

Draped in History: Understanding the Nexus of Warfare and Women’s Fashion Evolution

Ruoxian Cheng*

Communication University of China Nanjing, Nanjing 211172, Jiangsu Province, China

*Corresponding author: Ruoxian Cheng, cruoxian@163.com

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The war served as a catalyst for artists to introspect on society and human nature, prompting a reevaluation of women’s status. Shifts in perceptions of women’s gender roles subsequently manifested in alterations to their clothing styles. The enduring influence of modern clothing on women’s self-identity underscores the profound and lasting impact of these changes. The intricate connection between war and the evolution of women’s fashion goes beyond mere sartorial transformations, as it serves as a mirror reflecting broader societal shifts within the realm of fashion.

Keywords: War; Women’s fashion; Feminism

Online publication: April 29, 2024

1. Introduction

In 2019, the Bard Graduate Center in New York curated an exhibition titled “French Fashion, Women, and World War I,” offering a fresh perspective on the intricate interplay between French fashion, wartime exigencies, and gender politics during the First World War ^[1]. This pivotal period in human history ushered in profound transformations, particularly in the realm of women’s attire. As women assumed active roles in supporting the war effort, their clothing underwent a paradigm shift towards modernity. The traditional constraints of women’s fashion often tailored to appease the male gaze, began to unravel, even amidst the backdrop of a culture accustomed to multiple wardrobe changes daily. Simultaneously, women from privileged backgrounds embraced a simplification of their wardrobes, redirecting aesthetic norms from opulence towards functionality and practicality. Beyond merely addressing women’s quest for increased autonomy, equality, and independence through fashion, the discourse surrounding women’s attire serves as a poignant symbol of broader societal aspirations, encapsulating the collective struggle, perseverance, and advancement of humanity as a whole.

2. A subtle transformation silently unfolded within the realm of fashion

The advent of the second industrial revolution mechanized production processes, ushering in a shift from traditional to modern attire. While this mechanization streamlined manufacturing, it also seemed to strip

products of their intrinsic essence. Against this backdrop, a significant artistic movement emerged — Art Nouveau, capitalizing on the advancements in transportation. Rapidly traversing Europe and extending its influence to the Americas, Art Nouveau drew inspiration from the grace of Rococo and the intricacy of Gothic art. Characterized by soft curves and intricate expressions, this movement sparked a collective fascination with splendid and seamless lines.

Within the domain of women’s fashion, Art Nouveau ushered in the era of the “S-shaped” silhouette, with women embracing tight-fitting bras that accentuated the abdomen, breasts, and buttocks. Renowned illustrator Charles Dana Gibson played a pivotal role by associating the allure of curvaceous figures with the pioneering spirit of women. His characters, modeled after socially active figures like his speaker wife Irene and her friends, gave rise to a novel female archetype, known as the Gibson Girls. These illustrated women scaled mountains, engaged in intellectual pursuits, played musical instruments, and actively participated in political endeavors.

In the quest for a deeper sense of self-expression, real-world women began to emulate the appearance of the Gibson Girls by adorning with nipped waists, rounded hips, and natural, voluminous hairstyles, coupled with gentle and pleasant expressions. During the Belle Époque period, the focal point of fashion still gravitated towards accentuating the waist, breasts, and hips to underscore the feminine form. As this era unfolded, the world of clothing found itself on the cusp of a revolution, eagerly awaiting the winds of change.

3. War and women’s status

The French middle-class revolution of 1789 marked the overthrow of the monarchy and the dissemination of progressive ideals of freedom and democracy across Europe. The anticipation was that this upheaval might usher in an improvement in the age-old status of women. However, the Declaration of Human Rights fell short of addressing women’s rights explicitly. The petition to Congress deliberately omitted any mention of women’s rights. It wasn’t until three years later, with Obilund Guri publishing the world’s first Declaration of Women’s Rights, that he met his demise on the guillotine, and the cause of women’s liberation seemed to be fading away.

As society transitioned to industrialization, the physical disparity between men and women in mechanical production diminished. Factories, particularly in the textile industry, required larger labor forces, and female labor, being more cost-effective, became the linchpin. Employers, recognizing the economic advantage, were more inclined to hire women, transforming them into pivotal figures in the textile sector. However, despite these shifts, gender discrimination persisted in the labor market, and women were denied voting rights in parliamentary elections.

In response to these challenges, active suffragettes united to form the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. The movement, akin to a glacier, moved slowly but resolutely forward, fueled by the persistence of those advocating for women’s rights. Despite the gradual pace, the movement, like the unstoppable force of nature, pressed on.

Due to the erratic development of capitalism and the conflicts arising from the juxtaposition of old and new colonialism, persistent tensions between nations culminated in the outbreak of the First World War, bringing an end to the Belle Époque or beautiful era of the past. In response, the United Kingdom conscripted almost all unmarried men aged 18–41, later extending the age limit to 51, into the military. This significant societal shift left a void that women courageously filled, stepping into roles within industries traditionally dominated by men, all while shouldering the responsibilities of raising children and caring for the elderly.

The invaluable contributions of women during this tumultuous period did not go unnoticed. Their capabilities were acknowledged, and on an international scale, women actively engaged in the pursuit of peace

and freedom. The formation of the Alliance in 1915 underscored the collective commitment to these ideals. It becomes evident that without the active participation of women, sustainable peace and security would be elusive. Society, therefore, can no longer afford to overlook the imperative of recognizing and safeguarding the equal rights women ardently advocate for.

In 1918, a transformative moment occurred for British women as those over the age of 30 gained the right to vote, marking a significant milestone in their quest for equality. This newfound political agency translated into a more liberated social life, leading to an overall improvement in women's status. Concurrently, there was a noticeable shift in women's fashion, with clothing becoming increasingly open and shedding its previous limitations to work and family attire.

However, the post-World War I period was marked by economic upheaval. The collapse of the Versailles-Washington international order and the persistent imbalance in the capitalist world set the stage for the more devastating World War II. During this conflict, American women found unprecedented opportunities in the workforce, forming a vital force supporting society. Engaging in work not only provided them with confidence and a sense of accomplishment but also ignited a desire for continued progress beyond domestic roles.

Despite their crucial contributions during the war, societal expectations regarding women's roles did not undergo a lasting transformation. With the conclusion of World War II, there was a push for women to return to familial responsibilities, creating more job opportunities for returning soldiers. Unfortunately, the persisting issue of unequal pay for equal work remained prevalent. Due to the prevalence of post-war hedonism, some women were content with the traditional gender roles of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, unwilling to enter the workforce and bear the immense pressures of work and life ^[2]. In fact, the post-marriage employment rate of American women in the 1950s was even lower than that of the 1920s, standing at just 11%. Whether women chose independence or were compelled to assume traditional housewife roles, they found solace in dedicating more time to personal grooming and self-presentation. Society's collective yearning for a tranquil and prosperous era became intricately tied to the pursuit of beauty, fostering a trend towards refinement and heightened femininity. Despite these shifts, the societal perception of women's roles remained tethered to traditional norms, highlighting the complexity of the ongoing struggle for gender equality ^[3].

4. The transformative influence of World Wars on women's fashion

The First World War had impacted women's fashion. On one hand, with men deployed to the battlefield, women's attire lacked admirers. On the other hand, the war compelled women on the home front to take on various roles across different sectors of society ^[4]. The scarcity of materials during the war necessitated a shift towards practicality and functionality in clothing. The once elaborate leg-of-mutton sleeves and intricate embellishments became impractical burdens. To accommodate the changing landscape, clothing designs embraced simplicity, such as skirts being shortened to above the ankle, unnecessary adornments being discarded, and tailoring adopting a crisp and clean aesthetic. Even the solemn Victorian mourning dress, laden with heavy symbolism, yielded to a more economical expression through the adoption of black armbands.

The scarcity of male labor created a surge in the number of independent women post-war. These women, having served their countries in support roles, contributed significantly to societal shifts. The Victorian values that once confined women to stereotypical roles began to fade away, replaced by a new era of empowered, capable women. The aftermath of the war also saw a change in women's attitudes towards clothing. The ornate jewelry and garments that once accentuated feminine characteristics fell out of favor. Women, having experienced the empowerment of functional workwear, were no longer willing to conform to outdated societal

expectations. The heavy toll of the war led to a departure from traditional feminine attire, and women began adopting a more masculine style. The societal impact extended beyond fashion, as the loss of an entire generation of young men altered the dynamics between the genders. The idealized notion of women relying on men and fulfilling roles as dutiful wives and mothers shattered. In its place emerged a desire for independence and enjoyment, challenging conventional morality. The transformation culminated in the emergence of a new archetype known as the flappers. The tube-like appearance of flat chests, loose waists, and tight hips concealed the natural curves of women's bodies, symbolized by exposed arms reminiscent of ancient Greece, short transparent skirts hinting at nudity, low necklines adorned with trembling tassels, and the provocative long cigarette rod, all coalescing to form the image of a fashionable, liberated woman, unapologetically embracing the spirit of the Charleston dance ^[5].

In addition to the shifts in women's societal roles and activities, another often overlooked factor contributing to the rising hemlines of women's skirts is hygiene. From the early 19th century until around 1905, floor-length skirts were in vogue. However, beyond the aesthetic appeal, these skirts posed a practical concern, as they collected not just admiration but also a plethora of bacteria from the city streets. "From a hygienic standpoint, we vehemently oppose the entry of long skirts stained with feces, urine, and various disease-causing microorganisms into private homes," remarked doctors of the time. In 1900, medical professionals recommended that women wear shorter skirts when walking, as the association between long skirts and disease-laden garments instilled fear in the public consciousness. This emphasis on hygiene not only influenced fashion but also reflected broader concerns about public health and sanitation during the period ^[6].

The post-World War I artistic movements significantly influenced clothing styles. In the aftermath of the war, with German cities in ruins and a pressing need for architectural talents to rebuild, Walter Gropius, a designer from Weimar, Germany, presented his vision to the Weimar government and established the Bauhaus Design School. The college advocated for a simple and functional geometric modeling style that permeated various design fields.

Simultaneously, across the Rhine in France, the Art Deco movement emerged during the same period. Fueled by the post-war era and influenced by Egyptian archaeological discoveries as well as Chinese and Japanese art styles, Art Deco catered more to the wealthy class and embraced a public-oriented approach. Despite differing design concepts between Art Deco and Bauhaus, their aesthetic characteristics found expression in clothing. The evolution of women's skirts emphasized simple, straight lines, advocating for sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusivity. Vertical lines with numerous jagged, stepped, and radially symmetrical mechanical patterns on fabrics, reflect a refined sense of rhythm. This created a fresh feminine image, the opulent oriental style popularized by Paul Poiret before the war faded into obscurity in this new era of design innovation ^[7].

The aftermath of World War I, coupled with the devastating Spanish Flu pandemic, left survivors yearning for joy and respite. This collective desire for a peaceful and happy existence coincided with the rapid advancements in science and technology, painting a hopeful picture of the future and propelling society into the vibrant era known as the Roaring '20s.

In Victor Margueritte's seminal 1922 novel "La Garconne," the protagonist defies societal norms with short hair, men's attire, and a liberated attitude towards sexuality, embodying an independence that shatters moral conventions ^[8]. Coco Chanel, a visionary designer, amplified this trend with her bold creations. Drawing inspiration from masculine aesthetics, she ingeniously adapted men's garments, cinching them with belts for a feminine silhouette. Chanel challenged traditional notions of femininity, questioning why women should adhere to floral scents, thus creating the revolutionary Chanel No. 5 perfume with its distinct artificial fragrance. Similarly,

she questioned the need for authentic jewelry to signify status, pioneering the use of lightweight faux pearls as a chic alternative. Inspired by the somber black mourning attire of the Victorian era, Chanel revolutionized women's fashion with the iconic little black dress, liberating women from ostentatious displays of wealth and allowing them to exude sophistication in any social setting. Chanel's audacious defiance of societal norms reflected the zeitgeist of the era, embracing the newfound spirit of liberation and self-expression ^[9].

The First World War did not immediately usher in liberation for fashion or women on the surface. When the armistice was signed, the rights that women had acquired during the war were, in fact, rescinded. Notably, French women did not gain the right to vote until 1945. However, the war served as a catalyst for the emergence of new artistic styles and prompted societal reflection on gender roles. Amidst various forms of uneasiness, concern, critical contemplation, and experimental endeavors, a transformation occurred that cultivated women's sense of independence from within. The war, despite its initial setbacks in terms of rights, indirectly contributed to a shift in mindset, fostering a growing awareness of women's autonomy and individuality. This internal evolution would eventually lay the groundwork for the advancements in women's rights and the changing landscape of fashion in the subsequent years. The sensual and prosperous days of the Lost Generation came to an abrupt end on Black Thursday in 1929. With the intensification of class conflicts and the credit crisis, millions of people could only avoid death by "living like animals", the economy collapsed, and fascism rose. The government took advantage of the situation as the Great Depression left ordinary people unemployed. The conservative concept required women to dress in a feminine way, that was skirts were once again lengthened to the ankles, and the fabrics were close-fitting and soft to show an elegant and charming figure.

The fashion landscape on the eve of World War II was characterized by wide-shouldered narrow skirts and flat heels, marking a distinctive style shift in the late 1930s. However, the outbreak of World War II exerted a profound impact on the fashion industry, particularly in Paris, the epicenter of haute couture.

As the German army occupied Paris, a wave of closures swept through haute couture houses. The Nazis, under the misguided belief that Berlin or Vienna should be the true homes of haute couture, posed a significant challenge to the industry. To salvage what remained, the president of the Paris Haute Couture Federation engaged in rigorous lobbying efforts. Consequently, some brand stores managed to persist amidst the occupation.

Between 1940 and the end of 1944, a critical period during which the German army held Paris, the fashion community faced a dichotomy. While some designers chose to depart the city, others opted to stay, defiantly continuing their design pursuits. This period of upheaval created a unique environment where French fashion, distinct from styles in other countries, thrived in isolation due to the severed connections between France and Britain. As a result, these exclusive and unparalleled designs were only accessible within the confines of France during this tumultuous period.

During World War II, British wartime fashion underwent a significant transformation, primarily shaped by rationing measures and the necessity for practicality in clothing choices. The prevailing concept of "patriotic frugality" influenced the public's approach to fashion, emphasizing utility over extravagance. To conserve fabrics and labor, and reduce manufacturing costs, the United Kingdom implemented wartime clothing regulations ^[10].

These regulations included replacing double-breasted suits with single-breasted alternatives and limiting the size of clothing lapels. The British Ministry of Information actively promoted "make-do and mend" initiatives, encouraging individuals to repair and repurpose their existing garments ^[11]. The rationing system heightened awareness among the public about the quality, comfort, and durability of clothing fabrics. Cotton and wool became popular choices, reflecting the practical needs of the time. Military-style attire, characterized by

wide shoulders and short skirts, gained widespread acceptance. Resourcefulness was a key theme, with women ingeniously repurposing their husbands' idle military suits into waist-cinching women's styles. Additionally, some even transformed velvet bed curtains into long dresses to block out light. Despite the legal restrictions in Britain at the time, many women engaged in these creative adaptations. The movement towards practical fashion was further championed by British women and the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers. Together, they played a pivotal role in popularizing the fashionization of practical clothing, contributing to the success of this fashionable patriotism movement during a challenging period in British history.

Following the conclusion of World War II in 1945, Christian Dior introduced his post-war style in 1947, which fashion editor Carmel Snow aptly named the "New Look." Departing from the military-inspired women's clothing of the wartime era, this new style discarded shoulder pads, embraced rounded shoulders, accentuated pinched waists, and featured lengthened skirts.

While being a new style, it draws inspiration from the intricate structure of women's attire during the Victorian era, presented in a fusion of classical elements with modern embellishments ^[12]. This approach encapsulates the refined dressing of 19th-century upper-class women, blending new design and technology to convey a sense of nobility ^[13]. This portrayal captures the soft contours of the female form, with the graceful hourglass silhouette reminiscent of the serene and opulent golden years. Notably, a dress from the Corolla series utilizes 22.8 or even 73 meters of fabric, epitomizing the utmost extravagance in materials that align with postwar expectations of luxury ^[14]. This aesthetic resonated deeply with people's psychological expectations in the aftermath of the war. Women, having endured the hardships of wartime, sought a return to a life marked by peace and prosperity. The post-war era saw the emergence of a desire among new capitalists and the middle class to showcase their affluence. As a result, delicacy and elegance became the defining features of women's fashion during this period. However, differing perspectives existed within this trend. The war prompted a significant shift for women from the service industry to roles in manufacturing, national defense, and other positions traditionally dominated by men. Many of these women contributed substantially to their country and gained recognition for their own worth.

Nevertheless, as the post-war period unfolded, a considerable number of women found themselves unemployed. Public sentiment advocated for a return to traditional gender roles for these women, despite their earlier contributions. The luxurious clothing of the 1950s, characterized by intricate fabric tailoring and elegance, faced criticism from feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir. According to this perspective, the time-consuming and labor-intensive pursuit of beauty represented nothing more than an elegant constraint on women's freedom and autonomy.

5. Conclusion

Fashion, as an ever-evolving art form, bears the indelible imprint of historical events. The seismic impact of the two world wars reverberates through the annals of women's fashion, reshaping their sartorial choices and leaving a lasting legacy that echoes in contemporary designs. Icons like Chanel have etched an enduring image of independent and confident femininity, while Burberry seamlessly weaves the resilient and audacious wartime British style into the fabric of modern fashion.

Delving into history through reflective exploration allows us to preserve and transmit the rich fashion heritage of the war periods to the present day. Themes such as pragmatism, female empowerment, and military uniform elements serve as poignant tributes to history, celebrating the strength and resilience of women. Fashion, as a vital cultural carrier, mirrors societal transformations and actively contributes to the ongoing

pursuit of equality.

In essence, fashion transcends mere aesthetics, as it becomes a dynamic reflection of social metamorphoses and a driving force propelling the narrative of equality forward, which is an indispensable cultural medium intricately interwoven with the fabric of our collective history^[15].

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Li M, 2019, From Clothing to Identity and Power: Feminism Discussion in Fashion Design. *Art and Design*, 1(12): 156–159.
- [2] Qin QY, 2019, The Construction of Female Subjectivity in American Wartime Propaganda during World War I: An Analysis based on Beauvoir’s Existentialist Feminism. *Radio & TV Journal*, 2019(11): 192–193.
- [3] Li DQ, 2019, *A History of Costume in the West (Second Edition)*. Higher Education Press, 309.
- [4] Wang B, 2014, *The Impact of Feminist Development Since the Twentieth Century on the Evolution of French Women’s Clothing*, thesis, Capital Normal University.
- [5] Wen F, 2008, The First World War and the Development of Clothing. *Science and Technology Innovation Herald*, 2008(11): 187.
- [6] Alison MD, 2019, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present (Li C, translated)*. Chongqing University Press, 43.
- [7] Xie L, 2014, *Research on Modern Womenswear Design under the Influence of Feminism*, thesis, Dalian Polytechnic University.
- [8] Li YT, 2011, Analyses the Change Meaning of the Dress Masculine in the First World War. *Shandong Textile Economy*, 2011(174): 55–56.
- [9] Jin JQ, Gao CN, 2021, Feminist Analysis of Chanel Brand Clothing. *Chemical Fiber & Textile Technology*, 2021(6): 55–56.
- [10] Brown S, 2012, *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*. DK Publishing, Inc, Smithsonian Institution, 304.
- [11] Marnie F, 2016, *Fashion: The Whole Story (Chen L, translated)*. China Citic Press, 238.
- [12] Luo YH, 2022, The Design Characteristics and Aesthetic Value of Women’s Clothing in the 1950s. *West Leather*, 2022(12): 62–64.
- [13] Ge YY, Zhang J, 2018, Research on Dior’s “New Look” from a Feminist Perspective. *Journal of Brand Research*, 2018(02): 131–133.
- [14] Chen YL, 2018, An Analysis of the Characteristics of Dior’s “New Look” and Its Impact on the Post-World War II French Fashion Style. *West Leather*, 2018(03): 100.
- [15] Seeling S, 2013, *Fashion: 150 Years Couturiers, Designers, Labels*. Langenscheidt Publishing Group, Berlin.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.