

# IN FASHION

## *Landscapes with Figures*

THE street-cleaners here are dressed in bright-green jumpsuits that match the long green brooms they use to sweep the gutters, and the green motorbikes on which they patrol the sidewalks, vacuuming up what the dogs have left behind. On café terraces, the cane chairs and small round tables are arranged in rows, like boxes at the opera, all turned to face the passersby. Everything, right down to the dirty ashtrays on the tables, is unmistakably French. Franco Moschino, the Italian designer, says that the dirt in Rome is real but the dirt in Paris is theatrical dirt.

Among people who work in the fashion business and travel the circuit—Milan, London, Paris, New York—the standard assumption is that these four cities now constitute one great big community: that New Yorkers wear clothes by Giorgio Armani, and Parisians shop for shoes at Manolo Blahnik, in London, and the Milanese carry Hermès bags, and Londoners wear Levi's. There is supposedly no longer any such thing as national style; there is only the international style, a kind of fashion Esperanto. And yet anyone who travels and takes along clothes that at home seem perfectly appropriate, or even fashionably elegant, knows what it's like to wear those same clothes in Paris—or, for that matter, in any other city—and to seem out of place, clearly identifiable as a foreigner.

The visitor to Paris feels at times like the answer to a "What's wrong with this picture?" puzzle. There is an astounding consistency to the French style—a consensus of color and texture and shape within any given

period which makes for a kind of seamlessness in the surroundings. A pants suit by Giorgio Armani, stylish and "international" as it may be, looks slouchy and even sloppy in Paris—at odds with the aesthetic that built the Palais-Royal and laid out the Avenue de l'Opéra and furnished the Grand Véfour. At a time when more and more of the world is being colonized by Hyatt hotels and McDonald's restaurants and Benetton boutiques that are all interchangeable, and in the midst of endless speculation about a united Europe in 1992, it's reassuring to find that local distinctions still exist.

The notion of the elegant Parisienne, born with style in her bones, is not, as one might suspect, an American invention, an outgrowth of our national inferiority complex: the French played a big part in creating the idea, and when it had grown into a legend they subscribed to it themselves. Colette extolled the "little working girls" in the gardens. "For the most

part their hair is immaculately done, with a sense of modesty and dignity that restrains them from anything over-elaborate, from outlandish ornament, even from artificial coloring," she wrote. "They have slim figures. They wear starched white collars, blouses with the cuffs turned meticulously back at the wrist. They display a wise distrust of plaids and stripes, and their plain skirts would age them a trifle if they did not wear them a little short: because they have shapely legs and impoverish themselves buying stockings." Valerie Steele, in her recent book "Paris Fashion: A Cultural History," quotes Louis Octave Uzanne, a Frenchman and the author of "La Femme à Paris," published in 1894. "In every class of society, a woman is *plus femme* in Paris than in any other city in the universe," he declared. These observations have with time become clichés, but a mystique of sorts still surrounds Frenchwomen, and anyone with an interest in human nature can't help wanting to take that mystique apart in order to find out what it's made of and how it works. Riding on buses, sitting in cafés, walking down the street here, I study the way people dress. Suppose you took that



woman there, in the leggings and the jacket, or the one in the tweed suit, and set her down in New York City: what is it about her that would identify her as French? It is probably foolhardy to try to talk in general terms about fashion in a country that is home to designers as artistically far apart as Hubert de Givenchy and Jean Paul Gaultier. But the gulf between Givenchy and Gaultier is in many ways not nearly as great as the distance between the attitudes they share and the attitudes that back home we take for granted. It is these differences that occur to an American in Paris several times a day, and they strike me as more interesting than the similarities.

FOR one thing, the French respect fashion as a profession, as a diversion, as a topic for serious discussion in ways that Americans generally don't. Philosophers like Roland Barthes have delivered themselves of lengthy disquisitions on the subject; Pierre Bourdieu, one of France's leading sociologists, has undertaken an exhaustive investigation into matters of taste as they relate to social class; the semiologist Jean Baudrillard has examined the premises of seduction. One tries in vain to imagine an American market for a book like Gilles Lipovetsky's "L'Empire de l'Éphémère," a hefty treatise on "*la logique de l'inconstance, les grandes mutations organisationnelles et esthétiques de la mode*" (no pictures), or even for a handy reference volume like "Les Mouvements de Mode: Expliqués aux Parents."

Much of this discourse at the highest levels of thought is in fact buoyed by hot air—by an often exasperatingly pedantic elaboration of what seems as if it ought to be self-evident. At other times, the ideas and the statistics mustered to support them are a source of idle fascination. In Bourdieu's "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste," for example, we read the results of a 1976 survey in which Frenchwomen, grouped according to the occupation of the head of the household, were asked to rate their own features. The women in the "Farmworker" category rated their skin and their noses the highest; women under the "Clerical, Junior Exec" heading liked their hands best; and women in the "Executive, Industrialist, Professions" division were the

most satisfied with their hair, faces, eyes, teeth, and bodies. Even when the theory or the information is useless to someone trying to make some larger sense of the French tradition in fashion, the mere fact of this discourse is telling.

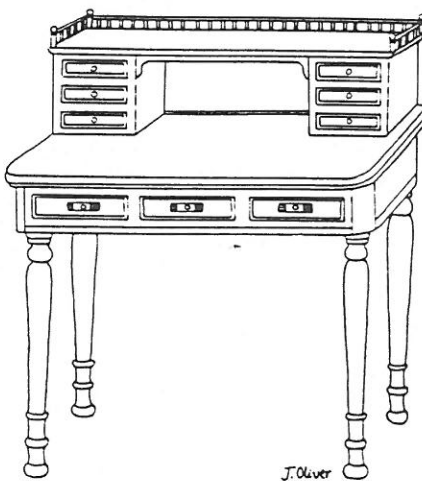
David McFadden, who was the curator of "L'Art de Vivre," last year's exhibition of the French decorative arts at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, in New York, says of France, "The surface is understood better than in other countries, because it's meaningful information—what people see in your house, in your dress, is who you are. The philosophy is that you are what you create around you." The information encoded in the surface of things here goes beyond the usual socioeconomic particulars that help people to know something about one another before they've exchanged a word; French objects and furniture and clothes also contain instructions for their use. In an essay in the book published in conjunction with the "Art de Vivre" exhibition, the art historian Suzanne Tise quotes from a 1925 luxury-goods catalogue describing French curios: "They contain our souls, they assume the most exquisite form of our thoughts. It is the virtue of the curio that it secretly influences our ways of feeling, and perhaps acting." An object's function is for us its reason for being, and its design is something extra; for the French, good design, even at its most decorative, is not a luxury. Even their everyday objects encapsulate a lesson in civilization. A Louis XIV *bergère* reminds us to sit up straight; a narrow suit by Yves Saint Laurent teaches us to make our movements small and close to the body.

In New York, people are often described, if not defined, according to the

designers they ally themselves with, and even to the untrained eye the labels are fairly easy to identify: "She's tall, blond—a real Ralph Lauren type," or "Who was that woman across the table, the one in Lacroix?" Here in Paris, the labels are more often illegible. Women tend not to dress right down to their shoes in clothes by a single designer. Yet snobbery is alive and well. McFadden says, "In France, if something is mass-produced—truly mass-produced—it loses its popularity, because it doesn't have that cachet of being special. The French want pieces made by hand of fine materials, with beautiful workmanship. But the French artists working in small studios, the craftspeople, have a difficult time of it, because the average buyer wants an *objet de luxe* by a firm that has a name. You don't go to some unknown artist's studio to buy hand-made glass, you don't go to Saint Gobain and buy mass-produced glass—you do go to Baccarat and buy cut glass. The objects the French want fall right in the middle, between craft and industry."

Yvonne Brunhammer, the chief curator of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and a consultant for "L'Art de Vivre," says that France is a terribly conservative country, and that its conservatism is the climate necessary for the growth of an avant-garde. If the course of French fashion is, as Brunhammer defines the course of the French decorative arts, "a constant dialogue between tradition and innovation," then the course of American fashion seems to be a constant dialogue between fashion and non-fashion. In a nation of immigrants, eager to fit in, fashion is the local game that newcomers play to get accepted, with the result that people who follow fashion come under suspicion for being conformist, and fashion itself is seen as pernicious, coercing people to look alike. So the cult of the individual in America is, when it comes to clothes, the cult of non-fashion, and this rejection of all the things that fashion stands for gets played out, ironically, in the mainstream of American fashion, with designers devising clothes that manage to be both fashion (fancy fabrics, famous name on the label) and non-fashion (functional articles from sporting-goods and other "legitimate" realms).

The French find our love-hate rela-



tionship with fashion mystifying—it's the "hate" part that they don't understand. Their ability to recognize innovation presumes a certain familiarity with what has gone before. The French, convinced that fashion is not only something they do better than anyone else but something they invented, feel collectively obliged to follow its progress, the way an American who isn't a baseball fan might watch the World Series. Among the people here who have asked me for an eyewitness account of events on the runways were a taxi-driver and a professor at the Sorbonne. During the semiannual rounds of fashion shows in Paris, highlights of the day's collections are shown each evening on the TV news.

An American here is struck by how strong the herd instinct is among the French when it comes to fashion. Frenchwomen of a certain age habitually dress in suits by or after Saint Laurent. Young Frenchwomen express their solidarity in trends—a sudden rash of black lace stockings or knitted shawls bordered with a ribbed ruffle—that usually last no more than a season or two and rarely make their way abroad. The latest discoveries are telegraphed on the street, and the air is charged with the exchange of fashion information.

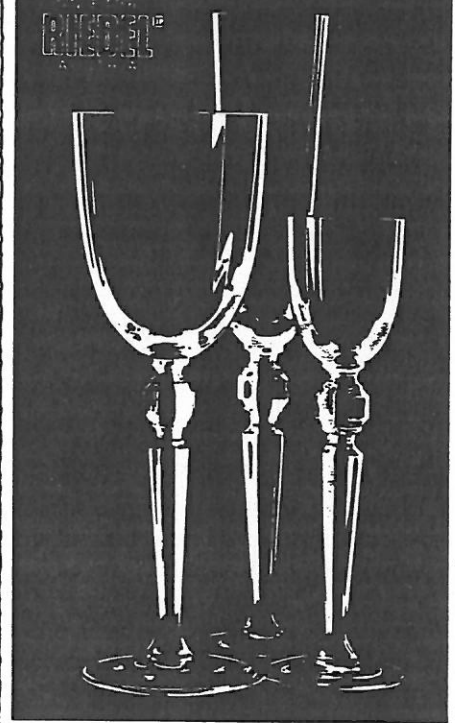
And yet Frenchwomen, even when they're wearing the same skirt or carrying the same handbag, somehow succeed in looking one of a kind, usually by virtue of some small detail. Living in Paris, one comes to realize that there are an infinite number of ways to tie a scarf or comb one's hair. These little flourishes remind me of tales of the Paris Opéra Ballet a century ago, when every dancer in the corps went out of her way to distinguish herself from every other dancer in the corps, for the benefit of the members of the Jockey Club in the audience, who often selected their mistresses from the stage. Writing half a century later, Edwin Denby imagined "a Paris fan's dismay at the sight of our clean-washed girls, looking each one as like all the others as possible, instead of (as in Paris) as unlike," and he added, "As for the Americans, when they see a huge gifted company on the vast stage in Paris, they wonder that the Opéra public likes its dance pleasure of so small a kind, inspected as though through an opera glass, a limb or a waist at a

time." As attention-getting devices go, the ones deployed by Frenchwomen are remarkably subtle, drawing the viewer in, requiring closer study. This is an art not of first impressions but of lasting ones.

THE institution of the demimonde is, of course, defunct, but the attitudes that gave rise to it live on. The *grandes horizontales* had an enormous influence on fashion in their day, and that tradition survives, unreconstructed, in clothes designed by Emanuel Ungaro. To our minds, sex is, on the one hand, something furtive and naughty (there has always been a place in American culture for designated "bad girls"—sex symbols like Marilyn Monroe and Madonna), and, on the other hand, something organic and good for your health. To the French, sex is something exquisite, to be led up to and orchestrated—an aesthetic experience that takes place amid ruffles in a tufted-satin setting, like the inside of a candy box. This idea is, in its way, curiously sentimental, leaving no room for heavy breathing, no room for sweat—and it seems a far cry from America, where the sexiest genre in fashion these days is exercise clothing.

If the way a society keeps sexual behavior under control is one of its organizing principles, then fashion, being the language in which sexuality (among other things) is expressed, is a key to something basic. The clothes Frenchwomen wear are nearly always fitted, if not tight and sometimes downright constricting. (A suit by Saint Laurent indicates the body underneath it more precisely than, say, a suit by Bill Blass.) Perhaps because they seem to be "held" by their clothes, Frenchwomen walk and sit and carry themselves as if they thought they were sexy. (My friend Lucie, an Englishwoman living in Paris and a thoughtful observer of the local landscape, has a related theory: that Frenchwomen feel sexy because they still wear such elaborate underwear—an idea corroborated by the fact that there are nearly as many lingerie boutiques in Paris as there are bakeries.) When Frenchwomen dress in something big and loose, it is more often than not a man's sweater or sports coat borrowed from a boyfriend's closet and worn as a trophy. An American in Paris eventually arrives at the conclusion that the

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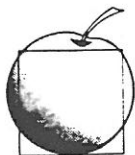
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differences in the way the French and the Americans dress—or, more accurately, between the way Parisians and New Yorkers dress—come down to differences in the relations between men and women in Paris and in New York.

Surely the most glaring of these is that American women still feel conflicted about being regarded as sex objects, whereas if Frenchwomen aren't regarded as sex objects they're insulted. American men rarely compliment a woman on her looks, for fear of activating her suspicions about their motives; Frenchmen compliment women routinely. (Lucie says that in twenty years in England the highest compliment she ever received from a man was "You're looking well this evening"—a remark ambiguous enough to be interpreted as a comment on the state of her health.) We American women want to be loved for ourselves, for who we are, and if it so happens that we're pretty, that's a bonus. This attitude may have its origins in our Puritan heritage, but the feminist movement has recently given it a big boost by reinforcing our conviction that it's wrong for a woman to trade on her appearance. Also, the worship of beauty doesn't sit well with the tenet that good looks constitute an unfair advantage in a society in which all women are supposed to be created equal.

The French are astonishingly free of any such qualms. Soon after the film festival last year in Cannes, the magazine *Télé 7 Jours* devoted its cover to Josiane Balasko, one of the stars of Bertrand Blier's "Trop Belle pour Toi," in which Gérard Depardieu, though he is married to the beautiful, young, refined Carole Bouquet, falls in love with Balasko, his dumpy middle-aged secretary. Alongside a closeup portrait of the pudding-faced actress, the cover line proclaimed that Balasko seduces Depardieu despite her "*physique banal*."

If Frenchwomen, by the clothes they wear, seem to endear themselves to men in ways that would make an American woman uncomfortable, their style of dress is often contradicted by their extraordinary self-possession and by their manner, which can seem remote by our standards. Depending on the circumstances, a Frenchwoman may pout or sulk or stalk out, but she does it in clothes that declare her willingness to

please a man on his own terms. Frenchwomen would seem to be more aware of what Valerie Steele in her book calls their "erotic responsibilities."

**T**HERE is an everyday formality, a routine decorum, to life in Paris which permeates the clothes people wear. It is, as Aldous Huxley once wrote, simply another form of democracy: "In America the cowhand addresses his millionaire boss as Joe or Charlie. In France the fourteenth Duke addresses his concierge as *Madame*." In America, one dresses down; in Paris, one dresses up, and that is not the same as overdressing.

The vanity threshold is higher here, for men and women alike. No woman would think of going to the grocery store on Saturday morning without first putting on her makeup and maybe high heels. Almost consistently, Frenchwomen present themselves as if they found themselves attractive, regardless of their attributes, and almost consistently the presentation is convincing. Maybe the French criteria for beauty are more elastic than ours, capable of encompassing what in America would be a nose too large or lips too thin. At any rate, Frenchwomen seem to regard beauty both as something they were born with and as something to be achieved. "As for the women of the dominant class they derive a double assurance from their bodies," Bourdieu writes. "Believing, like petit-bourgeois women, in the value of beauty and the value of the effort to be beautiful, and so associating aesthetic value and moral value, they feel superior both in the intrinsic, natural beauty of their bodies and in the art of self-embellishment and everything they call *tenue*, a moral and aesthetic virtue which defines 'nature' negatively as sloppiness. Beauty can thus be simultaneously a gift of nature and a conquest of merit."

Honesty is not nearly so highly prized here as it is at home, but that is not to say that the French are dishonest; it's just that for them artifice is a means of expression. I would be willing to bet that honesty is not very high on the list of what French men and women are looking for in each other: reality, to their way of thinking, is not an aphrodisiac. Nor is "natural" beauty considered a virtue, even when it comes to nature—the French plant the trees in their gardens in a matrix

and coax their shrubs into poodle-like topiary. It is not uncommon in Paris for a Frenchman to compliment a woman on her makeup—the kind of comment that horrifies most women who have just arrived from the States, where makeup, if it's well applied, is supposed to be imperceptible, and where most men instinctively know to pretend that it is. There is something fully realized about the way Frenchwomen look, as if they had envisioned a certain image of themselves and had taken the necessary steps to arrive at it. By comparison, American women look like works in progress, if only because we can't admit to having done anything to improve on our appearance. The glamour we see in a self-righteously drab actress like Jessica Lange is beyond the French, who prefer a woman to look more "finished," as Catherine Deneuve and Isabelle Adjani do. Most American women figure that sooner or later a man is going to have to see their face naked anyway, and that when that day comes the makeup will be recognized for what it is—a mask. (The irony of this, of course, is that American women wear as much makeup as Frenchwomen, if not more.) The appeal of the straightforward, clean-scrubbed look, unfalsified by "paint," is essentially moral: we admire a woman for the courage to show herself to the world as she is, and in the end it's the courage we find attractive.

For their part, the French are comfortable when they know that what they're wearing is appropriate. The notion of comfort, the cornerstone of American style, is not alien to the French (despite their frequently ridiculous attempts to look casual), but theirs is essentially a cerebral comfort, not a physical one. Women in New York walk to work in their suits and running shoes, for the sake of their feet, and change into their "real" shoes when they get to the office. In New York, one has the sense that on the street one is not only anonymous but invisible.

Stephen de Pietri, who died in February, and who had been the director of exhibitions for Yves Saint Laurent and a resident of Paris for five years, used to lament the effects of this notion that comfort comes first—a notion that has taken hold in the decades since America freed itself from the supposed tyranny of Paris designers. He said

once, "In many ways, you could say it's hostile, or, anyway, antisocial, this independence from fashion—that it becomes an aggression, to say that you don't care about clothing, because, really, dressing well is a social grace, and something you do for someone else."

SOME of the most important designers in the history of French fashion have, of course, been foreigners who settled in Paris: Charles Frederick Worth, an Englishman; Cristobal Balenciaga, a Spaniard; Elsa Schiaparelli, an Italian. In the end, their styles were all seen as French, and so was their success. In recent seasons, some of the liveliest ideas advanced on the runways here have been proposed by designers who aren't French: Martin Margiela, a Belgian; Katherine Hamnett and John Galiano, from London; Romeo Gigli, from Milan; Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto, who with a dozen or so other Japanese designers now account for the first two days of the fashion-week schedule.

The current debate here is about the state of French fashion and its fate in a world dominated by business conglomerates, with giant corporations having bought up a number of the most famous haute-couture houses in the hope of following Chanel's example and building a successful empire on the name of a dead founder. When the word got out last year that the new management at Dior was looking for a designer to replace Marc Bohan, who had directed the house since Yves Saint Laurent's departure, in 1960, rumor had it that the short list included two Italians—one of whom, Angelo Tarlazzi, was living and working in Paris—and only one French designer, Claude Montana. In the end, Tarlazzi—whom the French now claim as their own—went to design the haute couture for Guy Laroche, Montana went to do the same for Lanvin, and the job of the Dior ready-to-wear and haute couture was given to the other Italian, Gianfranco Ferre, who is based in Milan. If at first some French fashion enthusiasts found it galling that the house of Dior, the cradle of the New Look, had passed into the hands of an Italian, their misgivings were allayed by Ferre's first couture collection—a resounding success, for which the French press awarded him the Golden Thimble. The reed-thin tailleurs, the frothy blouses, and even the evening gowns

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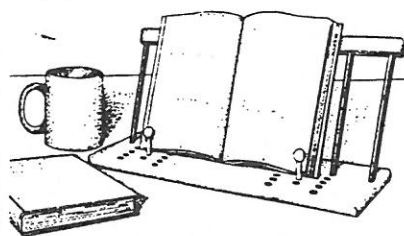
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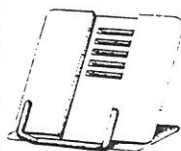
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looked like the Ferre we know from his collections under his own name, but the focus was somehow sharper: the shapes were less exuberant; the materials were more restrained; the sexiness was not quite so forthright. The overall effect was more disciplined than what we had come to expect from Ferre, and that in itself seemed to indicate that he had arrived at some deep and sympathetic understanding of a creative tradition that is indigenously French.

Whether or not you accept the theory that the French, having grown up surrounded by beautiful objects, are incapable of bad taste (a theory that any recent Thierry Mugler collection would go a long way to refute), it is at least safe to say that the French are probably more sensitive than anyone else to the panorama in which they're seen. In Paris, where the city itself jealously commands so much attention, where conversations and trains of thought are continually interrupted by the sight of some rooftop or passageway or window, a human being is a mere figure in the landscape. From time to time, at dinner parties and on the street, one sees American expatriates who persist in dressing exactly as they did back home, completely oblivious of the fashion going on around them. This is the sartorial equivalent of never learning the language.

Five years ago, a man I know, an American who was living out West at the time, made a trip to Paris. Walking one afternoon along the Esplanade des Invalides, with the Grand Palais at his back, he saw coming toward him an impeccably dressed Frenchman, who looked as if he'd stepped right out of Charvet's windows; on his arm was a sleek, impeccable woman. The American, who had never given much thought to his or anyone else's clothes, was turned out in a ragged lumberjack-plaid flannel shirt, grease-stained khaki pants (the ones he always wore when he worked on his car), and scuffed-up hiking boots. He felt the Frenchman's gaze steadily on him, taking in every fraying edge, every splotch of oil, and as the distance between them narrowed it seemed to him that he was entering a force field of disapproval. Finally, from a few feet away, the Frenchman looked him in the eye, shook his head, and, without breaking his stride, said, simply but firmly, "Non."

—HOLLY BRUBACH



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