

French Fashion, Women, and the First World War, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York, September 5, 2019 – January 5, 2020

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French Fashion, Women, and the First World War is currently on display at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 18 West 86th Street, New York City. Curated by Maude Bass-Krueger and Sophie Kurkdjian, this exhibition was first presented in Paris in 2017 at the Forney Library, a public library from the city of Paris during the commemoration of the First World War in France. This exhibition examines for the first time the relationship between fashion, women, and gender in France during the First World War.

The exhibition is organized in sections that include the pre-war days of 1914, wartime textiles and fashion, French-American fashion cooperation, women at work, nursing, mourning, the midinettes' strike of 1917, tensions that rose from women's changing identities, and the question of postwar women's social and political rights.

During this period, the fashion industry represented the second largest economic driver in France. Fashion was part of the French economy, while at the same representing the national identity. Fashion had both an economic and a symbolic value; what explains why the protection of the fashion industry was a priority during the conflict and why the fashion industry as well as the fashion press never ceased their productivity between 1914 and 1918 despite the difficulty of the national and international context. In the couture, while Paul Poiret was mobilized at the front, he continued to produce new collections, like Jeanne Lanvin, Jeanne Paquin, but also Jeanne Sacerdote, and a new designer who created her first jersey skirt suits during the war: Gabrielle Chanel. Parisian women were encouraged to regularly buy new clothes: to consume became a patriotic behavior.

For the French couture, it was a priority to be visible abroad, and especially in the United States. That is why the Parisian couturiers presented their designs at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco to ensure that France maintained its position at the pinnacle of worldwide fashion. Publishers such as Lucien Vogel created new magazines, such as *Les Élégances Parisiennes* and *Le Style Parisien*, to disseminate new French fashions at home and abroad, helping to accelerate changes in women's attire introduced before the war, like simplified silhouettes and higher hemlines.

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In the society, women were mobilized to keep the French economy afloat. The nurse first, most of the time women from the aristocracy, wore a codified uniform constituted by a white skirt, a white blouse, a white apron, a veil and a coat. The nurse became a very important figure, embodying the idea of maternity and femininity. During the war, the nurse even became a *fashionable* figure. The fashion press featured nurses on fashion magazines covers and gave advice on how to be *coquette* while wearing a nurse uniform while the department stores, such as the Galeries Lafayette, sold nurse blouses. This confusion between fashion and uniform created lot of tensions between men and women in the society. The “other” women at work came from the working class. For the first time, these women replaced men in munition factories, train station, restaurants.... Some became postwomen, tramway drivers, inspectors while others were chimney sweep, and “munitionnettes.” Called the “remplaçantes,” those women did not have uniforms to work and wore what they had at home along with armbands or hats to signal their status; most of the time a skirt suit which became the home front uniform, worn by the majority of women in France during the war.


The question of fashion was not only a question of economic production, of uniform and working clothes, but was also a social issue. Indeed, the evolution of fashion into a shorter and more practical fashion – during the war, two different lines were created: the “war crinoline” in 1915 and the, the “barrel line” in 1917- the new jobs and professional responsibilities of women worried a lot soldiers who, during each of their leaves, discovered new changes in the society and in their family. Their anxieties were at the origin of numerus articles published in satirical magazines, caricaturing women for being either too frivolous or too “masculine.”

At the end of the war, while the “remplaçantes” are asked to go back home and make babies to repopulate France, French women did not gain the right to vote until 1944 (American, British and Armenian women got it in 1918). The skirt-suits, worn during the war, certainly represented a simplification of fashion, shorter and more practical which spread during the interwar period. Nevertheless, if this “new” fashion looked simpler, the war had not completely freed the women’s body. The corset was no longer used but it was replaced by the girdle, while cosmetic surgery, diets, new powders, lotions and new skin and hair cares were sold in high numbers by the cosmetic industry, which became more important than never during the roaring twenties.

The archives mobilized for this exhibition are different, ranging from garments and fashion magazines, to commercial catalogues, postcards, posters, photographs, and private letters. These documents come from major French fashion houses and French and American museums and libraries, including Musée des Arts décoratifs (MAD), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Musée de la Grande Guerre du Pays de Meaux, The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Collection Patrimoine de Chanel¹, Patrimoine Lanvin, Archives de Paris, Bibliothèque Forney, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Fashion Institute of Technology Library Special Collections and College Archives, Thomas J. Watson Library of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

French Fashion, Women, and the First World War is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue published by Yale University Press. In addition to Maude Bass-Krueger and Sophie Kurkdjian, editors of the volume, contributors include Margaret Darrow (Dartmouth College), Michele Majer (Bard Graduate Center), Jérémie Brucker (Université d’Angers), Susan Grayzel (Utah State University), and Johanne Berlemont and Anaïs Raynaud (Musée de la Grande Guerre de Pays de Meaux).

1. On display in the exhibition: a silk jersey blouse from 1916 and a hat from spring-summer 1917.



French Fashion, Women, and the First World War

Thursday, September 12, 2019
Exhibition Viewing and Reception 6:30–9 pm
Remarks at 7:30 pm
Bard Graduate Center Gallery
18 West 86th Street, New York City

RSVP required to Minna Lee at 212.501.3038 or to vip.rsvp@bgc.bard.edu by Wednesday, September 4. This invitation admits two and is non-transferable.

Support provided by The Coby Foundation, LTD. and Mission du centenaire de la Première Guerre mondiale.

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Image: A woman in work clothes, Paris. "The new professions for women since the war," Excelsior, June 24, 1917. Silver gelatin print. © Excelsior-L'Equipe / Roger-Viollet, RV-72195-59.

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Figure 1: Invitation of the exhibition *French Fashion, Women, and the First World War*, September 12, 2019, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York