The Crafted Newsletter

Fashion is a Feast

Installment number 2 of the Paris fashion exhibitions series this week, and we're visiting "Paul Poiret: La Mode est une Fête" (Fashion is a Feast), on at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs until 11 January 2026 - so plenty of time to include this on a trip to Paris!

As I mentioned last week, I went to the exhibitions in reverse chronological order - this one covers the brief but bright career of Paul Poiret, a designer who was active from the turn of the 20th century until 1932. It's clear from the exhibition materials that the curators feel Poiret is somewhat of a forgotten name - something I was a bit surprised at, but maybe that's my skewed perspective having been an avid listener of the Dressed podcast for so long. Nevertheless, their aim with this exhibition is to shine a light on this highly creative designer again and show how many lasting changes in fashion he was at the forefront of.

The first and most obvious of these, and the one he is most commonly credited with, is the abandonment of the corseted figure - introducing the bra as we know it today and offering women looser, more comfortable clothing. However, there was another designer already doing this at the turn of the century as well - Madeleine Vionnet, which is acknowledged in the exhibition.

Poiret's go-to shapes frequently used either an empire waistline (bringing the most fitted part of the dress to under the bust), or the drop-waisted or straight column shape which

became synonymous with the roaring 20s. His emphasis on designing through draping upended the existing monopoly of skilled tailors working to flat patterns. In addition, by eliminating the corset he fundamentally changed how clothes were designed to be supported. I found this quote particularly interesting:

"C'est en étudiant la sculpture ancienne au Louvre que j'ai compris que le point d'appui du vêtement devrait résider dans les épaules, non dans la taille. Toutes mes robes flottent depuis ce point de soutien, ça a été mon principe de base [...]" // It was by studying ancient sculptures at the Louvre that I came to understand that the anchor point of a garment should be at the shoulders, not the waist. All my dresses float from this support, that was my core principle [...]

If there is one single thing I had to choose out of everything I've learned making and customising the fit of my own garments over the years, it's exactly this - fit the shoulders, and the rest follows. It came up on the Introduction to Inclusive Design course I did with Kim McBrien Evans - many, many poor fit issues with handknit jumpers often stem from a neckline or shoulders which are too wide. With sewn garment alterations, the rule of thumb is to make changes there first, and then see how the fit and hang has changed before you tweak anything else.

Besides the styles, Poiret also threw out the status quo in terms of colour palette - he favoured bright, bold colours, often with clashing combinations or prints. It must have

seemed extraordinary to a society used to seeing women corseted in stiff, heavy fabrics in sombre, muted shades.

Poiret was a huge admirer of the arts and an amateur artist himself, although he didn't start painting in earnest until the end of his life. However, it meant that as well as dressing the actresses and stage stars of the day, he also patronised artists by commissioning their designs for fabric, interior decor and illustrations of his designs.

After he visited the Wiener Werkstätte in 1910 and observed their philosophy of design across all areas of life - which introduced the concept of a "lifestyle", he brought this idea back and incorporated it into his own company - founding a design school the following year and opening a new branch of his business, Atelier Martine, which sold home furnishings and decorative items designed at the school.

That same year he also opened a perfume branch - Les Parfums de Rosine - and this time, he was definitely the first fashion designer to do so. No one else would take this leap for more than 10 years, and of course nowadays, perfume is a big seller for every major fashion brand.

So let's recap on what aspects of today's fashion landscape we can thank Poiret for:

- No more corsets, more fluid garments (together with Vionnet)
- Bright patterns and colours, freedom of self-expression
- Perfume produced by fashion brands
- Fashion as a lifestyle - transcending garments and offering curated, "on-brand" style across home decor, accessories and more (Orla Kiely or Laura Ashley are really clear examples of this).

All this influence, in barely thirty years. Poiret's start in fashion was working for others; Doucet and Worth, but he opened his own house in 1903 and finally closed in 1932. He was actually recruited by Gaston Worth, commercial director of Worth, to develop a line of simple and practical dresses which would appeal to a younger market and sit in contrast to the styles they were known and respected for. However, that role was short-lived thanks to the creative director and Gaston's brother, Jean-Philippe, who wasn't ready for Poiret's radical ideas.

So, Poiret set up his own house and quickly found success. Unfortunately, his success was halted in its prime by WWI, and he was drafted aged 35. Although he returned to his business after the war, he was plagued with financial difficulties. This was partly due to the Depression, but he also mismanaged money. He was known for spending money like water, and in 1925 he decided to put on his own exhibition alongside the International Exhibition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts. This involved three barges moored

on the left bank of the Seine, one for Atelier Martine, one for the perfumes and one for the clothing. This exhibition was nowhere near successful enough to recoup the vast expense, and Poiret never recovered financially - in 1929 he was forced to sell his house, and in the words of Simenon:

"l'homme de ces fêtes inoubliables, qui dépensait par millions [...] est devenu clochard [...] Vêtu d'une vaste cape de gros drap qui lui restait de son époque glorieuse, il dormait sur les bancs des squares." // the man who had thrown those unforgettable parties, who spent millions [...] had become homeless [...] Dressed in a huge cloak of coarse cloth left over from his glory days, he slept on the park benches.

His latter years were spent in temporary lodgings or staying with friends and former colleagues, and he died aged 65, rather forgotten - but not entirely. In particular, he had met Schiaparelli in 1922 and mentored her for a while. There is clear evidence of his influence on her work, and I'm interested to see how next year's V&A exhibition on her brings in any references to Poiret.

The last part of this exhibition also illustrates how modern designers have drawn inspiration from Poiret's work.
Above left: Uniforms designed by Poiret for staff to wear on board his 1925 exhibition barges

Above right: Costume designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier, 1985, for the Ballet Atlantique-Régine Chopinot

Below left: Coat, Adeline André A/W 2005 Couture collection
Below right: Coat and dress, John Galliano for Christian Dior S/S 1998 Couture collection.

Next time, we'll be stepping back into the 19th century and exploring the venerable House of Worth.
There's still more fashion exhibitions to come - there's two more in London I need to visit at time of writing (*Splash! A Century of Swimming and Style* at the Design Museum and *Textiles: the Art of Mankind* at the Fashion & Textile Museum) and then the V&A opens a new exhibition *Marie Antoinette Style* later in September. I can't keep up!

Nicole Hawkesford - a certain style

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