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6

Dressed to quill

The origin and significance of the feathered showgirl in First World War Paris

Emily Brayshaw

Plumes and Paris

The fashions for women's large, elaborate hats trimmed with vast sprays of ostrich feathers began in the 1880s and coincided with the period of French history known as the Belle Époque, an era of affluence, security and gaiety that lasted from 1871 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.¹ The finest ostrich plumes were very expensive, but with at least fourteen varieties and countless grades available, women from all social backgrounds could purchase ostrich-feathered fashions.² In November 1903, for example, the Cawston Ostrich Farm in California offered American consumers plumes from \$1.50 each and 1.5-yard long feather boas for \$35 each.

While the Californian ostrich feather industry rose to capitalize on the high prices of raw South African plumes, feathered fashions emanated from Paris, not the United States. Indeed, by the 1890s, many wealthy American socialites traveled annually to Paris to order bespoke wardrobes from the new collections.³ Parisian fashions were also the subject of countless international newspaper and magazine reports, which coincided with the phenomenon of famous actresses appearing on world stages wearing the latest French haute couture.⁴ Consumers' knowledge of Parisian fashions, therefore, meant that ostrich feathers remained modish as long as France decreed them so.

France was a leading global consumer of raw ostrich feathers prior to 1914 and Paris, where the plumes were treated and readied for sale in extensive manufactories, crafted the world's finest trimmings.⁵ The prolonged, ubiquitous popularity of plumed fashions during the Belle Époque meant that the Parisian feather industry was a significant economic force in France. However, the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914 was accompanied by a mood of austerity in French fashion and women needed utilitarian clothes for war work, which contributed to the decline in fashion of garments and hats trimmed with large ostrich plumes.⁶ Thus, the global price of ostrich feathers crashed in the early winter of 1914.⁷ Plumes, it seemed, were *passé*.

Laisse les Tomber!

Laisse les Tomber!, an opulent revue in two acts with fifty scenes, opened on December 12, 1917, at the Casino de Paris and starred the French music hall star Gaby Deslys (born Marie-Elise-Gabrielle Caire, 1881–1920) wearing towering ostrich feather headdresses made by Maison Lewis, a leading court and society milliner with workshops in Paris and London. The revue also featured more than 800 costumes designed by Canabate (dates unknown) and the great costume designer and poster artist, Charles Gesmar (1900–28), and executed by one of the Belle Époque's leading costumiers, Maison Pascaud of Paris. Deslys and her co-star, Harry Pilcer (1885–1961), danced to American ragtime. The press praised the show, writing, “The revue, ‘Laissez les Tomber,’ [*sic*] . . . is a magnificent show . . . The costumes are gorgeous, particularly for war time [*sic*]! The ladder scene has been introduced as the three colors (red, white, blue), and pleased immensely.”⁸ The ladder scene, which the New York theater publication *Variety* called “the most important tableaux,”⁹ featured dozens of nude showgirls wearing large, feathered headdresses descending 30-foot ladders.¹⁰ The revue's international and local audiences would have simultaneously associated the showgirls' red, white and blue feathers with the *tricolore* of the French flag (due to the French history of tying nationalism with commercial and musical culture) and with the British Union Jack.¹¹ Any Americans present would have associated it with their own flag; *Laisse les Tomber!* included the musical number, “Stars and Stripes” (1917).

Laisse les Tomber! also left an indelible impression on the avant-gardist, Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), who wrote:

M. Pilcer . . . and Mademoiselle Gaby Deslys, a great ventriloquist's doll with . . . [an] ostrich-feathered gown, danced through this tornado of drum and rhythm . . . The house was on its feet to applaud, roused from its torpor by this extraordinary turn, which is to the frenzy of Offenbach, as a tank is to an 1870s state carriage.¹²

Paris in 1917

Paris was in torpor in 1917. Workers, soldiers, cultural elites, and the fashion industry were despondent due to the war, poor working conditions, rationing, inflation, and the freezing winter of 1916–17.¹³ The English journalist Helen (Pearl) Adam (1882–1957) wrote in her diary of life in Paris that the “deterioration of civilian morale” and that of the troops made itself felt in the spring of 1917.¹⁴ The French expressed their dissatisfactions however they could, including industrial action, mutiny, sophisticated indifference, and by mocking German soldiers and civilians. On May 18, 1917, for example, 10,000 *midinettes* (dressmakers) from forty fashion houses in Paris went on strike; 5,000 female workers in the gunpowder factory of Toulouse went on strike for a week from June 13, 1917.¹⁵ The *poilus* (French infantry) were also fed up and began a mutiny on April 17, 1917,¹⁶ which by June included more than 40,000 soldiers who rejected the High Command’s “mindless devotion to offensive at any cost.”¹⁷ This was in direct contrast with the image of tough, easy-going, jovial, scruffy *poilus* promoted by French propagandists in 1914.¹⁸

The avant-garde, cultural and intellectual elite of Paris too expressed its dissatisfaction with the war. Jean Cocteau’s Futurist, one-act ballet, *Parade*, for example, dealt with the terror of war through its “cultivated apathy.”¹⁹ *Parade* premiered on May 18, 1917 and featured a score by French composer Erik Satie (1866–1925) and costumes and scenography designed by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). It was performed by the Ballets Russes and represented a Parisian Sunday fair with a travelling theater that employed three music hall turns: a Chinese conjuror, an American girl, and a pair of acrobats. Many music halls typically employed acts outside the theater to entice potential audiences to the show.²⁰ Yet *Parade*’s costumes, music, and choreography were deliberately disjointed and distorted with the dancers becoming increasingly desperate and frantic, perhaps reflecting the conditions in Paris in 1917 and the horrors of war.

Parisian fashion designers and illustrators expressed their frustrations by mocking the Germans sartorially during the war years. Cartoons have always been a popular form of expression in France and during the war “an unexampled flood of cartoon and caricature poured from artists both celebrated and unknown.”²¹ Lou Taylor writes that, “The most successful cartoonists lampoon the circles they live amongst or close to.”²² Georges Kugelman Benda (d. 1921), Leonetto Cappiello (1875–1942), and Georges Barbier (1882–1932), for example, were well positioned to mock restrictions placed on the Parisian fashion industry during the First World War. Cappiello was a prominent *fin-de-siècle* music-hall poster and advertising artist and caricaturist who produced covers for satirical journals, while Benda and Barbier produced illustrations for the highly influential fashion magazine, *La Gazette du Bon Ton*. Barbier was also a prominent costume designer. They, like many of their peers, however, also produced anti-German cartoons during the war for popular magazines, many of which mocked German approaches to fashion.

Such anti-German cartoons typically featured stout, tasteless, poorly dressed women, such as Cappiello's cover for *La Baïonnette*, on 20 January 1916 entitled *Les Gretchen* (The Gretchen).²³ A 1917 Benda sketch for the satirical magazine *La Baïonnette* entitled *Leur Theatre: La Grosse vedette* (Their Theater: The Big Star) shows a fat German performer wearing an outdated, ostrich feather-trimmed hat and a gown in a style from the early 1900s. The French term *la grosse vedette* implies a grotesque star past her prime. Such representations were antithetical to illustrations in the popular press by Cappiello, Benda, and Barbier of chic Parisian women and French music hall stars wearing elegant, ostrich-feathered fashions and costumes.

Parisian music halls

Music halls rose in France in the *fin de siècle* and incorporated sumptuous production values and interiors, lively music, and a brash aesthetic. They originated in England during the 1840s and the format was imported to the café-concert scene in Paris where the term "music hall" came to mean the theater itself and the type of entertainment held there.²⁴ Music hall programs of the Belle Époque predominantly featured *tours de chant* alternating with circus and ballet numbers and culminated in an "opulently staged *revue à grand spectacle*."²⁵ Paris's first *revue à grand spectacle* was performed at the Folies Bergère in 1887.²⁶ Music hall tickets ranged in cost from two to six francs in 1900, making them a "feasible entertainment venue for most of the French populace."²⁷ By 1914, music hall revues had become the focal point of an evening's entertainment for many Parisians.

Parisian music halls closed in August 1914 with the onset of the war, but reopened in December with a "stream of flag-waving revues" that glorified the Allied and French soldiers.²⁸ Despite their popularity with locals and visiting troops alike, however, the war took an economic and physical toll on the Parisian music halls, which were required to donate 15 percent of their takings to war-related charities.²⁹ *Variety* reported that Parisian music-hall attendances were also affected by curfews imposed in response to the threat of the *Parisgeschütz* (Paris gun), a long-range super-heavy field cannon the German army used to bombard Paris during the First World War.³⁰ The *Parisgeschütz* was designed to act as a psychological weapon against the French and the most vicious attacks were launched in March 1918, when more than 1,000 shells "fell on . . . Paris killing a total of 522 people and wounding 1,223."³¹ Paul Duval (1880–1966), who became the director of the Folies Bergère in 1918, wrote that his music hall also took a hit during the attacks.³²

The dissatisfaction with life in Paris in 1917 contributed to a social nostalgia for the security and affluence of the Belle Époque. Parisian music hall revues during the war expressed much of this nostalgia through their musical content, which included the hit song of 1917, "Quand Madelon" (1914), about a cheerful barmaid who serves *poilus* in her sunny rural tavern (Sweeney 2001: 255).³³

The title of Deslys's revue scorned the threat of German bombardments by proclaiming, *Laisse les Tomber!*, which is often translated as "Let Them Fall!", but also literally translates as "Drop it!" or "Forget it!", which encouraged Parisians to rouse themselves from their torpor to attend the music halls.³⁴ *Laisse les Tomber!* also tapped into audiences' nostalgia for the Belle Époque, although not strictly through its musical content, which included many American ragtime numbers. Rather, the revue provided visual references to the movement, decadence, and ostrich feathered fashions of the Parisian Belle Époque, which were captured by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) in his work *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* (Mademoiselle Eglantine's troupe) (1896). The poster shows the English dancer Jane Avril (1868–1943) and a female chorus line wearing large hats trimmed with ostrich plumes and performing the "can-can."

Sociopolitical and cultural context is important when people choose clothing that references the past. This is "particularly apparent in high design."³⁵ Cocteau's description of Deslys highlights her sartorial allusions to Belle Époque music halls through his mention of her ostrich feathers and his reference to composer Jacques Offenbach's (1819–80) music for the "can-can." Deslys herself, whose stage career had started around 1902, was also part of the Belle Époque's visual legacy. A famous actress, Deslys had used her exploits with wealthy, powerful lovers in the 1910s, such as King Manuel II of Portugal (1889–1932) and Harry Gordon Selfridge Sr. (1858–1947), the founder of Selfridge's department stores in the United Kingdom, alongside her jewelry, and displays of expensive fashion and feathers to fascinate her public.³⁶ Yet, Cocteau firmly situated Deslys in the Paris of 1917 with all of the subtlety of a military tank that ploughs through the old era, represented by an 1870s state carriage.

Le Retour des plumes d'autruche

Parisian nostalgia for the Belle Époque also meant that ostrich feathers did not become unfashionable during the war; rather they experienced a deliberate resurgence in use by French milliners and *couturiers* as modish trimmings. According to Steele, "[h]istorical revivalism is most often used as a tool to create a pervasive, and recognizable, environment for fashion that responds very pertinently to the times in which it is created."³⁷ An analysis of *Les Éléances des parisiennes* (the official monthly publication of the French fashion industry) from 1914 to 1918, for example, reveals that the industry pushed ostrich feathered fashions from April 1916 when it heralded "*Le Retour des plumes d'autruche*" (The return of ostrich feathers), noting that, "Ostrich feathers are coming back into fashion . . . Little tufts on the end of a long ostrich barb are straw-colored. We find borders of ostrich feathers on afternoon and evening gowns produced by the leading couturiers."³⁸

Taylor cautions that fashion plates and magazines are idealized images, but in this context, they do provide strong evidence that Parisian fashions and music hall costumes used ostrich feathers during

the war to signal frivolity and decadence to audiences starved of luxury and fantasy.³⁹ Barbier, for example, sketched a scene from the revue *Maousspoilpoil* (1916), *La Triomphe du Champagne* (The Triumph of Champagne), for *La Vie Parisienne* in 1916 that depicts the French music hall star Mlle Musidora (1889–1957) standing atop a champagne bottle wearing a large, foamy, straw-colored ostrich feathered headdress. Benda also drew Mlle Musidora as “Champagne” wearing the frothy ostrich-feathered headdress for a 1916 edition of *Fantasio*.⁴⁰ *La Vie parisienne* published an illustration by Barbier on November 11, 1916, entitled *Soldats de jadis* (Soldiers of Times Past), in which an early 1800s French Imperial Guard drum major and a contemporary young woman in fashionable dress, wearing hats trimmed with three large ostrich plumes, stand side by side. The caption reads, “*Le galant tambour-major de un [sic] concours de panaches*” (The gallant drum major in a contest of “panache”). “Panache” means “elegance” in French, but it also refers to a trimming that uses three large ostrich wing feathers.⁴¹ Panache plumes were traditionally large, luxurious, and expensive and had historical ties to the sixteenth-century tournament wear of European noble houses, where they adorned the fighters’ helmets.

An opinion piece in *Les Éléances Parisiennes* in February 1917, “Le Réveil de la Mode Parisienne” (The Rise of Paris Fashion), announced it was the duty of Paris’s *modistes*, or female hatmakers, to renounce the austerity of previous seasons to make fashion, a core component of the French national economy, more palatable to global markets.⁴² However, raw material and trimming shortages as well as the voluntary fabric restrictions agreed upon by the Syndicat de la Couture Parisienne in 1917 forced the Parisian fashion industry to produce the illusion of extravagance with very few materials and colors. For example, “woollen fabrics had risen to fearsome prices” and many colors were simply unavailable or very expensive in 1917 because “for two years no one had worn anything else, even when not in mourning, unless it was the very darkest blue or brown.”⁴³ A note in the February 1917 edition of *Les Modes de Paris*, also pointed to necessity being the mother of invention: “*Une des caractéristiques de la saison sera la variété des tissus employés*” (“One of this season’s features will be the use of a variety of fabrics”).⁴⁴ The publication also promoted ostrich feathers as a trimming on mules.

Throughout 1917, therefore, the Parisian fashion industry, including milliners like Maison Lewis, used ostrich feathers to signal an apparent break from austerity, even though fashions did not reach the enormous proportions of women’s Belle Époque picture hats with their vast ostrich plume sprays. For example, in March 1917 the *New York Herald* ran a catalogue for the American department store, Macy’s, that contained an advertisement for hats manufactured in America but which copied Maison Lewis’s latest styles. This included a small black and tan hat, which reflected the colors available for use in Paris, but which was trimmed with small ostrich plumes to lighten its mood. *The New York Times* also reported the trend, noting that the “revised popularity of ostrich feathers is a fashionable millinery trimming,” and that the plumes were not subject to American anti-plumage laws.⁴⁵

The influence of Paris on global fashion in 1917, even in the midst of a long and bloody war, remained strong enough to reach the Antipodes. *The West Australian*, for example, reported the trend of matching ostrich feather trims to the outfit as mandated in the April 1916 edition of *Les Éléances*, and the role of Parisian music hall fashions to signal light-heartedness.⁴⁶

In an exaggerated sort of way the theatres and reviews give us a foretaste of fashion, and, although one looks at first upon such displays as a huge joke, they help us to get accustomed to every freak of “La Mode,” and to invest it with some association of gaiety, which is welcome in these times. The only thing is that the 1917 fashions seem curiously unsuited to economy and work.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the *New Zealand Herald* reported: “The uncurled ostrich feather is being used as trimming again. It rears itself in soft, straight fluffiness on tall, toques of crinoline, or fine straw. It . . . is sometimes turned into a sort of pompon, for one very smart milliner seems to like pompons this year.”⁴⁸

Finding feathers

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the French fashion industry had ready, unrestricted access to cheap ostrich feathers that had been stockpiled and processed in Paris before the war. Prior to 1913, “Brokerage firms, feather wholesalers, and manufacturers in New York and London were stocking great quantities of feathers in anticipation of a rise in value.”⁴⁹ Wholesalers in France also imported almost 146,371 lbs of unprocessed ostrich feathers in 1912 (mainly from London merchants), yet exported 5,810 lbs of processed ostrich feather trimmings.⁵⁰ This speculation and hoarding, however, proved unwise and the “ostrich feather trade in Paris during World War I was extremely bad.”⁵¹ Indeed, the number of ostriches and global imports of raw plumes declined during the war. The New York sales branch of a leading South African ostrich feather wholesale house reported a significant drop in the number of ostriches raised in South Africa from 776,268 at the end of 1913 to 399,010 in 1917.⁵² London-based plume wholesalers were also so badly affected by the crash that ostrich farming became the butt of a joke in the English satire magazine, *Punch*, in 1917: “Imports of ostrich feathers to London have fallen from 33,000 lbs in 1915 to 182 lbs in 1917. Ostrich farmers, it appears, are on the verge of ruin as the result of their inability to obtain scissors and other suitable foodstuffs for the birds.”⁵³

In spite of the global crash, however, there were no restrictions on the use or supply of ostrich feathers in France.⁵⁴ Further, an analysis of ostrich-feather trimmings in photographs, news articles and illustrations in 1916 and 1917 indicates that existing plumes may have been repurposed. Four of the top ten fancy feather trimmings in the winter 1913 season were made from ostrich feathers.⁵⁵ Number ten resembles a trimming described in *Les Éléances* in April 1916, “little tufts on the end of a long ostrich barb.” Number two, a larger chrysanthemum, resembles the ostrich feather “pompon”

Figure 6.1 Quelques fantasies typiques de la mode d'hiver 1913 (*Some trimmings typical of winter 1913 fashions*). Lefèvre: 316 (1914). Credit: Robarts Library of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Toronto, Canada.

mentioned by the *New Zealand Herald* in 1917. This resurgence of pompons in fashion was a striking piece of French ingenuity and thrift in the face of austerity and rationing. Pompons are best made from offcuts produced when refining ostrich plumes, and thus inexpensive to produce.⁵⁶ Pompons also provided a material luxury of softness and signalled an almost incongruous levity in the face of war akin to the 'cultivated apathy' of Cocteau's *Parade* (Figure 6.1).

War work

Deslys's trademark feathered headpieces moved from the realm of fashionable hats to large, elaborate ostrich-plumed headdresses during the 1910s. Many of her headpieces were ordered from Maison Lewis, which prepared a "collection of astonishing hats" for her to wear in *Vera Violetta* (1911) in New York.⁵⁷ Deslys quickly became a symbol of the Allied Forces of France, Britain, and America and

starred in productions and fundraising efforts in the UK and the during the war.⁵⁸ Maison Lewis continued to make Deslys's feathered headpieces throughout the 1910s including for her hit London show, *Suzette*, which opened on March 29, 1917 at the Globe Theatre and ran until October 1917.⁵⁹

The USA entered the war on April 6, 1917, on the side of France and Britain against Germany, and Deslys celebrated by wearing an "Allied flags" costume in *Suzette* on April 20. *Variety* appreciated the sartorial significance of her cape with an ostrich feather border and headdress trimmed with ostrich plumes: "Great enthusiasm was manifested . . . when Gaby Deslys appeared in a costume representing the flags of the Allies, with a stupendous head-dress of red, white and blue, covered with stars."⁶⁰ *Punch* took Deslys's penchant for plumes and her support for the Allies one step further and published a cartoon on June 25, 1917 with the caption: "Mr. Punch's National Service for All. It is not implied that the above are at present out of War Work—but Mr. Punch is very anxious to see everybody's natural gifts employed to the best advantage."⁶¹ Among the famous figures lampooned, including the author H. G. Wells (1866–1946) and the silent film star Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977), *Punch* presented Deslys displaying her design sketch for "The Gaby," an anti-shrapnel helmet shaped like a feathered headdress with protruding metal "plumes." Deslys's sartorial messages of support for the Allies were thus well-known prior to *Laisse les Tomber!* Her headdresses in *Suzette* also gave audiences a "foretaste" of *Laisse les Tomber!* and although Deslys's extravagant plumes seemed "unsuited to economy and work," they perfectly suited her important work as an actress who supported the French economy and devoted herself to fundraising and morale boosting during the war.

An ostrich in the hand . . .

The conditions of Deslys's return to the French stage reflected *Variety*'s 1917 claim that big stars were playing Paris for small salaries.⁶² Léon Volterra (1881–1949) purchased the Casino de Paris in early 1917 as a rival to the Folies-Bergère and teamed with producer Jacques-Charles (dates unknown) to develop *Laisse les Tomber!* Deslys is believed to have owed Jacques-Charles a personal favor and therefore agreed to appear for a low salary and to pay for Pilcer's salary, her costumes, and the costumes of the showgirls in her scenes, many of whom had worked on *Suzette* in London.⁶³ Deslys also supervised the construction of her own costumes and those of her "girls." Despite this apparent generosity, however, Deslys was a shrewd businesswoman. In 1913, for example, she told the American press that:

I have adapted from that old saying "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." I have written over my financial window: "Two per cent in the hand is worth seventeen per cent in the bush." I play safe . . . A true French woman, I believe that no sum is too small to save.⁶⁴

A further measure of Deslys's business savvy is apparent in the three-year contract she negotiated in 1911 with American impresarios, the Shubert Brothers,⁶⁵ who guaranteed her \$4,000 per week,⁶⁶ plus traveling expenses for her whole party.⁶⁷ Deslys, like many of her contemporaries, would have been aware of audiences' expectations that she appeared on stage wearing the latest French fashions, including feathered hats, to tempt women theatregoers to her productions with displays of luxury and taste.⁶⁸ She also knew that these fashions were extremely expensive, with the American press reporting: "The costumes worn by Gaby Deslys at the Winter Garden in New York are said to have cost nearly \$15,000 . . . For some of her gowns, she paid \$1,000, while one . . . trimmed with Bird of Paradise feathers cost \$3,000."⁶⁹

It is, therefore, significant that Deslys injected her own cash, and stardom, into *Laisse les Tomber!* to boost the French economy and morale. An experienced actress, Deslys would have also been aware that massed feathers were visually spectacular on stage. Her involvement in the construction of her costumes suggests that she was aware of the cheap, ready supply of ostrich feathers in Paris in 1917. There is also strong evidence that Deslys re-wore and repurposed her feathers.

A photograph of Deslys in *A la Carte* (1913) by the London portrait studio Foulsham and Banfield, Ltd. shows her wearing a headdress trimmed with two large ostrich feather "barbs" that were fashionable in 1913 and in April 1916.⁷⁰ A portrait of Deslys taken in 1917 by the British photographer Emil Otto Hoppé (1878–1972), shows her wearing a headdress trimmed with eleven large ostrich feather barbs from *Suzette*.⁷¹ This suggests that some of her plumes were recycled, while others were sourced from trimmings manufactured and stockpiled in Paris in 1913. Another photograph of Deslys by Foulsham and Banfield, published in the August 1917 pictorial "Gaby Plumes Herself" (publication unknown), shows her wearing another headdress from *Suzette* from which protrudes two long, horizontal sections of ostrich feathers and two large vertical plumes. A photograph of Deslys in *Laisse les Tomber!* by the Frenchman Albert Harlingue (1879–1963) shows her wearing a headdress trimmed with large ostrich feathers protruding horizontally and vertically.⁷² This appears to be a version of the headdress from the pictorial "Gaby Plumes Herself" that has been re-trimmed with *têtes*, which were also popular trimmings in 1913.⁷³ Harlingue's photograph demonstrates how Deslys enhanced the headdress's visual impact by teaming it with a gown featuring a tailpiece of long, uncurled ostrich feathers and a frontal fringe of Barbary plumes.

In early 1918, Capiello produced a sketch of Deslys and Pilcer for *Fantasio* entitled *Pupazzi var Capiello* (Capiello's Italian Puppets), that demonstrated her thrift and her visual legacy of the Belle Époque (Figure 6.2).⁷⁴ Capiello's illustration depicts Deslys wearing a large, dark ostrich feathered headdress which resembles one worn in *Suzette* and shows her dancing like the women in Lautrec's *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine* and like the ostrich-plumed "cancan" girl that Capiello sketched for a 1899 cover of *Le Frou Frou*.⁷⁵ The dancing figure of Deslys in ostrich plumes evokes the joy and frivolity that were typical motifs expressed in Belle Époque poster art.

Figure 6.2 Leonetto Cappiello, “Pupazzi var Cappiello,” 1918. *Fantasio* (1918): 373. Courtesy the Author’s Collection.

The quick turnaround for Deslys and Pilcer between the end of *Suzette* and the opening of *Laisse les Tomber!* likely influenced the re-use of her headdresses. Nonetheless, this reuse, and the displays of massed ostrich plumes meant Deslys could create the opulence and luxury audiences associated with the *revues à grand spectacle* of the Parisian Belle Époque, while keeping to a tight budget amid strict rationing.

Conclusion and legacy

This chapter has discussed how Deslys’s use of ostrich feathers on stage during the First World War deliberately coincided with the social and economic rationale for the resurgence of the plumes in French costume and fashion following the 1914 crash of the global ostrich feather market. Deslys’s use of ostrich feathers *en masse* proved so visually arresting it was permanently adopted by the French music hall star Mistinguett (1875–1956) as her own trademark when she took over from Deslys in

Laisse les Tomber! in May 1918.⁷⁶ In addition, Gesmar, who had designed many of Deslys's costumes for the show, went on to design costumes for Mistinguett herself, after Deslys's death in 1920, ensuring the visual continuity of the aesthetic that led to the popular associations of showgirls with massed feathers that still persist around the world. Yet, this chapter's primary focus on the ostrich feather during the First World War as a complex sartorial symbol of thrift, ingenuity, and luxury consequently highlights the need for further analysis of the intersection of French revue costumes and fashion as social and economic responses to the war. Indeed, much has been written about the music of the French music halls during this era yet work on the costumes, which were an integral part of these spectacles, is often neglected.

International pressure on French fashion designers to produce collections that renounced the sober looks of 1914–15, combined with the unrestricted availability of cheap ostrich plumes in France during the war, influenced the trimming's resurgence in vogue in 1916. Deslys's ostensible lavishness was, therefore, typical of the innovation and thrift practised by the French fashion industry, which rejected the grimness of war by trimming the mantle of austerity with ostrich feathers. Parisians in 1917 articulated their dissatisfaction with the bleak realities of the war through strikes, mutinies, sophisticated indifference, and by mocking the Germans sartorially. It was in this environment that Deslys used her magnificent ostrich-feathered costumes to articulate her economic and moral support of France by evoking the visual landscape of the Belle Époque that Parisians yearned for. The ostrich plumes of *Laisse les Tomber!* celebrated French ingenuity, aesthetics, and extravagance, and sent the clear sartorial signal that France and her Allies would not bow to Germany.

Notes

- 1 Holmes and Tarr provide a broader discussion of the term Belle Époque in Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, *A Belle Époque? Women and Feminism in French Society and Culture 1890–1917* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 1–2.
- 2 Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.
- 3 Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway was the Runway: Theatre, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 132.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 7, 8.
- 5 Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes*, 78.
- 6 The passage of anti-plumage legislation designed to protect rare birds around 1913 in the UK and US also contributed to the decline of the global ostrich feather market in 1914 as women became more aware of environmental issues and their demand for ornamental plumes decreased. *Ibid.*, 24.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 E. G. Kendrew, "In Paris," *Variety* 49, no. 6, January 4, 1918, 3.

- 9 "Casino Paris, reopens," *Variety* 49, no. 3, December 14, 1917, 59.
- 10 The term "nude" is used in revue parlance to indicate that the showgirl is topless. The nude showgirl generally wears tights, dancing shoes, a G-string, jewelry, body makeup, a headdress, and/or wig of some kind.
- 11 Nationalism had been, "well established in [French] commercial popular culture since the 1870s when a singer named Amiati had won fame wrapping herself in the Tricolor and singing 'La Marseillaise' in Paris music halls." Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.
- 12 Quoted in James Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys: A Fatal Attraction* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986), 152.
- 13 Helen (Pearl) Adam, *Paris Sees It Through: A Diary, 1914–1919* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 107–32, provides a discussion of rationing in Paris and its social effects during the First World War. The French government could, "do little to keep down inflation, which soared over 400 percent between 1914 and 1919. Even if they had money, French families faced shortages in almost every category of consumable," Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2010), 47.
- 14 Helen (Pearl) Adam, *Paris Sees It Through*, 79.
- 15 Rod Kedward, *La Vie en blue: France and the French since 1900*, New Penguin History of France, 3 (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 150.
- 16 *Poilu* was the colloquial term for the French First World War infantryman. Although *poilus* were drawn from all strata of French society, the French media portrayed them as tough, scruffy, middle-aged smokers with facial hair. For example, the cover of the daily publication, *Excelsior*, 1706, July 12, 1915, featured the headline, "Le Poilu permissionnaire" ("The Soldier on Leave"), accompanied by a picture of a typically scruffy *poilu* walking next to a smartly dressed woman who is carrying a young child.
- 17 Kedward, *La Vie en blue*, 152.
- 18 Charles Rearick discusses the stereotype of the cheerful, singing *poilu* in *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories: The City and Its Mystique* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 5.
- 19 Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 197.
- 20 Albright, 189.
- 21 Helen Pearl Adam, *International Cartoons of the War* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1916), vi.
- 22 Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 141.
- 23 Gretchen was a common name for girls in Germany up to the 1950s and became a popular French slang term for a German woman. Benedikt Eppenberger, "Eine Armee Gretchen: Nazisploitation Made in Switzerland," in *Nazisploitation! The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges, and Kristen T. Vanderlugt, eds. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 172.
- 24 Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840–1914: A Social History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 73–104. The café concert was a form of popular entertainment during the Belle Époque. Cafés concerts were allowed to present one-act plays, operettas, and revues with a single set fixed to the floor. Many stage shows later evolved into, "rambling spectacles arranged in sumptuous tableaux, since the number of scenes (as opposed to the number of acts) was unrestricted." Stephen Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22. It is possible that *Parade's* single act may have been referencing the café concert format.

- 25 Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9.
- 26 Charles Castle, *The Folies Bergère* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), 27.
- 27 Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 19.
- 28 Rearick, *The French in Love and War*, 5.
- 29 Helen (Pearl) Adam, *Paris Sees It Through*, 39.
- 30 "The suspension of the subway and other means of urban transportation at the early hour of 10 p. m. . . . [in Paris] has played havoc with [attendances at] the amusement resorts," "In Paris," *Variety* 46, 9, April 27, 1917, 4.
- 31 Rearick, *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories*, 45.
- 32 Paul Duval, *The Folies Bergère*, Lucienne Hill, trans. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1955), 12.
- 33 Regina M. Sweeney, *Singing Our Way to Victory: French Cultural Politics and Music During the Great War* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 255.
- 34 While Rearick has argued that the true nostalgia for Belle Époque Paris and its glamorous nightclubs, restaurants, and music halls did not occur until the 1930s, his 1997 analysis of Parisian music hall and popular song does reveal that there was a strain of nostalgia operating in French society during the First World War for a prewar time that many remembered as "simpler." Rearick, *Paris Dreams, Paris Memories*, 3.
- 35 Valerie Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 420.
- 36 Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys*.
- 37 Steele, *The Berg Companion to Fashion*, 420.
- 38 "Nouvelles de la Mode," *Les Éléances parisiennes*, 1, April 7, 1917.
- 39 Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, 136.
- 40 It is also possible that Benda and Barbier were deliberately evoking the mood of Lautrec's poster *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Eglantine*. Lautrec's poster, with its frothy, bubbly whites and yellows was, in turn, inspired by the artist Pierre Bonnard's (1867–1947) poster, *France-Champagne* (1891).
- 41 E. Lefèvre, *Le Commerce et l'industrie de la plume pour parure* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, 1914), 254.
- 42 "Le Réveil de la mode Parisienne," *Les Éléances parisiennes*, 11, February 1917, 165.
- 43 Helen (Pearl) Adam, *Paris Sees It Through*, 127.
- 44 "La Mode et les modes," *Les Modes de Paris*, 170, February 1917, 12.
- 45 "As to ostrich feathers," *New York Times*, October 21, 1917.
- 46 "The modern note [on the tea frock] is represented by a triple row of curled ostrich feathers at the hem . . . White ostrich feathers are very plentiful just now, and if they are dyed to match the costumes successfully this decoration is sure of a prosperous career. . . . Ostrich feathers are to be in favour again in millinery, as they are in dress. I think that there is not a more becoming hat decoration," "Fashion notes by a Paris expert," *The West Australian*, May 8, 1917.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 "Paris fashions," *New Zealand Herald* 54, 169, October 13, 1917, 4.
- 49 Abrevaya Stein, *Plumes*, 24.

- 50 Lefèvre, *Le Commerce et l'industrie*, 339.
- 51 Ibid., 79.
- 52 "Fewer South African ostriches," *New York Times*, April 22, 1917.
- 53 "Charivaria," *Punch, or the London Charivari* 153, November 28, 1917.
- 54 R. Pommereuil, *La Guerre Économique, 1914–1917: Legislation et réglementation douanières* (Paris: Poitiers Librairie administrative, 1917), 364.
- 55 Lefèvre, *Le Commerce et l'industrie*, 315, 316.
- 56 Ibid., 255.
- 57 Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys*, 54–5.
- 58 Deslys also had the gowns for all of her productions made in Paris during the war, including *The Rajah's Ruby* (1914) at the Palace in London and *Stop! Look! Listen!* (1915) at the Globe Theatre in New York.
- 59 *Suzette* ran for 256 shows, Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys*, 147.
- 60 "Gaby in flags: London, April 2," *Variety* 46, 9, April 4, 1917, 27.
- 61 "Mr. Punch's National Service for all," *Punch, or the London Charivari* 152, June 20, 1917, 27.
- 62 There was a "drought of acts in Paris" in 1917 and big stars were unable to demand their usual high salaries and consequently could expect engagements lasting only four to six weeks in Paris. "In Paris," *Variety* 46, 9, April 4, 1917, 27.
- 63 Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys*, 146.
- 64 Gaby Deslys, "A lesson in thrift by the witty French artiste who explains the folly of giving away anything you may need and the wisdom of holding on to everything you have," *Los Angeles Examiner*, April 6, 1913.
- 65 Lee Shubert (1871–1953) and Jacob J. Shubert (1879–1963) were two of New York's most influential theater owners, producers and directors in the early twentieth century.
- 66 This amounted to the equivalent of more than \$100,000 per week in 2015.
- 67 Gardiner, *Gaby Deslys*, 53.
- 68 Many actresses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries spent thousands of dollars each year on clothing and jewelry, and publicized that knowledge, to cement their positions within the profession, impress their fans and, "to prevent undesirable performers from gaining access to the stage," Schweitzer, *When Broadway was the Runway*, 100.
- 69 "Stage Clothes," *The Theatre* 20, 199, December 1914, 296.
- 70 Foulsham & Banfield, *Gaby Deslys (Marie-Elise Gabrielle Caire)*, published by Rotary Photographic Co. Ltd., bromide postcard print, early 1910s, NPG Ax160398, © National Portrait Gallery, London, at: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait-list.php?search=sp&sText=Ax160398&firstRun=true> (accessed May 17, 2019).
- 71 "Passed by the Censor," *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1917.
- 72 *Gaby Deslys (1881–1920), chanteuse et meneuse de revues française, dans la revue "Laissez-les tomber"*, Casino de Paris, 1917. © Albert Harlingue / Roger-Viollet, at: <http://www.parisenimages.fr/fr/galerie-collections/1239-15-gaby-deslys-1881-1920-chanteuse-meneuse-revues-francaise-revue-laissez-tomber-casino-paris-1917> (accessed March 5, 2015).

73 Lefèvre, *Le Commerce et L'Industrie*, 316.

74 The title of Capiello's cartoon echoes Cocteau's description of Deslys as a "great ventriloquist's doll."

75 A cartoon published in April 1917 by the Irish artist Norman Morrow (1879–1917), "Gaby still wears those hats" in the London publication, *The Bystander*, includes a sketch of Pilcer performing "The Cold Water Rag." The cartoon also shows Deslys in various feathered headdresses, including one that resembles the headdress in Capiello's cartoon. According to the official programme, Pilcer also performed "The Cold Water Rag" in *Laisse les Tomber!*

76 Mistinguett wore a large ostrich feathered headdress designed by the fashion and costume designer Romain de Tiroff (1892–1990), better known as Erté, in the Orientalist fantasy *Gobette of Paris* (1917) that played at the Théâtre Fémina in Paris around the same time as *Laisse les Tomber!* Mistinguett's trademarks at that time, however, were her long legs and experience as an established Parisian performer, not expansive, ostrich-plumed headdresses.

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