent of most couturiers' gross business is with the buyers. But this is an important 25 per cent, and without it the couturiers would find it hard to exist. For the buyer often pays cash, always pays promptly. Private accounts, on the other hand, are notoriously slow and often hazardous. Rail against the buyer as a commercializing, standardizing influence as he will --- and does --- the couturier nonetheless depends on him for the ready cash with which to carry on his business. Thus the buyer supplies the cash, the fabric manufacturer the credit.

## **Pirates**

Only too often the buyer is not willing even to pay for the master model. In which case he consults or becomes himself a "style pirate". This is currently the most hotly discussed problem in the whole world of Paris fashion.

Enough to say here that for the last few years there has been a growing movement against the style pirates. These gentry, though traitorous employees or spies at openings, contrive to get detailed information about the new models without going to the formality (and expense) of buying any. Making up copies from this infor-

mation, they bootleg them at greatly reduced prices. French law is hard on these buccaneers, who are prosecuted mercilessly if they are caught: as many as 400 of them have been jailed in one drive. Leader of the war against pirates is an Egyptian named Trouyet, who is "head of the house" at Vionnet's and is described as "a horrible person, but smart".

### **Fashion: whence and why?**

The origin of a new fashion is as baffling an affair as the birth of Aphrodite from the sea foam. Certainly there is nothing to the idea that the couturiers meet in caucus to decide on future fashions. yet, though they won't speak top one another and they don't see one another's work, they draw their inspirations from common sources. They all know "what is being worn" in the most fashionable circles. (It is in this sense that the *grandes dames* of Paris are the final arbiters of taste.) They all work about the same materials. Of the samples shown by the textile manufacturers, some are so obviously good that practically all the houses choose them. They all see the same shows: them Empress Eugenie rage was started by the 1860 costumes in a Parisian revival of Offenbach's opera *La Vie Parisienne*. Moreover, the world they live in is, geographically, a small one: on the east it includes the Place Vendome and the rue de la Paix, to the west it goes to the Etoile, with occasional excursions beyond to the Bois de Boulogne and the race courses at Longchamp and Auteuil. And so there is a certain prevailing tone to the showings of any given season --- a tone that is merely the overtone of a common environment.

The couturier is the barometer not only of the prevailing Parisian atmosphere, but also of much great social and economic forces. He is far from being a passive indicator. In every collection he makes proposals which, if they are accepted, will start fashion in a new direction. He must venture these prophecies, for his reputation depends on change. He has, indeed, no other reason for existence. Whether his proposals for change are accepted or not, however, depends on how accurately he has gauged the temper of the times. For the Paris dressmakers do not so much create fashion as discover it. They are, indeed, the midwives rather than the mothers of fashion. As artists, they are vain, vindictive, and in such cases as the elder Worth and Paul Poiret, endowed with a Jovian sense of their own importance. They seem to dictate, and on whatever is done they leave a strong personal imprint. And yet they must look beyond their personal tastes and express the current manner of living in their creations. They are arbitrary, but only to a certain point. They can make no profound change in dress unless there is a corresponding change in society.

We recognize this at once in the costumes of the past. They mirror the manners of a period; they may even embody, more truly than literature, its deep desires and obscure aspirations. Take a decade not utterly unlike the one we have just lived through. At the end of the Reign of Terror, there came, in France, an extraordinary release. The guillotine was closed up and theatres opened; manners were free and morals most libertine. Also, it will be remembered, the *Directoire* was trying to establish a government and a society on an antique model. People had been reading both Rousseau and Plutarch. So that the women wore light tunics, classical in outline, allowing great natural freedom. They even went naked under them and appeared on the Champs Elysees waling in diaphanous display. (Those bare legs were not to be seen again until 1929.) A little later things settled down, and costumes became more complicated. Under the Restoration, women were soon laced in at the waist and incommoded in sleeves and skirts, both voluminous. Pantaloon, which had been a symbol of Revolution, had become the pantalettes, symbol of Respectability.

That fashions are influenced by social and economic forces --- this is a dull statement. it grows exciting, however, when one notes that the fluctuations of Paris fashions in the past decade closely paralleled the fluctuations of the frame.



Designed by Edward Molyneux (1926-1927) this silk dress for dancing, sequins in vertical stripes are overlaid with loose lengths of georgette picoted along the edges for a delicate shimmer on vertical filaments. It is in the collection of The Costume Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

It was essentially a struggle between the American woman and the *Parisienne*. For the later, change is a necessity. The French have the reputation of being fickle. They are not: they are an old race with a curiosity for novelty. The *Parisienne* has no illusions about her own faults. She cares less about what other women are wearing than the American; she considers rather what *she* can wear. She dresses more for men than the American, and tries to compensate for their changeableness by presenting each season a new sensuousness. The American woman, on the other hand, almost invariably resists a new fashion, only in the end to succumb to it more completely than ever the Frenchwoman would. In America, changes of fashion are really changes of uniform. "I have never met women as faithful as the Americans," observes Poiret scornfully. "This is a quality, and a somewhat rare one, but when it is a question of fashion, fidelity becomes routine, and routine is detestable. Fashion needs change, and original dressmakers are becoming weary of dragging at their feet the ball and chain which represents the American public."

The American woman dominated the mode during most of the last decade. She liked the short skirt, so perfectly adapted to her free, athletic life --- and to showing off her slim legs and ankles. It was a feminist fashion. But the *Parisienne* is feminine. Her knees are better hidden, and so, for that matter, are her ankles. The Americans also like the tube dress, which goes well with slender hips and square shoulders but very badly with the rounded, less athletic French figure. French women complained they felt they were walking around in a chemise. But the franc was falling, falling, falling all those years from 1919 to 1926. The American dictatorship flourished, and Paris did not dare oust the tube dress and short skirt, which became the uniform of the decade. Poiret might rage that "Americans have imposed their taste on our Parisian *couture* and substituted the experience of buyers for the invention of creators," but there was nothing much to be done about it. In 1926 the franc sank to thirty-one to the dollar, and exportations (and with them the American influence) reached their height.

Today, France is, economically, the most powerful nation in Europe and the franc is backed by one-third of the world's gold. The result of the return to power was a great surging up of national pride and a determination to rid France of foreign influences so strongly felt in the post-War decade. Styles were once more designed for the French. Tube dresses were replaced by flowing, distinctly feminine gowns and skirts came down. They came down, in fact, a month or so before the 1929 stock market. Thus the couturiers of Paris preceded even the stockbrokers of Manhattan as harbingers of the new economic order.