

PAUL POIRET



Paul Poiret (1879-1944) was a French fashion designer who came to prominence in the early 20th century. He was known as 'The King of Fashion' in America and *Le Magnifique* in Paris.



Paul Poiret in 1920

Early life

Poiret was born on 20 April 1879 in Les Halles, a poor neighbourhood in Paris.

His father was a cloth merchant, and his parents apprenticed him to an umbrella maker. Poiret collected spare scraps of silk and used them to make clothes for his sister's dolls. As a teenager, he sold drawings to Parisian couture houses.

Hired by Jacques Doucet in 1898, Poiret became famous after designing a mantle used by actress Gabrielle Réjane in a play called *Zaza*. In 1901 he moved to the House of Worth. Here, he was responsible for designing simple, practical dresses, but his modernity was too much for the conservative-minded clients.

Success

In 1903, Poiret established his own house. He made his name with a kimono coat and other loose-fitting designs. He got rid of the petticoat and later the corset, becoming known for his technique of draping fabric as opposed to tailoring and structure. One theory states that he was responsible for the infamous hobble skirt, but he certainly contributed to the emergence of modernism in clothing.

Poiret launched a perfume, 'Parfums de Rosine', in 1911, named after his daughter. He was the first French couturier to launch a signature fragrance. That same year he also launched the Les École Martine, a home decor division of his design house, named for his second daughter.



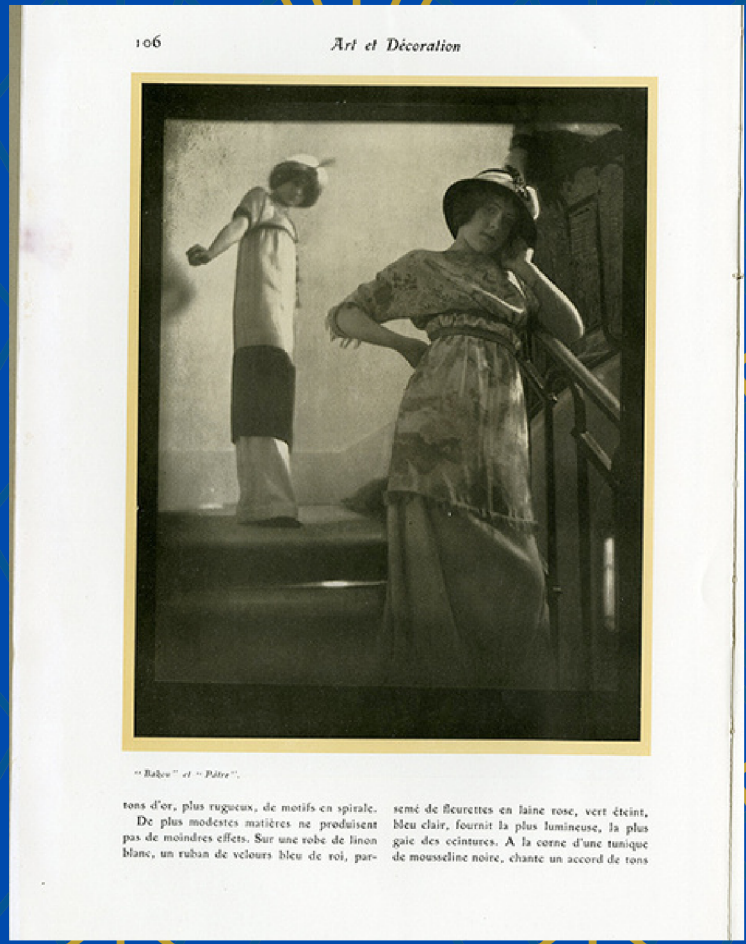
1911 opera coat

Inspiration

Poiret has been described as an 'Orientalist', taking inspiration from Eastern designs such as the kimono, as well as antique forms of dress. The fancy dress ball he held in 1911 to mark the launch of his perfume was inspired by the *Tales of One Thousand and One Nights*; he dressed as a Sultan and encouraged guests to wear Orientalist styles.

Promotion

The April 1911 issue of the magazine *Art et Décoration*, featuring Edward Steichen's pctures of Poiret's gowns, has been hailed as the first ever modern fashion photography shoot.



106 *Art et Décoration*

"Ballon" et "Pêtre".

tons d'or, plus rugueux, de motifs en spirale.
De plus modestes matières ne produisent pas de moindres effets. Sur une robe de linon blanc, un ruban de velours bleu de roi, parsemé de fleurettes en laine rose, vert éteint, bleu clair, fournit la plus lumineuse, la plus gaie des ceintures. A la corne d'une tunique de mousseline noire, chante un accord de tons

Photograph from *Art et Décoration*

Decline of the House of Poiret

During World War I, Poiret served in the military. When he returned in 1919, the business was on the brink of bankruptcy and was being overshadowed by designers like Chanel.

In 1922 Poiret was invited to New York to design costumes and dresses for Broadway stars, but he soon returned to Paris, feeling that New York was not his home. Poiret was increasingly unpopular and in debt.

In 1929, his fashion house was closed and he died in 1944, in poverty and almost forgotten.