PAUL POIRET

FURNISHING THE FASHION INDUSTRY

BY LAURA LAYFER

Paul Poiret "arrived on the Paris scene when the nineteenth century was closing belatedly and the twentieth century slowly was opening."[1] Born in 1879 to the owners of a woolen goods and cloth business near the Les Halles section of Paris, Poiret expressed his independence early, often sketching designs along the margins of his school notebooks, sneaking into art galleries, or watching theater performances at the Comédie-Française.[2] After he finished his degree, his father arranged for an apprenticeship with a family friend who owned an umbrella company. Although Poiret was unhappy sweeping floors and running errands, he made the most of his time, conjuring up some of his first dress designs from umbrella remnants. In 1898, he presented twelve sketches to Madame Madeleine Chéruit, then head of the fashion house Raudnitz et Cie. She purchased the entire series, and with his first

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Fig. 1: Plate depicting a turban by Paul Poiret, from *Les choses de Paul Poiret vues par Georges Lepape* (Paris: Maquet, 1911). The drawing of a tassle, on the same page, is from the same source. Courtesy of Leonard Fox, Ltd., New York.

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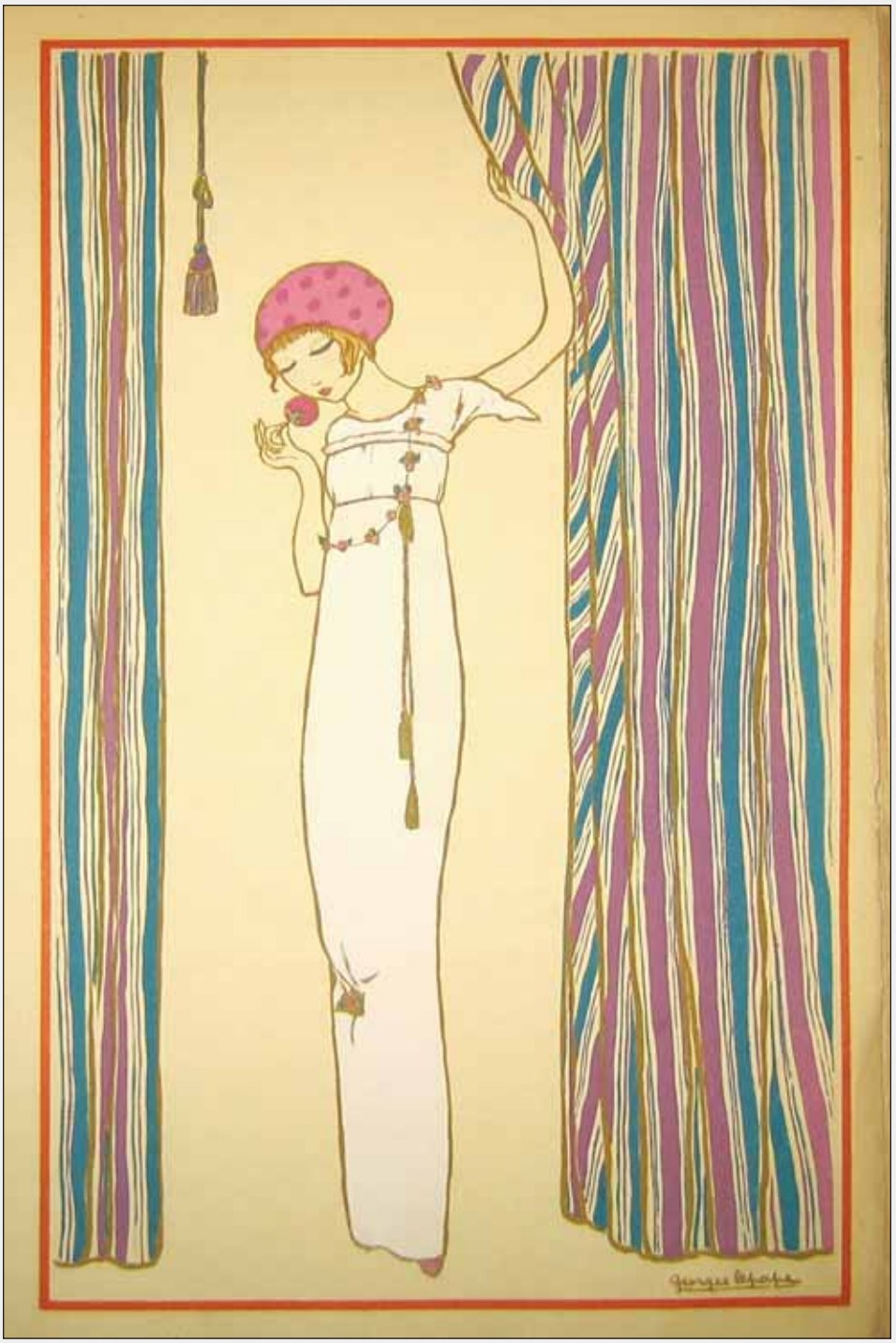
Fig. 2: Plate from *Les robes de Paul Poiret by Paul Iribe* (Paris, La Société Générale d'Impression, 1908). Courtesy of Leonard Fox, Ltd., New York.

sale behind him, Poiret soon caught the eye of renowned couturier Jacques Doucet (1853–1929), who offered Poiret a job as a junior assistant designer.

If Doucet was impressed with the aptitude of his young protégé, Poiret was equally intrigued with his employer's glamorous lifestyle. Doucet was a fixture on the Paris social scene, where he courted a clientele that included stage actresses Sarah Bernhardt and Réjane. Doucet was not only a highly regarded couturier, but also a respected art collector; he held an affinity for designing the types of lavish gowns seen in his own personal collection of paintings by Fragonard, Boucher, and Watteau. During the first decade of the twentieth century, however, Doucet's eye was taken by the new art movement of up-and-coming artists such as Picasso and Braque, and he later auctioned off the entirety of his eighteenth century art in order to acquire modern works by these avant-garde artists. This savvy ability



to stay ahead in the art market was exactly what Poiret aspired to emulate.

In 1900 Doucet fired Poiret for what the older designer considered a social faux pas; Poiret had snuck into one of Bernhardt's dress rehearsals and was overheard criticizing the work of another designer. Soon thereafter Poiret departed for his military service, and when he returned a year later, he found work with another leading couture house, Maison Worth.

Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895) was the "inventor" of many original ideas in fashion. He was the first modern couturier who dictated style rather than simply fabricating a client's demands, the first to use live mannequins, and the first to develop the concept of a brand label to be sewn into clothing. When Poiret went to work there, the company was overseen by Jean and Gaston Worth, sons of the founder, who wanted to expand the business from elegant evening dresses to include a casual line for the modern woman. Poiret was put in charge of this new daywear division, referred to as the 'fried potatoes' in the now extensive menu of Worth clothing selections. Though impressed with the concept, the position did little to appease Poiret's ambitious appetite. By 1904, he was ready to open his own couture salon with a plan to integrate a similar multi-production output: fashion and furnishings.

His first fashion innovation was a complete reformation as he professed to have "freed the bust [and] shackled the legs."[3] Poiret's reintroduction of the Directoire-style dress (a silhouette initially developed in the late eighteenth century) abandoned the lavishly ornamental S-curve corset of the Belle Epoque for a straighter sheath-like garment requiring less corsetry and allowing greater bodily ease of movement. His inspiration was likely more personal than practical, as Denise Boulet, who became Poiret's wife in 1905, had a slender, delicate figure that was flattered by the narrower-cut Empire style gowns. Denise became his muse and model for the clean, falling lines that were neither shape-hugging nor shapeless. Poiret experimented with exotic styles from the Far East such as sack dresses, kimono coats, robes, and wide pantaloons paired with head turbans (Fig. 1). The materials Poiret employed were rich and vibrant, and much influenced by Léon Bakst's amalgamation of bold and daring costumes for the Ballet Russes that performed at the Théâtre de Châtelet in 1910. Poiret's adaptation of such cultural influences, however, was completely his own and this dramatic contrast from the conservatism of the previous Edwardian style's soft tones and subdued dress code was only the tip of the iceberg.

Adding playful themes to his work would also prove important in the overall genesis of Poiret's business. While he often attached names to his creations, such as the "Sorbet"

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Fig. 3: From *Les choses de Paul Poiret vues par Georges Lepape* (Paris, Maquet, 1911). Courtesy of Leonard Fox, Ltd., New York.

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Fig. 4: A drawing by Pierre Fauconnet (1882–1960) of Martine-made products: a glazed earthenware vase on a gold mosaic stand, a reflector lamp in the background, and cushions. From *La Gazette du Bon Ton,* 1912. Courtesy of Leonard Fox, Ltd., New York.

gown or "Lampshade" tunic, it was his 1002nd Night Ball, in 1911, which Poiret famously orchestrated in the garden of his avenue d'Antin salon, that pledged a certain validity to the inclusion of art and entertainment in the realm of fashion publicity. Poiret sent out invitations designating which Persian costumes guests should wear, perhaps so that no attendee's attire would rival that of his own "Sultan's" ensemble, or conceivably, he was positioning himself in a role that would predate today's fashion stylists.

In his autobiography, *King of Fashion*, Poiret rhetorically asked "Am I a fool when I dream of putting art into my dresses, a fool when I say dressmaking is an art?"[4]

Poiret, in contrast to his predecessors Doucet and Worth, equated his actual vocation with that of artists' work. The onset of the couture profession alone had elevated the status of clothing to a form of artistic expression as the attribution of designs to designers was itself a major advancement for fashion in the late nineteenth century. Poiret, on the other hand, took it one step further. If couture transformed the assemblage of outfits from mere decorative coverage to a medium in which to express the tastes and desires of its makers and wearers, then Poiret sought to cultivate those aspirations into a reality.

In 1908, Poiret asked the illustrator Paul Iribe to assist in producing a limited edition catalogue entitled *Les robes de Paul Poiret*. This colorful "look book" featured Poiret's clothing set against elaborate art-filled rooms, and single-handedly established the importance of the decorative interior as the ideal home for fashion creations. The partnership of an elongated chaise lounge with an Empire-styled gown, for example, provided clients with an appropriate context for Poiret's couture. Models were posed before paintings, or admiring sculpture (Fig. 2), placing Poiret's clothing in a direct relationship with art. Later, Poiret collaborated with artist Georges Lepape for the design of a second catalogue where again, interior and exterior settings were juxtaposed with various clothing ensembles to present Poiret's vision for a decorative totality:

fashion, interior, and decorative object.

Always looking for fresh ideas, Poiret journeyed to Vienna in 1910 to meet with Josef Hoffmann, a founder and director of the Wiener Werkstätte. The workshop's centralized training and production appealed to Poiret, though its strict regimentation did not. In 1911 he established his own interior design school in Paris, École Martine, named for one of his two daughters. Here, young girls, known as the Martines, unfettered by formal training, were encouraged to study nature and to paint from pure inspiration and imagination. Their creations were then transferred on to fabrics used in an assortment of decorative furnishings sold in Poiret's atelier Martine, opened that same year. The shop was described in a 1912 issue of *Vogue* as offering "everything that one could wish, and each article the loveliest of its kind."[5] The merchandise ranged from hand-painted glass bottles for Poiret's perfume line "Rosine" (named after his other daughter) to silk parasols, and larger items such as tables inlaid with colored woods.

While exoticism in style, color, and ideas was a constant over the course of Poiret's career, the Martines brought this aesthetic to fruition on fabric with their abstraction of natural elements and naiveté of expression. Crudely drawn, the untamed flow of wildflowers, use of abnormal shapes, and bursts of vibrant colors became the Martines' trademarks that could just as easily accentuate the wallpaper of a room as the allure of a garment. Accessories were also prey to crossover in the Poiret oeuvre, like the tassel on the belt of an Empire-style gown that seamlessly transitioned as a decorative feature for a group of Martine pillows (Figs. 3, 4). An interior could now be "Martinized," a term synonymous with a refreshingly contemporary sensibility.[6] Not everyone was pleased by Poiret's dominance. A writer for American *Vogue* in 1912 was quite critical: "[C]ertainly couturiers have never before insisted that chairs, curtains, rugs and wall-coverings should be considered in the choosing of a dress, or rather that the style of a dress should influence the interior decorations of a home."[7]

Fig. 5: "Abricot," probably from a Martine design, adapted by interior designer Thomas Jayne for Brunschwig & Fils.

Nothing seemed to slow Poiret down, not even bad press, and soon Martine branches opened throughout Europe and in the United States. Additionally, patrons of the arts, such as his ex-employer Doucet, now sought the guidance of Poiret and the Martines for creating interior settings to complement important art collections. By 1913, Poiret had become one of the leading authorities in the field of art and design, finding himself as one of the first interior designers of the day while still maintaining his success as a couturier.

World War I drastically altered Poiret's lavish life. When he was summoned to military service, he closed the couture salon while the Martines and Rosine remained in operation. In spite of these efforts, his postwar return was not met with the same success he had previously known. While Poiret ventured into new creative endeavors in the entertainment field, such as the opening of a nightclub called L'Oasis, none prospered into substantial businesses. By 1919, he had formally closed École Martine but maintained the company division of Martine as an interior design and decoration production outlet. He reopened his fashion house in 1925, and that same year, he planned to take the crowds by storm at the Exposition Universelle des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes with his display housed on three barges, *Amour*, *Délices*, and *Orgues*. Moored along the river Seine, each presented Martine interiors, yet in the aftermath of WWI those designs that once made Poiret distinct had now become seemingly extinct. Public interest had moved on from the bright and bold to the sleek and streamlined as people now favored efficiency in every mode of life. In 1926, Poiret was forced to close his business, and in 1944, he died destitute.

With all of Poiret's accomplishments, the greatest obstacle he faced may simply have been his timing. For if Poiret's debut marked the opening of an era, the curtain call for his encore would not come again until the near close of the twentieth century. And, then almost as if taking their cues directly from the *King of Fashion* himself, contemporary fashion designers emerged as total arbiters of taste. Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Giorgio Armani, and the late Gianni Versace were among some of the first to expand their clothing lines to encompass home lines. Similar to Poiret, these designers aimed to target all of the senses. While many followed his path of parlaying their stylistic signatures into the form of fragrance lines, accessories, clothing and furnishings, most advanced to include the fields of cosmetics, jewelry, restaurants (also an original Poiret idea set-up on the 1925 barge *Delices*), costumes for movie credits, and sports equipment. Through the specialization of defining a look, one that is both visible and tangible, fashion designers now strive to shape and design complete lifestyles. Positioning himself as the creator of the "total work of art" — couturier, connoisseur, and collaborator, Poiret provided the initial silhouette. And, not surprisingly, today's interior designers and fabric manufacturers turn to Poiret as well, reintroducing Martine patterns in varying palettes and textures for the home (Fig. 5). Proving, once again, the Poiret aesthetic was more timeless than timely.

Poiret's life and work is the subject of a major exhibition, *Poiret: King of Fashion*, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art through August 5, 2007. Aimed at highlighting one of the greatest fashion innovators of the twentieth century, the exhibition is being sponsored by Balenciaga with additional support from Condé Nast.

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1. James Johnson Sweeney, "Poiret: Inspiration for Artists, Designers, and Women," *Vogue* (September 1, 1971): 188.
2. Palmer White, *Poiret* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1973), 14–15.
3. Paul Poiret, *King of Fashion: The Autobiography of Paul Poiret*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (Philadelphia & London: J.B. Lippincot, 1931), 65–66.
4. Paul Poiret, *My First Fifty Years*, trans. Stephen Haden Guest (London: V. Gollancz, 1930), 31.
5. White, *Poiret*, 120.
6. Sarah Ferguson, "Paul Poiret's Total Look: Revolutionary Design Before Its Time," *Elle Décor* (November 1990), 64.
7. "Poiret's New Kingdom," *Vogue* 40, no. 1 (July 1, 1912):16, as cited in Nancy Troy, *Couture Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 44.