

Great War Fashions

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By Zita Thornton

The First World War saw the breaking down of social barriers as women of all classes volunteered their services for war work. When it came to fashion there was less distinction too as practicality mattered more than class. Freedom of movement and comfort were important for women who were replacing men in the factories, driving trams and delivering the post. Viewers of the latest series of ITV's 'Mr Selfridge', set in this period, will have seen how the women replacing the men in the store loading bays, demanded shorter and lighter working uniforms. Nurses rejected trailing skirts and women no longer wished to hold up their dresses as they hopped on and off trams.

The period from 1914-1918 was a bridge from the formality of Edwardian fashions, to the liberating flapper style of the 1920s. More relaxed designs no longer demanded a restricting corset (the

first bra was patented in 1914 and by 1915 *The Lady* stated that brassieres were essential underwear.) Hemlines rose shorter than they ever had before, reaching mid calf by 1915. The long hobble dress gave way to a fuller, shorter, double tiered skirt. Even formal wear such as bridal gowns became more relaxed.

Yet, important as this period in fashion history was, it did not give us an identifiable and iconic fashion style, as did the beaded Art Deco designs or vintage retro from the 1960s and 1970s, even though it was just as liberating for women. Nevertheless, garments that came up for auction at the specialist sales at Kerry Taylor Auctions in the past year were nonetheless stylish, lovely and typical of the period, representing good value at an average hammer price of £150 each. **Fig 1, Fig 2.** In any auctions there will always be exceptions. One such example was the sale of a 1915



Fig 1. A printed and beaded ivory chiffon dress, c1914, floral printed highlighted with beads, black satin belt to raised waistline; with a pale peach tulle and organza sequined gown, labelled 'Salomon Davidsen, Copenhagen', c1914; and a pale pink taffeta tunic c1916. (3) Provenance: Henning Thorsen collection. £440.



Fig 2. A black sequined tabard circa 1918-20, tulle ground covered with a shimmer of black beads in strapwork with foliate medallions, open sides linked by bands, bust approx 92cm, 36in. Provenance: Henning Thorsen collection. £140.



Fig 3. A printed satin dress, fabric in imitation of the 1913 design by Iribe for Paul Poiret, dress c1915, white rose resist print on a purple satin ground, cross-over panels to front bodice, trimmed and edged in ruffles of white tulle, with remains of dark blue cummerbund sash, bust approx 86cm, 34in. (2) £450.



Fig 4. A rare Omega Workshop blouse, c1914, white linen, borders with faggotted seams, edged in Vanessa Bell designed 1913 'Maud' modernist printed linen in shades of blue and pink, of simple T-shaped construction, bust approx 86cm, 34in. £2,000.



Fig 5. An embossed blue velvet cocoon coat, c1915-20, inset with curved black velvet bands; and a plain black velvet coat c.1920. (2) £100.



Fig 6. A group of clothing including bridal wear, 1900-1930s, including a tiered tamboured net gown c1918 with coloured ribbons to waist, ivory embroidered tulips to the hem; an Edwardian skirt, tamboured cream mesh skirt; a bridal bodice c1900; a grey velvet pelerine c1900; two 1930s evening coats and a quantity of stockings. (qty) £700.

**Photos courtesy of
Kerry Taylor Auctions.
All prices hammer.**

dress made from fabric in imitation of a Paul Poiret design which raised £450 **Fig 3**. An earlier rare blouse from the Omega workshops, edged in printed linen designed by Vanessa Bell, sold in June 2013 raising £2,000. **Fig 4**. A jet and glass beaded tulle tabard c1918, adorned with a lattice of faceted medallions and seed beads, with fringes to the hem, a forerunner of the flapper fashion which followed, raised £450 in February 2014.

As war continued, clothes took on a more sombre appearance in dark colours, the fuller top skirt disappearing. However, as you might expect mourning clothes have not been popular in the sales, a pair remaining unsold in the April sale.

Coats of this period were stylish and modern, often with curved hems, wide lapels, turned back cuffs, trimmed with buttons and embroidery. A pair of faux astrakhan and beaver Refern coats sold for £300 in February 2014. Evening coats took

their inspiration from Poiret's Oriental kimono style, **Fig 5**.

Mid-war, brides often chose to be married in practical travelling suits. Where a bridal dress was worn, this was modest, loose fitting, mid calf length and frequently ivory or silver grey. One such as this sold in February 2014 for a mere £80. Examples that were more flamboyant, including lace or ribbons, **Fig 6**, or when a whole bridal ensemble including shoes, a veil, even underwear was offered, raised higher prices.

If values of garments from the Great War were relatively modest, fashion sketches from the Lucile studio of couturier Lady Duff Gordon have raised increasingly high bids reaching £1,600 in April, **Fig 7**. The sketches reflected her innovative, liberating designs which would have been shown off to her illustrious clientele by the 'mannequin parades' that she introduced, a precursor to modern day catwalk shows.



Fig 7. Lucile studio fashion sketches, c1916, two signed Lucile, each with a red-headed figure wearing predominantly green ensembles incl. a robe de style, blossom appliqued evening cape and a day ensemble with veiled hat, 37.5 x 20cm. (3) £1,600.