Leading up to the Nazi occupation of France in 1940, Paris was the hub of the fashion world. As an American designer, Caroline Gershel-Davis discovered her way of keeping up with the desire for French Fashion: by pirating hundreds of designs. The Historic Costume and Textile Collection recently acquired 2000 of her stolen sketches, along with the mysterious stories behind them.

With a team of hired artists, Gershel-Davis would have designs sketched right from design rooms and shows. Upon acquiring the sketches we were told that some of them were drawn outside or in the bathrooms in the middle of a runway show. Gershel-Davis would then smuggle these sketches out of Paris by gluing them into the pages of magazines.

To further our understanding of Davis and the timeline in which she obtained these sketches, we began comparing the sketches to fashion publications of the time period. We were able to uncover matches in Vogue Women’s Wear Daily, and the New York Times. We found that the majority of Davis’s sketches were linked to designs published in spring of 1940. Our findings allow us to better understand how French designs were leaving Nazi-occupied France.

In our initial research, we focused on the sketches that had designer names written on them. This way we were able to find similar designs or duplicates in major fashion magazines and publications. This gave us a clear range of dates.

This sketch is an exact replica of a Piguet dress featured in L’Official de la Mode in 1940.

This bolero jacket, sketched by one of Gershel-Davis’ artists, is nearly identical to a design by the House of Paquin featured in the June 15, 1939 issue of Vogue. The writing on the side of the sketch gave the designer fabric or trim information.

We spotted this beaded band Balenciaga dress in the June 15, 1940 issue of Vogue. While not exactly the same, similar elements are in both designs.

This collection includes hundreds of pirated sketches from designers including Balenciaga, Piguet, Paquin, Lelong, Lanvin, Chanel, and Alix. We focused on a handful of these designers during our research.