

## PAUL POIRET AND ORIENTALISM

By Jennifer Eurell

Paul Poiret (1879-1944) was a French couturier in Paris in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He rose to fame in the first two decades through his exotic garments and subversive fashion ideas. This essay looks at the connections between Orientalism and Poiret's pre-World War I fashion.

Poiret was born into a world where fashionable women wore structured outer garments with many undergarments to achieve an hour glass figure. Poiret dispensed with the obligatory corset in 1906, giving women the freedom to dress themselves, breathe easily, and present a more relaxed shape to the world (Koda 2013). In 1908 he showed his Directoire Line (Fig. 1) offering a softer look with skirts falling from a high waistline. Fig. 2 shows how women's shape morphed from hourglass to cocoon to the straight lines of the flapper dress.

*Fig. 1 An Iribe illustration of women in Paul Poiret's high waisted garments observing the previous hourglass style fashion.*

Source: <http://www.vogue.it>





Dinner dress, House of Worth ca.1900. The tailored hourglass shape dominated for 400 years.  
Source: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



Eugénie 1907, showing Poiret's Directoire style in a bright Fauve pink.  
Source: [www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr](http://www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr)



Opera coat, 1912, Paul Poiret. Poiret's cocoon shape in bright yellow.  
Source: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



Robe du soir, 1907 Poiret predicts the straight lines of the 1920s with this sumptuously decorated dress.  
Source: [www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr](http://www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr)

Fig. 2 Changing shapes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Poiret had good beginnings. He worked as a draughtsman for Jacques Doucet and was apprenticed by The House of Worth before starting his own fashion house in 1904 (Baudot 2007). He worked in the affluent era between the Franco Prussian War and World War I. It was an age of technological change as well as ideological change. Poiret supported women's liberation by doing away with the corset and wide skirt, moved with the times with car coats, put women in trousers, launched suspender belts, and made a light brassiere. On the other hand, Poiret also boasted that he 'freed the bust, but I shackled the legs' with his hobble skirt. He promoted Art Deco, and designed for stage as well as *haute couture* (Watson 2004).

After a new translation of *The Arabian Nights* was published in Paris between 1899 and 1904 there was a resurgence of Orientalism (Chadwick 2004). Kant points out 'novelty makes fashion alluring' (Chadwick 2004) and Poiret soon designed Oriental garments that had both.

Martin (1994) describes Orientalism as a construct of the European psyche. Spatial extent changed over time, but in the early 1900s it was countries east of Europe plus Spain and North Africa. The Orient was 'The Other' on a grand scale and a result of exploration and French, British and Portuguese colonization.

Orientalism was not a new influence in Europe. There had been trade with China in ancient times; 17<sup>th</sup> century European ceramics were influenced by Chinese design and Asian textiles enhanced the desire for far off lands. The *Robe de la Turquerie* was a fad in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought Japanese influenced art and fashion, and the ubiquitous Kashmiri shawl was manufactured in Europe as well as India. Easy travel and nostalgia for Persian legends encouraged the interest in Orientalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mears, n.d.).

Artists had traveled to the Orient since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and returned to Europe with sketches, paintings, and curiosities (Rosembaum n.d.). Expeditions continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Eugene Delacroix painted romanticized harem scenes and J.A.D. Ingres appealed to western desire with his more erotic vision (Martin 1994). Renoir visited North Africa and used prostitutes as models. His *Odalisque* of 1870 (Fig. 1) is a tribute to Delacroix and precursor to the equally decorative, but flatter, paintings of odalisques by Matisse. Renoir's confronting work returns the viewer's gaze and offers all the perceived temptations of the East in a manner artists were reluctant to depict for women of the West. The Gaze was a significant factor in Poiret's work. He was bestowing the desire for the odalisque on his clients. A woman wearing Poiret was meant to be seductive and seen (Lemaire 2001).



Fig. 3 *Odalisque*, 1870, Auguste Renoir. Oil on canvas, 69.2 x 122.6 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Source: Lemaire, 2001  
Source: <http://arthistory.about.com>

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century painters, including Edouard Manet, Wassily Kandinsky, Kees Van Dongen, Albert Marquet, Louis Moilliet, August Macke and Paul Klee, turned from romanticized ideals when painting in the Maghreb, and concentrated on abstracted compositions of light, colour, pattern and shape. Many paintings would return to Paris for exhibition at The Salon or in Ambrose Vollard's gallery (Lemaire 2001).

There could be some debate on whether artists influenced Poiret or vice versa, however, it is equally likely that all were a product of their times. Poiret considered himself an artist. He stated 'I am an artist, not a dressmaker' (Svendson 2006, 91). He had a point, he had the ability to transfer his artistic ideals to clothes, and after he retired from fashion in 1926 he became a painter. Poiret mixed with artists and collected their work, including the work of the Fauves – Henri Matisse, André Derain, Raoul Dufy, Kees Van Dongen, and Maurice de Vlaminck, and also Pablo Picasso (Baudot 2007). Poiret's ex-employer Doucet owned Picasso's 1907 African mask inspired *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Gombrich 1988) so Poiret was well aware of Orientalist aspects in modern art. Picasso and Georges Braque were rearranging the human form with Cubism, and in his way, so did Poiret with his new silhouette.



Fig. 4 *The Manilla Shawl*, 1911, Henri Matisse, Oil on canvas, 118 x 75.5 cm

Source: <http://www.artic.edu>

The work of the Fauves around 1905-7 had discordant hues and freed colour from local tone. It would inspire Poiret's use of colour with bright purples, pink, blues, greens and golds (Taylor n.d.). Matisse considered that 'a work of art should be decorative after all' (Graham-Dixon 2005). He was fascinated with Islamic art, painted in Morocco in 1912-13 and was passionate about textiles (Watkins n.d.). He came from a family of weavers and collected costumes, Arab embroidery, Eastern carpets, Byzantine prayer mats, Romanian blouses and Congolese fabrics (Graham-Dixon 2005).



Fig. 4 shows Matisse's use of stylisation and colour. A Manilla scarf is simply wrapped around the woman. Poiret also was fascinated with the Eastern tradition of 'wrapping women' as he was a draper of fabric, rather than a tailor. Wollen (1987) describes Matisse and Poiret as the last of the fine art orientalists and the first modernists as they broke with tradition but did not reject the body or the decorative. Fig. 5 highlights Matisse's passion for decoration, with bright areas of flat colour and little regard for perspective, as in Japanese art. Flatness would also appeal to Poiret and many of his garments would rely on rectangular cuts of material. Fig's 6 and 7 show the Japanese connection between the Fauves and Poiret.

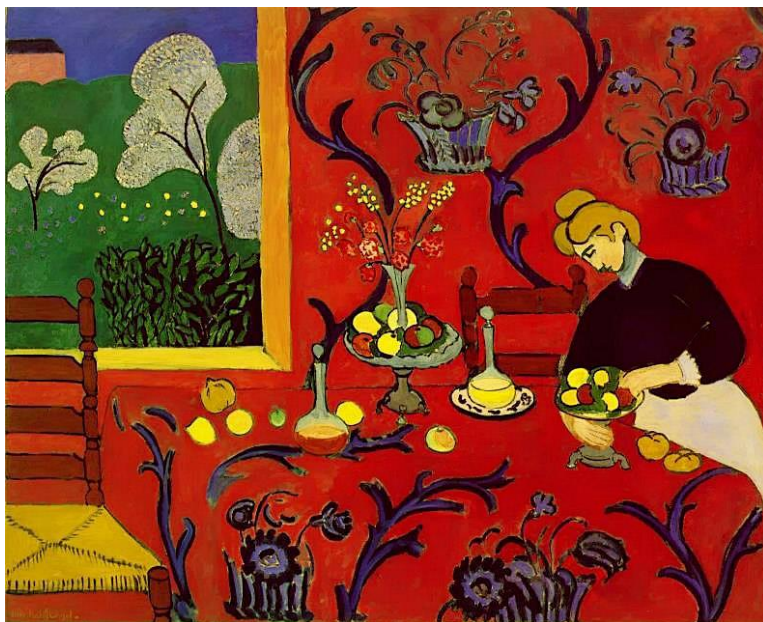


Fig. 5 *Harmony in Red*, 1908, Henri Matisse. Oil on canvas, 180 cx120 cm  
Source: [www.artchive.com](http://www.artchive.com)

Many artists collected Japanese prints of the *Edo* period. Raoul Dufy was employed by Poiret from 1909 to 1912 as an illustrator. He used the Japanese process of wood block prints for outlines and *pochoir* for flat colours in his prints (Muller 1967). His ideas revolutionised fashion illustration and textile production. Poiret's *La Perse* coat, 1911 (Fig. 7) is based on a Japanese kimono cut and uses a Dufy print for the fabric.

Troy (Chadwick 2004, 384) stated that 'both fashion and fine art in the modern period require "an audience, a discourse, a profile in the public sphere"'. Poiret would excel at this. He was an entrepreneur with fashion shows; was the first couturier to launch his own perfume (Baudot 2007); advertised by using illustrators and fashion photographers including Edward Steiche; and used his wife Denise as both 'muse and walking advertisement' (Watson 2004). Poiret's *École Martine* served as a marketing base as well as a school for the decorative arts



Fig 6 Andre Derain Madame Matisse au kimono, 1905  
Oil on canvas 80.5 x 65 cm  
Source: <http://nordonart.wordpress.com>



Fig. 7 La Perse coat, 1911. Textile design is a Raoul Dufy block print.  
Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org>

In 1908 Poiret commissioned Paul Iribe (1883-1935) to illustrate *Les Robes de Paul Poiret racontée par Paul Iribe*, and Georges Lapape (1887-1971) to illustrate *Les Choices de Paul Poiret* in 1911 in a deliberate attempt to connect his Oriental inspired pantaloons, tunic dresses and turbans with art (Rosembaum n.d.). Illustrators like Bakst, Lepape, Iribe, Erté, and Dufy created exquisite stylised illustrations to create an ambience which added elegance, glamour and value to the garment. In 1912 Poiret was also a sponsor for Lucian Vogel's *La Gazette de Bon Ton* (Steele 1998). Fig. 8 shows how The Oriental style was illustrated for Poiret by Georges Barbier for *Les Modes*.

Fig. 8 Chez Poiret, 1912 cover illustration for *Les Modes* by Georges Barbier.

Source: <http://www.newyorker.com>



The Ballets Russes had astonished Paris with their artist designed sets and costumes and the Fauves had made an impact through adverse publicity after the 1905 Salon d'Automne (Cavendish, 2013), so the Parisian elite were Modernist and Orientalist aware. Poiret was one for 'the spectacle', so he dazzled Paris society with his 1911 'The Thousand and Second Night' party with 300 guests. Poiret had researched Indian turbans at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013)

and visited North Africa in 1910. His friend Dr. J.C. Mardrus translated *The Thousand and One Nights* so Poiret borrowed the theme for a sumptuous garden party to present his Oriental line of fashion. Poiret attended as a turbaned sultan with whip and scimitar, with his wife, Denise, clothed in his 'lampshade' dress with her attendants in a golden cage as slaves. His guests dressed appropriately and his fashion amidst the Eastern bands, fountains, braziers, Dufy painted awning, and mounds of cushions earned his reputation as *Le Magnifique*. Poiret denied being influenced by the Ballets Russes *Scheherazade* of 1910, however, he was friends with Diaghilev and some of the visual artists so was aware of their sumptuous costume and set design. Poiret was using Oriental fantasy to eroticize the female body in the same way that Diaghilev would eroticize the male in the Ballets Russes (Wolley 1987).

Not everyone appreciated Poiret's work as some considered it subverted Parisian fashion and sensibilities and his Hobble Dress was declared a freak (Vogue 2013). He was nonplussed so designed several hundred costumes for a three act play by Jacques Richepin, *Le Minaret*, in 1913. Chadwick (2004, 386) describes this as a 'plethora of bouffant trousers, turbans, bejeweled corsets, wired hems and hoops that gave the performers the look of tasseled lampshades'. The play publicized his Minaret style and Denise Poiret made an appearance in lampshade tunic over bouffant trousers (Koda 2013). Poiret drew a fuzzy line between fancy dress and *haute couture*.





*Fig. 9 Georges Lepape's interpretation of Denise Poiret's lampshade dress and turban, 1911.*

Source: [www.theblack-nouveau.com](http://www.theblack-nouveau.com)



*Fig. 10 Sorbet, 1912, a skirt and tunic with a hoop hemline, was a later version of the lampshade dress.*

Source: [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)



There is no doubt that Orientalism was a significant factor in Paul Poiret's fashion, as well as in fine art, graphic design and theatre in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Poiret's Oriental fashions were innovative and fun, his fashion legacy is dispensing with the corset and his 'package deal' entrepreneurship. The Orientalism significance of Poiret's work is that he was offering mystery, fantasy and allure to woman and a peek into the harem for men. His garments offered luxury and style, as well as the exotic and erotic. His Oriental style peaked just before the outbreak of World War I and although he continued to design after the war the market no longer required the fantastic, exotic and Oriental. Other designers at the time were also similarly influenced, and although Orientalism returned in the 1970s and still lingers on in design, it is still Paul Poiret that wears the *haute couture* Orientalism crown.

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