

## HIGH PRIESTESSES OF FASHION

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Madelonelle Andrée Spirelly in the "Buddha Studio" of her home  
Designed by Martine, ca. 1923

At the turn of the twentieth century, Parisian women of the upper crust who cared about elegance and decorum patronized such top couture houses as Worth or Doucet and also Paquin, Redfern, Rouff, Lanvin, Boué Soeurs, Callot Soeurs. These were places where one could be assured of being addressed properly; of having one's clothes delivered in a timely manner; and, above all, of beautiful clothes, perfectly made and fitted, clearly grand but never too ostentatious. One couturier's creation differed from another's mainly in terms of how it was adorned. Worth's boldly scaled silk damasks or Doucet's gossamer laces were applied to rigid constructions that featured such unseen structural elements as pliable metal or plastic whalebone bands, thread-wrapped wire, canvas tapes, and horsehair or other padding. Thus, contained in the silhouette of the day, a couture client could be assured of impeccably representing her husband's position in society.

At Maison Poiret, decorum did not prevail. Notably lacking in opulence (and corsets), his earliest designs were aggressively, even radically, simple. When he opened his first *maison de couture* (in 1903 on the rue Auber), he arranged the windows to attract attention, rather than display objects discreetly. Appreciating the kitsch value of the previous tenant's carpet (woven with roses as large as "beefsteaks"), he kept it. Whereas Worth or Doucet might mail a client an invoice printed in feathery copperplate inviting one "kindly to remit," Poiret commissioned emerging artists to design invoices decorated with bold woodcuts. As part of his artistic persona, Poiret did not suffer fools gladly. If he disliked a famous client's performance in a play, or the way a lady of title treated his sales staff, he made his disapproval clear and then delighted in spreading the tale. Appropriately, there was a cardboard sign at the entrance to his office: "Danger!! Before knocking ask yourself three times—Is it absolutely necessary to disturb HIM?"

For Poiret the simplest act of riding in a motorcar, attending a rehearsal of a new play, or going to the races was an excuse to make a visual statement every bit as dramatic and stylized as the pochoir fashion plates he helped popularize. Accordingly, this king of fashion was often seen surrounded by his court: at his fêtes, it was his guests, whose costumes were carefully vetted for accuracy to the chosen theme; out and about in Paris (or touring America or the Continent) his court consisted of his group of house models. In one arresting photograph, Poiret, wearing a cheetah-lined coat and spats is flanked by models dressed in striped coats, checked skirts, and spats. In his autobiography, Poiret credited Worth with inventing the "living mannequin," or live-as-opposed-to-wooden model: "The living mannequin is a woman who must be more feminine than all other women. . . . by her gestures and pose, by the entire expression of her body, she must aid the laborious genesis of the new creation." When Man Ray arrived at Poiret's atelier to take some photographs, he was struck by the "beautiful girls with every shade of hair from blond to black, moving about nonchalantly in their scanty chemises, stockings and high-heeled shoes." According to Jean Cocteau, Poiret taught his models not to comport themselves like ladies but to assume the stylized stance of a praying mantis.

The quintessential Poiret client was a woman who recognized in the couturier a fellow artistic soul; she was likely to be known for her own achievements as opposed to those of a spouse. Naturally, it took a rare individual to see herself as an enchantress or siren in a Poiret cocoon, minaret tunic, *jupon culotte*, hobble skirt, or *robe de style*. Although Poiret's designs were dramatic in and of themselves, the drama surrounding the designer made him appealing to women involved in the (both serious and popular) performing arts. Among his first fans were the top two actresses of his time: Réjane and Sarah Bernhardt. Lillie Langtry and Eve Lavallière were clients. The actress usually described as "the great Spirelly" wore Poiret on and off the stage and lived in a Poiret (Martine)-designed house. She posed, in a Poiret costume of bra top and full long skirt, pretending to eat the apple off a painted tree for one of Poiret's perfumes "Le Fruit Défendu" (Forbidden Fruit). Ida Rubinstein, Russian-born dancer who started her own dance company and produced plays (in not posing nude as Venus for Romaine Brooks), dressed in Poiret. He made clothes for Isadora Duncan, decorated her house to look like "Circé's kingdom," and also invested in her career. He designed costumes for the stage and the cinema, notably dressing Georgette Leblanc in the visually striking modernist film *L'Inhumaine* (1924). Two entertainers known more for

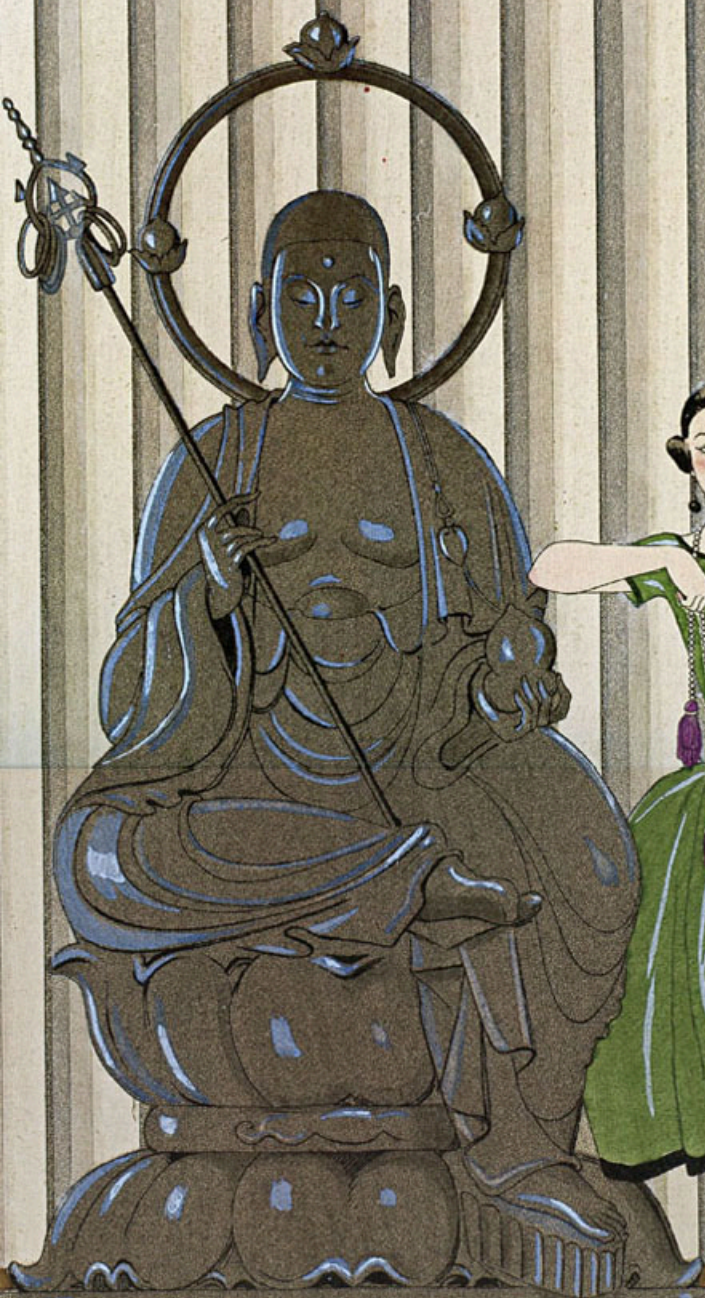


Man Ray (American, 1890–1976)  
Mannequin wearing 'Séonstis' model, 1923

Opposite: Georges Barbier (French, 1882–1932)

Detail of Madelonelle Spirelly chez elle

Pochoir from *Le bachelier du jour*, 1920–24





La Marchesa Luisa Casati, ca. 1913



Man Ray (American, 1890–1976)

Peggy Guggenheim, 1923

their lack of clothes also wore Poiret: Josephine Baker and Mistinguett.

The celebrated Liane de Pougy, one of the last of the *grandes horizontales*, wrote movingly of Poiret's designs in her memoir. Among his French upper-crust clients there were the Comtesse Greffulhe (muse of Marcel Proust), who came to Poiret for a dress of gold, trimmed with sable, to wear to her daughter's wedding, and the Duchesse de Gramont, for whom he designed Winterhalter-era *robes de style* for her "Bal en Crinolines." Margot Asquith, wife of the English prime minister, showed Poiret her violet undergarments before inviting him to show his styles at their residence in London, creating a political furor for her (and her husband's) disloyalty to British designers. Nancy Cunard, ivory-bracelet-clad icon of early-twentieth-century style, recalled that she had been wearing a gold-pannied Poiret dress in 1922 at a ball where she was bored dancing with the Prince of Wales but thrilled to meet and chat with T. S. Eliot.

International cosmetics entrepreneur Helena Rubinstein met him while he was a young design assistant at Worth and followed him as he struck out on his own. As a businesswoman building a cosmetics empire, she crafted a public image of herself as a connoisseur of outstanding fashion and jewels and was photographed numerous times, for publicity purposes, wearing Poiret clothes. The quintessentially French author Colette was a client and appeared with him in one of her plays. The Marchesa Casati, whose exotic presentation of herself was an art form, was painted by Giovanni Boldini in a swirl of Poiret and greyhounds. (Although it is not known whether Sarah Bernhardt wore any of her Poiret clothes when lying in her coffin in her living room, the Marchesa Casati was infamous for sitting at a party next to an exact likeness of herself in wax dressed in a matching Poiret ensemble; guests were expected to be mystified as to who was who.) In his autobiography, the artist Erté described making a dramatic entrance at a dress rehearsal of a play in Paris, in a borrowed Poiret evening gown and turban, accompanied by four male friends in white tie and tails. After making such a glamorous splash that he was written up in the newspaper, he was called into Poiret's office, expecting censure. Instead, Poiret offered to design specifically for him and to have him model dresses in his next collection.

The American art patrons Peggy Guggenheim and Gertrude Whitney dressed in high-bohemian Poiret. (Guggenheim must have appreciated Poiret's affinity for contemporary art: she ended up owning the Brancusi sculpture of a bird seen in many of the photographs taken of Denise Poiret and others in Poiret's own quarters.) Whitney, sculptor and founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art, was intentionally presenting an avant-garde artistic self to the world when she wore a Poiret "Robe Sorciere." Natacha Hudnut Rambova, a designer and the wife of matinee idol Rudolph Valentino, went to Poiret for her trousseau. As a struggling young designer in the early 1920s, Elsa Schiaparelli attracted Poiret's attention and received free clothes to wear.

By the mid-1920s, however, a circle of clients photographed at Maison Poiret watching a *défilé* hardly seem exotic or unusual. Instead, they are elegant to a fault—all with the same dark painted mouth, cloche hat, sheer stockings, and Louis-heeled pumps. Poiret had become merely interesting, a must-see in a guidebook of Paris highlights. As the Depression drew near, the days of high priestesses wearing sorcerer's robes to "1,001 nights" balls gave way to women tackling solo flights around the world, running for Parliament, and defining radioactivity. Poiret's global exoticism would not seem modern again until the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the haute couture had found new resonance as one of the most dramatic of arts.

