

# 'The Easy Allure of Flivver Dressing': Originality, Mass Production and Canadian Fashion Reporting

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In one brief morning you can shop the world around; buy treasures from the Orient, Paris, London, New York . . . every known centre where delightful things abound. And they are just around the corner from your own home. That is the charm and wonder of the Mayfair shops. The hat, the frock, the bag, symphonies of chic, each bearing the magic name of some world-famous designer . . . and yet, comparatively inexpensive. One cannot sail to Paris for every gown . . . but proud Paris comes to you through the shops of Mayfair.



'The Shops of Mayfair in Montreal', *Mayfair* (April 1928): 95

## The Paris Letter

by EUSTELLA BURKE



The dress, black, is a classic, made to be worn with the white collar. It is a simple, elegant design, and the skirt is long and full. The woman is standing and looking towards the camera.

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## Making Original Frocks From Paris Inspirations—by our writer in Paris

In this Paris letter, The Chatelaine's special correspondent shows some valuable suggestions for interpreting the mid-winter mode





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MARCH, 1937 Ten

# Chatelaine

For March, The Queen



**IT'S NEW!**  
But is it meant for Me?

THESE NEW FROCKS are a real revelation in style. They are the latest in fashion, and they are sure to be popular with all who are interested in the latest in fashion. They are the latest in fashion, and they are sure to be popular with all who are interested in the latest in fashion.



Certainly you're not a fashion plate ... lucky you. You've got quirks and lines and a style personality quite, quite different from that of anyone else in the world. It gives you an opportunity to have a distinctive flair of your own - instead of looking like number six in a series of department store dummies. [...] So don't carry off the first spring clothes you see that are obviously patterned after the dictates of the Paris designers. Think yourself into them first. [...]

Just above you'll see two very charming girls - both decked out in the *dernier cri* of spring millinery. The upper photograph is a clever example of adaptation. The model has a round face, so in choosing one of the new sailor-beret types of fine milan hats, she doesn't go too pancakey, or too tipsy as to line, or too extreme in any way. [...] But, alas - the girl below has made a mistaken flight into a pretty kettle of feathers. It's a new and smart hat - but meant for the petite, very perky type of *jeune fille*. And obviously this type of hat demands a tight-fitting flared shoulderline.



'It's New! But is it meant for Me?'  
*Chatelaine* (March 1937)

what true Canadian has not dreamed of seeing his country recognised . . . taking its place in the world of arts, of letters . . . establishing its individuality . . . individual literature . . . individual books. . . *magazines*? Who has not yearned to see virile young Canada expressing itself . . . to see sophisticated, cultured, yea, even distinguished Canada depicted to the life . . . charmingly, interestingly, even amusingly!

And you . . . the fashionable elect of our country . . . women who are distinguished for your good style . . . you, no doubt, have dreamed of seeing the mode adapted to the interesting, the vivid personality of Canadian women! You saw the possibilities, the marvelous scope for a magazine which could do just this.



[J. Herbert Hodgins], editorial. *Mayfair* (March 1928): 11.



Chatelaine March 1931

Chatelaine April 1930

The prestige garnered by showing or selling European couture was clearly promoted in Eaton's fall fashion show in 1947, 'Overture to Fashion', at which the commentator announced, 'To own a model frock means to own a portion of someone's creative mind. It gives a woman a thrill to know she can walk abroad and never "meet herself" ... She will be recognised as a woman of taste and discrimination wherever she goes.' [...]

An haute couture design purchased directly from the couture house was an insurance of exclusivity for the client's wardrobe. Her *vendeuse* [...] would be familiar with the client's lifestyle and social circle, thus providing security against the client encountering someone else in 'her' design. By the 1950s, a more serious issue was to safeguard a private client against buying a 'Ford', a design that would soon be knocked off in the mass-produced clothing market.

Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*. University of British Columbia Press and the Royal Ontario Museum, 2001. 40, 44



Gwennyth Barrington, *Chatelaine* (March 1932)

... you have found yourself on Broadway. Immediately you will notice another of those fetching little Agnes adaptations confronting you; two more may pass you in quick succession. The copy of the Jenny blouse suit will be marching by [...] on a thin girl wearing pince-nez, on a straw blonde of generous Swedish proportions, on a brace of brunettes from a Harlem night club, until it will seem that the street is swarming with women whose one idea is to conform to the same silhouette. [...] These "runners" or "flivvers", so called by the sorority of better shops, have reproduced themselves so widely that a select house would not touch anything resembling their original lines with a ten-foot pole, and yet the style idea will be repeated everywhere until it is as epidemic as checker cabs.



Gwennyth Barrington, *Chatelaine* (March 1932)

... that which seems inherent in Canadian women – the gift of wearing clothes which depend for their appeal on some ineffable quality of individuality which defies the quick turn-over of mass production! [...] unquestionably Canadian women have succeeded where their American sisters have failed in achieving individuality of choice. Because a single effect is good, does not mean that it is better when it is repeated. [...]

Canadian women have learned to look beyond the mere statement of a fashion style – and to analyze its possibilities for personal adjustments. Perhaps it is the sheer geographic necessity of blending American chic with English practicality which has produced this success, which, mingling with unconfessed worldly wisdom, has led them past the easy allure of 'flivver' dressing, to the very sound conclusion that, as there is only one of each of them, it is the subtlest sophistication to capitalize on the fact.



### Wartime fashion coverage in *Chatelaine*

A smart French woman was seen in the Ritz the other day with a black bag on which was inscribed, "It must stop once and for all." But we probably won't go that far in Canada.

- 'The 3 Ages of Women – and that 1940 Look.' (April 1940)

So long as the French couturier sets the fashions, women's clothes will echo the heartaches and triumphs of France. [...] Our shoes become sensible ... don't France's smartest women wear low heels for new hard-working days?'

- Lotta Dempsey, 'Will war affect our fashions?' (February 1940)

The French influence in Canada should contribute much towards carrying on the tradition of French couture in the Western Hemisphere.

- Kay Murphy, 'Fashion Shorts.' (October 1940)

The Dominion [is] going to stop following Paris and New York slavishly, and formulate some of her own ideas for clothes.

- Carolyn Damon, 'How Do We Dress from Here?' (February 1941)





'À New-York . . . À Paris . . .'  
*La Revue Populaire* (juillet 1946)

Nette, soignée, élégante à toute heure, telle est la New-Yorkaise, femme d'affaires qui circule sur Fifth Avenue, sur Park Avenue aussi bien que sur Broadway. Le vêtement sport sied à ravir à sa silhouette élancée et gracieuse, et s'adapte à sa vie active. La robe américaine est simple et du genre fourreau, excentrique et théâtrale quelquefois, mais avant tout pratique. Ingénieux, ses couturiers transforment une petite robe de rue en robe bain de soleil; avec un ruban de brocard, des perles ou de brillants accessoires, ils en font une robe habillée que l'ouvrière, aussi bien que la femme du monde, peut se procurer. Malheureusement, les créations américaines, taillées rapidement et en grande quantité, ne durent que l'espace d'une saison. La New-Yorkaise est toujours à la recherche d'un arrangement nouveau, d'une décoration différente, d'une fantaisie originale qui mettront en valeur son charme.

Depuis des siècles, Paris est considéré comme le centre de la haute couture. Ce qui fascine dans la mode parisienne, c'est cette ligne du couturier-créateur, c'est un drapé savant qui épouse la taille, c'est un mouvement qui donne une allure royale, c'est la grâce d'une épaule arrondie, c'est un décolleté coquet et indiscret; c'est le charme séduisant du couturier-décorateur qui joue avec les couleurs; c'est l'ingéniosité du sculpteur qui drapé et fait jaillir de ses doigts la coiffure idéale; ce sont les doigts patients et habiles des midinettes qui travaillent amoureusement à la réalisation de ces rêves tant caressés.



'À New-York . . . À Paris . . .'  
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what I term the 'originary authentic', equated authenticity with the original or the one-of-a-kind, something that was not a copy. The mystique of the originary object had long been felt, but the turn of the century saw its rapid emergence as a powerful advertising strategy. [...] The originary authentic was in part defined by and valued for its alleged separation from the mass market, and it was likewise aggressively marketed in what are now familiar strategies: appeals to the coterie, to high fashion, to the limited edition. Part of the originary's allure was its evocation of the prototype [...] of being the first, the cutting edge, the new. [...] The power of selling the originary authentic lay in its paradoxical promise: middle-class consumers might (allegedly) have both the genuine article and something that they could easily purchase, both the exclusive and the accessible, the original and the perfect reproduction.

- Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic*. Oxford UP, 2009. 9-10

Middlebrow culture is the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural.

John Guillory, 'The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture.' Review of *The Western Canon* by Harold Bloom. *Transition* 67 (1995): 87.

In the twentieth century fashion, without losing its obsession with the new and different, with change and exclusivity, has been mass-produced. The mass production of fashionable styles – itself highly contradictory – links the politics of fashion to fashion as art. It is connected both to the evolution of styles that circulate in 'high' and avant-garde art; and to popular culture and taste.

Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. 1985. Second edition. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003. 8

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