



82 JEANNE HALLÉE
French, active early 20th century

Jupe-Culotte Evening Dress

c. 1911

Silk charmeuse harem trousers; silk chiffon sleeves and overskirt; tulle scarf, cummerbund, and overskirt with bead embroidery and a beaded tassel ornament

Courtesy The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Isabel Shults Gift, 1981

From head to toe, a woman fashionably dressed in Orientalist taste (during its height in 1910), sported a turban, perhaps ornamented with a jeweled aigrette; a wrap-front tunic, cut either as the bodice of a dress or as a kind of loose-fitting jacket; flowing pants gathered in at the cuffs, a skirt fashioned similarly, or the combination thereof called a jupe-culotte (cat. no. 82). On her feet were shoes with upturned toes (cat. no. 86). Colors reminiscent of the most glorious plumage sparkled with metallic thread or fabric. From her wrist hung a beaded bag ornamented with tassels (cat. no. 83), perhaps made in the design of a magic carpet; inside were such necessities as a cigarette case or vanity items, crafted in precious metals, enameled, and set with stones of clashing colors. Her earrings were long and dangling, and her preferred jewels were pearls—ropes and ropes of them. Sautoirs of beads often reached the knees, culminating in tassels (cat. no. 84). Over her shoulders she threw a wrap, perhaps a burnous or a caftan, falling in supple folds, its cowl weighted with yet another tassel. Dressed thus *en élégante*, she went to dinner, or to dance the tango or perhaps to see the latest opera or ballet come alive.

This was a look that perfectly suited fashion at a crossroads. The Victorian age had left the sexes cemented in rigid roles that were easily discernible in their dress—men in the drab yet freeing uniform of business, and women in an almost literal gilded cage of whalebone and steel, brocade and lace. For most of the nineteenth century, Orientalism had provided fashion with occasional decorative flourishes and a favorite form of fancy dress. Its most far-reaching influence proved to be an “anti-fashion” look, based on a Turkish model, that was adopted by women seeking to advance women’s rights. Perhaps the earliest example in this country is that of Frances Wright—author, abolitionist, and utopian—who was known as early as the 1830s for wearing Turkish trousers.¹ Thus, there was a precedent for equating such a look with reform when, in 1851, a small group of suffragists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, adopted a uniform consisting of voluminous pantaloons worn under a knee-length dress with a fitted bodice and full skirt. Bloomer’s newspaper *The Lily* published illustrations of this type of ensemble along with letters from satisfied wearers, doctors, and other interested parties. “Bloomers,” as the trousers came to be known, eventually became so controversial that their original wearers began to feel that they diverted attention from the matters that most concerned them, and so they stopped wearing them.² However, the practical bloomer remained in use for physical labor, and, increasingly, for sports.

Traditionally, high fashion, as epitomized by the Paris *haute couture*, was a matter of society’s sartorial requirements realized with exquisite workmanship. In 1910, however, many new factors came into play. In June, the Ballets Russes performed *Scheherazade* at the Paris Opera, with sets and costumes by Léon Bakst. Its effect on the world of design was immediate. Those who attended the production or saw Bakst’s watercolor sketches reproduced in such luxurious journals as *Art et Decoration* were dazzled by the daring

color combinations and swirling profusion of patterns. Since the Belle Epoch could be said to have been defined by delicate, subtle tints, such a use of color was seen as groundbreaking. Typically, couturier Paul Poiret gave himself credit for bringing about the change: "Nuances of nymph's thigh, lilacs, swooning mauves, tender blue hortensias, niles, maizes, straws, all that was soft, washed-out, and insipid, was held in honour. I threw into this sheepcote a few rough wolves; reds, greens, violets, royal blues, that made all the rest sing aloud."³ Couture was not the only métier to embrace novelties in color: jewelers such as Cartier were inspired by the East as interpreted by Bakst and began combining not just sapphires and emeralds but amethysts, coral, lapis, opal, and turquoise, in addition to enamels. After the decades-long reign of diamonds set in platinum in designs as fine as lace, this was a radical departure.⁴

Although color and pattern were what people talked about, they serve to obscure the most daring aspect of Bakst's costume designs: the sheer-ness (not to mention scantiness) of the materials. Even in drawings published in 1911, nipples can be seen through sheer silk bodices, and thighs were visible in harem trousers. Midriffs, both male and female, were bared altogether. While some of this transparency made its way into high fashion—in particular, the sheer skirts over harem trousers in the jupe-culottes—its real influence had to do with fluidity and the adoption of a natural, as opposed to corseted, figure. During the decades leading up to 1910, the corseted upper body common during most of the nineteenth century had been supplanted by a figure confined from the neck to the knees in steel and whalebone. Ironically, Poiret, who claimed to have single-handedly banished the corset, was to reverse this configuration, freeing the bust, waist, hips, and thighs, but hobbling the ankles.

Its sensuality aside, part of the allure of Orientalized attire was its blurring of gender boundaries. Men in fancy dress draped themselves in pearl necklaces; women in harem pants revealed that they had two legs. The world couldn't help being stunned by the idea of pants on women when, six months after *Scheherazade* opened, women in trousers made the news. Coverage in the *New York Times* wavered between descriptions of aeroplane or suffragette costumes (usually featuring bloomers under princess-cut dresses) and more social reports of jupe-culotte sightings at the Plaza for tea. At the end of 1910 came the first bulletin from Paris that Poiret was about to bring out bifurcated skirts. One person interviewed, a dressmaker, said, "The idea of this new skirt is not to popularize trousers for women, but to add a little touch of Orientalism to their dress."⁵

83 French Evening Bag in Persian Taste

1910S

Faceted steel beads in shades of gold, metallic blue, rose, green, and black
Museum of the City of New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Slater



84 Sautoir

1920S

Pearl, lapis, and gold
Private collection, New York



85 PAUL POIRET

French, 1879–1944

“1002nd Night” Dress Ensemble with Turban

C. 1911

Silver lamé and green gauze dress with harem pants and wired panniers; trimmed with blue and green foil, gold metal beads, and faceted celluloid beads in shades of blue, green, red, and yellow

Courtesy The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Trust Gift, 1983



The skirt, as described in the cable dispatch, was “an exact reproduction of the dress worn by Turkish women, minus the veil.”⁶ By the beginning of the new year, fashion magazines were showing the look. The April issue of *Vogue* featured both photographs of the new styles (the most tailored and suffragist-suitable, curiously, was exotic Poiret’s) and photographs of Persian fancy dress as worn at a costume ball in Chicago. Perhaps to deflect criticism that *Vogue* was promoting pants for women, the caption for a particular jupe-culotte read, “One could scarcely apply ‘trouser’ to this creation of Margaine Lacroix, [it’s] really a modest bag through which the feet are thrust in the interest of locomotion.”⁷ Even as the controversy over the jupe-culotte waned (they were made, and worn, but in such small numbers as to make the evening dress by Jeanne Hallée particularly rare), a precedent had been set: for the next fifteen years, most of the pants ensembles shown by couturiers would have an oriental flair.

The taste for things Near Eastern continued to gain momentum. Events such as Poiret’s renowned fete, the “1002 Nights,” held in May 1911, fanned the flame. According to Janet Flanner, Paris correspondent for the *New Yorker*, “three hundred guests stayed to see the dawn come up in his garden in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Black slaves served dishes at tables seventy-five feet long. Paler female slaves lay feigning sleep on an

1. Neville-Sington 1998, 110.

2. Bloomer 1975, x.

3. Poiret 1931, 93.

4. Untracht 1997, 403, describes Bakst’s *Sheherazade* and its effect on jewelry: “A master at creating mood through color and pattern, Bakst’s work often reflected his ongoing interest in ethnic cultural models, in this case, Indian and Persian concepts. The result was a riotous fantasy of sumptuous ‘orientalist’ sensuality, to a large extent well researched and authentic.”

5. “Pantaloons Skirt Here,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1910.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Vogue*, 1 April 1911, 57.



86 NELLE BABANI

French, active 1920s

Platform Shoes

1920s

Red suede tambda embroidered in gold and

sewn with ivory braid

Courtesy Sandy Schreier

immense golden staircase erected beneath the trees. In one salon lay Mme. Poirat, dressed in aigrettes. De Max, the actor, in another, recited poems, his costume shivering with the shaking of thousands of pearls. Among electric blossoms, live parrots were chained to the bushes; their companions were monkeys and cockatoos. Rug merchants, beggars, and sweetmeat sellers, hired to whine, strolled among the crowd.²⁸ So precise was the Arabian Nights dress code, that those arriving in mere evening dress, or even in Chinese mantles, were taken to the first floor and outfitted in more appropriate garb (cat. no. 85).⁹ Poirat went on to create influential costumes for a play, *Le Minaret*, in 1913. Along with turbans and harem pants, these designs featured tunics with wired hems. Enough versions of his similarly styled dress, “Le Sorbet,” exist today to indicate that even at its most exaggerated, Poirat’s Orient was popular.

The early-twentieth-century women who adopted this look wore it as a definition of who they were, attempting to place themselves outside society. While the height of fashion, it was also definitely daring, and those who took it up tended to be women of unusual accomplishment. The noted art collector Peggy Guggenheim had herself photographed by Man Ray wearing a sinuous Poirat gown with a metallic gold harem hem. Rita de Acosta Lydig’s appreciation of fashion was on the connoisseur level; her museum quality laces were made into tunics by the Callot Soeurs to wear with harem pants. Natasha Rambova, Hollywood costumer (and Mrs. Rudolph Valentino), briefly ran her own New York couture house specializing in exotic clothes often made from antique Persian textiles. Aline Bernstein, costume designer and muse to Thomas Wolfe, donated exotic dresses by Babani and Jessie Franklin Turner to the Costume Institute,³⁰ of which she was a pivotal early patron. Dancer Isadora Duncan wore Babani and Fortuny designs, even while performing. Other fans included poets, actresses, and writers.

Perhaps most devout was Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney—heiress, wife, and mother, as well as artist, patron, and museum founder. Multiple photographs of her in varia-

87 Evening Gowns Illustrated in “La Gazette du Bon Ton”

January 1914

Private collection, New York



LENCENS, LE CINNÂME ET LA MYRRHE

Robes du soir

88 **BARON ADOLF DE MEYER**

Austrian, active United States,
1868–1949

*Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney
Wearing a Bakst Tunic and
Harem Trousers*

C. 1913

Gelatin silver print, 9 × 4½ inches
(22.9 × 11.4 cm)

Courtesy Emily Irving



tions on the same theme show that Near Eastern fancy dress was a favorite of hers during the first decade of the century. In 1911, she was buying clothes from Poiret. In 1912, she was buying pantalons and blouses as separate items from Nicole Groult, Poiret's sister. In 1913, she commissioned from Bakst an ensemble consisting of a flared tunic with an oversized Persian design and harem trousers. That she saw herself, in this ensemble, as an artistic entity is supported by the number of times and media in which she was portrayed wearing it. She was photographed by Baron de Meyer (cat. no. 88), sculpted in silver by Emanuele de Rosales, painted life size by Howard Cushing in the mural he installed in her Long Island studio, and drawn, in an exuberant pose suggestive of a dancer taking a bow, by John Singer Sargent. In 1916, Robert Henri painted her, lying in an almost odalisque style on a sofa, wearing Chinese pajamas. A 1919 photograph in *Vogue* shows Whitney in an elaborate evening dress with Persian details. Just as she was maturing as an artist, showing her work to acclaim, and enjoying a real place in the artistic world, she went from wearing these clothes for fancy dress to actual dress. That she considered this way of dress part of her artistic, "downtown" self, as opposed to her wealthy, socially connected, uptown self, is revealed in her choice to keep her Henri portrait at her studio and not in her house.

After World War I, this style lingered as an exotic air of otherwise increasingly modern clothes—the little chemise dress of the 1920s serving as a blank canvas for surface

8. Flanner 1972, 151.

9. Poiret 1931, 189.

10. See Martin and Koda 1994, 62, 68.

89 PAUL POIRET

Advertising Fan

c. 1911

Printed paper

Courtesy Sandy Schreier



90 BLACK, STARR & FROST

Vanity Case

c. 1925

Gold polychrome enameled with a scene
from a Persian garden

Private collection, New York

ornament, the bolder the better. Such a streamlined silhouette cried out for a greater emphasis on accessories; openly smoking and wearing cosmetics created a demand for attractive cigarette and vanity cases (one example [cat. no. 90] combines a powder compact and a lipstick in a pendant brooch). A hint of the East became a marketing asset as, throughout the 1920s, the fashion magazines ran advertisements for scents, evening bags in small Persian brocades, jewels, and *objets vertu*. To promote his perfumes in the 1920s Poiret relied on the imagery that had created his reputation; his advertising fan (cat. no. 89) features a Georges Lepage odalisque, dressed by Poiret, circa 1911.

Ultimately, the biggest difference between clothing of the East and West has to do with the cut. The burnous, to use one example, is rectangular, and can be laid flat. When a flat garment is put on a rounded figure, the result is that the fabric hangs in soft folds. Most western clothes had been cut in shaped pieces to fit the (corset-molded) form. During the teens, Orientalizing garments let loose onto fashion not just an acceptable (i.e., feminine-seeming) way for women to wear pants but a new, more supple, silhouette, which evolved into the nearly flat, almost rectangular chemise of the roaring twenties. Thus it followed that ancient, basic forms of dress gave western fashion its first real modernity.