

THE GREAT ESCAPE – TRANSATLANTIC FASHION IN THE DECO PERIOD

LA GRANDE EVASION- LA MODE TRANSATLANTIQUE
PENDANT L'ERE DECO

Hope and optimism marked design in the 1930s. Architects built lofty, shiny, angular buildings. Industrial designers embraced the future through modernism. Engineers reached for speed, fluidity and shapely lines in their trains, automobiles and ships. Designers felt compelled to create solutions evoking power and strength, with a healthy dose of escapism. With this came the explosion of the Art Deco period, which permeated almost all fields of design. Fashion design was no exception. Style in the 1930s was all about shape, movement, angles and curves – optimism, fantasy and folly.

Like most artists, clothing designers were responding to the crash of 1929. Fashion and interiors of the time embraced affluence. Designers went crazy for gossamer fabrics, sexy shapes, flowing lines and rich textures. Perhaps as a backlash or denial of “hard times,” fashion by the mid-1930s seemed to scream, “Opulence is okay, especially if you’re rich... and if you’re not, fake it!”

CELEBRATING THE BODY
With the end of prohibition in 1932, the modern woman was ready to let loose and embrace her body. Suddenly physical fitness was the rage; breasts, hips and muscles took center stage after a decade of being under wraps. Suntans were in vogue, and with sunbathing came the need for accessories – sunglasses, brimmed hats and eventually the stretchy bathing suit. The big band sound was dawning, and folks took to the dance floor in large numbers. A bias-cut gown with a low back, feathers and beading would best show off a hard-earned figure and seductively “swing” at a ritzy nightclub or aboard a luxury liner. Hollywood pictures were talking now, and audiences were devouring every worship-worthy image the film industry served up. Shop girls and Park Avenue mavens alike copied the clothes, makeup and hairstyles of Hollywood starlets, such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford and a young Katherine Hepburn.

THE STYLISH MALE
In celebration of the new sporty lifestyle, men of the 1930s abandoned flannel pants and long sleeves for more functional “sportswear” pieces. French tennis star Rene Lacoste’s polo shirt became the choice staple for fashion-conscious players on and off the court. By



OPPOSITE: Madeleine Vionnet summer dress (Paris, 1938). Hulton Archive. © Getty Images.



THIS PAGE: First Class Swimming Pool aboard the Normandie. Courtesy of Mario J. Pulice. OPPOSITE: Fred and Adele Astaire. From the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC., LC-B2-5950-11[P&P].

1935 attitudes had adjusted enough to allow men to wear only swim trunks to most public beaches, a racy departure from the full body suits that were once mandatory beach attire. Elegant, masculine silhouettes and the sophisticated tailoring of suits worn by princes and silver screen icons dictated the formal menswear styles of the entire decade.

The Prince of Wales (later the Duke of Windsor) had an undeniable influence on men's fashion. Well-heeled men around the globe emulated his regal chic, which was delivered via countless newsreels, newspapers and magazines. Ever the trendsetter, the Prince introduced the double-breasted jacket with roll lapel. He was responsible for the re-emergence of the Fair Isle Shetland, his eponymous Prince-of-Wales check, and of course, his namesake - the Windsor knot. Film icons such as Fred Astaire, Clark Gable and Gary Cooper became the ultimate arbiters of style as their suave aesthetic and confident swagger splashed across the silver screen. Abandoning the austere, overly structured suits of the 1920s, suiting in the 1930s flattered the male physique, draped more comfortably and conveyed a subtle elegance. A few classic silhouettes emerged, including the blazer and the double-breasted suit. Commenting on men's wear of the period, legendary designer Yves Saint-Laurent explained, "By 1930 to 1936, a handful of basic shapes were created that still prevail today as a sort of scale of expression, with which every man can project his own personality and style."

FROM SCHOOL GIRL TO GLAMOUR GIRL, SURREALISM TO ART DECO STREAMLINING, FASHION IS ART

Women's fashion too was about functionality, mobility and elegance. However, style-conscious women of the times were unapologetically dressing to impress. French designers reined supreme. They embraced the "new,"

using innovative fabrics, sinewy cuts and luxurious embellishments. Their precisely assembled and intricately finished garments draped the rich. And like today, New York's Seventh Avenue "borrowed" inspiration, churning out more affordable iterations for the less privileged.

The best-known and most celebrated French designer of the time was the inimitable Coco Chanel, who revolutionized the look of fashionable women from the 1920s through the 1930s. She stripped down and simplified over-the-top dressing styles, presenting a sophisticated "school-girl" look for daywear, and working in a sober palette relying heavily on navy and black. Her signature cardigan suit was born and lives on to this day as a staple of the well-dressed woman.

became an important part of Chanel's design repertoire. Indeed, she popularized costume jewelry, using innovative materials for the time, such as plastic and Bakelite.

Chanel also broke the rules for evening-gear. Her sequined trouser ensemble for Dianna Vreeland (1937), part of the Victoria and Albert Museum collection, likely created a deluge of opinionated chatter at the time - but now, it is so Chanel.

It was also Chanel who popularized suntans, once a hallmark of the lower classes. The bronzed body became synonymous with a life of leisure, one with time and money for cruise ships, holiday resorts and sporting activities. New activity-specific clothing augmented the female wardrobe, including culottes for cycling, chamois (sweaters) for



With a nod to her humble roots she embraced a new use of affordable fabrics, creating bold designs in cotton with lines simple enough for the home seamstress to imitate.

Coco embellished her pared-down, restrained look by adding strategically placed hints of femininity - lace (at the neck or wrists), sequins and bows. Heaps of pearls were, and remain, emblematic of her style. Accessories

motoring and sleeveless leather waistcoats (vests) for hunting.

And so "Cruise Wear" was born. Sailor stripes and oversized collars, or "boat necks," populated First Class decks. Nautical motifs such as anchors and ships' wheels were embroidered on pockets and lapels. Beach pajamas were seen at seaside resorts or poolside. These lightweight "cover up"



separates mimicked sailor suits and became must-haves for the seaside reveler. Fashion magazines touted these lighthearted outfits as “essential garments to pack.”

Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli, who was friends with Man Ray, Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp embraced fantasy. She began with *trompe l'oeil* effects such as the now-famous black wool sweater with contrasting cream butterfly bow woven in at the neckline. Later, cues taken from the Surrealist art movement became her calling card. She created hats that looked like shoes or wicker baskets filled with butterflies, dresses complete with “desk drawers” or gloves with gold fingernails attached. But Elsa also embraced the practical. She incorporated



synthetic material into her *haute couture*, a savvy business decision. She latched onto plastic zippers, which she used in both her sportswear and evening lines, often choosing ones in contrasting colors, a revolutionary idea at the time.

Collaborating with Dali, Schiaparelli created some of her most exotic designs including a crepe evening gown known as the tear dress. A work of art in itself, it hugs the body, dovetailing at the hem. Dali’s “tears” caress the wearer, like dripping paint or flames, or indeed, tears. Another notable Dali-Schiaparelli creation is the mutton-chop hat worn with a matching suit embroidered with “cutlet” designs.

The professional rivalry between Chanel and Schiaparelli is well documented, but two lesser-known but equally pivotal designers working in Paris were no doubt carefully watched by both – the French Madeleine Vionnet and the American born Main Rousseau Bocher (also known as Mainbocher).

If ever there was a dress design that mirrored Art Deco streamlining, it was the bias-cut dress, perfected by Madam Vionnet. If aerodynamics, speed and modern shapes were the order of the day, her bias-cut dress

was the race car of fashion. The technique of “cutting” across the grain of the fabric and diagonally seaming created a stunningly sensual effect once the garment encased the body. It clung and hung in all the right places. Low-backed and sleeveless, the bias-cut gown was a siren for men and women alike. Often crafted in silk, satin, chiffon or crepe, the bias-cut was embellished with braids, bows or bustles to further accentuate the low back (or rear end). Vionnet also experimented with shiny metallic fabrics such as lame, sequins and beads made of colored plastics, and even cellophane to further capture the reflective, sexy quality of Art Deco styling. The plunging back and exposed shoulders of the halter bias cut dress no doubt elicited its share of hushed gasps, but fantastical wraps of white fox or velvet were available to cover up scandalous shoulders. The most fashionable women were known to wear entire animals (fox furs), one over each shoulder.

DESIGNERS AND HOLLYWOOD COSTUMERS

While Mainbocher was widely known for his simple unpatterned clothes, he was also a master at creating beaded dresses and jackets with designs ranging from jungle florals to diagonal stripes. Born in Chicago, but very much a part of the French fashion milieu of the 1930s (he was the first American designer to open a Paris salon in 1931), Mainbocher was primarily a couture designer throughout his later career. He designed tastemaker Wallis Simpson’s wedding dress for her marriage to the Duke of Windsor. Its gathered bodice and tiny ornamental buttons are telltale details of Mainbocher’s work.

Mainbocher, Schiaparelli and several others also worked with jersey knit, a fabric



THIS PAGE: Edward VIII, former King of England, now Duke of Windsor, and his bride, Bessie Wallis Warfield Simpson (wearing a dress designed by Mainbocher) are seen following the civil and religious ceremonies at the Chateau de Candé, June 3, 1937. (AP Photo) OPPOSITE: Coco Chanel suit (Paris, February 1936). © Roger Violette/Getty Images. Boating outfit for Summer by Schiaparelli Fashion (1935). © Getty Images.

perfect for draping the body in sinewy folds. Best known for draping, however, was Alix Barton, known as Madame Gres. Her early ambition was to be a sculptor. She opened a fashion house in Paris in 1934 and became famous for her Grecian-style designs replete with folds, gathers and swags that flatter the figure then, and now.

HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR FOR THE COMMONLY STYLISH

While Paris fashion certainly influenced the well-dressed woman of the 1930s, women always kept a locked eye on Hollywood. Costume designers including Gilbert Adrian, Edith Head and Orry-Kelly churned out glamorous looks for Hollywood stars

that were adapted by the garment industry and sold by the thousands. The Letty Lynton dress, a wide-shouldered white organdy dress with poof sleeves, fitted waist and full skirt, was all the rage. Worn by Joan Crawford and designed by Adrian, Macy’s department store reported selling over half a million dresses in this style.

Shot in black and white, films of the period were moving tributes to the Art Deco style. The public looked to the silver screen to escape real-world woes, stepping into the celluloid lives of stars such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Set designs of cruise ships, swank hotels and beauty salons were marvelously modern with their Art Deco curves, angles and highlights. Those who could not afford to be part of the “continental set” just head to the pictures.

Whether it was the bias-cut dress of Norma Shearer, the bleached blond hair of Jean Harlow, the belted trench coat and dark glasses of Greta Garbo or the thin mustache of Clark Gable, women and men of the 1930s appropriated the styles of Hollywood stars and starlets with no apologies. Marlene Dietrich’s “men’s wear ensemble” still makes its occasional runway appearance, and vintage collectors still covet these classic Hollywood pieces.

Many consider the 1930s to be the decade for exquisite fashion design. Designers capitalized on what was lovely and sexy about the body. The style-savvy woman tastefully captured the attention of her gentleman with sleek, smart daywear or luxurious yet seductive gowns. Clothes became “part of the man,” celebrating his physique, elegance and bravado. New materials captivated the industry, and a relaxed elegance emerged. The artistic movements of the time were nurtured and celebrated by the international design community. Life was glamorous, the mood gregarious, and Art Deco was divine. ❖

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