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Wartime marketing of Parisian haute couture in the United States, 1914–17

Mary Lynn Stewart

The First World War threatened Parisian haute couture's status as the center of international fashion. One of its largest and fastest growing markets, the United States, had its own expanding garment industry that might have challenged French domination of the luxury apparel business during a prolonged war. Because the United States did not enter the war for two years and because of its distance from the war front, Americans had more disposable income and fewer inhibitions about spending it on luxury goods than citizens of countries at war, making them an especially attractive wartime market. This essay assesses haute couture's marketing initiatives in the United States between August 1914 and April 1917, when America entered the war.

In America, the period between 1870 and 1914 is known as the Gilded Age, characterized by the emergence of corporate capitalism and a dramatic increase in the number of wealthy families with luxurious lifestyles. During this period, haute couture attracted many American ladies to Paris to acquire their wardrobes and about 500 American buyers—approximately one-third of them women—who regularly purchased between five and sixty models apiece. The buyers represented many dress shops and manufacturers.¹

Before the war, haute couture was concerned about commercial copying of their models in the US. A provision of American copyright laws that required registration of a product before any promotion of that product was incompatible with the seasonal fashion shows in France, which identified the models worth importing and reproducing in America. Moreover, American officials often refused to register any item of practical utility, like clothing, under their design patent law.² Couturiers held early showings for foreign buyers, many of whom commissioned or bought sketches at the showings. Some

cut swatches of material or tore trim off garments to have similar materials and notions for garments made by their clients in America.³ For each model, a buyer received a certificate with information about the fabric and notions needed to produce the model and specified the number of reproductions allowed. Often American manufacturers made far more copies, or close copies, than the certificates specified.⁴

Couturiers also worried about losing control over the quality of their designs and models. They feared that Americans who altered designs before selling them as Parisian originals undermined the reputation and profits of haute couture. Their opinion was shared by the French government. According to the Minister of Commerce, American alterations lowered the “cachet of elegance and distinction” of the French originals—not to mention the revenue from exports to the US.⁵

In April 1913, *La Gazette du Bon Ton* (The Gazette of Good Taste), the society magazine sponsored by seven major Parisian couture houses (Cheruit, Doeuillet, Doucet, Paquin, Poiret, Redfern, and Worth) reported that fashion was the only French industry that was the major foreign competitor in a segment of the American market, yet their German competitors had far more business representatives in America. The magazine claimed that middle-class women were seduced by attractive fashion catalogs and magazines published by foreigners, mostly Germans, falsely advertising French styles. *La Gazette* urged couturiers to “redouble their efforts to uphold the prestige of our elegance.”⁶ When Paul Poiret visited the States later that year, he discovered knockoffs of his models selling for as little as \$15 and duplicates of his dress labels being sold openly. On his return to France, he formed an association to protect couture’s interests by ending “counterfeiting of labels and illicit use of their names.” The initial members were Callot Sœurs, Cheruit, Doucet, Jeanne Lanvin, Jenny, Paquin, Poiret, Premet, and Worth, joined by textile manufacturers Bianchini-Férier and Rodier.⁷ At the suggestion of Poiret’s representative in the United States, they became the Syndicat de Défense de la Grande Couture Française (Syndicate for the Defense of French Haute Couture, hereafter the Syndicate) in June of 1914.⁸

On August 3, 1914, the day that Germany and France declared war, the Syndicate rallied to defend their domination of international fashion. They decided to hold the fall openings that month, even though four couturiers were mobilized and several others had closed shop or turned their workshops over to bandage making. Because buses, taxis, and trains were mobilized for the Battle of the Marne, the remaining designers found it difficult to get enough workers into the city and to procure adequate supplies of fabric and trim. Despite these obstacles, the Syndicate held openings in order to maintain the prestige of haute couture in the international market. They established a clearing house to ensure that there would be enough new models for the openings and required foreign buyers to pay in cash or certified checks when they placed their order, not when it was delivered. At least four major houses did not present collections; those who did have openings showed fewer models to fewer buyers than usual. All but one of the major houses followed the syndical line on payment at the time of purchase,

which annoyed American buyers who found it difficult to acquire cash or certified checks in the “money panic” of the first few weeks of war. Some found ways to get their product to the market via ports in the south; others followed Worth to London, where American Express and other American businesses honored American cheques or offered credit.⁹ The season was not profitable but made a statement about haute couture’s continuing presence, if not its future domination, of the market.¹⁰

The situation was not promising. Even after German troops retreated, repeat customers avoided the capital. *La Gazette du bon ton* ceased publication.¹¹ *Le Style parisien* (Parisian Style), which replaced *La Gazette* a year later, informed American women accustomed to getting their wardrobes in Paris, what was being shown and worn in Paris.¹² Unfortunately, Parisian society was not lively because of early wartime closures of cafes, theatres, and other entertainment venues and because Parisiennes had adopted “sober” and practical clothing in deference to the war and their new occupations as nurses and drivers. American fashion columnists worried that American women might not find these sober styles attractive. Their concern proved to be exaggerated, but their attitude contributed to a depressed atmosphere.

Compounding haute couture’s concerns, in September 1914, the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce in Washington urged American manufacturers to seize the opportunity to develop foreign trade.¹³ The president of the American Ladies Tailoring Association argued that the situation “afforded an opportunity to demonstrate that American designers and dressmakers were the equal of any in Paris.”¹⁴ However, there were dissenting opinions. Chicago dressmakers pointed out that American designers could not quickly or economically replace established French designers, while *Women’s Wear Daily*, the organ for the New York garment industry, praised the fall collections. The same daily newspaper recorded the resumption of weekly shipping from France to New York and the dates that imported models would arrive in New York.¹⁵

Vogue magazine, which had promoted Parisian fashion since 1892, had been trying to develop New York fashion since Condé Nast bought the magazine in 1909.¹⁶ In the fall of 1914, the magazine organized a Fashion Fete showing American models, explaining that “there is a small prospect of new Paris styles for the midseason.”¹⁷ The Fete drew 700 people and raised money for an American charity for French women and children left destitute by the war. However, American fashion arbiters were quite critical because some contributors held back their best designs for their own openings later that month and some of the garments were not well designed. Influential fashion columnists found the gowns beautiful but not distinctively American. Several prominent society ladies publicly vowed that they would purchase their wardrobes in Paris. *Women’s Wear Daily* admonished the “Made in America cabal” that what they really needed to do was improve the quality of American clothes.¹⁸

Despite a lukewarm reception in New York, the Fashion Fete galvanized couturiers in Paris.¹⁹ As German troops pulled back in the fall of 1914, refugees from the capital straggled back to the city. But most American buyers had left, because there was little product to buy or transit to ship it. Many seats

were empty at the fall 1914 openings. A *Vogue* article speculated that there would be no midwinter collections.²⁰ Although *Women's Wear Daily* correspondents liked the fall collections, one questioned whether the spring 1915 collections would be successful.²¹ Much the same combination of positive coverage of the collections yet public doubt about the future occurred in the same newspaper in the spring of 1915.²²

Haute couture had two major responses to the crisis. One was to participate in the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in the summer of 1915. Textile and clothing manufacturers associations had presented their creations at international trade fairs between 1900 and 1914. In 1904, several couturiers had taken part in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition (informally known as the Saint-Louis world fair). Despite regulations that prohibited copying goods on display "without the permission of the exhibitor," many French companies, including couture houses, complained about counterfeiting after the Saint-Louis fair.²³

In May 1912, France had accepted an invitation to participate in an international exhibition in San Francisco to celebrate the completion of the Panama Canal. Although the war interrupted preparations, the government reaffirmed its commitment to the project late in 1914.²⁴ For two years, French ministers and officials lobbied the American government, legislators, and officials about tariffs and industrial property rights and recruited French companies to display their products. They encountered opposition in both endeavors. American manufacturers, patent agents, and senators tried to rescind or limit the protection offered foreign businesses willing to display products at the fair.²⁵ Many French exporters and associations like the Federation of the Fashion Industries (eleven syndicates including couture, confection and other branches of the garment industry) refused to take part on the grounds that their products and designs would not be protected from tariffs and copying. The Minister of Commerce reminded the Federation that French exports to the States had almost doubled between 1902 and 1912 and described how the French ambassador and other government agents had lobbied American legislators to vote for a September 1913 law conferring tariff immunity on all products destined for the fair and assuring exhibitors of their property in all goods sent to the fair for a term of three years.²⁶

While these negotiations went on, the larger organization of French fashion designers, united under the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* (Trade Association of Parisian Couture, henceforth *Chambre Syndicale*), reorganized itself after ousting twenty German- and Austrian-owned or -financed houses. A few of the ousted houses dissociated themselves from alleged German or Austrian ties, notably Drecoll and Redfern, and were readmitted. The newly reconstituted *Chambre Syndicale* unanimously agreed to contribute to the exhibition in San Francisco to counter the "campaign led against Parisian couture to the profit of American fashions."²⁷ The President of the *Chambre Syndicale*, Jean Aine-Montaillé, kept American buyers informed about these developments and portrayed German and Austrian houses as copyists who undersold Paris houses.²⁸

The Syndicate, individual couturiers exhibiting at the fair, and *Women's Wear Daily* did advance publicity for the fashion exhibit at the fair.²⁹ Twelve prominent couturiers, including Beer, Callot Sisters, Cheruit, Doucet, Jenny, Paquin, Premet, and Worth, displayed as a collective.³⁰ Sixty outfits, ranging from evening gowns to children's clothing worth about \$100,000, were shown on wax mannequins in three settings where French designs had been publicized before the war: Vichy, Longchamps, and the Côte d'Azur.³¹ That publicity had included *Vogue*, *Women's Wear Daily*, and other American magazines and newspapers. As the three sites revived the following year, the same magazines and papers resumed reporting on them.³² *La Gazette du bon ton* reappeared with a double issue on the San Francisco couture exhibit, one in English done in collaboration with *Vogue*. The English edition was a translation of the French original, minus one piece on financial exigencies in France.³³

Both volumes claimed that the collection reflected "the elegance of war, a light and sporty elegance, loose, permitting easy gestures . . ." A long-time fashion columnist, Nada, specified that the skirts were gathered and the hemlines above the ankles, so women could run and move easily, while waistlines were relaxed "in order to lean over to console someone who suffers."³⁴ This kind of publicity reflected a trend toward practicality in wartime fashion.³⁵ Conversely, another article by an occasional reviewer added that women "must appear frivolous, even when we have never been less frivolous."³⁶ These commentators were expressing two French conceptions of American taste: one that American women wanted more practical clothing, the other that they desired spectacular outfits from Paris. Both types of publicity encouraged American consumption of haute couture.³⁷

Couture's second response to the threat of American competition saw couturiers break with tradition by sending new models directly to New York before Parisians viewed them. Concerned that Americans might not buy subdued wartime styles, couturiers sent models that varied from the French versions.³⁸ This was precisely the kind of catering to American customers that worried pre-war couturiers. The nine houses and two textile manufacturers in the Syndicate sent 100 models and many new fabrics to New York. Poiret, who ran his company from the front, was permitted to return to the capital and advertised that he would make models for America alone.³⁹ He also persuaded *Le Style parisien* to set up a charity for war orphans to benefit from the New York event. The French Fashion Fete, held at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in November 1915, was a success.⁴⁰ John Wanamaker bought all Poiret's models—the only Poiret models available that season—and many customers trusted other houses enough to pay in advance of delivery. *Vogue*, which co-sponsored the fete, devoted a special issue to it.⁴¹

In addition to these major initiatives, the Syndicate continued their campaign against copying. Some of this campaign was accomplished legally and amicably.⁴² When the Women's Board of Trade in Massachusetts mobilized against foreign labels on American-made goods in early 1915, Aine-Montailé expressed the full support of haute couture for the campaign.⁴³ The Chambre Syndicale also negotiated with American importers to impose certificates confirming that a design was a French original.⁴⁴ As President of the Chambre Syndicale until the spring of 1917, Aine-Montailé wrote

regularly to *Women's Wear Daily* to soothe recurring tensions about escalating anti-copying measures by the Syndicate. When the Chambre Syndicale ousted German and Austrian buyers and implicated German American buyers in early 1915, Aine-Montail wrote *Women's Wear Daily*, saying that German American buyers were only identified and shamed if they copied.⁴⁵

In the winter of 1915–16, the Syndicate put out a stringent set of rules to protect their models from foreign buyers that, in their terms, “have perverted and vulgarized our designs.” One of these rules designated the fashion magazines allowed to view the collections and one blacklisted any buyers who engaged in illegal copying. Although the principal targets were German and Austrian magazines and buyers, there was some spillover to German American houses and buyers. The spillover angered Americans. The *New York Times* suggested that importers ignore Poiret and deal with “others among the 402-odd French designers.”⁴⁶

When the Syndicate excluded a prominent New York buyer, Morris Weingarten of Weingarten and Pearl, he protested publicly until the Syndicate retreated from their position. Weingarten also criticized the Syndicate for their assumption that professional buyers, as opposed to manufacturers, were responsible for copying. The Syndicate also distributed entry cards for openings but refused to extend them to naturalized German Americans, who were labelled “Style Pirating Manufacturers.”⁴⁷ In February 1916, many buyers announced that they would not apply for entry cards and some members of the Syndicate ignored the entry-card system.⁴⁸ Major American importers such as Bendel, Bergdorf-Goodman, and Bonwit Teller formed an Association that worked with the Chambre Syndicale and the Syndicate to set up a clearing house to handle shipping of models under a double seal.⁴⁹ But Callot Seurs, Jenny, and Paquin soon withdrew and Worth’s departure in the summer of 1916 signaled the dissolution of the Syndicate.⁵⁰ None of these efforts resolved the problem of illegal copying in the United States, and the couture syndicate repeatedly suggested solutions in the remaining years of the war and for decades thereafter.⁵¹

Throughout this turmoil, haute couture mounted seasonal collections and President Aine-Montail assured American buyers that the seasonal openings would be held on schedule.⁵² In the spring of 1916, *Vogue* reported that “Bubbles of Fashion” were rising “to the Surface in Paris.”⁵³ However, supply remained a problem. The German occupation of the northeastern departments amputated two-fifths of the textile industry’s productive capacity.⁵⁴ To compensate for the dearth of wool and cotton, designers used more taffta and serge. When serge became too scarce in 1916, couturiers introduced new, finer jerseys made by Rodier. To replace luxury fabrics, they used more decorative embroidery, ribbons, lace, tassels, or beads.⁵⁵ The number of workers employed in couture and confection ateliers nearly doubled from 48,880 in August 1914 to 85,077 in January 1917.⁵⁶

In 1916 and 1917, the industry tried to attract American customers. The couture houses of Bou Seurs and Marianne Buzenet acquired shops in New York in 1915 and 1916, respectively, and in 1917, Poiret opened a New York branch.⁵⁷ Over these two years, many other couturiers sent models to stores

like J. M. Gidding and Co. of Fifth Avenue, which set up salons displaying Paris originals alongside salons with “modified” versions of these originals.⁵⁸ Individual couturiers combined openings in New York with support for charities or with exhibits of French paintings.⁵⁹ Couturiers also made designs more attractive for American buyers and improved deliveries.⁶⁰ Even before America entered the war in the spring of 1917 and imposed the famous restriction to four-and-a-half yards of wool for suits or dresses, couturiers had shifted from the barrel silhouette to a straighter line.⁶¹ After the restrictions, they raised hems, slimmed skirts, shortened jackets, and eliminated “useless” pockets and flounces. Subsequent collections kept the silhouette but added draping and other details.⁶²

Conclusion

When America entered the war, Paris and haute couture welcomed American intervention.⁶³ Some couturiers added items of clothing like tailored suits or shirtwaist dresses—outfits “beloved in America”—to their collections.⁶⁴ North and South American buyers—and even some British buyers, despite restrictions on luxury imports—made larger than usual purchases.⁶⁵ Over the next two years of war, couture continued to make and sell items of clothing like suits but also luxurious gowns, all of which attracted North and South American buyers. One consequence was steady sales of French designs in North and South American shops. After the war, Britain remained the largest foreign market for French clothing, but the United States took second place by the mid-1920s. Western European countries came third through seventh place in these years, but North and South American countries like Canada and Argentina moved up to eighth and ninth place among importers of French clothing.⁶⁶ Haute couture had held onto and expanded its American markets.

Notes

- 1 Allison Mathews David, “Vogue’s New World: American fashionability and the politics of style,” *Fashion Theory* 10, 1–2 (2006): 13–38. The figure for American buyers is from an advertisement for “Original Paris fashions,” *Women’s Wear Daily* (WWD), September 18, 1914, 9.
- 2 Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Paris, III 3.91 (18) Soleau Reports, 1905 and 1915, and Tailleur note.
- 3 “La Grande Couture française et quelques uns de ses clients,” *Le Style parisien*, December 5, 1915.
- 4 Ibid. and Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 81.
- 5 Arsène Bonnaire, Director of Maison Laferriere, “American taste in dress,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1912, 6; “American lifting Paris fashion yoke,” *ibid.*, July 14, 1912, 4; and “American women responsible for sensational French styles,” *ibid.*, July 5, 1914, 8.

- 6 André de Fouquières, "Du Prestige de la mode aux États-Unis," *La Gazette du bon ton*, April, 1913, 177–8.
- 7 Edna Woolman Chase and Ilka Chase, *Always in Vogue* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 92–3. "Le Syndicat de Défense de la Grande Couture Française et des Industries s'y rattachant," *Le Style parisien*, November, 1915.
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- 9 Anne Rittenhouse, "London honors American drafts," *WWD*, August 6, 1914; Anne Rittenhouse, "De Lange letters," *ibid.*, August 28, 1914; Anne Rittenhouse, "Fashion under fire," *Vogue*, October 1, 1914, 11 and 40–1; Anne Rittenhouse, "Couturiers under arms," *Vogue*, October 15, 1921, 44; Lady Duff-Gordon, "Paris fashions that escaped the war zone," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 1914.
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- 12 La Rédaction, "Le Couturier," and Francine, "Lettre d'une Parisienne," *Le Style parisien*, September 2, 1915. Francine's "Letter from a Parisian" appeared monthly until the magazine folded in 1916.
- 13 "American trade activity. Bid for European markets," *London Times*, September 17, 1914.
- 14 "M. Greene, President of American Ladies Tailoring Association," *WWD (Fashion Illustrated Edition)*, September 3, 1914; "La Haute Couture," *ibid.*, September 21, 1914, 1.
- 15 "Chicago dressmakers discuss fashion situation," *ibid.*, September 8, 1914, 1; "Causerie de Paris," *ibid.*, September 15, 1914; "Stern Brother's Opening," *ibid.*, September 24, 1914.
- 16 David, "Vogue's New World," 13–14.
- 17 "Editor's note," *Vogue*, September 15, 1914, 25; "Editorial," *ibid.*, October 15, 1914, 29.
- 18 "The Ritz-Carlton Fashion Fête," *WWD*, November 6, 1914, 1, 5; "Costumes," *ibid.*, November 13, 1914, 7; "A Reproach or A Recommendation," *ibid.*, November 13, 1914.
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- 23 Archives Nationales (AN) AN/F/12/7431, Exposition de San Francisco, dossier Règlements, République Française, Ministère du Commerce, de l'Industrie, des Postes et des Télégraphes. *Exposition Universelle Internationale de Saint-Louis en 1904, Règlement général* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, Mars 1913).
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- Ministres, undated but likely December 1914; and dossier “Crédits”: Tirman, Commissaire général de l’Exposition, Rapport à M. le Ministre du Commerce, de l’Industrie etc., (December 2, 1914).
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- 29 “La Haute Couture,” *ibid.*, Feb. 10, 1915, 2; “The Paquin Models for San Francisco,” *ibid.*, March 16, 1915, 1; Edith L. Rosenbaum, “An exhibition worthy of France,” *ibid.*, April 20, 1915, 1.
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- 41 "Paris is Paris for a 'That,'" *Vogue*, December 1, 1915, 44; "The Paris Fashion Fete," *ibid.*, December 15, 1915, 33ff.; Roger Boutet de Monvel, "Fashioning our first French Fashion Fete," *ibid.*, 15 December, 1915, 34–5; Roger Boutet de Monvel, "The Blue Book of the Grands Maisons," *ibid.*, December 15, 1915; "La Fête parisienne à New York," *Le Style parisien*; Francine, "Lettre d'une Parisienne," *ibid.*, November 4, 1915, 22 ff.
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- 45 See "American citizens welcome to Paris," *WWD*, January 25, 1915; "The German couturiers in Paris," *ibid.*, March 17, 1915, 1; "Attitude today of French Syndicate," *ibid.*, March 24, 1915, 2; "M. Aine Tells of Paris Conditions," *ibid.*, April 7, 1915, 1.
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