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The War to End All Wars on Ideal Female Figures: An Analysis of WWI and its Effects on U.S. Women's Fashion from 1917-1927

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The word flapper often calls to mind a lavishly dressed woman with a thin cigarette clasped between her gloved fingers and her every step dogged by jazz music. Above all else, the flapper was a product of her surroundings and her age. This was a woman who dressed in a masculine fashion through the cut of dresses and jackets, gained greater liberties as a result of the role she took during WWI, and simply wanted to feel young again after the war aged American men and women alike in psychological and emotional ways. Clothing is what one wears to cover his or her body, but fashion is the social, economic, cultural, and political lens through which an era is observed. By considering fashion as something greater than a superfluous fascination or stroking of vanity, historians can begin to analyze its message and how it fits into the larger construct of events. This paper will question how American fashion changed because of World War I and how the "War to End All Wars" affected the feminine ideal immediately after the war and in later years.

In evaluating the fashion following the First World War, one must rely upon outside circumstances to explain the reasons behind this fashion transition. Those who have evaluated these outside forces on fashion include co-authors Sara Marcketti and Phyllis Tortota, as well as John Peacock.[1] Their books provide an overview of 1920's fashion and work to describe how politics, culture, economics, and society influenced fashion trends. For example, wool and silk were used by the U.S. military in WWI, but at the end of the war, these textiles returned to women's daily wear, resulting in new patterns. Another important researcher is Mildred Jailer-Chamberlain, a historian focused on the flapper era and women's actions during this time.[2] She

[1] Phyllis G. Tortora and Sara B. Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume* (New York, NY: Fairprint Books an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2015) and John Peacock, *The Complete Fashion Sourcebook* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2005).
[2] Mildred Jailer-Chamberlain, "Flappers in Fashion the 1920s," *Antiques and Collecting Magazine* 108.7 (2003): 24-30.

is particularly interested in the taboos women performed, such as widely employed smoking and drinking by young women of the era. What these scholars have in common is their larger emphasis on how the outside world consciously impacted fashion; clothing became a way of publishing a woman's political, social, or economic status at a glance. The authors also agree that while not every woman was able to follow the flapper trend due to economic, cultural, or social factors, those who had the means to do so usually did. These historians concur that after WWI, fashion was a direct link to the various attitudes of women.

Fashion during wartime and in the following years shows a distinct shift in women's clothing style as a product of the social, cultural, political, and economic environments in America. It exhibited changes in women's rights, the post-war economy, and the social freedom following WWI. Through the new ideal boyish figure, trends consisted of raised hemlines and dramatic cosmetics, and the differing reactions to these pieces show how World War I liberated the world of women's fashion and clothing, allowing it to become more practical. Fashions represented the trending ideal of a woman looking more youthful and boyish, which then led styles towards the flapper era. This paper aims to shed light on how war affected fashion by focusing specifically on wartime fashion, the years leading up to the Roaring Twenties, and the Roaring Twenties themselves.

Textile shortages and the necessity for women to fill masculine roles had begun to affect the foundations of women's fashion in the 1910s. *Harper's Bazar* from July 1910 provides one example of the clothing of a middle-class woman. This description of a trend seen in 1910 appears on a page entitled "Summer House Gowns." Highlighted here are images of women in dresses with hemlines that reach or are resting on the floor, cinched-in waists, and sleeves that

reach to at least the elbow (Appendix A).[3] This reflects the belief that women are not meant to do practical, dirty work; they are ornaments, displays in a man's summer home that are trifled with no more than a boy would trifle with a fine china doll. The other important aspect of this ad is the woman's figure. The women are very slender and graceful, which is in keeping with the belief that they are not meant to do hard work or heavy lifting, but at the same time, the curves under the dress are still acknowledged through the belting or cinched-in manner of the dress. The accentuation of the hips reminds the viewer that the dress is meant for a woman who will become a mother, that there are birthing hips hidden under the domesticity of the apron or the flower pattern on the dress. The same general ideas appear on the next page, the "Smart Street Gowns" (Appendix B).[4] While these women are more heavily bundled in the coats, the slender figure is still apparent, and the curves of the ideal feminine figure are still emphasized. Again, the hemlines reaching to the ground and the simple, subtle patterns on the dress call to mind a soft, domestic woman.

The time period allowed for this type of indulgence and excessiveness because it was in the midst of a large upsurge in technological advances and economic prosperity. New technology such as the typewriter and self-binding harvester allowed the profits to roll in for company owners with little exertion needed by machine handlers.[5] Telephones and trolley cars allowed the public greater access to information, which, more often than not, carried news of Parisian fashions to the doorsteps of women across the country.[6] In the early twentieth century, Paris was viewed as a fashion capital of the world, and it impacted American fashion trends prior to WWI. Generally seen as one of the most pivotal fashion centers since the reign of Louis XIV in the

[3] "Summer House Gowns," *Harper's Bazar* 44 (July 1910): 449.
[4] "Smart Street Gowns," *Harper's Bazar* 44 (July 1910): 448.
[5] Tortora and Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 422.
[6] Ibid., 426.

seventeenth century, the French capital had a reputation for starting and ending almost all fashion trends up to the twentieth century. In the early half of the 1900s, many countries tried to detangle themselves from French influence and create their own unique style that was not so wholly dependent upon France. The United States was one such country, and with the start of WWI marking an end to the American isolationist foreign policy, the U.S. succeeded in creating its own unique fashion culture.

The years leading up to WWI created a need for American nationalism to surface not just in the social and political sphere, but in fashion as well. *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1913 was one magazine that described this charge for a new fashion trend, believing American women needed to reject the French fashion and instead create a style that showed the true spirit of America.[7] The *Journal* had a wide reading audience, so large that while the *Journal* did not create the national revolution it hinted at, it did manage to spark debate about the issue of nationalism and Parisian influence.[8] This debate seems ironic, however, considering that while there was a dispute about whether or not a woman should wear a gown modelled after one in France, the aforementioned hypothetical woman would have worn a dress similar in design to that which Paul Poiret designed in Paris. A ground-breaking designer and leader of his time between 1903 and WWI, Poiret managed to do away with the corset for women and instead narrowed the skirts, making it harder for a woman to move about freely.[9] As seen in the picture captured in *Vogue* magazine in 1913 (Appendix C), the appearance of a flat chest—one great indication of a lack of a corset—

[7] Marlis Schweitzer, "American Fashions for American Women: The Rise and Fall of Fashion Nationalism," in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture, and Consumers*, ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 130.
[8] Ibid., 130.
[9] Tortora and Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 426.

and tight skirt shows Poiret's design at work.[10] Despite the debate that American nationalism guided women's fashion in this era, it would be inaccurate to ignore the international influences on American styles.

Trends were also affected by occupations women held in the Great War as well as the war's effect on clothing trends. World War I caused an increase in women taking on male roles and wearing more practical clothing than the constricting and delicate dresses of the previous five years. Best seen through propaganda posters for the war, women began to discard dresses and take up blouses and skirts that were more practical for their new tasks as breadwinner and step-in father. One example of this fashion transition emerged in the poster "Patriotic League" (Appendix D); the blouse and skirt are both conservative, yet also show the new value of women moving around more freely as the situation mandated.[11] Some professions, however, did not allow for a skirt to be exchanged for a dress. Despite the raised hemline of a skirt, pants were still required for numerous professions such as factory workers, railroad workers, traffic conductors, police officers, and auto mechanics; all these were jobs women had begun to fill after the men went away to war.[12] Wartime fashion also needed to adopt different textiles to supplement those not readily available because of the war. Wool and silk were in high demand, not only for men's uniforms, but also for the parachutes needed for various missions of war. Linens became useful for airplane wings, and cotton was a necessity for uniforms, tents, and helping "fire one of the large guns".[13] With all the functional uses for fabrics, it was illogical to ease sanctions on textiles for the sake of female fashion.

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[10] Jane Mulvagh, *Vogue History of the 20th Century Fashion* (New York, NY: Viking, 1988), 26.
[11] Howard Chandler Christy, "Patriotic League," 1918, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002708924/, accessed September 9, 2017.
[12] Tortora and Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 429.
[13] Ibid., 425.

Another trend that occurred during WWI was the conversion of men's wear into women's wardrobe. As displayed in *Vogue*'s fashion pages (Appendix E) and propaganda posters like "New York Spring Horse Show" (Appendix F), there was a large integration of masculine pieces into feminine styles. These were often female jackets cut to military regulations or masculine standards, as seen in the propaganda image.[14] At other times, this transformation was as simple as a woman stealing a jacket from her husband's closet, as shown in Figures 16 and 18 (Appendix E).[15] Commonly, it was out of necessity that these fashion trends began, especially when clothing makers were faced with a lack of the wool that would otherwise have been used for women's jackets. Nevertheless, this practice began to pick up steam and would continue past the end of WWI into the twenties, which marked the style shift not as a temporary fad, but as a movement remaining until the 1930s.

The end of the war in 1919 allowed soldiers to return home and women's efforts before and during the war to culminate in the nineteenth amendment. In 1920, Congress passed the nineteenth amendment that allowed women to vote, a goal thousands had sought throughout the late 1800s and into the early twentieth century. With this new political activism ensured, the woman's wardrobe was now thought to be an extension of her political standing.[16] This meant that a woman no longer wore fashion to keep abreast with the trends; a woman made a political and social statement with what she wore and how she wore it. For example, the time leading up to the nineteenth amendment witnessed a great number of women wearing trousers, not just for

[14] Howard Chandler Christy, "New York Spring Horse Show…" 1918, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97520329/ , accessed September 9, 2017.
[15] Mulvagh, *Vogue History*, 43.
[16] Annamari Vanska, "Gender and Sexuality," in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion*, vol. 6, ed. Alexandra Palmer (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 107.

practical concerns, but because they also helped to buck social norms. Fashion was no longer about how a woman could best accomplish a job, but how she could get her statement across.

Another way the fashion changed after 1919 is shown in the ready-to-wear industry and the new textile markets. The introduction of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, Tiffany and Company, and Paquin created a market overflowing with options for clothing that did not have to be made at home, and the prices were often cheaper than what would be necessary to buy material and make the garment.[17] Kasha, a cashmere blend that was durable, resilient, soft, warm, breathable, and wrinkle-resistant was essentially perfect for winter suits and afternoon or dinner dresses.[18] Rayon was also introduced after the war as a cheaper substitute for silk.[19] These new textiles effectively lowered costs and expanded the interest in the growing ready-to-wear industry; such post-war fabrics provided women with old and new materials in greater abundance with cheaper price tags.

One of the pinnacle effects of the war was the new feminine ideal reflected in women's clothing. This was considered the barrel-shaped figure, the pre-pubescent girl, or the adolescent boy physique. Essentially, the ideal was a female figure who had a rectangular shape, a woman whose curves were not accentuated and whose clothing began at the neck, performed right angles at the shoulders, and closed off in a box or tube-like shape under the knees. The ideal woman had a figure simply not as feminine as in the past decade, and her hair was cut in a bob not out of practicality, but because it minimized the femininity she would otherwise exude. As seen in *The Complete Fashion Sourcebook* (Appendix G), women in their leisure or active wear in 1924 did

[17] Tortora and Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 430-431.
[18] Susan Ward, "Textiles" in *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion*, vol. 6, ed. Alexandra Palmer (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 23.
[19] Ward, "Textiles," 23.

not show feminine curves, nor did they sport any specifically feminine patterns.[20] They wore stripes and plain materials, not floral or tiny polka dots. Even *Vogue*'s 1925 fashion pages (Appendix H) show women with straight figures and no real feminine extravagancies beyond the cosmetics on their faces and the occasional bows or pearls draped around their chests.[21] Never in history had an American or European woman worn dresses with such short hemlines, and never before had western society seen a woman chop off her hair to be part of a fad. These two groundbreaking trends rocked the foundation of the womanly appearance and its social acceptability.

With this new woman as a postmark of the U.S. and the 1920s, historians understand the flapper as a woman who welcomed these fashion trends and utilized the new freedom of dress to act outside the social norms of the previous decade. But what is a flapper? One source explains that flappers are reminiscent of the hair bows girls wore post-WWI that flapped on the back of their heads, and others believe that flapper refers to the analogy of the flapping wings of a young bird, thus relating a woman to a bird trying out her new wings.[22] Regardless of where the definition of the term comes from, the ideology remains. Flappers were young women who made a space for themselves to be independent and to act on behalf of themselves—not their fathers, husbands, or children—as women a decade earlier had done. These women were not just the partygoers seen in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, but women who were working on a college education, participating in sports, and smoking, drinking, cursing, and participating in sexual intercourse just as men had for decades.[23] These new social spheres

[20] Peacock, *The Complete Fashion Sourcebook*, 31.
[21] Mulvagh, *Vogue History*, 83.
[22] Tortora and Marcketti, eds., *Survey of Historic Costume*, 480.
[23] William H. Chafe, *The Rise and Fall of the American Century: United States from 1890-2009* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71-72.

allowed women to be a wife and/or a mother but also seek education alongside like-minded women, work a job, and vote. These political, social, and cultural changes were most certainly seen in the fashion of women as they too pushed the envelope and broke out of the original spheres they had been kept in for centuries.

The period of 1917 to 1927 featured a radical change in women's fashion as a result of WWI and the social, political, economic, and cultural effects of the war on the U.S. By looking at the fashion trends prior to, during, and after the war, historians can see a distinct shift towards more masculine dress. This masculine dress is the culmination of women establishing independence via work, education, and voting rights. Scholars can also use the example of WWI's effect on fashion to look at other major events in history and trace how fashion reflected them. Fashion was used as a tool for expressing an individual's political, social, economic, and cultural response, and it serves as a window into a time period and its people.

Appendix


HARPER'S BAZAR
449
SUMMER HOUSE GOWNS
DOTTED and PLAIN WHITE LINEN
PALE PINK SILK WITH DARKER MULL
EMBROIDERED WHITE LAWN WITH FRINGE
GREEN and BLUE GOWN WITH GOLD EMBROIDERY
BLUE and WHITE STRIPED LAWN
FLOWERED SILK MULL OVER BLUE CHIFFON

A


448
HARPER'S BAZAR
Smart Street Gowns
BLUE TAMOO WITH BLUE AND WHITE TIE
WHITE and ROSE FOULARD BLACK SATIN and LACE
WHITE FOULARD WITH BLUE DOTS and BLUE CHIFFON
CANARY TAMOO WRAP WITH GRAY EMBROIDERY
GREEN LAWN WITH BLACK LACE
TAMOO AUTOMOBILE COAT WITH BLACK FUR

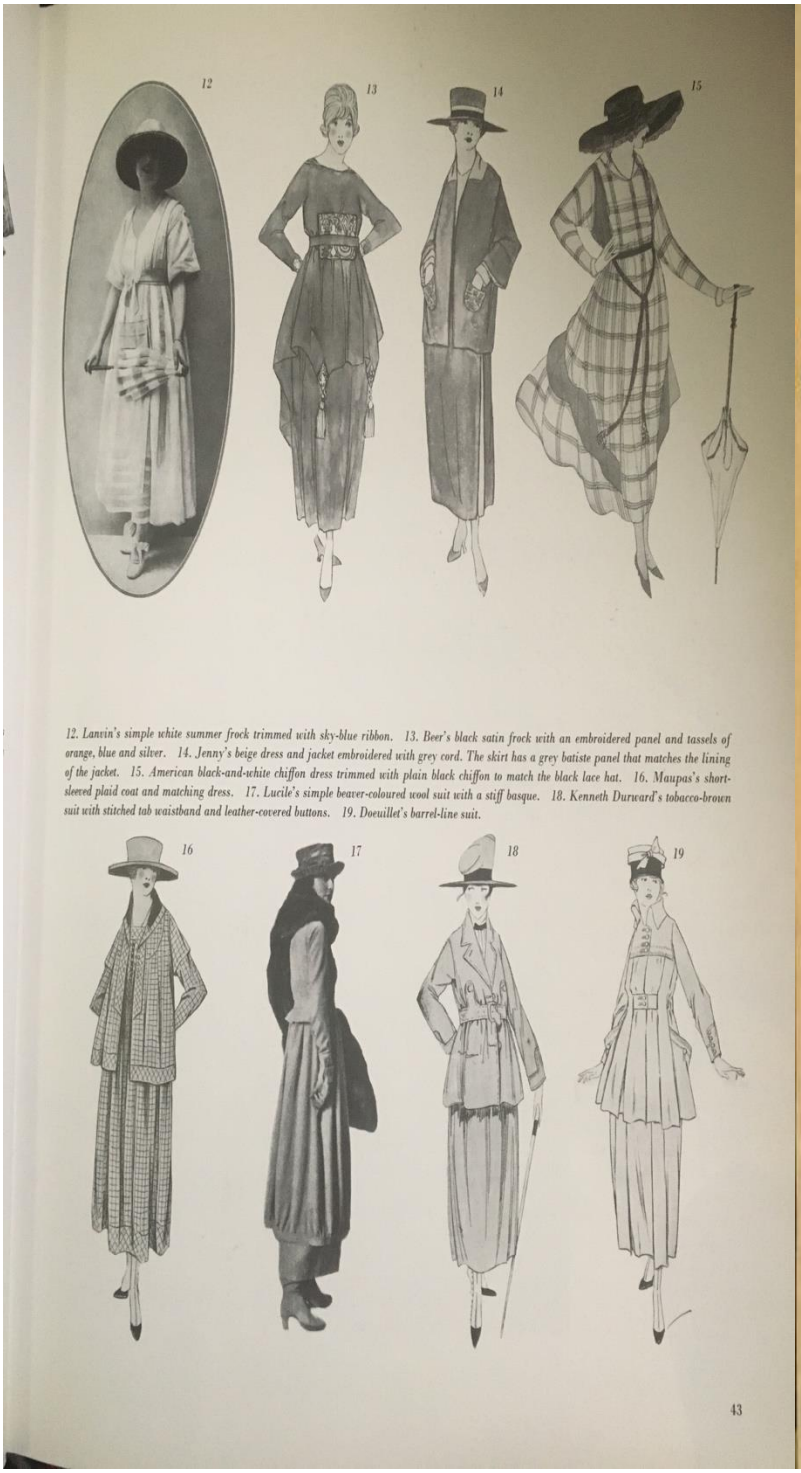
B


4
5
6
7
8
4. Paquin's pagoda-shaped suit with Louis XV waistcoat, cut-away skirt and plumed tricorne. 5. Nardi's black-and-white wool riding coat and matching breeches. 6. Poiret's short white skirt, straight green jacket, Russian-style, leather boots and white hat. 7. Bergdorf Goodman's tennis costume: green ratine jacket with green-and-white batiste collar and cuffs and a linen skirt, worn with rubber-heeled buckskin shoes and a straw hat. 8. Leon Bakst's blue-and-white outfit for Paquin. The large artist's beret ends in a tasselled point.
26

C


PATRIOTIC LEAGUE

D


12
13
14
15
12. Lanvin's simple white summer frock trimmed with sky-blue ribbon. 13. Beer's black satin frock with an embroidered panel and tassels of orange, blue and silver. 14. Jenny's beige dress and jacket embroidered with grey cord. The skirt has a grey batiste panel that matches the lining of the jacket. 15. American black-and-white chiffon dress trimmed with plain black chiffon to match the black lace hat. 16. Maupas's short-sleeved plaid coat and matching dress. 17. Lucile's simple beaver-coloured wool suit with a stiff basque. 18. Kenneth Durward's tobacco-brown suit with stitched tab waistband and leather-covered buttons. 19. Doeuillet's barrel-line suit.
16
17
18
19
43

E


NEW YORK
SPRING HORSE SHOW
DURLAND'S ACADEMY
5 West 66th St., New York
APRIL 29, 30, MAY 1
1919
For the Benefit of
THE
MOTOR-CORPS
OF
AMERICA

F


Sports and Leisure Wear 1924
31

G


12
13
14
15
12. Patou's circularly cut white georgette frock with black Chantilly lace inserts, which also outline the inside of the shoulder wings. 13. Chéruit's black and pink Riviera frock. 14. Lelong's long-sleeved afternoon dress of chiffon velvet in 'Lézard d'Afrique' (one of the new cloth approximations of animal skin) is slightly flared and illustrates the style of waistband that was cut higher at front than back. 15. Lanvin's black crêpe, coat-like roma tunic with shirred skirt front and rose-coloured crêpe roma slip beneath and a rose crêpe bow. The tunic and the sleeves are embroidered with rose-shaded circles. 16. Vionnet's tobacco-coloured crêpe-de-Chine dress with masterful tucks. 17. The Eton collar, the tailored kid-leather jacket and the straight tweed skirt were popular sports attire. The washable suede jacket, right, has knitted sleeves.
remained lower at the back than the front. The most popular evening materials were crêpe, chiffon, mousseline, supple metal cloths and lace, or velvet for the colder months. By the autumn there was a move towards longer, more elaborate evening gowns, particularly at Louiseboulanger; the sheath or short chemise now seemed too simple.
This year's coat was generally buttoned; wrapped styles were now considered dated in Europe, although they continued to be worn in America. The cut of coats also became more intricate: the back of the silhouette was flattened and the front and sides emphasized with jabots and flaring godets. Fur trims in both Paris and London were used in more artistic ways than the usual cuffs, collars and hems, for instance as inserted bands. Leather and suede were hardy materials for sports clothing and were now highly fashionable, styled like masculine sportswear.
The luxury leather luggage firm of Fendi opened in Rome.
16
17

H

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