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Was (and is) "French fashion" Just a Myth?

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By the mid nineteenth century, with the establishment of Charles-Frederick Worth's maison de couture in 1858, widely regarded as the beginning of the haute couture, the term "Paris fashion" had become a pleonasm, as the very existence and prominence of Paris fashion was taken as a given. Paris was described and promoted by the couturiers themselves, the press, the trade unions and its clients across the world as the epicenter of chic and refined elegance. The terms "capitale de la mode," "capitale du goût," and "capitale du chic" became increasingly prevalent in order to define—and subsequently promote and export – "French taste." These terms were employed to demonstrate that French fashion was distinctive and that it encompassed not only clothing but also taste, manners, style and etiquette.

This study draws on a corpus of French and American fashion magazines, including *La Gazette du bon ton, French Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily*, as well as prominent newspapers such as *Le Figaro* and *L'Humanité*, and seminal books published between 1850 and 1940. It examines how the emergence of the concept of "Paris, capital of fashion and taste" is the result of a discursive construction that French journalists especially have built in an attempt to define Paris fashion, differentiate it from other capitals, and assert its uniqueness. The present article aims to demonstrate that the prevailing conceptions of Parisian fashion and taste, as depicted and discussed in the press and societal discourse of the era, offer a misleadingly simplistic interpretation of "French fashion," obscuring (or perhaps even deliberately concealing) the historically and fundamentally cosmopolitan essence of what is referred to as "Parisian fashion." This is especially evidenced by the fact that a significant proportion of fashion designers, workers, fashion illustrators, and photographers working for the Parisian fashion industry were not French, an example of this being the British Charles-Frederick Worth, generally seen as the founder of haute couture. How could the idea of "French taste" accommodate the reality that French fashion was created, disseminated, and sold by many people from other countries? Was (and is) "French fashion" just a myth?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prevailing discourse in the press concerning Parisian fashion highlighted the dichotomy between nationalistic and cosmopolitan conceptualizations of French identity and taste. Some proponents asserted that a couturier must be born in France to be considered a Parisian couturier, or, if born abroad, that he must align with the Parisian fashion code to be recognized as a Parisian couturier. In contrast, other journalists were more keen to celebrate the fashion industry as a cultural melting pot, within

which the couturier was regarded as a creator who was open to foreign textile and clothing influences. Thus, there were two distinct perspectives on French fashion and Frenchness stemming from these differing viewpoints. The first viewpoint asserted that the merits of Parisian fashion were exclusively the result of French persons, knowledge, and expertise. In contrast, the second viewpoint emphasized the role of Paris's function as a crucible for diverse styles and trends, adeptly assimilating and incorporating foreign influences.

The Discursive Construction of Paris as the Capital of Fashion, Taste and, Manners

Western fashion emerged as a domestic field of interest in the seventeenth century. This was due to the recognition of its social, economic and cultural importance by Louis XIV (1638-1715) and his Controller General of Finance, Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683). Colbert's view, as articulated by him but never supported with a historical source, was that "Fashion is to France what the gold mines of Peru are to Spain." From that period onward, fashion and textile crafts became a significant source of wealth, reputation, growth, and "soft power" for France, particularly contributing to France's cultural preeminence on the global stage. The eighteenth century saw the consolidation of Parisian fashion as a central element in the cultural and social landscape. Under the leadership of Queen Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) and the influence of her fashion minister, Rose Bertin (1747-1813), the commercialization of fashion underwent a significant dynamization, profoundly influencing the fashion sense and style of the eighteenth century.[1]

The period under scrutiny in this article, which spans from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, witnessed Paris attaining global acclaim as a preeminent nexus of fashion. The designation "fashion capital" emerged as a prevalent term during the nineteenth century, with its initial appearances emerging in the French press, novels, and memoirs.[2] For instance, in 1818, the *Journal de Paris* referred to Paris as the "capital of fashion," describing it as a "divinity."[3] Similarly, in 1836, the term "capital of fashion" was used in *Le Journal des Coiffeurs* as a synonym for Paris.[4] The term also appears in *Voyage en Italie*, a work written by Jean-Claude Fulrichon between 1843 and 1858.[5] In the *Encyclopédie Populaire*, published in 1856, Isidore Mullois expounded the notion that "fashion has always been the true sovereign of the French," further asserting that Paris was the "capital of fashion" which, for three centuries, had attracted all the courts of Europe. It was from this period that the notion of the centrality of

[1] Sapori, *Rose Bertin*, 2010 ; Coquery, *La Boutique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, 2006.
[2] A survey in the documents digitalized by Gallica shows that the words "capital of fashion" is irregular during the nineteenth century, and became "mode" after 1925.
[3] *Le Journal de Paris*, August 10, 1818, 2.
[4] *Journal des Coiffeurs*, December 20, 1836, 2.
[5] Fulrichon, *Voyage en l'Italie*, 1858.

Parisian fashion was established on a European and, increasingly, global scale.[6] In 1854, for instance, *La Presse* proposed a vision of Paris as a "fashion capital," describing an "immense space" and a promenade that is "incomparably and indisputably the most beautiful in the whole of Europe."[7] A semantic shift occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, when the notion emerged that this classification as the "capital of fashion" rendered Paris the center of "culture." For instance, in 1852, in an article about the promenades at Longchamp the journalist Louis Goudall referred to Paris as the "capital of fashion and civilization."[8] In other journals, Paris was described as the capital of fashion, as well as "of taste," "of beauty," and of "progress."[9] All of these qualifiers were used interchangeably to establish Paris as a cultural and intellectual city. It appears that the meaning of the term "capital of fashion" was changing as it was increasingly being replaced by alternative expressions such as "capital of taste," "capital of beauty," or "capital of progress." For example, in 1860, we can read: "Paris is the meeting place of all artists; it is the center towards which all our talents and abilities from the provinces converge. The taste, the elegance, that rare intelligence of beauty which Paris possesses, thanks to this happy combination of all the talents of the country, and which has made it the capital of fashion and set the tone for the world, isn't all this the property of the whole country?" The term "fashion center" can also be traced back to 1841. Since then, Paris had been transformed into a "cluster," a term coined by Alfred Marshall in 1890 and theorized by Michael Porter a century later.[10] The Parisian fashion ecosystem gradually consisted of several maisons de couture, including those of Paul Poiret, Jeanne Paquin and Jeanne Lanvin, fashion magazines such as *La Gazette du Bon Ton* (1912) and *French Vogue* (1920), department stores and a fashion trade union (The Chambre syndicale de la couture Parisienne). Together, they built the Parisian fashion industry, which was soon to be promoted through fashion presentations to international clients and buyers and, above all, through international exhibitions.

Paris's reputation as a fashion capital, based on a fertile national craft sector, was shaped by the French press but also influenced by the American press. In 1910, for example, *Women's Wear Daily* expounded that the "perennial supremacy which enables France to give the law to the rest of the world, is the possession by the French of a special faculty or national quality." The article went on to cite the pivotal role of the handloom silk weaver in Lyon or Saint-Etienne, the peasant seamstress in the Vosges, the glover at Grenoble, the straw plaiter of Nancy, the linen and lace worker of the Nord, the milliner and modiste in Paris, and finally, the French women who exhibited a "feeling of elegance, a sense of effect."[11] The article concludes by explaining that the

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[6] Mullois, *Encyclopédie Populaire*, 1856.
[7] *La Presse,* December 22, 1854.
[8] *La Vérité*, January 1, 1852, 2.
[9] *Le Rappel*, November 21, 1875, 3; *Mémorial de la Loire et de la Haute Loire*, August 18, 1860, 2; *L'Avenir diplomatique*, March 29, 1883, 67.
[10] Porter, *On Competition*, 1998.
[11] "The Mystery of the Fashions," *Women's Wear Daily*, August 10, 1910, 5.

success of Paris also relied on this perfect complementarity between the French manufacturer and the French wearer.

This history of Paris fashion was initially disseminated through the press (and later the cinema and theater) with a view to supporting a cohesive national narrative. However, this account omitted a significant element of its own history: namely, its inherently global character.

The Hidden Face of Parisian Fashion: The Cultural Diversity of its Players

From its inception, the field of haute couture has been characterized by the contributions of foreign designers who emigrated to Paris, a notable example being the British Charles-Frederick Worth, who is widely regarded as the inventor of Parisian couture. In 1858, Worth established the first couture house at 7, rue de la Paix, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of the fashion industry—Worth had radically and profoundly transformed the function and status of the couturier, who, under his influence, ceased to be a mere craftsman, creating clothes according to his clients' requests, as tradition dictated, and became an artist, determining fashion and imposing it on his clients.[12] After Worth, a significant number of prominent fashion designers at Parisian fashion houses were also of foreign origin, having emigrated from their respective countries to Paris. Indeed, numerous fashion houses of this period have since been consigned to oblivion, yet they played a significant role in the history of French fashion. These include, but are not limited to, British designers such as John Redfern and Edward Molyneux; Italian designers such as Nina Ricci, Elsa Schiaparelli and Pierre Cardin; Spanish designers such as Mariano Fortuny and Cristobal Balenciaga; Russian designers such as Natalia Goncharova and Maria Pavlovna; American designers such as Weeks, Yvonne Davidson, Marjolaine and Mainbocher; German designer Gustav Beer; and Ukrainian designer Sonia Delaunay.[13] The list is extensive, albeit unfinished, and offers a valuable insight into the intricacies of the subject of immigration in the field of haute couture.

The American historian Elizabeth Block, in her book *Dressing Up*, also notes the presence of foreigners among the collaborators of the *grands couturiers*: this is the case of Jacques Doucet's tailor and chief designer, José de la Peña de Guzman, of Spanish origin, as well as Charles-Frederick Worth's assistant, Carl Isidore Carlsson, of Swedish origin.[14] The same can be said of fashion industry workers, including seamstresses, models and sales assistants. A significant proportion of these roles were filled by immigrants, who were also employed by fashion

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[12] Trubert-Tollu, Tétart-Vittu, Martin-Hattemberg, Olivieri, *La maison Worth (1858-1954),* 2017.

[13] For studies of these individuals, see North, *Costume*, 2009; Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life*, 2007; Blum, *Shocking*, 2003; Saillard, *Cristóbal Balenciaga: collectionneur de modes*, 2012; Albertini, Kurkdjian, *Les broderies russes de Mlle Chanel*, 2023; Sinklard, *Making Mainbocher: The First American Couturier*, 2016

[14] Block, *Dressing Up. The Women Who Influenced French Fashion*, 2019, 67.

houses.[15] In addition to the cosmopolitan nature of the actors of the *grande couture* industry, the international dimension of Parisian couture at the end of the nineteenth century was also evident in the small fashion houses founded by foreigners. Notable examples cited by Block include Mademoiselle Hunsinger of Swiss origin, Madame Signorino, an Italian milliner who settled in Strasbourg in the 1870s, the German dressmaker Adolphine Koenig, who specialized in ladies' wear, and the Polish Madame Brylinski, wife of the President of the Chambre syndicale de la couture pour dames et fillettes between 1890 and 1892, and the Polish hatmaker Michniewicz-Tuvée, who established her business at 25, place Vendôme between 1868 and 1905.[16]

Was Parisian fashion a microcosm of the world? The diversity of fashion houses and individuals in Paris serves as a testament to the city's role as a global center with a distinctly cosmopolitan character. This geographical, social, and cultural crucible has had a profound influence on the Parisian fashion industry, rendering it permeable to diverse influences. Furthermore, it has imbued the industry with a capacity to act as a nexus for the exchange of ideas, motifs, techniques and models from various origins—a dimension that can also be found in painting and photography of the same period. By shifting the focus of the history of couture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is possible to propose a non-Franco-centric analysis of the history of fashion, taking into account the idea of cultural circulations and transfers (of skills, technics, know-how) in fashion, and to put into question the notion of "French taste." As historian Olivier Saillard points out, the very fact that couture, that uniquely Parisian craft, was invented and put into practice by an English couturier means that we need to take a fresh look at this national industry, which has been praised, promoted and held up as an example by France for centuries.[17]

At the end of the nineteenth century, few daily newspaper and weekly cultural magazines celebrated the cosmopolitanism of Parisian couture and of French taste, but the exceptions are worth examining. There were two tendencies in the way the press discussed the international aspects of Paris fashion and taste: some journals and magazines ignored the foreign dimension of the non-French couturiers, such as the Italian Elsa Schiaparelli and the British designer John Redfern, and focused only on their integration into the Parisian ecosystem and their adoption by France—in this vein, the critic André de Fouquières stated in 1937 that fashion was influenced by the atmosphere of Paris, "that the air of Paris breathed fashion"; the proof of it was that Parisian couturiers living abroad were unsuccessful, whereas foreign couturiers who had established a house in Paris were prosperous.[18] And this is what we understand from the designer's description and the interviews published in the press. Regarding the Italian designer

[15] Green, *Du Sentier à la 7e Avenue: La Confection et les immigrés*, 1998; Garnier, *Paris-Couture-Annees Trente*, 1987, 115.
[16] Block, 64.
[17] Saillard, *Fashion Mix: Mode d'ici, Créateurs d'ailleurs*, 2014, 16.
[18] *Paris-Midi*, June 25, 1937, 2.

Elsa Schiaparelli, for example, the journal *Bravo* explained that Paris was a confirmation of Elsa Schiaparelli's ideas, playing the role of both support and inspiration.[19] Further, in 1940, speaking to the newspaper *Marianne*, Schiaparelli was described as having once been Italian and as having long been "French by nationality and Parisian in spirit.'[20] In most of her interviews, Schiaparelli always insisted on her love of Paris and France. In 1932, for instance, she elucidated that her ideas were conceived during automobile journeys, yet she acknowledged the necessity of Paris to transform these spontaneous inspirations into concrete projects ("Catalyse de Paris").[21]

Other journals, especially right-wing and religious ones, were more hostile to these designers and workers from abroad who were threatening French customs and tastes. When Charles-Frederick Worth died in 1895, the Catholic newspaper *La Croix* warned the French of the "danger of cosmopolitanism," alluding to the flourishing Jewish tailor trade in Paris.[22] In 1912, *Le Monde illustré* published an article entitled "Il faut sauver l'art français" ("French art must be saved"). In this text, the magazine expressed its concern about the influx of foreign artists participating in the Salon d'Automne, suggesting that the increasing presence of "metèques"—foreign painters, sculptors, writers, and couturiers who were allegedly flocking to France to affix the label "Made in France" to their works—had to be stopped.[23]

Rare were the journals that celebrated the already cosmopolitan face of both producers and consumers of fashion, but we find some exceptions such as *L'Intransigeant,* which wrote that there was nothing Parisian about Parisian fashion and taste:

> Fashion is French, exclusively French, and it is from Paris that all the currents of elegance flow, but it is quite pleasant to note that all the exotic costumes are to be found in this Parisian fashion. We have seen Serbian embroidery, Romanian embroidery, [...] oriental hairstyles, and at the moment everything is Russian [...] the Russian influence is making itself felt.[24]

The passage appeared in 1925, when many Russian refugees started working for the French fashion industry after the 1917 Revolution. A similar perspective had previously been expressed in *La Vie Parisienne:*

> Even our fashion is no longer Parisian. We have borrowed our charming women's toquets from Spain, Hungary and Scotland; our bodices and velvet

[19] *Bravo*, December 1, 1923, 17.
[20] *Marianne*, April 24, 1940, 5.
[21] *Bravo*, December 1, 1932, 17
[22] *La Croix*, March 13, 1895, 1.
[23] *Le Monde illustré*, July 6, 1912, 235.
[24] L'*Intransigeant*, Novembre 5, 1925, 5.

> braces from Swiss shepherdesses; our soutache helmets from the embroidered jackets of the Albanians; our burnous from the Arabs; our fur waistcoats from the Russians and the Poles, etc. etc. Our leading fashion designer is an Englishman, and his fantasies are popularized by a German woman. Where are Paris and the Parisians in all this?[25]

Influenced, and even created, by many foreign couturiers, French fashion was also impacted by international trade and universal and international exhibitions that brought textiles and clothing from China (silk), India (Indian fabrics) and Japan (kimono) to Paris, where they were absorbed by European industry. Consequently, French fashion was thus often in contact with international textiles and clothing, rather than being isolated from global crafts, textiles, clothes and styles.

Moreover, the international exchange of fashion and textiles was further promoted by French couturiers' tours of Europe and North America. At the same time, Parisian fashion was also influenced by the Orientalist movement, which adds to the complexity of the question of the nature of French fashion and taste. Paul Poiret, a couturier who was sometimes known as a "couturier orientalist," proposed designs such as the kimono evening coat "Confucius" in 1905, harem trousers in 1911, the dress Minaret in 1913, drawing on inspirations from countries such as China, Japan and Persia. These efforts earned him the title "Poiret the Magnificent" in reference to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566).

The concept of Orientalism in fashion, which today invites debate over the difference between cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation, is a complex one. According to the scholar Edward Said, Orientalism is rooted in a Western, distorted, and inaccurate vision of non-Western cultures and systems, portraying them as "exotic," different, and often inferior.[26] In fashion, Orientalism consists of Western couturiers borrowing designs, patterns and styles from other cultures, often exoticizing them in their collections, misrepresenting, or romanticizing the meaning of colors and patterns in those cultures. While acknowledging the significance of Said's work and ideas, the scholar Adam Geczy critiques its one-sidedness, emphasizing the mutual influences and agency of non-Western cultures. Challenging binary views of the West versus the East, he argues that fashion reveals the complex intertwining of the two. According to him, Poiret "made the Orient of the Middle East a dimension of his own creative signature," proposing his own Orient, both "decultured, decentered, and reappropriated."[27] In other words, Geczy argues that Poiret's Orientalism is not static imitation, but rather a dynamic interplay of borrowing, reinvention, and reinterpretation—what Geczy terms "transorientalism." The question of how Poiret's and Parisian couturiers' engagement with Orientalism should be understood remains open to interpretation. Poiret himself seldom articulated a clear position on

[25] *La Vie parisienne*, January 1, 1864, 103.
[26] Saïd, *L'Orientalisme*, 1978.
[27] Geczy, *Fashion and Orientalism*, 2021, 137 and 146.

his use of Orientalist motifs. However, in a 1905 interview with *Women's Wear Daily*, he acknowledged the significance of the Orient, identifying it as a source of inspiration for the major artistic movements and as a foundational model for civilization. Should the appropriation of Middle Eastern cultures in fashion be viewed as exoticization or as a manifestation of the historical processes of cross-cultural exchange, translation, and mutual influence that have long characterized relations between the East and the West? Either way, it is evident that global exchange and Orientalism have shaped the hybrid aesthetic of French fashion from its very origins, adding to its richness, complexity, and cultural diversity.[28]

The First World War had a significant impact on the defense of French fashion taste, which was threatened by these international influences but also and especially since the 1910s by German and American fashion designers and manufacturers. From 1914 onwards, the provenance of couturiers and their employees became indeed a matter of significant concern for the Parisian couture. The First World War exposed initial fissures and culminated in a purge of the couture industry in December 1914. Several couturiers, including Poiret, advocated for the complete exclusion of foreigners, the defense of foreign models for the sake of French taste, the request of commercial rules from suppliers, measures against Austro-German workers, and measures against Germans in America. They further proposed the reorganization of the industry following the exclusion of twenty-one houses deemed to be foreigners. The maisons de couture that were then successful in Paris, including Redfern and Drecoll, were amongst those targeted by the press, which was unrelenting in its criticism. For instance, in 1915, Drecoll was openly accused of being a foreigner, maintaining "Bohemian friendships" and denying the country of its birth.[29] It was asserted that he should never have been awarded the Legion of Honor before the war. The press began to differentiate between Parisian fashion houses, distinguishing between those that contributed to French chic and taste and those that jeopardized them. On October 1st, 1914, for instance, the newspaper *Le Ruy Blas* published a list of Parisian fashion houses, categorizing French couturiers, milliners, corsetiers, and bootmakers as distinct from their English counterparts.[30] The list, however, failed to differentiate between the various companies within these English houses, most of which were Parisian, and their foreign subsidiaries.

In addition, during the war, the "bon goût français" (French good taste) in fashion was used as a tool to criticize German fashion sense, opposing the chic of the "Parisian woman" with the vulgarity of the "Gretchen women." In 1916, the fashion journal *Les Elégances parisiennes*, expressing a sentiment that commonly appeared in the satirical journals read by soldiers in the trenches, wrote:

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[28] Gril-Mariotte, *Les Indiennes*, 2022; Welters and Lillethun, *Fashion History. A Global View,* Londres, Bloomsbury, 2008; Singaravélou, Venayre (eds.), *Le petit magasin du monde. Une histoire du monde par les objets, XIXe-XXIe siècles*, 2021.
[29] *Le Petit Bleu de Paris*, August 3, 1915, 2.
[30] *Le Ruy Blas*, October 11, 1914, 3.

> Whatever the fat ladies with glasses and the massive "Gretchens" do, the "extravagant" dresses of Paris will still be copied in Berlin, as elsewhere... perhaps less well than elsewhere; with these little overloads, these changes of color which immediately indicate that a little culture has passed through... but the only fundamental difference between our fashion and theirs will consist in the way it is worn.[31]

More generally, a nationalist rhetoric emerged in the press. In 1916, in the fashion journal *Les Elégances parisiennes*, we can read:

> We are undoubtedly one of the most gifted peoples when it comes to taste and a sense of elegance... a Parisian hat can be recognized in both hemispheres, by that *je ne sais quoi* of lightness, charm, pleasantness that can only be acquired on the Rue de la Paix. So, let's stay ourselves. Let's not cater to the tastes of Mr. X, the big commission merchant from the other side of the Atlantic, or Mr. Y, the import buyer from the Balkans... French fashion owes it to its reputation to remain purely French; it will only be more successful and more admired for it.[32]

An emblem of France and an integral part of its identity, fashion has always been seen as the exclusive province of Paris, inextricably linked to the skills, techniques and ideas of French workers and designers. Couture offers a particularly compelling case study due to its insular nature and strong adherence to its "Parisianism." Despite the emergence of other fashion capitals, such as New York, London, and Milan, Paris continues to dominate the fashion industry. An examination of the origins of the directors and workers of fashion houses allows us to consider the rise and success of French fashion—which dates from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth—not only as the result of purely national production, but as the fruit of exchanges of ideas, hybridization of techniques and creative proposals, and to give greater importance to the contribution of successive waves of immigration.[33]

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[31] *Les Elégances parisiennes*, September 1, 1916, 86.
[32] *Les Elégances parisiennes*, June 1, 1916.
[33] Espagne, *Bordeaux baltique. La présence culturelle allemande à Bordeaux aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, 13.

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