ELSA SCHIAPARELLI AND JEAN COCTEAU: CLOTHING THE LIBERATED FEMALE

Becca Gross

ARHI 4570

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Elsa Schiaparelli, famed Parisian couturier active in the interwar period, has recently come to be labeled as a Surrealist artist. Scholars have noted her intense involvement with Surrealists like Salvador Dali, a partnership that resulted in bold avant-garde designs which often become the focal point of any discussion relating to Schiaparelli’s sartorial oeuvre. Schiaparelli undoubtedly aligned herself with the art world, claiming in her autobiography that she never produced mere fashion, only art.¹ More recently, art historian Jennifer Sweeney-Risko has even claimed that Schiaparelli should be considered the sole artistic figure responsible for Surrealism’s success as a socio-political movement.² Past scholarship has effectively argued that Schiaparelli utilized Surrealist methodology in a way that served to actually subvert its misogynistic tendencies, thereby reconciling her association with a group of artists who, “incorporated into their theories an idealization of ‘woman’ that was as narrow and restrictive as the Victorian ideal of femininity.”³ Schiaparelli was not the only female Surrealist to use Surreal imagery in ways that actually liberated the feminine. These artist include Meret Oppenheim, Leonor Fini and Eileen Agar, among others.⁴ Schiaparelli has been effectively written into the history of the avant-garde, recently becoming exalted as a proto-feminist Surrealist, and one of the few women to successfully navigate the heavily masculinized style in a way that actually empowered women.

¹ Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life*, 46.
² Sweeney-Risko, *Surrealist Politics*, 313. Sweeney-Risko argues that Jacques Ranciere’s conclusion pertaining to the failure of Surrealism is incorrect once Schiaparelli is considered. If the aim of Surrealism was to successfully infiltrate the public’s consciousness, thereby merging art and life, then Schiaparelli is arguably the only one of the group who was able to reach a large enough audience for this to be true. Sweeney-Risko asserts that Schiaparelli’s designs truly did have an impact on the way women dressed and portrayed themselves in the public sphere, therein successfully affecting the level of socio-political change that the Surrealist movement sought.
⁴ Many scholars have written on the complicated relationship between female artists and the male Surrealist aesthetic, including Whitney Chadwick in *Woman Artists and the Surrealist Movement* and Ghislaine Wood in *The Surreal Body: Fetish and Fashion*. The basic claim of these authors is that these female artists were able to use Surrealist tropes in their art as a means to producing images of a liberated and empowered feminine body, often drawing on themes of nature, motherhood, and the sacred feminine.
However, scholars have thus far failed to deeply explore Schiaparelli’s collaborations with Jean Cocteau, a figure associated not with the Surrealist avant-garde, but rather the modern aesthetic of Purism. Illuminating Schiaparelli’s dealings with Cocteau enables us to examine her oeuvre in a different context altogether. If we no longer consider her an avant-garde Surrealist artist, then where does she fit within a larger art historical context? This paper will argue that Schiaparelli should still be considered an artist, but one who was not a member of any single artistic movement. Rather, she should be considered a singular figure who used a combination of artistic styles in order to communicate her own unique aesthetic vision. As previous scholars have indicated, this vision heavily aligned with the ideals of the women’s liberation movement. This paper will attempt to expand upon said claims by demonstrating how Schiaparelli utilized aesthetics other than Surrealism in her proto-feminist creations. I will explore the ways in which her collaborations with Cocteau served to advance the status of women in the modern world while still operating within his Purist aesthetic. In my investigation, I will address two aspects of Schiaparelli’s oeuvre which scholars have identified in her Surrealist designs: the fetishization of the female form and theatricality. I will then examine these two characteristics as they relate to some of Schiaparelli’s Cocteau-inspired designs, in an effort to demonstrate that her style should not be tied exclusively to Surrealism, but rather regarded in its own context.

Schiaparelli was a divorcee, single mother, and business owner at a time when “respectable” women were still discouraged from walking in public unless accompanied by a male. In her autobiography, Schiaparelli describes the stigma many people had toward single women, even in liberal 1920s Paris, once declaring, “If ever I wished to be a man it was then. The possibility of going out alone at any time, anywhere, has always excited my envy. To wander aimlessly
through the night, to sit in cafés and do nothing, are privileges that seem to be unimportant, but in reality they make the taste of living so much more pungent and complete.”

It is clear that Schiaparelli was no stranger to the hardships endured by those women seeking a more liberated lifestyle during this time period. Although she was clearly an ardent supporter of female liberation, Schiaparelli did sometimes portray a fetishized female form (a Surrealist trope), often creating tight-fitting garments that accentuated a woman’s body. However, Sabina Stent argues that Schiaparelli does this in a way that actually subverts traditional modes of female objectification. Although the garments are form fitting, they are not revealing in the traditional sense, usually covering the wearer completely from neck to ankle. A prime example of this is Skeleton Dress (Figure 3), which will shortly be discussed in great detail. This type of design allowed women to simultaneously claim their sexuality, embrace their femininity, and still remain resistant to the male gaze. The practice of “moving beyond” the male Surrealist aesthetic is explicated by Emma West, who succinctly typifies the relationship which existed between Schiaparelli and the male Surrealists: “What makes Schiaparelli’s use of sexual imagery different than that of her male counterparts, though, is the issue of agency: created by a woman, chosen and worn by a woman… [the clothing] becomes a defiant, knowing, gesture of resistance.”

The concept of a female artist fetishizing the female form is an important aspect of Schiaparelli’s artistic mode. It can clearly be found in her Surrealist pieces, and as I will argue shortly, is also present in her Cocteau inspired designs.

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5 Schiaparelli, Shocking Life, 45.
6 Stent, Woman Surrealists, 103.
7 Ibid.,105.
Schiaparelli was often led to use Surrealist notions of absurdity and juxtaposition in order to provoke the public consideration of the origin and validity of certain social norms, such as women’s dress.\(^9\) This is often actualized in her use of theatricality, another recurrent theme in Schiaparelli’s Surrealist designs. Schiaparelli’s outlandish, sometimes dramatic, Surreal fashions acted as a sort of costume through which women were able to publicly assert control over their own appearance. No longer were their appearances being governed by society (i.e. the white male), but instead according to their own will. Schiaparelli’s creations acted as a screen through which the wearer could filter any negativity she may encounter. Criticism regarding her liberated lifestyle would be metaphorically absorbed by the garment, allowing the woman inside to continue asserting herself in the public sphere and taking control over her own image.\(^10\) Examples of these theatrical designs can be found in the *Skeleton* and *Tear Dresses*, but also in designs like *Shoe Hat* and *Gloves with Fingernails* (Figures 1 and 2), which all utilize outlandish, absurd imagery that was more associated with costume than haute couture.

*Skeleton Dress* and *Tear Dress*, both a part of the 1938 *Circus Collection*, are arguably two of Schiaparelli’s most avant-garde designs, and they are certainly among the most discussed. Both dresses were produced in collaboration with Salvador Dali and have been consistently interpreted as strong socio-political statements aligning with the women’s liberation movement of the 1930s. Sweeney-Risko provides us with an attentive interpretation of the two garments, building upon the scholarly opinion of Sabina Stent: *Skeleton Dress* (Figure 3) is a full-length, high-necked, long sleeved black silk dress. The only decoration comes in the form of a three-dimensional skeletal design which protrudes from the fabric. The dress is skin tight, particularly emphasizing

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 317.
the pubic area. Dali’s Surrealist influence can be found in the emphasis on corporeality and the fetishization of the female form.\textsuperscript{11} Sweeney-Risko agrees with Stent in that the body-accentuating nature of the garment serves a dual purpose. It emphasizes the wearer’s sexuality while still keeping her body physically covered. This effectively allows the wearer to be in control of her own sexual image; instead of being subjected to the male gaze, she now has complete autonomy regarding what parts of her can be seen and admired.\textsuperscript{12} Sweeney-Risko further suggests that the color black plays a significant role in the meaning of this dress. Black, being a color associated with morbidity, in conjunction with the skeletal reference to death, leads to the conclusion that this garment also hints at the potential for violence and death in act of liberating of the modern woman. The tight dress is overly constricting, preventative of movement, and therefore corpse-like.\textsuperscript{13} These violent and morbid associations indicate a second layer of meaning present in Schiaparelli’s design. While the dress does allude to the liberation of woman through her embrace of a covered sexuality, it also indicates that the adoption of this new liberated lifestyle is not without its risks.\textsuperscript{14} In this way, Schiaparelli is able to use her designs as true communicative tools, publicly expressing the complexity of issues faced by women during this time.

\textit{Tear Dress} (Figure 4) further exposes the violent undertones associated with the female liberation movement of the 1930s. This piece directly refers to a Surrealist work, using a motif of torn flesh found in Dali’s painting \textit{Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra} (Figure 5). The white dress has a looser fit than \textit{Skeleton Dress}, instead

\textsuperscript{11} Stent, \textit{Woman Surrealists}, 110.
\textsuperscript{12} Sweeney-Risko, \textit{Surrealist Politics}, 318.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{14} Sweeney-Risko cites Eugene Weber’s \textit{The Hollow Years} as a source for more information on violence towards French women in the 1930s.
alluding to the body through the use of a flesh colored motif, which from a distance may even appear to be the wearer’s actual skin peeking through torn fabric. This design also includes a white veil, which exhibits the same torn flesh motif. Stent interprets this dress as an intense juxtaposition of elegance and violence, suggesting that the wearer is proudly exposing her wounds in an effort to make them publicly known.\textsuperscript{15} This violent imagery is clearly in reference to the domestic abuse that many women underwent during this time period. Sweeney-Risko echoes this interpretation, suggesting that the juxtaposition served to provoke a public conversation about the origin of certain social norms. The veil becomes a symbol for marriage, separation, and silence, recalling the traditionally silent struggle of an abused wife. This serves to demonstrate Sweeney-Risko’s point regarding the ways in which a culture’s sartorial symbols can be used to actually engrain certain behaviors into normalcy.\textsuperscript{16} Again, by placing this violent imagery into the public sphere through her Surrealist fashions, Schiaparelli aimed to bring certain socio-political issues to light, at the same time empowering the women who wore her designs to embody the powerful messages they projected.

Before analyzing two of Schiaparelli’s Cocteau inspired garments, I will first give a brief overview of Jean Cocteau’s oeuvre as it relates to drawing, theater and film. Cocteau initially entered the French artistic sphere as a writer, becoming well known for his 1926 book \textit{Le Rappel a L’ordre}, which included essays and poems outlining his famous call for a “return to order”. This idea aligned with one of the post-war artistic movements happening in Europe, which included a return to classicism and a revitalization of Cubism, all of which became encapsulated in a new aesthetic called Purism. Though he was not a prolific visual artist by any means,

\textsuperscript{15} Stent, \textit{Fetishising the Feminine}, 80.
\textsuperscript{16} Sweeney-Risko, \textit{Surrealist Politics}, 320.
Cocteau favored a more Purist technique when he did draw, distilling forms into singular lines as a way to find both the “physical likeness and moral truth of the model.” This belief in a moralizing art is famously couched in Cocteau’s declaration that “art is a lie that tells the truth; that beauty, which is always born invisible, lives only an instant, and that for a work of art to be beautiful it must have moral purpose.” These beliefs very much align with Purist thought, which called for form that was informed by function (i.e. art that serves a purpose, like demonstrating morality).

Interestingly, Cocteau cites his fascination in theater as being sparked by his own childhood experience of watching his mother get dressed before attending the Opera. For the young Cocteau, his mother and her own personal costuming embodied the theater itself. The question remains as to why Cocteau gravitated toward the mode of theatrical spectacle later in his artistic career. The answer may lie in his deeper fascination with the concept of the fleeting. The theater was a place in which the final curtain acted as a sort of death – the fact that a production could (and always would) end is what made theater so spectacular for Cocteau, who was often interested in exploring themes of death and finality in his work. As playwright and filmmaker, Cocteau was above all associated with theatricality and spectacle. In her book on Cocteau’s theater aesthetic, Lydia Lallas Crowson says, “Cocteau needed spectacle… he utilised it in every genre in which he created.” In a 1954 article regarding the then still-living Cocteau’s relationship to theatricality, Neal Oxenhandler proposed that Cocteau used his experiments with

17 Chanel, *Cocteau French Scene*, 111.
18 Ibid., 112.
19 Oxenhandler 71
20 Oxenhandler 72. Other instances of death in Cocteau’s theatrical oeuvre include *L’éternal Retour* (1943), *Orphée* (1934), *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), and *Romeo and Juliette* (1924).
21 Crowson 169
the theater as a way to develop his own personal philosophy. He also suggests that 1934, the year in which Cocteau’s plays *Orphée* and *La Machine Infernale* were produced, served as a turning point in Cocteau’s creative career. Oxenhandler claims that it is then that Cocteau finds the theme to which he would adhere for much of his remaining artistic career: the alienated poet-artist estranged from society. It is only three years after this “turn” that Cocteau collaborates with Schiaparelli.

Aesthetically speaking, it is no surprise that Schiaparelli would have collaborated with both the Surrealists and Cocteau. Though Surrealism’s founder Andre Breton was adamantly opposed to Cocteau’s belief in a “return to order” (instead favoring the chaos and disjunction of modern life), the two entities did in fact share some common artistic approaches. Much to Breton’s chagrin, Cocteau’s first film *The Blood of a Poet* (1930) had a definite Surreal aesthetic, focusing on the unconscious dream world of a poet and exploring the fantastical “otherside” of the creative process. In terms of visual art, both Cocteau and the Surrealists often utilized double imagery. What makes Schiaparelli’s associations with Cocteau even more intriguing is Cocteau’s apparent disdain for all things poplar, including fashion, and specifically artistic fashion. Cocteau was (or tried very hard to appear as) a marginalized artist, one who felt he couldn’t possibly be understood by the larger public, or be sponsored by any state. The fact is, however, that many of his works were popular. His film *L’eternal Retour* (1943) was an immense success, publicly, critically, and even with the conservative Vichy regime. Clearly Cocteau is a complicated figure to categorize in terms of his aesthetic leanings. For the purposes of this paper,

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22 Oxenhandler, “Theater as Parade”, 71.
23 Ibid., 74.
24 Schiff, “Poet of Cinema”, 61.
25 Sims, “Poetics as Politics”, 34.
26 Ibid., 36.
I will focus mainly on the aspects of his work which align with a Purist aesthetic, demonstrating how Schiaparelli utilized this as one of the multiple artistic modes in her own sartorial oeuvre.

I will first provide a visual analysis of each of the two garments on which Schiaparelli collaborated with Cocteau. *Evening Jacket* (Figure 6) is a long sleeved, cropped linen jacket designed by Schiaparelli, and embellished on the front with a drawing by Jean Cocteau. For the purpose of clarity, I will henceforth refer to this garment as *Linen Jacket*. The decoration was done by the Parisian embroidery house Lesage. The highly textured linen is a light beige color, with the embroidery taking the form of neutral colored thread outlining the profile of a female form. This form is positioned on the wearer’s right side and appears at an angle, leaning away from the wearer. The hair and bracelet are filled in with gold sequins, the eyes and handkerchief with blue sequins. Jean Cocteau’s signature is featured in light pink thread on the lower right corner of the jacket front. The structure of the jacket is form fitting, with a wrap-around closure and plunging neckline, both of which accentuate the wearer’s waist and bust. The form of the embroidery follows the lines of the jacket, the figure’s arm aligning with the front edge of the jacket and the hair filling up one sleeve. This figure definitely appears to be female, her vacant gaze seemingly directed toward the wearer.

*Evening Coat* (Figure 7) is a dark blue, full-length, long-sleeved, silk coat. All of the decoration of this piece is located on the back of the garment. This work also features a drawing by Jean Cocteau, embroidered onto a design by Schiaparelli, realized by Lesage. The design shows two mirror image faces which form the outline of a vase. This vase appears to be sitting atop a fluted column and contains a bouquet of flowers, which spread across the shoulders. The column and two faces are outlined in gold thread, the feminine lips are filled in with red sequins.
and the eyes with blue. The top of the vase is embellished with gold sequins, and the three-dimensional flowers are made of pink silk.

Both garments contain visual elements that connect the female form to antiquity. *Linen Jacket* utilizes a form reminiscent of both ancient Egyptian and Etruscan art (Figures 8 and 9) and *Evening Coat* places the female form on either side of a Grecian inspired vase (Figure 10), atop a Greco-Roman fluted column. These references to antiquity, and specifically classical antiquity, are an aspect of Cocteau’s associations with the Purists, who, in a decidedly post-war aesthetic, equated the classical world with order, civilization, and the essential. The face-vase imagery could also be a reference to Rubin’s Vase, a popular image developed in 1915 by Edgar Rubin, a Danish psychologist (Figure 11). Rubin used the image to study human perception as it related to the ambiguity of shared boundaries and double forms. The image can be either a vase or two faces, but it cannot be both simultaneously.27 This use of double imagery and ambiguous form is an aspect of Cocteau’s work that can be seen in Surrealist art as well.

Instances of Cocteau’s urge to theatricality can be found in both of these garments. In *Linen Jacket*, Jean Cocteau’s signature is incorporated as a prominent element of the embroidery design. At this point in the mid 1930s, Cocteau had been regularly involved in theater production for nearly twenty years, having produced his first movie only seven years prior. By placing his signature prominently on the garment, Schiaparelli visually conflates Cocteau’s theatrical associations with the wearer. It is upon this association that we can view this jacket as a sort of costume. Though it may lack the outlandish theatrical elements present in many of Schiaparelli’s

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27 Donaldson, “Rubin’s Vase”.
Surrealist designs, this jacket nevertheless serves as a type of costume for the wearer, purely through its associations with a popular playwright and filmmaker.

Just as she used the Surrealist aesthetic of garrish theatricality to her own ends, Schiaparelli used Cocteau’s association with film and theater in a way that elevated the woman wearing her design. As discussed earlier, incorporating elements of theatricality into her designs was a method Schiaparelli used in order to give women agency. By creating costume-like pieces, she was giving women the ability to have a say in the portrayal of their own public self, allowing them to choose their own costume and “direct” their own life. By connecting her designs to contemporary instances of theater and film through Cocteau, Schiaparelli is aligning the wearer with the very act of disguise. Giving women the power to manipulate their own image effectively removed that power from (male-dominated) society. As if confirming this urge to theatricality, Cocteau himself wrote that all women who walked into Schiaparelli’s “devil’s laboratory… come out masked,” indicating that her designs did in fact have an effect on the public’s perception of the wearer. Not only did women feel the internal satisfaction of having had a choice in their own appearance, but they also drew attention to themselves publicly, effectively proclaiming to society that they would no longer be submissive when it came to the presentation of their own bodies.

In addition to the visible signature, Schiaparelli further associated her designs with the theater by designing costumes for some of Cocteau’s plays, a fact that would have publicly aligned her couture pieces with costume. There is also a possible association with the theater to be found in *Evening Coat*, though more research would be needed than the breadth of this paper allows. To

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29Blum, *Shocking!*, 140.
briefly touch on the subject, the image of the double-face vessel is a motif that has appeared in reference to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, a Romantic opera based on the medieval precedent to our traditional *Romeo and Juliet* tale. In the story, the two lovers drink a cup of poison, hence why they are sometimes portrayed as two faces separated by a goblet of wine. In 1943, Cocteau made a film entitled *L’eternal Retour*, which was essentially a modern version of the Tristan and Isolde myth. Additionally, in 1953, Salvador Dali made a brooch utilizing a very similar motif in reference to Tristan and Isolde, which also inspired a later 1972 print (Figure 12). The implications of these associations are virtually unknown at this point in time, however, further research may provide evidence linking the double-face imagery present on Schiaparelli’s jacket more explicitly to the various representation of Tristan and Isolde being made during this time period. If expounded upon, this connection would only serve to strengthen Schiaparelli’s connection with theatricality, and could even open up a discussion regarding her relationship to yet another artistic style: Romanticism.

It could be argued that Schiaparelli also purposefully drew on Cocteau’s interest in the spectacle of the fleeting. Fashion has always been notorious for its ephemerality; what is *en vogue* one day quickly becomes outdated the next. It is very possible that *Evening Coat* would have been one such briefly popular design, something that a fashionable Parisian woman would wear once when attending the theater. Costumes, afterall, are usually only worn once. By connecting her sartorial work with the oeuvre of Cocteau, could Schiaparelli have been commenting on the ephemerality of fashion itself? Cocteau favored spectacular theatricality on stage and in film because it provoked an examination and appreciation of the fleeting moment. Maybe Schiaparelli found this to be true of fashion as well.
In regard to Cocteau’s drawings, Schiaparelli utilizes the artist's distilled line forms to comment on the objectification of the female figure. As previously mentioned, Cocteau’s drawing aesthetic was based on the Purist belief that the essence of a form could be represented by a single line. This style materializes in both jacket designs, which depict the female form as flattened, one-dimensional, and decorative. Although I do not wish to imply that Cocteau represented women in this manner in order to intentionally objectify them, I am suggesting that Schiaparelli is using the flattened forms to make a statement about the broader issue of female objectification in society. Unlike with the Surrealist imagery, I would argue that here Schiaparelli mostly recontextualizes rather than subverts Cocteau’s aesthetic, which was never noted as being particularly misogynistic. However, if we are to believe Cocteau’s Purist methodology, then the line drawings on these garments should represent his visual interpretation of the essential “moral truth” of the female form. Yet they are not forms which evoke powerful, independent women with agency, but rather flat, static, decorative bodies with overly emphasized physical traits. In *Linen Jacket*, attributes typically associated with objectified feminine beauty are emphasized: the flowing golden hair and the large blue eye. I would also argue that in emphasizing the handkerchief and bracelet, the design is referencing the stereotypical female obsession with consumerism and bodily adornation, both of which suggest vanity.

By including a figure symbolic of stereotypical feminine vices and objectification on *Linen Jacket*, Schiaparelli is able to create a juxtaposition with the real woman inside the jacket, emphasizing the ways in which the wearer of the garment is *not* like that objectified form. In some manner, the two figures are one; they share a breast (the right breast of the wearer falls
roughly where the embroidered form’s would be), yet they have different heads, different hands, and different hair. In this way, coupled with the references to antiquity, the embroidered woman can be viewed as a part of the wearer, but an ancient part. Leaning back, eyes turned up in reverence toward the powerful woman she has yet to become, the embroidered form recalls the old ways of feminine depiction. Now, in the act of wearing this ancient form, the woman inside the jacket is symbolically reappropriating this kind of imagery, removing its power, and replacing it with her own public image: that of a woman proudly clothed in a garment of her own choice.

In *Evening Coat*, a similar conflation of woman as object is projected through the use of Rubin’s Vase. The optical illusion visually treats the two feminine forms with the same amount of attention as an object—the vase. Arguably, the inanimate flowers are given the most attention in the composition, rendering the female form as rather flat, decorative, and objectified in comparison. The illusions begs a scientific question: “Does your brain perceive a woman or a vase?” Yet for Schiaparelli, I would argue that it implies much more. By using imagery that employs a decorative female form, Schiaparelli is again giving the wearer the agency to reappropriate the image, effectively taking away its power. Something could also be said of the fact that this design is located on the back of the coat, as if suggesting that modern women are “turning their backs” on this kind of objectified representation of the female form, leaving it in the (classical) past where it belongs.

Importantly, Schiaparelli ensures that both these designs do not obscure the feminine silhouette of the wearer, instead they emphasize it. In stark contrast the the boyish *la garçonne* silhouette popularized in the 1920s, which was also heavily associated with the burgeoning
feminist movement, Schiaparelli takes a different approach clothing the liberated woman. Instead of masculinizing the female form in an effort to equate it with man, Schiaparelli celebrates the feminine figure by creating form-fitting garments that accentuate a woman’s curves. Rather than imply women can have socio-political power despite their femininity, Schiaparelli wanted women to publicly assert themselves because of their femininity. Schiaparelli aimed to create an aesthetic which associated the female form with agency, power, and respectability. She accomplishes this by creating garments which allowed women to appropriate traditional forms of female objectification while simultaneously asserting the validity of their own feminine form.

Historian Mary Louise Roberts has asserted that, in comparison to the politically radical flapper aesthetic of the 1920s, the following decade represented an era when, “the notion of liberty and scandal in fashion disappeared.” However, I find this conclusion to be inaccurate when Elsa Schiaparelli is considered. Although it is nearly impossible to produce concrete evidence regarding the effect of Schiaparelli’s garments on the everyday lives of women, we can turn to an examination how the socio-political climate was changing in France during this time period. Despite the oppressive 1940-1942 Vichy regime, French women finally gained the right to vote following World War II in 1945, eight years after Schiaparelli created her Cocteau inspired designs. Though it was a long and arduous road, it is clear that France was experiencing a great period of change and transition regarding gender roles during Schiaparelli’s active years as a couturier.

We also have the words of Schiaparelli herself, who describes many such promising encounters in her autobiography:

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30 Latimer and Chadwick, Modern Woman Revisited, 84.
31 Lackerstein, National Regeneration. Under this government, women were further confined to traditional roles of domesticity and motherhood, reversing much of the progress that had been made in the prior two decades.
A woman came in one day from the Middle West. She was timid and did not dress well, and was definitely plain... She had a look of gentleness, and an innate restraint. I liked her and began to mould her... She seemed to become taller, and her large bones, that were a drawback at the beginning, became strangely interesting and took on a certain special beauty. She chose very plain dresses that followed the skeleton of her body... colours that were deep and daring, and much black and white. She married a man of subtle taste who helped her build up this new personality... She thus became a woman who stirred interest and curiosity everywhere she appeared. She was more than smart, more than beautiful.  

This I find this to typify the kind of artist Schiaparelli was. She wanted her clothes to change women’s lives. To a 21st century audience, this encounter may seem initially oppressive. We are so used to the mantra “be yourself”, we tell our children this regularly, encouraging them to not let something as fleeting as fashion dictate who they are or what they look like. However, I would argue that Schiaparelli was, in her own way, doing the same thing. Many of her clients were wealthy socialites, women who were thoroughly entrenched in a traditional, male-dominated culture that limited their ability to assert themselves. As in this encounter, many of them may not have even realized the oppression they were facing until Schiaparelli encouraged them to break away from what mainstream culture was telling them to do.

Schiaparelli encouraged her clients to instead be bold, be assertive, be women with agency, beauty, and brains. For a culture that had historically dictated that their women be chaste, submissive, objectified, seen but never heard, this was a radical way for women to assert themselves in the public sphere. Though many of her most striking designs were suited for those in a higher social class, she also made a great deal of garments for everyday women. Her split skirt was revolutionary in that is allowed women to be able to ride their bikes in the city, unencumbered by a the long skirts society had long forced them to wear.  

were widely published in magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and her designs were frequently discussed in newspapers all over the world.\(^{34}\) Even women who could not afford her couture pieces were still being exposed to Schiaparelli’s images of radical female liberation, which could very well have inspired them in their own personal struggle for equality.

Schiaparelli’s use of different artistic modes in expressing her sartorial vision is perhaps why they were so successful in communicating these liberal ideas on gender equality. Society as a whole had become accustomed to studying and interpreting artworks, film and theater, trying to find the meaning behind often enigmatic imagery. By aligning her couture pieces with various art movements, Schiaparelli was asking the public to look deeper. She did not want her designs to be dismissed as mere fashion, so she creatively employed various artistic influences—Dali and Cocteau, Surrealism and Purism— with seemingly disparate aesthetic languages, in order for her ultimate message to be conveyed in the most demonstrative and dynamic way possible.

\(^{34}\) Cocteau’s illustration for *Linen Jacket* was published in the July 1937 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* and Schiaparelli frequently references the media’s reaction to her designs in her autobiography *Shocking Life.*
Figure 1
Shoe Hat 1937
Figure 2
*Fingernail Gloves, 1936-7*

Figure 3
*Skeleton Dress, 1938*
Figure 4
*Tear Dress*, 1938
Figure 5
Salvador Dali, *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 1936
Figure 6
Linen Jacket, 1937
Figure 7
*Evening Coat, 1937*

Figure 8
*Lamenting Women, from the tomb of Ramose, c. 1411-1375*
Figure 9

*Hermes carrying a Woman*, Caere, 6th century BCE
Figure 10
Attic Black-Figure Dinos Vase, Attributed to the Circle of the Antimenes Painter (Greek (Attic), active 530 - 510 B.C.)

Figure 11
Rubin’s Vase, 1915
Figure 12

Salvador Dali, *Tristan and Isolde*, 1972
Bibliography


