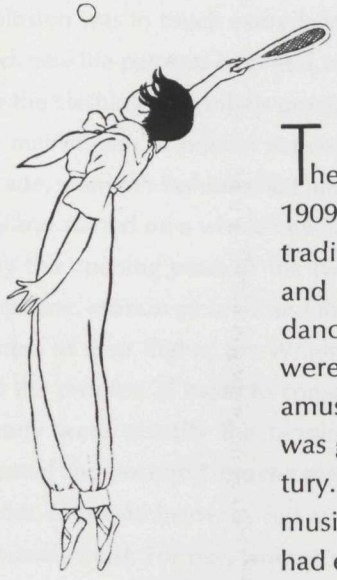

# INVENTIVE CLOTHES 1909-1939

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

August 1914, *Vanity Fair*

*"An innovation first makes its appearance and because it is new, it is startling; then a modification of the idea, or a duplication of it, is seen—then another, and another. Finally, the observer asks herself: 'Can it be that we are actually going to wear these things?' Even as the words are being spoken the idea grows less startling and she is gently coerced into ordering something similar for the first days of autumn."*



The twentieth century came in fresh as paint and by 1909 had started to roll. Total change took place—traditions evaporated and Paris became the artistic and social center of the Western world. Paris was dance mad. The carpets in my parents' apartment were never down. Victrolas blared and the Castles amused themselves doing the turkey trot. Everyone was gay, elegant and totally tuned into the new century. The world was intoxicated with its new art, new music, new way of life and new clothes. No dresses had ever been cut anything like those of Poiret, Vionnet, Callot, Chanel and Schiaparelli.

This collection reveals the unique changes that took place in the world of fashion from 1909 to 1939.

DIANA VREELAND
*Special Consultant,*
*The Costume Institute*

# 1909-1939.

An era bracketed by the rumblings of one world war and the beginning of another was a period of thirty-one years linked together by a series of dizzying changes. Spiralled and propelled by a burst of technological developments, this explosion was to touch every facet of life. Traditions were smashed, class barriers crumbled, new life patterns emerged, and fresh styles in art, literature and music all converged like the clashing of cymbals proclaiming the ushering in of a new age. Fashion, always in the mainstream of human activity, reflected these changes. Before the end of the first decade, women's fashions had jumped the slow evolutionary path of the nineteenth century and started on a whole new faster track more in pace with the times.

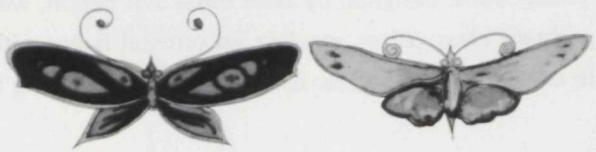
By the opening years of the twentieth century, electric lights, the steam engine, the telephone, motion pictures and the automobile were a practical reality. In 1903, with the success of their flights, the Wright Brothers paved the way for air travel. And there was also the promise of more to come. The fashions for most of the first decade of the new century were actually the terminal phase of those of the late 1890's. Women were corseted and postured into the serpentine S-shape, chest jutting forward in a large monobosom, followed below by full rounded hips. Top and bottom were linked by an incredibly small waist. For day, women's necks were encased in stiff high collars; for evening, low décolletages revealed plump shoulders. The gowns were mainly of pale soft fabrics, mostly silks, and profusely trimmed with laces, braids and other such confections. Hats became very large and heavy with ornamentation. The fashionable circle was small, closed and elite. Womanliness was the keyword, and if the pace of life was slow, it was the "good life," the *belle epoque*.

By 1910 three events had put the final punctuation on the Edwardian period—the death of Edward VII, the arrival of Cubism and the first appearance in 1909 of the Ballet Russe in Paris. Diaghilev's productions, designed by Leon Bakst and Benoit, were stunning spectacles in radiant, vibrant clear colors, exuding an oriental flavor with exotic costumes worn over supple corsetless slim bodies. By contrast, the prevailing fashions

became colorless, looked faded and in form took on the appearance of slowly dying swans. Within a very short time fashions underwent revitalizing changes. Costumes were ablaze with color and accented with bold trimmings. The new silhouette, straight and loose below the bosom, released the torso, and corsets could now be discarded. Freedom, however, was not yet complete. Constriction fell from the waist to the ankles. Skirts became so narrow at the hem that to walk, fashionable women had to hobble in small mincing steps. In 1913 the tango split the skirts at the sides or in front, freeing the legs and giving them some, if not total, exposure. Fashions remained, nevertheless, still essentially feminine. Women wearing silken gowns conforming to and accenting female curves had become supreme temptresses, vampires.

It took the vicissitudes of World War I, which forced women into the male world and in turn permitted them activities and freedoms previously denied them, to reduce their costumes to functional simplicity and put a male cast to their appearance. Toward equality with men and to resemble them, in the 1920's women flattened their bosoms and hips, and cut their hair. For the first time in centuries a woman's legs were totally exposed from the top of the knee down and freed for mobility and action. Aesthetically the fashions mirrored the hard-edged abstract elements in the art, architecture and decorative arts of this period. Geometric in design, the clothes relied on the motion of living women to breathe in a shape, a movement and a sexuality into an otherwise sterile form. This was totally sympathetic with an era of pulsating dynamism bent on breaking down restrictions hanging over from the social, economic, political and moral concepts of the past century. The accent was on youth, motion and speed. No experience was too adventuresome, too daring or too dangerous, so long as it was new. Freed bodies found release in round-the-clock dancing—the Charleston, the black bottom and the fox trot. As though to expand these new jazz rhythms, the costumes of the Twenties, basically an unfitted rectangle, were decorated with embroidery, ruffles and fringes, designed to reverberate like an echo each motion of the body.

By 1929 society found itself worn out, spent, confused. The American economic collapse rocked the world. The pace slackened and a kind of languor set in. To insulate



themselves against the harsh unpleasant realities of life, the wealthy international set along with their entourage—those who could stimulate or amuse, and some who lived by their wits—spun a shiny cocoon around their private universe. In almost complete apartness, oblivious to the world's miseries, they created a new continental life of luxury. Summers were spent on the Riviera, winters in St. Moritz. There were seasons in Paris and other European capitals. Thrill-seeking was replaced by play-seeking, rudeness by suaveness, pursuit of speed by idleness. For a few years, time for them seemed to stand still.

By 1930 the hemlines for day dropped below the calf, and to the floor for evening. Stripped of trimmings, dresses clung to the body like a second skin—slinky, languorous and for evening completely backless. Movement was hardly necessary. Mere breathing injected sensuality. The waltz was rediscovered. For leisure and pastimes, there were soft clinging lounging pajamas and bathing suits not so much for swimming as for sunbathing, designed primarily to reveal and flatter the wearer.

By the mid-Thirties lassitude turned into ennui. The fact that the world was gearing itself for another world war began to touch consciousness. As though to circumvent this reality, fashions for women turned to the past, to nostalgia, to festive gay peasant clothes and to romance. The music to dance by alternated between the Latin American rhythms—rumba, samba, the conga—and the sweet dreamy smooth sounds of "swing." For day there was a return to male-type suits. Shoulders were squared off and padded. Smartly tailored, made of fine woolens or silks, worn with small whimsically adorned hats, accessorized with quantities of jewelry and artificial flowers, they achieved a kind of "hard chic." In 1939 war broke out in Europe. The era came to an end.

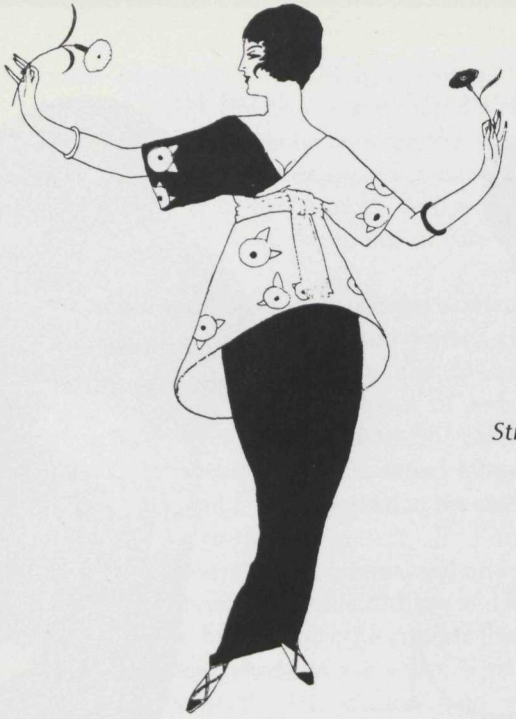
Throughout these three decades, Paris was the cultural center of the world. Artists, musicians, writers, designers flocked together, worked together and influenced each other. This rich fertile climate of creativity was the spawning ground of art movements—Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism. There were new sounds by Stravinsky, Ravel,

Debussy, Satie, the Dixieland band, the blues; literary works by Proust, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Fashion also had its great creators: Poiret, Callot, Vionnet, Chanel and Schiaparelli. A part of the French couture, these designers devised inventive clothes for women from all parts of the world who looked to them for the latest fashions.

Overlapping in time, each of these individual designers rose at propitious moments to invent appropriate clothes. Poiret with his unique brand of fantasy enticed women into less restricting clothes, thus setting them in the direction of more freedom. Callot gave fashions a patina of luxury and elegance in an age of razzle-dazzle. Vionnet with her gowns cut on the bias developed a whole new concept of construction. Chanel introduced beautiful clothes of functional simplicity. Schiaparelli was fancifully innovative.

The clothes that these designers created and that have survived for us to see are vivid records of the human experience during the years from 1909 through 1939.

Fashion in the final analysis is a social contract. It is a group agreement as to what the new ideal should be. There is always a degree of trial and error. Designers keep proposing something new, but whether their ideas come to fruition depends ultimately on whether the society that counts, accepts them or rejects them.



# THE 10s

## THE SCENE

*It is 1909*

*The Cubists have arrived—Braque and Picasso*

*Diaghilev's Ballet Russe has arrived*

*Stravinsky, Debussy, Satie, Ravel—all new sounds—*

*all a new school of music*

*Traditions are being shattered*

*Orientala has taken over*

*Vibrant colors are everywhere*

*Irene and Vernon Castle*

*The tango craze*

*World War I—1914-1918*

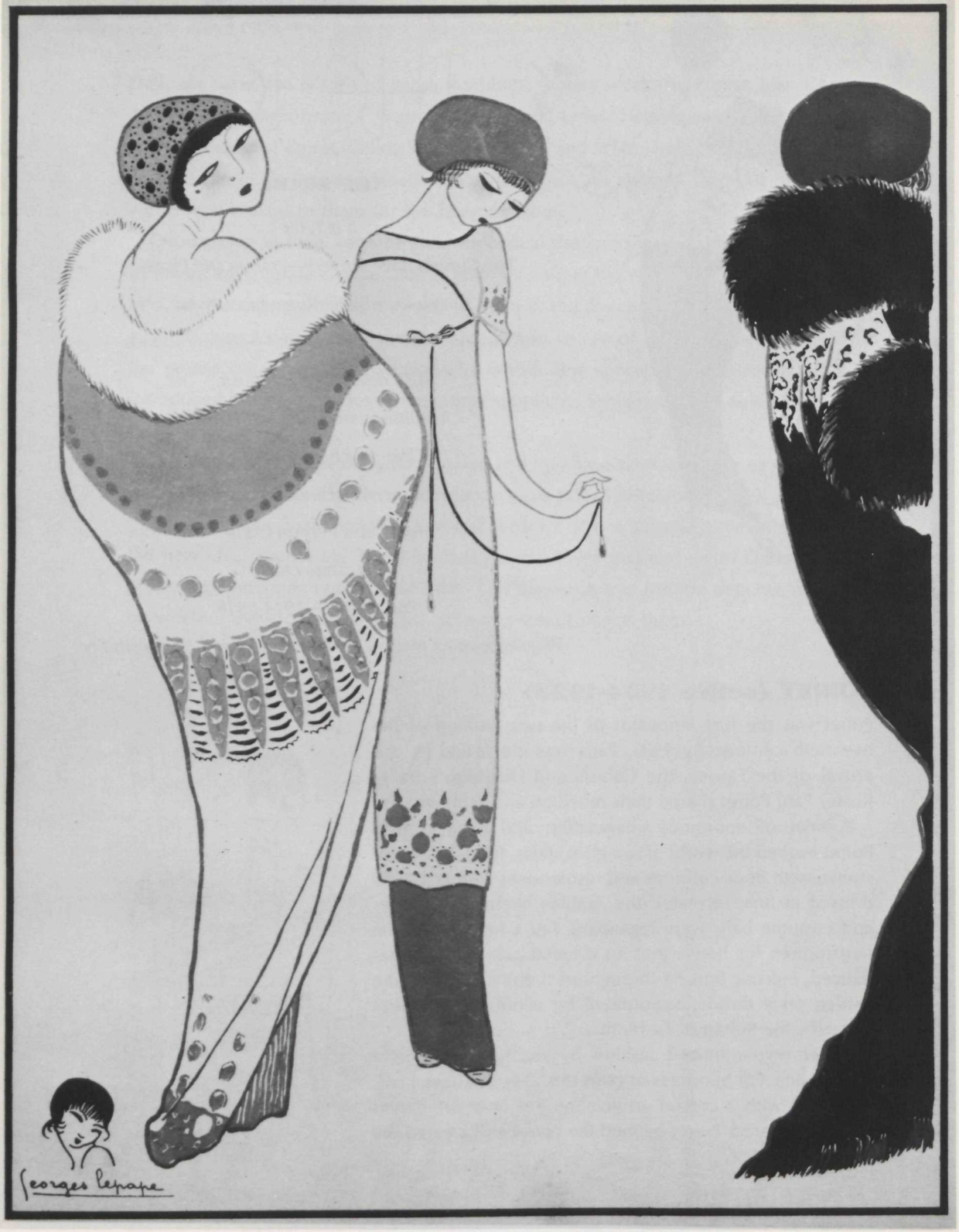
*Women enter a man's world of activity and responsibility*

## POIRET (active 1904-1925)

Poiret was the first innovator of the new fashion of the twentieth century. By 1909, Paris was electrified by the arrival of the Fauves, the Cubists and Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. Paul Poiret shared their rebellion and achievement.

A man of enormous imagination and extravagance, Poiret evoked the world of seraglios, galas, fetes. His salon, strewn with floor cushions and resplendent with assistants dressed in furs, recreated the Arabian Nights; his parties and costume balls were legendary. For a masquerade he transformed his house into an oriental palace. Ballerinas danced, incense burned throughout the night, and in the garden on a throne, surrounded by admirers, sat Poiret himself—the Sultan of Fashion.

Poiret revolutionized fashion by seeing woman in a straight line. For hundreds of years the body had been held, projected with a certain artificiality. But now the curves had disappeared. Poiret banned the corset and created the

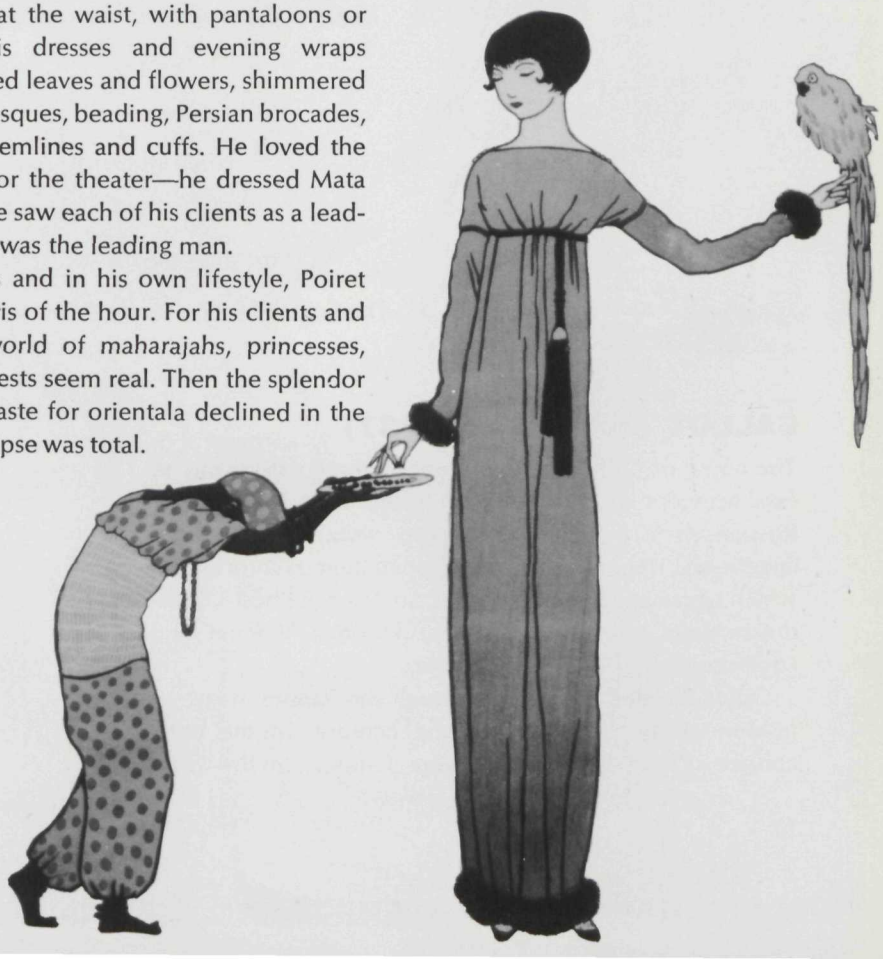

Georges Lepape

*soutien gorge*, which we call the brassiere. He made dresses with high waists, tunics, side and shoulder closings, all with an easy flow. But while he released the waist and freed the bust, he evolved the hobble skirt so narrow at the bottom that women could hardly walk. And smart women were delighted to trip along the streets of Paris with tiny, mincing steps.

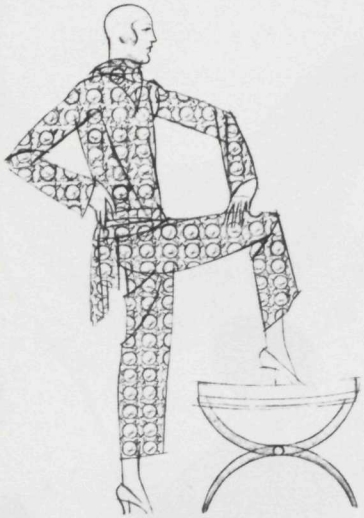
Poiret created the modern slender woman and presented her in every sort of coloring and fantasy. He replaced the delicate, washed-out palette of the Edwardian Age with brilliant, primary color—blotches of red, green, violet, orange, lemon yellow, cobalt blue, the colors of the Fauves and the Ballet Russe. He surrounded himself with artists: Lepape, Iribe and Erté all worked in his atelier. Raoul Dufy was there, designing fabrics.

The clothes were always original and often absurd. Poiret adored Turkish trousers, little turbans and high aigrets, kimono blouses, huge tassels; he created the minaret dress, to us like a lampshade at the waist, with pantaloons or drapery underneath. His dresses and evening wraps gleamed with embroidered leaves and flowers, shimmered with gold and silver arabesques, beading, Persian brocades, metallic bands circling hemlines and cuffs. He loved the exotic. Poiret designed for the theater—he dressed Mata Hari for the stage—and he saw each of his clients as a leading lady in a pageant. He was the leading man.

In his sense of clothes and in his own lifestyle, Poiret caught the essence of Paris of the hour. For his clients and friends, he made the world of maharajahs, princesses, peacocks and treasure chests seem real. Then the splendor eventually faded as the taste for orientala declined in the Twenties, and Poiret's eclipse was total.



# THE 20s



**THE SCENE**

*Art Deco*

*The blues—St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans*

*George Gershwin*

*Josephine Baker at the Casino de Paris*

*Nightclubs*

*Dance teams—Maurice & Hughes*

*Indian maharajahs doing the Charleston*

*Red lipstick, rouge and red varnished nails*

*Suntan*

*Short skirts*

*Nude stockings*

*Diamond solitaires*

*Short shaped hair—shingled*

*The finger wave buries the hot marcel tongs*

## CALLOT (active 1895-1937)

The house of Callot, presided over by three sisters, was an establishment of the utmost elegance. Born in France of Russian ancestry, *les Callot soeurs* were first sellers of lingerie and ribbons; later they opened their couture house, which became a great institution. Some of the best-known dressmakers trained in their workrooms; Vionnet and Louiseboulanger worked at Callot.

Callot traveled gracefully through the various stages of fashion at the beginning of the century. In the *belle epoque,* Callot lace dresses were famous; in the years

before World War I, Callot followed the fashionable silhouette, the disciplined straight line. These clothes continued and heightened the tradition of great luxury and quality in fashion. They were celebrated for their workmanship; made of the finest silks, lamés, velvets, satins, crepes, Callot dresses were perfect in every detail. In the Twenties, legs were being seen from the knee down for the first time. Callot sheaths blossomed with Chinese motifs and framed the legs with beautiful hemlines—scalloped, panelled, crusted with beading, tassels and embroidery.

Possibly influenced by their Russian forebears or by the fascination in Paris with the Far East, the Callot sisters were irrepressibly entranced with *la splendeur de la chine*. Their embroideries glowed with exquisite Chinese colors—the creams and pinks of lotuses on mauve and chartreuse, the greens of jades and emeralds, the blues of lapis lazuli and waterfalls, the contrast of tangerine, of orange, against black. Chinese motifs in gold or silver might border a hemline, water lilies waft across a skirt, brilliantly plumed birds cover a panel, an entire dress. Some Callot dresses, with panels at the sides or down the front, are reminiscent of the robes on the carved wooden figures of women of the T'ang dynasty.

Callot made not only dresses with the straight line but every fashion of the Twenties—lounging pajamas, evening dresses with layered tulle skirts punctuated with silk roses, a snappy pleated skirt and middy top. Callot dresses were always of the moment. Yet their tasteful restraint, their subtlety, and their superb workmanship give them the timelessness and elegance of classics, and the most fashionable women of the world went to Callot to dress.

## VIONNET (active 1912-1939)

Hers was the spirit of a great artist. Today, a woman of ninety-seven, Madeleine Vionnet lives in Paris in her salon full of sun, beautiful Art Deco furniture, big striped fur rugs, her portrait by Dunand in eggshell lacquer. Lying on a chaise longue, surrounded by her special rose-pink, she is totally delighted to receive her visitors. "Remember," she says, "I never made fashion, I never saw fashion, I don't

know what fashion is. I made the clothes I believed in." And that is true, for Vionnet was not a trend-setter. No one ever copied her, because nobody ever could.

Vionnet started in London, worked in the house of Callot, was a designer for Doucet, and then opened her own house where she produced dresses that were masterpieces of construction. She brought to couture absolute expertise in the use of the bias, or fabric cut on the cross so that it has a pull and a fall. Consisting of intricately cut bias triangles and rectangles, skilfully mitered, a Vionnet dress could be slipped over the head and become form-fitting without any side or back opening. Never before did well-shaped bodies have a more beautiful showcase.

Vionnet insisted on quality in her materials. To meet the demands of the bias, she had special fabrics made for her; they were often transparent but strong as steel. Her silks were fifty-four inches wide; never before had silk been woven half as wide. Vionnet used crepe de chine for the exterior of a dress; previously it had been used only as a lining.

Vionnet was an architect. Her creations were a total work of art. She was a pure creator. She understood proportion, balance, the harmony between a dress and the rhythm of body underneath. Vionnet dresses are essential, devoid of trimmings. Vionnet's colors are black, ivory, beige, brown, a vibrant green, and always her beloved rose-pink. She used the bias in many ways, for halters and cowl necklines, petal skirts, skirts fluttering with pieces of fabric that look like handkerchiefs. These dresses convey a great simplicity that belies their intricate workmanship.

Vionnet is without a doubt the most admired and important one-dress maker of the twentieth century. Fashionable women cherished their Vionnets in the Twenties, the Thirties, and in the years after Vionnet closed her house.

## CHANEL (active 1915-1971)

It is Chanel who saw positively the great spirit of the twentieth century and showed modern emancipated women how to dress.

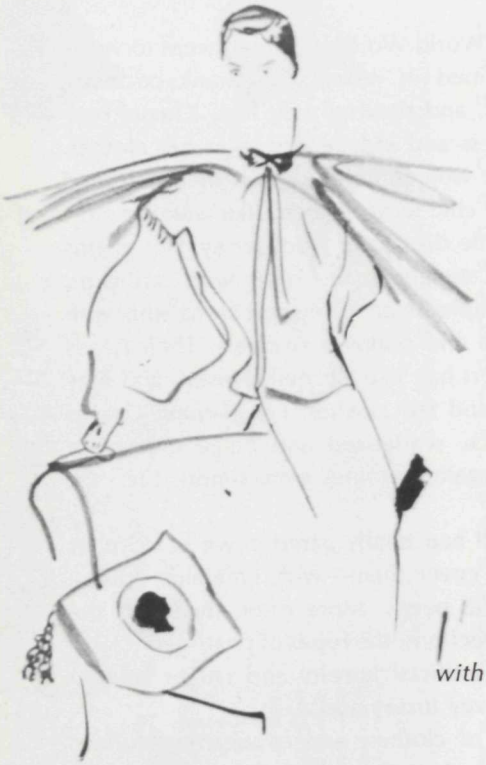
In the years after World World I, women went to work, took the Metro, dined in restaurants, drank cocktails, rouged their cheeks, and showed their legs. Chanel conveyed their headiness and independence in her clothes. She saw fashionable women going out on their own and thought it would be chic to dress them like working girls. She made simple little dresses of wool jersey. Her clients wore these dresses, straight to the knee, with cardigans. They went out in simple beige jersey and kasha suits with easy skirts, or slacks and pullover sweaters. Their heads were small, with short hair like Chanel's herself, and they wore velvet berets and felt cloches. For evening Chanel made gunmetal-black, scarlet-red and beige dresses of paillettes and lace; again, the lines were simple, the look smart and clear.

Only when Chanel had totally pared down her clothes did she proceed to cover them—with emeralds, rubies, sapphires, chains, and pearls. More often than not, the rubies were glass cabochons, the ropes of pearls were fake. Chanel popularized artificial jewelry and taught women to use jewels to convey luxury and dash.

Chanel's concept of clothes, and of wearing clothes, effected a revolution that changed fashion entirely, irrevocably, and with great élan. With one fell swoop, Chanel took everything away except the woman herself and whatever was essential. Chanel institutionalized the clean white shirt, the pullover sweater, the skirt with two pockets placed precisely where hands expected to find pockets, the suits with cardigan jackets—all the clothes we now call basic.

More than any other twentieth-century designer before her or after, Chanel understood the new century and changing way of life, and its economic and social requirements. Smart, uncluttered, functional as the new architecture and home furnishings, her clothes are in principle as appropriate today as they were in the Twenties. Chanel closed her house in 1939 and returned in 1954. She continued working vigorously and energetically, climbing daily the six flights to her atelier, until the end.

# THE 30s



**THE SCENE**

*The samba, rumba, and congo lines*

*The neo-romantics*

*South American music*

*Cole Porter*

*Big-time Broadway musicals*

*Callot, Vionnet and Chanel*

*continue to design in their individual ways*

*Fashion is getting soft and less adventurous*

*The adventure has been almost completed*

*and Schiaparelli gives the world a lift*

*with her marvelous colorings, shapes and absurdities*

*Synthetic fibers*

*The zipper as a fastening*

*World War II—1939—Paris couture closed to the world*

## SCHIAPARELLI (active 1928-1958)

Elsa Schiaparelli was an Italian.

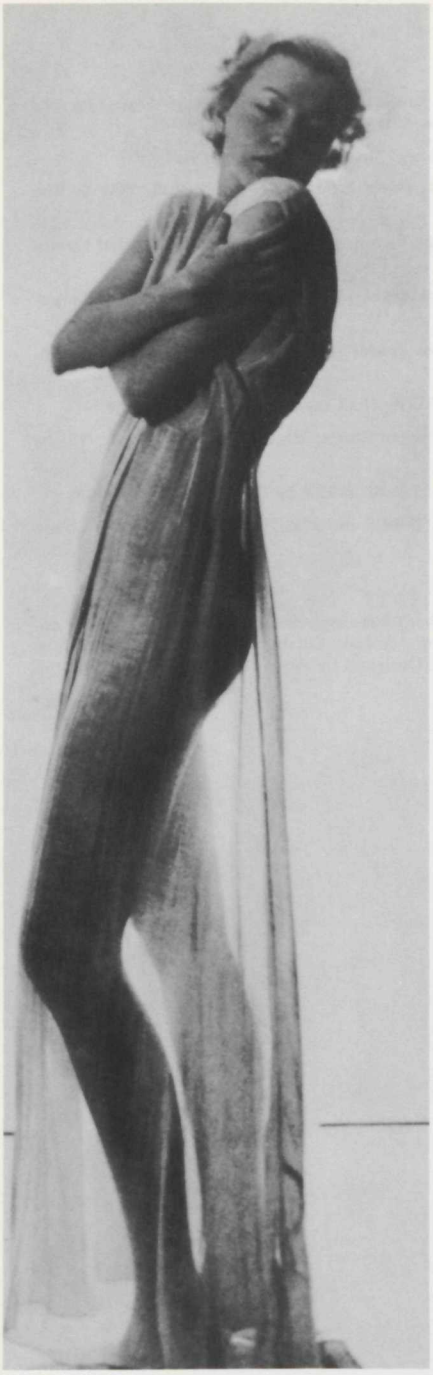
In the decade before World War II, she became a Parisian dressmaker. Her workrooms were among the best that Paris had ever had. Her total understanding of haute couture was second to nobody's; her clothes had a line of their own and a totally classic tradition. She made small black dresses, long narrow black dinner dresses and perfect

suits that her famous clients lived in. Her sense of proportion was unfailing and astute; she balanced long dresses with boleros and delicious tiny hats with feathers and absurdities, saucily turned brims and fanciful motifs.

It was in her trimmings and motifs that Schiaparelli revealed her wonderful Italian sense of amusement. There was always, in her clothes, a touch of the commedia dell'arte, of its stylish comic chic. She started, making sweaters with trompe d'oeil designs—collars, neckties, cuffs—woven into the knit. She graduated to be a fully fledged couturier. She "imposed" on her clients hats trimmed with a mutton chop, a slipper sitting on the top of the head, jackets with pockets that looked like bureau drawers, and her clients were enchanted. She was inspired by artists and people of the theatre, who were all her friends. Jean Cocteau drew profiles for her, and she embroidered them on her evening jackets. Salvador Dali designed prints for her fabrics. Schiaparelli's imagination and creativity were sparked by everything she saw, in her travels throughout the world, or simply walking on the street. She lavished North African designs, butterflies and dragonflies on her lapels, gave a jacket patch pockets like a Balkan coachman's, made a dress printed with ordinary packets of flower seeds. Often her collections centered on one theme at a time; the circus, with ponies with diamond bridles and colored plumes embroidered on her little boleros. Or a music motif. Under her hand, accessories were more than accessories. Buttons were masks, fat pompons or starfish; a glove was a virtual sleeve billowing to the shoulder, or a hand with nails.

Her colors were as startling as her designs. She infused fashion with poppy red, scarlet, violet, purple, vibrant pink, the colors of the modern French artists put together like a marvelous Matisse plume. Indeed, it was "shocking pink," the pink of the Incas, that became her characteristic, her fashion signature.

Schiaparelli was the first to bring synthetic fibers to couture, and to use the zipper as a fastening. But perhaps her greatest innovation was her audacious spirit. She brought to the world of fashion mischief, daring, playfulness, and fun.



Drawings by Georges Lepape, pages 1, 2 (right), 8, 9, from *Les Choses de Paul Poiret vues par Georges Lepape,* 1911

Drawing by Georges Lepape, page 7, from *Gazette du Bon Ton,* 1913

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