

# Chimère, evening dress



The House of Paquin opened in 1891 on the fashionable rue de la Paix in Paris. Its founder was Jeanne Paquin, who was considered the first important female couturier. Paquin used clever marketing techniques, sending her models to the opera and the races to parade her latest creations. Her *Chimère* evening dress is a fine example of the archetypal 'flapper' dress and a highlight of *Art Deco 1910–1939*. It was exhibited at the 1925 Paris Exposition and represents the height of French couture.

The dress, constructed from delicate chiffon and French silk, is covered in a mass of diamante studs, seed pearls and gold glass beads. The intricate finish and detailing was completed by hand by artisans specialising in beading and embroidery. Fashion designers decorated garments in a way that would emphasise light and movement, which was best demonstrated when the wearer danced to one of latest crazes such as the Charleston or the foxtrot.

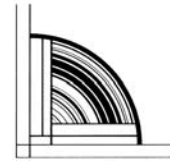
Fine textiles were an important part of Paquin's design. Skilled weavers from Lyon, the silk capital of France, collaborated with the couturiers of Paris and were a major supplier of sumptuous fabrics.

The changing role of women in society made a significant impact on the 1920s Paris fashion scene. The dominant fashion silhouette became streamlined and tubular. Looser and less structured, it allowed the wearer freedom of movement. This look was known as the 'garçonne' style with its androgynous, 'boyish' lines.

Paquin combined various cultural influences including Egyptian and Chinese elements in the form of geometric shapes and motifs. The contrasting central panel of the *Chimère* costume consists of blue Chinese silk and depicts twisting dragons or chimeras with sparkling eyes. The skirt features an elaborate design of stylised cloud-like motifs, echoing those found on Chinese robes.



# Chimère, evening dress



Throughout the duration of the *Art Deco* exhibition, all the works on display will be constantly monitored to ensure that any potential problems are identified and remedied as quickly as possible. A condition report is kept on every item. This is very important when a work is borrowed from another organisation. The most effective method of preserving works of art is to prevent damage occurring in the first place. Textiles in particular are very susceptible to the harmful effects of light, temperature, humidity, dirt, mould, insects and chemicals. It is essential that methods of transport, storage, handling and display are of the highest standard and do not cause or contribute to deterioration.

The following preventative measures are implemented in accordance with international museum standards:

## Light

Light is harmful to textiles and causes discolouration and fading. This damage is cumulative and irreversible. The recommended illumination level for textiles is no more than 50 lx. Textile items are usually displayed for a period of three months before being returned to storage where they should remain for about twenty-seven months before being displayed again.

## Temperature and Relative Humidity (RH)

Fluctuations of temperature and relative humidity cause textile fibres to absorb and release moisture. This causes swelling and shrinkage, which can reduce strength, elasticity and lead to brittleness. The recommended temperature and RH for environments in which works of art are displayed or stored is generally  $22\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C} \pm 2^{\circ}$ ;  $50\% \text{ RH} \pm 5\%$ .

There are sensors in every gallery space of the *Art Deco* exhibition. Small boxes on the walls at shoulder/artwork height are linked to a computerised air-conditioning system that regulates the temperature and RH. The system is monitored by a regular printout in graph form.

## Mould

Mould spores will start to grow if the RH is above 65%. It is difficult to remove mould spore stains from textiles.

## Dirt and Dust

Textiles are displayed in sealed showcases to protect them from dust and provide a barrier to insects and, most importantly, visitors.

## Insects

Infestations of insects that feed on fibres and deposit stains can cause serious damage to textiles in a very short time. The Conservation Department of the National Gallery of Victoria has introduced an Integrated Pest Management system.

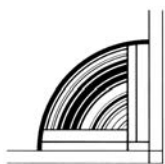
## Display

Flat display is recommended for textiles with heavily beaded and appliquéd surfaces such as the *Chimère evening dress*. Flat display is ideal for most textiles as it frees them from the stress of supporting their own weight.

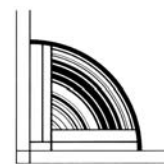
## Handling

Frequent handling can transfer dirt and grease that damages delicate fabrics. It is important to always wash your hands before handling works and to remove jewellery and watches. White cotton gloves should always be worn.

When textiles are handled, they should be supported as much as possible. Moving costumes horizontally on a clean flat board is an ideal method. The *Chimère evening dress* will be transported on a backboard with padded inner support. Carrying a textile or garment by its top edge can cause damage.



# Chimère, evening dress



## Research and Investigation: Haute Couture

### What is haute couture ?

Read the following article online: *The Hands that Sew the Sequins* by Elizabeth Hayt, 2006.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/19/fashion/thursdaystyles/19ATELIERS.html>

Discuss the following quote: 'Fashion isn't necessarily about concept but about craftsmanship'.

Valerie Steele, director, Museum of Fashion Institute of Technology, New York.

Jeanne Paquin employed the services of ateliers to add couture details to her garments. The numbers of artisans working in France has diminished significantly from about 10,000 in 1920 to about 200 today.

Why has this number diminished ?

What will happen to haute couture if the skills of specialists die out ?

How do we preserve the knowledge and standard of specialist artisans ?

Explore the hidden world of Melbourne artisans located in the Nicholas Building, 27-41 Swanston Street, Melbourne (for details, see *Handmade in Melbourne*).

### Materials and Technology

How did the invention of the Singer sewing machine and the zip revolutionise clothing production ?

Create a mind map exploring the possible impacts. Items to consider: design, construction, fabric selection, mass production and patterns.

Compare dressmaking techniques of designers from the 1920s to today's designers.

French silks were valued as sumptuous fashion fabrics. Explore the history of silk textile production in Lyon from the 18th century.

### Social and Historical

Gain insights into the world of Jeanne Paquin.

Write a personal response considering the following:

- Historical and cultural sources of inspiration.
- Social context of Paquin's work in time and place.
- People who would wear her creations.

## ACTIVITY

### The Modern Woman

Flapper fashion epitomised the liberated culture of Paris in the 1920s during a period of dramatic social, political and technological change. The French called the style 'garçonne'. Research this word to discover why.

Research and design the essential wardrobe for the 1920s woman. Consider the following:

shape/silhouette	underwear	hairstyle
millinery	make-up	stockings
shoes, and	jewellery/accessories.	

Art Deco fashion traditionally displayed stylised motifs and shapes borrowed from a range of sources. Develop a decorative pattern that can be stylised and repeated on fabric, using the basic shape of the flapper shift.

Identify other examples of innovative textile design in the exhibition *Art Deco 1910-1939*.

### Marketing and Consumerism

The Paquin fashion label became a powerful symbol of status and prestige. Research Paquin's marketing strategy with a focus on social trends, design and construction, and quality of textile items.

Examine the factors affecting consumer demand in Paris during the 1920s.

Explore the marketing strategies used by other fashion houses of the time including Chanel and Vionnet. Consider the influence of fashion photography and cinema.

Compare the marketing strategies of fashion houses from the 1920s to 2008.

Trace the development of the Art Deco style of fashion from its emergence in Paris, including the shift from individual luxury items to more affordable, mass-produced lines between 1910 and 1939.

### The Exotic

Oriental styling was a major feature in the work of Jeanne Paquin. International travel between Asia and Europe and various exhibitions and publications influenced designers of the time.



# Chimère, evening dress




---

**Further Reading**

Benton, Charlotte, Tim Benton, Ghislaine Wood (eds.). *Art Deco 1910–1939*. V&A Publications, London, 2003.

Healy, Robyn. *Fashion and Textiles in the International Collections of the National Gallery of Victoria*. NGV, Melbourne, 2003.

Healy, Robyn. *Worth to Dior, 20th Century Fashion from the Collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1993.

Lussier, Suzanne. *Art Deco Fashion*. V&A Publications, London, 2003.

Samuels, Charlotte. *Art Deco Fabrics*. V&A Publications, London, 2003.

Wood, Ghislaine. *Essential Art Deco*. V&A Publications, London, 2003.

Phyland, Jan, Janet De Silva. *Handmade in Melbourne*. Geoff Slattery, Melbourne, 2006.

**Websites**

Art Deco fashion: <http://www.adsw.org/resource/websites/Fashion/>

Canadian Conservation Institute: <http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/>

Costume museums in Europe: <http://www.marquise.de/en/misc/museums.shtml> - fr  
(includes costume plates, patterns and articles)

Fashion eras, history: <http://www.fashion-era.com/>

History of fashion and costume: <http://www.designerhistory.com/>

Textile care: <http://www.preservation.gc.ca/flashindex.html>

Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology: <http://www.fitnyc.edu/museum/>

National Gallery of Victoria: <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/>

Powerhouse Museum: <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/>

The Textile Museum: <http://www.textilemuseum.org/>

<http://www.textilemuseum.org/CARE/BROCHURES/guidelines.htm>

Victoria and Albert Museum: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/>

*Art Deco 1910–1939*: [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1157\\_art\\_deco/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1157_art_deco/)

Vintage Fashion Guild: <http://www.vintagefashionguild.org/>

Please note: These websites have been gathered from various sources and the listing of them does not mean an endorsement by the National Gallery of Victoria.

Teachers: Although we check each site before listing, please ensure you have thoroughly checked any site before distributing to your students.

---