

*SHOCKING!*  
*THE ART & FASHION*  
*OF ELSA*  
*SCHIAPARELLI*

*Philadelphia Museum of Art*  
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### *Curator*

*Dilys E. Blum, Curator of Costume and Textiles*

*This packet of teacher materials was developed by the staff  
of the Division of Education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

# *Shocking!*

## THE ART & FASHION OF ELSA SCHIAPARELLI

*A Note to Teachers on the Use of these Materials:*

*This teacher packet is meant to be used in your classroom before, after or instead of visiting the exhibition. These materials were prepared for use with grades 5 through 12. Therefore, you may need to adapt the information to the particular level of your students.*

### ***THIS PACKET INCLUDES:***

1. OBJECT INFORMATION
2. SCHIAPARELLI IN THE CONTEXT OF FASHION HISTORY
3. BIOGRAPHY OF ELSA SCHIAPARELLI
4. SCHIAPARELLI AND SURREALISM
5. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES
6. RESOURCES



## *Object Information*

*Hand Knit Sweater with Bowknot, November 1927. Black & White Wool.*

*Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mme Elsa Schiaparelli.*



### *Discussion Questions*

- *How has Schiaparelli decorated this sweater?*
- *Why do you think Schiaparelli decided to knit a bow right into the sweater instead of making a scarf to go with it?*
- *This sweater was unique at the time. How do you think people reacted to it? Would you have bought one? Why or why not?*

*In the 1920's, the sweater was an important piece of clothing for a new type of "modern" woman who would rather play a game of tennis than sit still in a parlor. But sweaters of the time tended to lose their shape quickly which resulted in a sloppy appearance. In the Spring of 1927, Elsa Schiaparelli noticed a woman in Paris wearing a plain but unusually woven sweater, which didn't seem to stretch and had what Schiaparelli later described as a "steady look." Schiaparelli discovered that the sweater had been knitted by an Armenian woman using a special double layered stitch. Elsa soon recruited the young woman to knit several prototypes for her. Schiaparelli drew a white bow to look like a scarf tied around the neck of a sweater on a black background and had the design knitted into the sweaters. The sweater had its public debut when Elsa wore it to a luncheon that included several leaders of the fashion world. The sweater caused a sensation. A buyer from Lord and Taylor ordered 40 copies on the spot. Although her first collection launched the previous year had been well-received, it was the bow knot sweater which secured her fame.*

*Evening Dress with Lobster Print (Collaboration with Salvador Dali). Summer/Fall 1937. White and Red Silk Organza. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mme Elsa Schiaparelli.*



### *Discussion Questions*

- *Schiaparelli's designs were often shocking. What might people have found shocking about this dress?*

*Why?*

- *Schiaparelli is playing with contradictions and opposites in her designs by choosing unusual combinations of color, decoration and texture. In what ways does this design play with contradictions?*

*The oversized lobster on this dress is strangely out of place on such a romantic and feminine gown. The odd juxtaposition between evening gown and sea creature was certainly not an accident. Many of Schiaparelli's designs were both shocking and humorous.*

*The Lobster motif was a result of a collaboration with Salvador Dali who had been employing lobsters in his artwork for years, as in his famous Lobster Telephone from 1936. In Spring 1937, Schiaparelli asked Dali to design a lobster as a decoration for a white organdy evening gown. The dress was made famous when it*

*appeared in Vogue magazine modeled by Wallis Simpson. As an American Divorcee, Simpson gained notoriety when the Duke of Windsor chose to marry her rather than become King of England.*



Salvador Dali. Lobster Telephone. 1937.

*Shoe Hat. (Collaboration with Salvador Dali). Winter 1937-38. Black Wool Felt. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Rose Messing.*



### *Discussion Questions*

- *Why would Schiaparelli design a hat to look like a shoe?*
- *If you owned a clothing store, would you order this hat for your store? Why or why not?*
- *Schiaparelli challenged our idea of a hat by making it look like a shoe. Can you think of any clothing trends of today that challenge convention?*

*Accessories played an important role in Schiaparelli's collections from the beginning. She liked to design an entire ensemble, including shoes, hats, gloves and jewelry. By the 1930's, Elsa had a reputation for creating daring and innovative accessories but it was her hats that made the biggest impact. She used bold colors and unusual materials and often adapted everyday objects for her designs such as airplane propellers, igloos and even a birdcage holding a canary.*

*This Shoe hat from 1937 was perhaps her most whimsical design. The hat was designed by Salvador Dali who was inspired by a photograph of himself wearing his wife's shoe on his head.*





*Evening Jacket (Detail). Winter 1938-39. Blue Silk Velvet, Metallic Thread, Glass Beads and Rhinestones, embroidered by Maison Lesage. Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Anthony V Lynch.*



### *Discussion Questions*

- *Schiaparelli often based her collections on a theme. What would you say the theme of this jacket is?*
- *Can you see any signs of the zodiac?*
- *What materials did Schiaparelli use?*
- *This is an evening jacket. What might you wear it with?*

Since 1935, Schiaparelli had been presenting thematic collections at her salon, theatrically staged with dramatic lighting, backdrops and music. A fashion editor who regularly attended these events recalls that the front rows were filled with royalty, politicians, artists, film stars who pushed towards the models "as if it were rush hour." This sparkling and boldly decorated evening jacket is part of Schiaparelli's Zodiac collection from Winter 1938/39 which was one of her most imaginative collections. Clothing in this collection was decorated with the stars, the moon and the sun and horoscopes were printed on coats and jackets that foretold the future. The proportions of the clothing were built upon the strictest measurements based on Euclid's elements, a treatise on geometry. As a young child, Elsa's Uncle Giovanni had pointed out that the beauty marks on his niece's face formed the shape of the Big Dipper so she adopted the constellation as her good luck charm. This elaborate jacket is decorated with the signs of the zodiac and the planets, woven with gold and silver embroidery. Schiaparelli's symbol, the big dipper, is on the left shoulder. It would have been worn over a simple gown forming an "evening suit." The Evening Suit, which was popularized by Schiaparelli, became a standard among fashionably dressed women.

Evening Coat. Winter 1939-40. Patchwork, Quilted Felt  
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mme Elsa Schiaparelli



### *Discussion Questions*

- *This is also an evening jacket. How is this jacket different from the last jacket? (Think about material, design, shape and texture).*
- *Where might Schiaparelli have found inspiration for this jacket?*

*The thematic collections and theatrical presentations continued with the Modern Comedy collection for Spring 1939. The collection was based on the Commedia dell'arte an improvisational comedy, which originated in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Schiaparelli adapted colors and patterns from the actor's traditional costumes with brightly colored satins, peaked clown hats, and theatrical masks. This evening jacket was based on the costume of Harlequin, one of the stock characters from the Commedia dell'arte. Harlequin was known as a prankster and traditionally wore a costume covered with random patches of every color. Over the centuries the patches evolved into blue, red, and yellow diamonds. This floor length jacket, with its multicolored diamond shaped patches of wool felt, is Schiaparelli's interpretation of Harlequin's costume. Schiaparelli was not the only artist who adopted the harlequin pattern; the theme was also popular with modern artists such as Man Ray and Pablo Picasso.*



## *in the Context of Fashion History*

Like many modern artists, Schiaparelli built upon art from the past as well as reacting against it. Her designs follow trends in women's fashion that had been developing for decades. In the late 1800s, the tone of fashion was for the most part set by women of the upper classes. It was these women who had the time, money and reason to pursue high fashion. Clothing mirrored the strict stratification of Victorian society where clothes indicated social position. *Full dress* functions were an important part of high society protocol. Like society, the acceptable fashion for these events was artificial and rigidly prescribed.

The formal, full dress style did not suit all women however, especially those who led a more active, less opulent life. In 1867, a trainless *short skirt* was introduced which proved more practical. The lack of embellishment was controversial yet the practicality of the new style could not be denied and the *short skirt* gained major ground during the next 15 years. In 1885, the trend toward practicality continued with the introduction of the *walking suit*. The cut of the skirt and jacket combination was modeled upon that of men's suits, which allowed for more freedom of movement. The style was more practical for women as they participated in the outdoor activities which were becoming increasingly popular and acceptable. The austere, unadorned lines of the suit did not appeal to many women at first but the walking suit came to be appreciated for its comfort and convenience. It was universally accepted by the 1900s.

The trend toward practical fashion continued after the outbreak of World War I. Wartime prompted many women to change their roles and adjust their clothing. Society life was suspended during the war and many upper and middle class women spent their time doing charitable work and some even replaced their husbands in trade work. Fashion reflected the greater role women played outside the home. Skirts became shorter and the waist was low and unstructured. In addition, many women were spending time driving and playing sports. And in response to this trend, the first examples of sportswear for women, tennis skirts, sports sweaters and beach pajamas appear. While clothing was becoming more practical, it

also became more uniform. Specialized equipment was introduced to manufacture clothing more efficiently but the new technology did not allow for as much variety or refinement. However, these advances in fashion technology allowed for the creation of synthetic fabrics which freed women from bulky woolsens.

Many of the major fashion houses were slow to accept the comfort and practicality trend at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and suffered for their lack of foresight. Smaller, more savvy fashion enterprises were able to secure a portion of the market and designers such as Madeleine Vionnet and Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel began to make a name for themselves. These designers showed that mass production did not mean the end for fashion. Vionnet invented the bias cut which is cut at an angle of 45 degrees rather than on the straight grain. It allowed a piece of fabric to hang and drape in sinuous folds and stretch over the round contours of the body. Chanel followed where the *walking suit* left off. Her version of the three piece suit consisted of a cardigan, pullover sweater and a skirt made out of patterned jersey fabric. Her use of jersey knit exalted the status of knitwear, which had originally been used for undergarments and then as a sportswear.

Schiaparelli followed suit a few years later, presenting practical and comfortable sweaters, wool cardigan jackets, beach pajamas and an array of matching accessories. With her early collections, Schiaparelli readily accepted the idea of comfort and practicality in the design of women's clothing, using suits, sportswear and the evening gown as the basis for her collections. Yet Elsa reacted against the simplicity and muted color palette of Chanel and many other contemporary designers with her use of bold, contrasting colors, including a “shocking” pink of her own invention. She introduced whimsical decorations, patterns and accessories to the world of fashion, showing gowns decorated with lobsters, newsprint or cancelled stamp patterns, buttons in the shape of tiny snails and collars made from feathers and monkey fur. She often exaggerated particular features such as the shoulders by adding padding to her coats and jackets. Schiaparelli was also innovative when it came to both materials and fasteners. Her first sweaters were made from a mixture of metallic and wool yarn and a three piece beach ensemble she designed was crafted from linen with a terrycloth lining. She made great use of the zipper and metal clips as an alternative to buttons, using one on the sleeve of a ski costume to allow for unencumbered movement.

*It was Schiaparelli's bold, whimsical approach to fashion which allowed her to differentiate herself from other designers in the 1920s and 30s. Chanel once described her as that "Italian artist who makes clothes" but it was her artful approach that made her distinctive. She built upon fashion trends that had been developing since the late 1800s, branding them with her own unique sensibility. Although many of the designs are over sixty years old, her revolutionary approach continues to influence the fashion world of today.*



## *Biography of Elsa Schiaparelli*

### *Childhood*

In 1890, Elsa Luisa Maria Schiaparelli was born at the Palazzo Corsini in Rome. Her intellectual father ran a library that was housed in the palace. Her much older sister Beatrice was thought to be a great beauty while Elsa was thought to be unfashionably thin. Although she was a voracious reader, Schiaparelli was a reluctant student and was annoyed by anything academic. It was Elsa's Uncle Giovanni, a famous astronomer, who recognized her intellectual curiosity, spending hours with her looking through his telescope at the heavens. At the age of 19, she started a course in Philosophy at the University of Rome. She had a mystical way of thinking about the world and found that she enjoyed the course immensely. Two years later, she published a book of poems about sorrow, love, sensuality and mysticism. The book shocked her traditional family and her father packed her off to a convent from which she was removed after going on a hunger strike.

### *Broadening Horizons*

A year later, at the age of 22, Elsa was invited to England to work as a nanny and she gratefully accepted the position. On the way, she stopped in Paris where she was enchanted by the city's style, its powerful women and its avant-garde attitudes. While there, she was invited to attend a ball. Schiaparelli had never been to a ball nor did she own any gowns so she bought some dark blue fabric from a department store which she draped and pinned around her body. After ten days in Paris, she moved on to London where she spent much of her free time visiting museums, attending operas and lectures. Elsa was spellbound by one particular lecturer, Wilhelm Wendt de Kerlor, as he spoke of magic, eternal life and the power of the soul over the body. She met him after the lecture and the two were married a year later. By 1921, Elsa's husband had become very successful as a lecturer and the couple relocated to New York.. Elsa was immediately impressed by the modernity of New York and was struck by the status of American

women, who played tennis and golf, drove cars and wore corsetless garments. These were startlingly new concepts to her. Her husband, however, was not as impressed, unable to cope with the pressures of city living he began to spend more and more time on the road, lecturing and giving private philosophical consultations. By the time Elsa gave birth to her only child, her husband had abandoned his family and she was left to care for Maria Luisa Yvonne Radha on her own. Her daughter's doctor took pity on Elsa, who at this point was living in a cheap hotel, and put her in touch with Gaby Picabia, ex-wife of Parisian born artist, Francis Picabia. Gaby had moved to New York to start a business selling clothes designed in Paris and she was struggling to build a clientele. The doctor had hoped that Elsa, with her contacts, could assist the businesswoman. Elsa began working for Gaby and eventually made the acquaintance of people in her circle of friends, including the artists Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Alfred Stieglitz.

### *The Rise of the House of Schiaparelli*

In the mid 1920's, both Gaby Picabia and Man Ray left New York for Paris and Schiaparelli decided to follow. She was quickly immersed in the Parisian artistic and social scene while still struggling to support herself financially. It was only by chance that her situation changed. Needing a dress for a society ball, Gaby asked Elsa to design one for her. The dress was seen by Paul Poiret, an influential fashion designer in Paris at the time, who told Gaby to "compliment the designer" for him. Encouraged by his reaction, Elsa began designing clothes for herself and friends. In 1925, she was asked to design for a small dress house in Paris owned by an American friend. Although Schiaparelli's designs received favorable reviews, the dress house closed in 1926 for financial reasons. Undeterred, Schiaparelli presented her first collection out of her attic apartment in 1927. The collection included hand knit sweaters decorated with geometric designs which were featured in French Vogue the next month. Schiaparelli's sweaters were knit with a special stitch which helped them keep their shape, something which knitwear of the time did not do. In the Spring of 1927, she continued to show collections out of her apartment, gradually expanding her collection to include, skirts, wool cardigan jackets and accessories. In August of that year, she included a sweater with the illusion of a white bow knitted into a black background. This sweater was a huge success and was illustrated in Vogue in December 1927 with the caption "artistic masterpiece." The next year she added bathing suits, beach pajamas, tweed sport suits, two-piece linen dresses, coats, and ski costumes to her



collection. The sportswear she presented was very practical: sleeveless beach coats were lined with terrycloth, her beach bags unfolded into beach blankets and metal zippers on the ski costume sleeves allowed for freer arm movement.

### ***Success & Expansion***

In 1929, Schiaparelli exchanged her attic room for salons and workrooms two floors down. In 1930 & 1931, the designer continued to make advancements in practical sportswear. Her backless bathing suit included a patented invisible brassiere and one of her tennis costumes included a divided skirt, a bold new step in women's fashion. Lili de Alvarez shocked the tennis world by wearing Schiaparelli's divided tennis skirt to a tournament in London. Bolstered by her success in Sportswear, Schiaparelli introduced evening wear to her collection in 1931: reversible black and white gowns with draping trains that hook up under the waist for dancing. The next year she opened a small shop where she sold accessories at prices slightly lower than the main showroom. At this point, she had 400 employees working in eight different workshops. In 1933, Schiaparelli returned to New York, where she was besieged by reporters and photographers. By then her designs were well known in the United States because they had appeared in over thirty motion pictures, including *Every Day's a Holiday* with Mae West and *Moulin Rouge* with Zsa Zsa Gabor.

### ***Imaginative Design***

During the next couple years, Schiaparelli became fascinated with the use of fasteners and experimented with thick, square nickel buttons, black shield-shaped clips, copper slides, and elastic insets in skirts which replaced the need for fasteners of any sort. In her Fall 1934 collection, she used white plastic hands in place of buttons on her coats prompting Time Magazine to put her on their cover with the caption "Mme Elsa Schiaparelli . . . glorifies the gadget, persecutes the button." In 1935, she moved from her salon at the Rue de la Paix to a ninety-eight room space at the Place Vendome. The space was transformed into 3 showrooms, offices and workrooms. The lower floor was turned into a boutique, the first of its kind, called the *Schiap Shop*. To celebrate the opening of her new space, she designed cotton and silk fabrics printed with her own press clippings. Schiaparelli also introduced evening gowns made of draped fabric which

were inspired by Saris worn by Indian princess Karam who had captivated Paris in the summer of 1934 during an official visit. For her summer 1935 collection, Elsa presented a "celestial silhouette" with soft, draping folds. In the summer of 1938, Schiaparelli introduced a Circus-themed collection, which was reflected in the designs, embroideries and trimmings. The theme for Spring 1939 was the equally imaginative Commedia dell'arte, with harlequin patchwork embroideries and zippers tipped with tinkling bells.

### *The Decline of the House of Schiaparelli*

In September 1939, France and England declare war on Germany and Elsa's Spring 1940 collection was based on a military theme with "trench" brown and camouflage print taffetas. In July of 1940, Schiaparelli sailed to New York to begin a lecture tour called "Clothes and the Woman." At the beginning of 1941, she sailed back to Europe only to return to New York in May. She lived in the city until the end of the war where she volunteered at various war-relief organizations. In 1945, when the war ended, she returned from her refuge in New York. In Paris, she found that the mood of fashion had changed.

Women were interested in what was termed the "New Look" which was a reaction to pre-war style. Christian Dior was proclaimed the master of the New Look, which was younger, romantic and soft. The look recalled the gloves, petticoats and corsets of 30 years before, a style that Schiaparelli had rejected. Although she continued to present collections, the financial situation at the house of Schiaparelli was grim. By December, 1954, she was forced to close her couture business. Yet she did not fade from sight. Up until her death in 1973, at age 83, she continued to receive visits from celebrities in her lavish apartment in Paris and a house that she owned in Tunisia. She traveled the world, attended concerts, the theatre, and all the major fashion shows. Although the House of Schiaparelli closed in 1954, her groundbreaking ideas continue to influence the fashion world of today, where her designs have been continuously imitated and adapted.



## *Schiaparelli and Surrealism*

Paris was awash with revolutionary artistic spirit during the first half of the twentieth century. This spirit manifested itself in a variety of art forms. Picasso and the Cubists abstracted images from the real world, capturing the essence of an object through shape and color. The Surrealists transcended the real world in order to explore the unconscious mind. Elsa Schiaparelli was a part of this Paris. She translated the basic elements of modern art, simplicity, continuity of line, and contrast, into wearable art. She chose to modify the design of a hat or a sweater as other modern artists modified forms of painting, sculpture, and literature. While Marcel Duchamp shocked the public by displaying a urinal in an art gallery, Schiaparelli shook up the fashion world by turning a shoe into a hat.

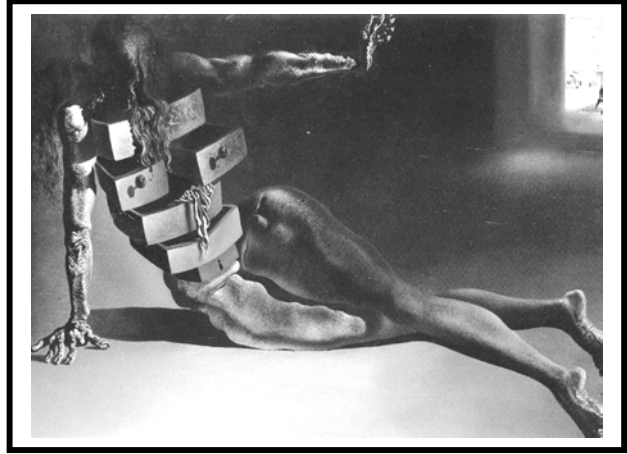
Throughout the twenties, Surrealist ideas provided inspiration for the fashion world and vice versa. Vogue hired surrealist artist Man Ray as a staff photographer and commissioned Salvador Dali and Giorgio de Chirico to design several magazine covers. Schiaparelli, out of all the fashion designers working during this time was most influenced by Surrealism. She was close friends with many of the major Surrealist artists including Salvador Dali, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and Jean Cocteau.

Throughout her career, she frequently collaborated with these artists but it is her collaboration with Salvador Dali which produced some of the most imaginative and unusual results.

In 1936, Schiaparelli and Salvador Dali presented suits and jackets with bureau-drawer pockets reflecting themes prevalent in Dali's Art.



*A Photograph of Schiaparelli's Desk Jacket  
from Vogue, September, 1936.*



*Salvador Dalí, Anthropomorphic Cabinet,  
Oil on Canvas, 1936*

*In that same year, she and Salvador Dalí created the "Shoe Hat," a black felt concoction in the shape of a high-heeled shoe with a shocking pink heel. In these designs, Schiaparelli and Dalí used the idea of displacement, where an object is selected and then removed from its usual environment. In doing so, they modify the object's original purpose. With the desk suit and the shoe hat, the artist and the designer altered an object's conventional meaning by transforming it into an item of clothing.*



## *Classroom Activities*

### **Shocking! T-Shirt Design**

*Give your students a chance to be unique and revolutionary fashion designers. Have students bring in an old t-shirt from home. Encourage them to alter the look of the t-shirt by cutting, tying, embellishing, adding texture etc.*

#### ***Materials:***

*Old T-Shirt, Scissors, fabric glue, fabric scraps, and embellishments such as sequins, buttons, feathers, ribbon, string.*

### **Shocking! Accessory**

*Inspired by the shoe hat? Have students bring a random object from home. Do not tell them what it will be used for. Ask them to turn it into an accessory or a piece of clothing.*



## *Resource List*

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