

Feature



From Opulence to Elegance: WWI's Impact on Clothing *Anne Merritt*

World War I triggered major changes to clothing styles, going from the opulence of the Belle Époque to elegant practicality.

The Great War from 1914 to 1918 ended empires, monarchies and the grand uniform. At the beginning of the war, the extravagantly trimmed uniform was seen on ranking officers and aristocrats, even the enlisted recruits had helmets with points! Women's clothes resembled craft exhibits of embellishment, embroidery, and appliqué.

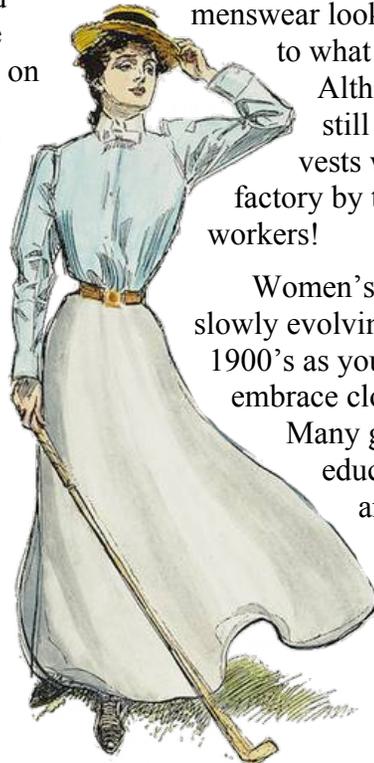
The Great War profoundly accelerated the trend for less restrictive women's clothing. The war also introduced some changes in men's wardrobes, but it was war and way the women supported it that remains most notable to us. Until the 1890's when the bustle was finally abandoned, and the corset no longer restricted movement, people were covered from neck to toe; including the middle and lower classes who were never as immobile as the upper class ladies.

The pervasiveness of working and living in the industrial age provided the impetus for clothing change. Only the wealthy with servants could safely wear garments with inordinate trim. The men quickly began to change their wardrobes to more practical garments for working around machines. The suit jacket lost its tail, the top hat was replaced by something less rigid. By 1910 menswear looked very similar to what we see today.

Although the pictures still show us ties and vests worn to the factory by the factory workers!

Women's fashions were slowly evolving in the first decade of the 1900's as younger women started to embrace clothes that let them move.

Many girls were now being educated though high school and even college before marriage. Many entered the workforce, the Gibson girl of the 1890's in her shirtwaist with upswept hair remains an American icon.

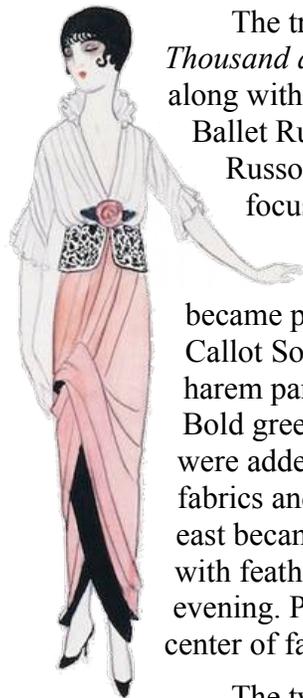


Heavy skirts with multiple petticoats were an obstruction. The corset permitted more and more movement and its size was reduced. Paul Poiret, a French designer, introduced a less restrictive corset that left the natural waist and flattened the hips, giving a longer line. He promoted the brassiere; some credit him with its invention in 1907. [See "Bust Support Comes of Age: The Bra in the 1920's and 1930's", *The Virtual Costumer*, [Aug 2010](#)]

The V-neckline replaced the high collar. The waist moved up, then to a looser natural fit before dropping to the hip in the 1920's. Sleeves were narrow and the shoulders natural. Hats were becoming more compact and skirts were shorter; many about 8 inches from the floor, often worn with laced up boots during the day.

While Poiret loosened the corset he favored slim skirts, which forced the wearer to take mincing steps rather than stride. Soon, a pleat was added by others, retaining the slim silhouette, and permitting the wearer to walk more naturally. Poiret is also credited with the introduction of the mannish suit (trotteur) that continues to be a wardrobe essential.

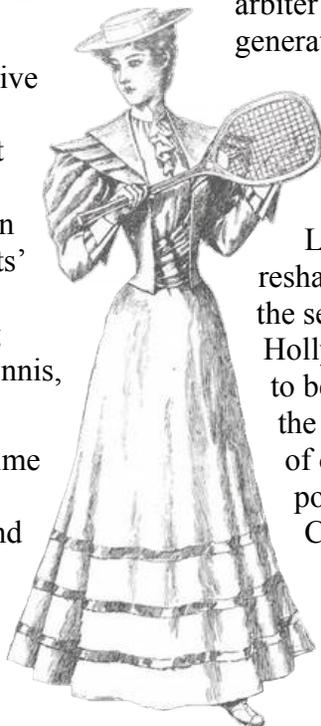
Above: Caricature of John Crichton-Stuart, Marquis of Bute in tailored brown suit with fine stripe, brown shoes and discrete green necktie, Drawing by Who for Vanity Fair. Left: *On the Golf Links*, 1899, Drawing by Charles Dana Gibson.



The translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, along with the arrival of the Ballet Russe in Paris, and the Russo-Japanese war all focused society's attention on the east. The exotic became popular, Poiret and Callot Soeurs embraced the harem pant and the kimono. Bold green and pink colors were added to wardrobes. Silk fabrics and the colors of the east became the trend. Turbans with feathers were worn in the evening. Paris was a cultural center of fashion and theater.

The twentieth century woman participated in active leisure time pursuits especially in America. The city park movement provided places for outdoor activity within the industrial city in an effort to improve the inhabitants' health. Weekends, the parks were crowded with both sexes enjoying athletic activities: golf, archery, tennis, and bicycling.

The lower classes now had time for some leisure as well. Leisure clothes meant less constrictions and shorter hems, some women even adopted pants without trying to disguise it: bathing clothes and bicycle bloomers come to mind.



Some of the early attempts at the exercise ensemble are amusing to us now. For the wealthy, clothiers were including this desire for movement into their designs. The fuller shoulder and waist were the points of emphasis in the 1890's. The skirts, while still floor length, were supple.

The natural silhouette favored by Poiret was widely adopted in the early 1900's. The waistline went up a bit before settling at the waist. Poiret and Chanel were doing some work for the theater as was Lucile. Poiret worked with illustrators to introduce sketch booklets of his designs to the public. A fashion association was formed in Paris that would become the arbiter of style for all classes of society for generations. Motion pictures also helped to spread the new fashions worldwide. Some of the fashion designers would not prosper after the war.

The sentimental romanticism of Lucile floundered after the war, to be reshaped by her sister Eleanor Glynn into the sexy allure of the "It" girl in Hollywood. Poiret and Chanel continued to be popular in the twenties adapting to the modern times. Although Poiret's love of opulence and costume was much less popular with most women than Chanel's jersey suits.

Top left: Asian-influenced drawing by Erte for Paul Poiret, 1913. Left: Tennis gown, 1893
Above right: Lieutenant Turcos (Tirailleurs) in service dress (1914).



The war interrupted much of this movement. Unlike the short conflicts and confrontations during 1890's and early 1900's that were fought in the Balkans and Africa, by the beginning of 1915 it was apparent to many that the current war would not be short. The uniforms of the armed services prior to 1914 had many elements that look fanciful to the modern eye. The French army wore red pants and blue jackets (right) with an ornate helmet. The German army was the one with the pointed helmet.

The military was a respected profession and many groups adopted clothing with military influences. Society looked favorably on the armed forces, even those in the peace movement. In fact, the military was invited and included in the international peace conferences held prior to the Great War. Emperors, Tsars, and Kings had wardrobes of uniforms. Uniforms in this case reinforced the authority of the ruler.

In the democracies, such as France, the military represented a powerful group admired by many. Organizations founded during the 1880-1910's frequently incorporated uniforms for their members. Little boys wore sailor suits, older ones wore camp shirts with neckerchiefs, and workmen wore uniforms. The Salvation Army was in

uniform no matter the sex of the wearer. Even the girls and women had some uniform elements in their clothing; the Girl Scouts for example.

The Naval middy blouse of the enlisted man was adopted by young men and women. It's popularity started in the 1880's when the wealthy purchased yachts. Female fashion responded with a yachting ensemble that featured stripes of navy and white and anchors embroidered on collars and hats. During Theodore Roosevelt's presidency the great white fleet of the US Navy sailed around the globe announcing the industrial power of the United States. The middy shirt gained universal acceptance. It remains today as a favorite fashion periodically re-appearing.



As the Great War continued past December 1914, practical concessions to trench warfare were introduced. On the home front, free time was utilized in troop support; knitting scarves, mittens and cowls; sewing shirts, baking to supplement the rations. With both men and women

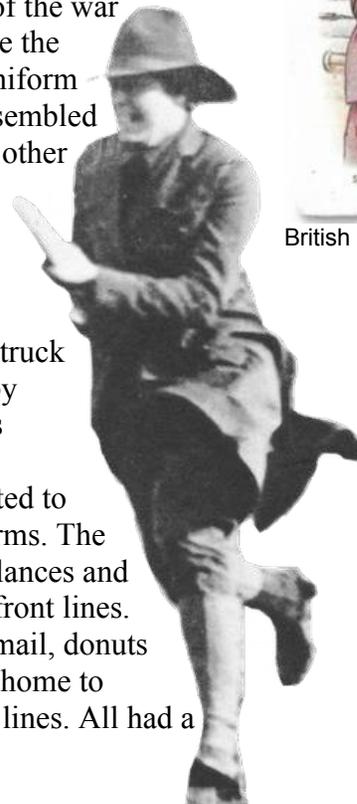
Above: from a WWI "Victory Girls" poster, part of the United States War Work campaign, c. 1918. Right: Member of volunteer American Women's League for Self-Defense participates in "Practice Attack on Hun" at Governors Island, New York, c. 1917.

supporting the war effort, uniforms became ubiquitous. The ceremonial helmets and colors that were common prior to 1914 quickly changed to practical-metal helmets, uniform colors that concealed, rubberized boots for trenches and inconspicuous rank emblems.

Uniform colors also became common as industries shifted to clothing the military. This left very little milling capacity for other fabrics or colors. The trench coat, rubber soled boots and shoes, and the wrist watch were among the items that entered fashion.

The nursing profession retained their longer skirts, long aprons and head veils, but the end of the war saw the cap replace the veil; and a dress uniform that more closely resembled the uniforms worn by other women service volunteers.

The troop support functions such as ambulance drivers and truck drivers were supplied by volunteer organizations during the Great War. Volunteers were expected to supply their own uniforms. The volunteers drove ambulances and trucks to and from the front lines. Groups helped supply mail, donuts and other reminders of home to troops behind the front lines. All had a uniform.



British cigarette cards show jobs held by women during WWI.

The length of the war involved the entire population of the countries involved. The support supplied by people on the home front at every level was unexpected and unprecedented. This actually contributed to the ability of the belligerents to prolong the fight. Women joined the workforce taking over jobs that freed men for the front. They worked on subways, railroads, the production line and the farm. There were even British cigarette cards of the different jobs held by women (above). Within the armed forces women joined as support troops, again freeing soldiers for the front

lines. The US Navy actually enlisted women and paid them -10,000 signed up.

Children collected scrap metal for munitions, peach pits for gas mask filters, books for the troops, and even learned to knit scarves and gloves for the soldiers in a program run by the Red Cross. The Red Cross in the United States distributed patterns for scarves, head gear, vests and fingerless gloves. In Britain, there was a song entitled, “ Sister Sara’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers “, think Gilbert and Sullivan. The Women’s Land Army was formed in Britain and the US.



Boys in Cooperstown, New York take up needles to knit for trench-bound soldiers, c. 1917.



After armistice, servicemen and women joined flag-waving civilians parading down crowd-lined Manhattan avenue in New York City. 1918.

The total commitment to waging the war left no resources for fashion innovation unless it improved the ability to wage war. Resources such as material and dyes were focused on clothing the troops. Society matrons put away the large brimmed hat, along with yards of embellishments that would not return when the war ended. Colors returned to fashion after the war, but the embellished uniform did not. It’s hard to find braid and nearly impossible to find feathers on hats. A few remain, even today, but they are ceremonial.

After the war, much in society was altered. Men and women returned to peace time pursuits, but society had some adjustments; women acquired the vote and remained in the workforce in many areas that once were closed to them. Wartime advances in electronics and flight accelerated the pace of life even more - the modern era had begun.

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Anne Merritt joined the Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild around 1999. She enjoys learning history by studying society, including what and how garments were made and worn. Anne works in accounting.