

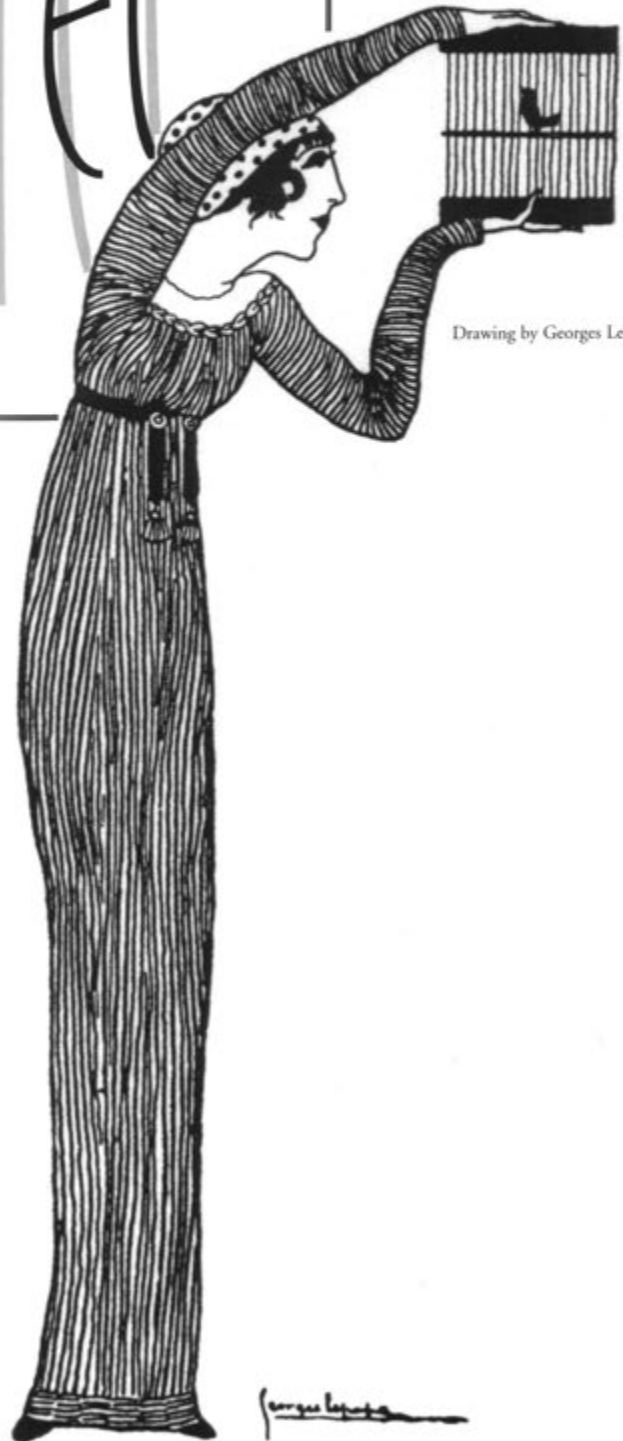
# Paul Poiret

By Curse and Kambriel

Master of Orientalism

In the Belle Époque

Paul Poiret, considered in the early 1900's to be the first truly modern fashion designer, created revolutionary designs which completely abandoned the pale-hued, highly tailored fashions so heavily demanded in previous years. Inspired by the art of ancient Greece, the opulence of the Orient, Fauvist paintings, and the theatrics of the Ballet Russes, Poiret excelled in his experimentations in exoticism.



Drawing by Georges Lepape

**Poiret** studied under Jacques Doucet, a grand fin de siècle designer for the **House of Worth**, from whom he first learned the technique of draping designs directly on the body--a technique he continued to use his entire life. In 1899, Paul Poiret designed a coat for stage vamp Rejane and created an instant sensation. This was merely a first taste of the innovative upheaval Poiret would instigate on the otherwise stagnant world of fashion.

In 1908, Poiret broke his partnership with Doucet, unveiling his own "Directoire" line in which skirts fell straight from the waist to within mere centimeters of the ground. The waists of these skirts were raised from the natural waistline to just below the bust as an encouragement for women to rid themselves of their long-favoured corsets. Thus, Poiret aimed to shift the focus of the female form away from a tightly-cinched waistline towards an elongated, extremely sleek silhouette. An infamous example of this stretched silhouette would be his "hobble skirt." These skirts were so confining from the knees down to the ankles that on occasion, a woman's legs would have to be taped together to prevent ripping the skirt while walking about. This drastic measure led to public outrage and even a Papal condemnation. As a gesture to placate these protests, slit skirts, buttoned hems and pleated details were added to ease mobility. Poiret happily admitted to having "freed the breast, but shackled the legs."

Poiret excelled not so much in intricacy of design, which was kept fairly simple, but in the daring, extravagant use of unusual fabrics and colours. He drew inspiration from the bright and unrestrained colours often found in paintings of the Fauves, and embellished lush velvets, silks and brocades with opulent trimmings. Poiret was quoted as saying, "I like a plain gown, cut from light and supple fabric, which falls from the shoulders in long, straight folds, like thick liquid, just touching the outline of the figure and throwing shadow and light over the moving-form."

Poiret's creations were often modeled by his wife Denise Boulet. When bedecked in one of her husband's Orientalist-inspired designs for his "A Thousand and One Nights" party, she caused a sensation. Afterwards, with the premiere of the **Ballet Russes** in Paris, Poiret's clients were transformed into Turkish harem girls with turbans and flowing pantaloons, which began his scandalous start to the 1910/1911 season.



Bank Evening Coat, April 1911 (photo: Edward Steichen (c))



Dress With Train, 1919 Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris



Drawing by Georges Lepape



From an invoice used by  
Poiret's couture house.  
Georges Lepape drawing taken  
from the album *Les Choses*

In the following years, Poiret experienced a great amount of expansion as he introduced the first perfume marketed by a couturier (named "Rosine" after his eldest daughter). He also collaborated with the likes of **Erté** in designing customized fabrics, and formed a Paris-based atelier (named "Ecole Martine" after his second daughter) for the teaching of decorative arts.

The arrival of the World War I disrupted all production, and after the war was over, Poiret found that the modern woman had grown favourably accustomed to her newly-found, active life. This did not coincide with his aesthetic visions of "reclining Madonnas"--his feminine ideal. With support diminished, he made the difficult decision to sell his collection of beloved paintings, and he closed his shop's doors in 1926.

Bankrupt, he turned his creative focus to the stage and to writing, in addition to finding a solace in his love for painting. Driven to the point of nearly having to beg for food, Poiret barely survived the Occupation in Paris. In 1947, **Jean Cocteau** organized a retrospective of Poiret's work. Tragically, Paul Poiret died just a few days prior to its opening, never getting the chance to savour a triumphant return.

Having taken the constrained status quo of yesteryear into a completely new direction, Poiret's legacy may continue to live on wherever artfully flowing, tempestuously unrestricted and exotic lines are dreamt-of by modern day artist-designers.

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Label by Georges Lepape