BACKGROUND

French Fashion before World War II

Fashion in France was a branch of high art, whereas, in the U.S., fashion was perceived as a branch of high art. Thus, the French fashion was more accessible to common people, but causing designers to lose millions of dollars in designs and sell them to manufacturers across the world, making the designs more valuable.

With France always being the center of attention, the talent of other foreign designers was overshadowed. Just as the royalty used to control what fashion was acceptable, the French trends were echoed across the world in years leading up the World War II.

One key to making these trends so accessible, were copyists that would steal designs and sell them to manufacturers across the world, making the designs more accessible to common people, but causing designers to lose millions of dollars in revenue. For instance, “in the late 1920s, the French couture industries lost an estimated five hundred million French francs to copying, equal to one billion dollars, according to journalist George Le Fevre” (Pouillard, 2011).

Fashion During War

When World War II did break out in Europe, changes had to be made in order to adapt to the current situations. Fabric, leather, and other materials were rationed in order to be able to provide soldiers with uniforms. Many fashion designers just up and left their design houses to move to safer locations. Then came June 14, 1940. This was the day that the Nazis officially occupied Paris, France, isolating them from the world. While war was not an ideal atmosphere for fashion, designer Lucien Lelong kept designing, in an effort to boost French morale. “This is a time for the French to show faith in themselves. Difficult times are those that stimulate and inspire rather than the easy ones, and you will see Paris couturiers will accomplish prodigies—have, in fact, already done so” (Cannell, 1941). But even as France was struggling, other cities jumped at the chance to claim themselves the new fashion capital of the world. To illustrate, “Mayor La Guardia says New York is now the fashion center of the world,” but “The Germans say that Berlin is to be the fashion center of the New Europe…Meanwhile Paris, which has the most to lose in this argument, is a prisoner” (Adams, 1941).

Research Questions

To begin with, much background research was done to get an idea of what fashion was like before, during, and after the WWII, and how that affected fashion and the copying business and how the copyists affected the designers.

After that, we began to organize these 2,000 illustrations, by organizing them into smaller groups. Some of the illustrations were pasted in the pages of an old magazine (to smuggle them through customs), some were marked with the letters “dupl.”, some were marked with “original”, and very few were marked with the name of a French designer. The groups that I primarily worked with was a group of roughly 100 illustrations that were pasted in a magazine with dates ranging from June 13th, 1940 through August 3rd, 1940.

We started looking through French La Official magazines starting with the corresponding dates on the illustrations. A side-by-side comparison of each illustration and each magazine photographed was done to try to find even slight similarities between the two. We kept track of all the similarities found. We also kept track of the dates listed on the illustrations, the signatures, the descriptions of the garments, and potential original designers, striving to find any kind of pattern we could.

More research was conducted on American magazines to try to find any sign of the copied designs in the American market. We looked through The Chicago Tribune and the New York Times to try to find any further correspondence.

METHOD

The purpose of this research project was to look at a small portion of Caroline Gershel Davis’ illustrations and try to recognize any set of systems Davis may have used to execute her business. We wanted to try to organize the large amount of images by their labels, dates, or signatures.

Research was done to find similarities in vintage French and American magazines to prove that she was a copyist working in France. We tried to trace those designs back to America and find if she was selling them to American manufacturers.

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CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

In conclusion, we found that there were the most similar illustrations and photographs in the La Official French magazines from 1940. When searching for adaptations of the designs in American magazines, The Chicago Tribune and The New York Times did not provide many photographs, but did have useful articles about the state of the fashion world during World War II. Other information gathered incudes the fact there were four different signatures of the artists who drew the illustrations, each having different amounts of pieces in this particular group of illustrations. Although this research is an incomplete picture of what was going on in the copy houses during World War II, this research may be able to help future researchers. My suggestions for future researchers is to stick with a small amount of illustrations to work with and look at a larger variety of magazines to try to stumble across any copies. Continue to keep track of dates, notes, signatures, and potential original designers to try to find out which designers they copied the most. Look into the possibility that Davis and her team could have gotten their designs from sources other than fashion shows, such as through clients, intermediaries, workers, sketches, references, or toiles.

Sources