The Great War: Women and Fashion in a World at War, 1912-1922

Sara Hume
THE GREAT WAR
Women and Fashion in a World at War
1912-1922
For every fighter a woman worker

Adolph Treidler
American, ca. 1918
Color lithograph poster

War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
THE GREAT WAR
Women and Fashion in a World at War
1912-1922

Sara Hume

Kent State University Museum
July 24, 2014 - July 5, 2015
This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition *The Great War: Women and Fashion in a World at War, 1912-1922* held at the Kent State University Museum from July 24, 2014 to July 5, 2015.

This exhibition has received support from the Ohio Arts Council through a Sustainability Grant.

Copyright © 2014 Kent State University Museum
ISBN 0-9968318-6-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the Kent State University Museum.

Kent State University, Kent State and KSU are registered trademarks and may not be used without permission.

Published by the Kent State University Museum
Sara Hume, Author and Art Director
Joanne Arnett, Photographer
Vanessa Port, Photographer

Rust colored silk damask suit and ivory net blouse, American, 1912-14, Suit: Gift of Mrs. W. A. Talbott, KSUM 1986.32.6 ab; blouse: Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Raymond R. Myers KSUM 1985.42.17

US Navy Yeoman (F) summer uniform, American, 1918, Gift of the family of Lois Jane Houghton Miller, KSUM 2013.43.1 a-d

Corset of cotton eyelet, American, 1914, Gift of Warnaco, Inc., KSUM 1983.3.52

Olive wool coat with fur trim, American, ca. 1915, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Gottlieb, KSUM 1984.1.94

US Army Infantry uniform, American, 1917, In memory of Fred Jilek, KSUM 1993.36.1 a-g

Canvas and leather boots, American, ca. 1910, Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.411 ab
Acknowledgements

Putting together an exhibition requires the cooperation and assistance of many people. All members of the staff at the Kent State University Museum have played a critical role in the organization and implementation of this exhibit. Jean Druesedow deserves particular thanks for her support and assistance. Jim Williams for his brilliant mountmaking, framing and the exhibit design. Joanne Fenn, for her proofreading, attention to detail and invaluable assistance with the loans. Mary Gilbert, for making sure all the bills get paid and coordination of all of the associated events. Thanks also go out to Ray Bergdorf for ensuring the successful operations of the museum. Perhaps my greatest debt is to Joanne Arnett for her expert photography, mannequin dressing, and all around critical eye. She is always able to find the Schokoladseite of every piece.

The staff of the museum would be unable to accomplish everything it does without the essential contribution of student workers. A special thanks go out to Vanessa Port, Stephanie Mote, Dave Gieske, Shawn Kerns, Eli Gfell, Jedidiah Stuelpnagel, Chloe Wingard, and Brent Nelson. All of our volunteers provide invaluable service particularly Marilyn Lown, Millie Chrin, Jan Butler, Kelly Cochran Davis, Judy Richner, Jean Giulitto, Laurie Howell, Susan Laubach, Judy Jerkich, and Ruth Krause.

I would like to extend a special thanks to the generosity and assistance of the staff of the University of Minnesota Libraries, particularly Cecily Marcus who assisted with the loans from the War Posters Collection.
Olive wool coat with fur trim
American, ca. 1915
Wool, beaver fur
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Gottlieb, KSUM
1984.1.94

Yes sir – I am here!
Edward Penfield
American, 1918
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
From 1914 until 1918, the world faced war on a scale never before seen. In addition to the loss of millions of lives, this period saw tremendous technological, social and political upheaval. These profound changes led to a transformation in the way women dressed. Increasingly called to work and contribute in numerous ways to the war effort, women made great strides towards equality. The war’s impact reached far beyond men in the trenches to effect women both at home and in the workforce. Women directly served the war effort not just as nurses, but also in roles that had previously been reserved for men including service in the Navy and Marines. Immediately following the war, women in the United States and Canada as well as in several European countries received the right to vote. This exhibition explores how the roles for women changed during and in the immediate aftermath of World War I through a careful look at how they dressed.

While many of women’s inroads into the workforce were quickly reversed once the war ended, the fundamental changes in how women dressed endured. They adopted shorter skirts and a looser, less confining silhouette. Gone were the cumbersome petticoats and rigid whalebone corsets and in their place were slim, clean lines and serviceable suits. This examination of changes in women’s fashions explores the links between these stylistic changes and the underlying social shifts.

This exhibition concentrates on the American experience during the war. Although the United States did not enter the war until 1917, the impact of the war was strongly felt across the country. While most clothing was produced and purchased locally, fashion styles largely originated in Paris and circulated rapidly throughout Europe and the Americas. The disruption of the Great War was felt in the United States well before its official entry into combat and its effects continue to be felt to this day.
One of the ways that women appeared in propaganda posters was as representations of the nation. The figure of Columbia stood for America and was generally portrayed as muscular with strong features. Although ostensibly female these figures evoked power and strength. The appearance of these allegorical female figures contrasted sharply with the delicacy more widely associated with femininity at the time.

Columbia generally appears in classical robes or armor, although artists made different choices for Columbia’s headgear. She is alternately shown in a Phrygian cap, a symbol of liberty; a laurel wreath, a symbol of victory; or a crown like that on the Statue of Liberty. She is always identifiable by the American flag, which she either wears or holds.

**Columbia calls**
Vincent Aderente, contributor Frances Adams Halsted
American, 1916
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota

**Preserve**
Carter Housh
American, ca. 1918
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Women in propaganda posters

Propaganda posters played a significant role in shaping perceptions of the war. Although the motivations for going to war in 1914 were complicated and obscure, the propaganda posters communicated clear, compelling purpose and encouraged activities that allowed all citizens to participate. These posters played an important role in instilling in citizens at home a sense of engagement in the war effort. The posters were published by a variety of different organizations, including both government agencies such as the different branches of the military, the National War Garden Commission, and the Food Administration as well as other organizations such as the Red Cross, the YWCA, and the Boy Scouts. Because women were a primary sector of the audience many of the posters were directly addressed to them.

Images of starving women and children were employed to encourage Americans to reduce their food consumption and in exchange provide food to the people of France and Belgium. The expressive imagery with sharp contrast between dark and light showed the influence of avant-garde, modern art.

Don’t waste food while others starve!
L. C. Clinker
American, 1917
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota

(detail) War rages in France
Frederick Henry Townsend
American, ca. 1918
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
The introduction of women into military service required the development of new uniforms. Women had two different uniforms: a summer uniform of white cotton twill and a winter uniform of navy blue wool. Women’s uniforms were adapted from men’s uniforms, even including ties and rank insignia on the sleeves, but substituted a skirt for the trousers. This particular uniform was worn by Lois Jane Houghton Miller who served as a Yeoman 2nd class.

US Navy Yeoman (F) summer uniform
American, 1918
Cotton canvas, brass buttons
Gift of the family of Lois Jane Houghton Miller, KSUM 2013.43.1 a-d
Women at work

A significant portion of women had always worked in certain sectors of the economy, particularly domestic service and the clothing industry. Labor shortages and demand for military supplies created by the war led to a much broader range of opportunities for women to join the work force, including service in the armed services. With the help of the Red Cross, the Army and Navy recruited tens of thousands of women for their respective nursing corps. The scale of the war effort led the Navy to not simply employ women as nurses but to also enlist them for roles previously filled by men. Starting in 1917, the Navy began to enlist women and ultimately more than 12,000 served in active duty in the Navy and Marines during the war.

Nurse’s uniform
American, ca. 1918
Linen dress, cotton apron
Gift of the Kent State University School of Nursing, KSUM 1998.52.1 a-c

Have you answered the Red Cross Christmas roll call?
Harrison Fisher
American, 1918
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Many of the propaganda posters directed women to perform tasks that were an extension of their traditional domestic role including: selling war bonds, knitting garments as well as conserving and preserving food. The preoccupation with food that appears in a number of the posters is a response to the food shortages across Europe that resulted as young men left their farms to fight on the front. To compensate for the serious decline in agricultural production, women were encouraged to farm and grow gardens by such organizations as the Women’s Land Army and the US Food Administration.

The Woman’s Land Army of America
Herbert Andrew Paus
American, 1917
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Corn: The food of the nation
Lloyd Harrison
American, 1917
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
The general style of women’s suits was adopted not just for military uniforms but also for civilian wear. Throughout the 1910s women’s clothing increasingly featured tailored suits. Suits from 1912 to 1914 were feminine with an emphasis on the slim figure, however in the second half of the decade the silhouette became wider and deemphasized the waist. This style of suiting calls to mind suffragettes, whose struggles were rewarded when women earned the right to vote in the United States immediately following the war.

**Cotton striped ensemble**
American, 1912-14
Cotton, lace
Gift of Frances Reed Wiland, KSUM 1984.16.16 ab

**Black wool suit**
American, ca. 1916
Wool twill, plastic buttons
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Raymond R. Myers, KSUM 1985.42.12 a-c
By the 1890s women's gym suits generally included a top of matching navy wool that buttoned to the waist of the bloomers. Starting around 1910, in place of the matching top, women adopted the middy blouse. These untucked blouses created the straight, waistless silhouette that would come to dominate women's fashion through the 1920s.

**Gym suit**

Label: “Columbia Gymnasium Suit Co.”
American, ca. 1910
Wool, braid
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Gladys Moore, 1953, KSUM 1995.17.358 ab

**Basketball uniform**

American, 1914
Wool
Gift of Laurie Johnson in memory of Jordye Dean, KSUM 2007.18.1 a-c
Sportswear

The introduction of physical education for women and the corresponding development of sportswear were important factors in the abandonment of corsetry and other restrictive clothing. Private women’s colleges, such as Mount Holyoke and Smith were at the leading edge of the development of clothing styles for female athletes. The sport of basketball was invented in 1891 by James Naismith for the YMCA in Springfield, MA and the next year was introduced for women at Smith College by Senda Berenson. The sport was intended to be played in a gymnasium and was thus a perfect sport for physical education. For outdoor sports, such as tennis and field hockey, women continued to wear skirts, but for sports like basketball that were played indoors, they were permitted to adopt bloomers.

This photograph shows girls from Sutton High School in Braxton County, West Virginia in 1914. One of these girls, Jordye Adams owned the uniform (KSUM 2007.18.1 a-c) shown on the facing page.
By the 1910s, swimming increasingly became an athletic activity for women rather than simply a leisurely pursuit. Gradually bathing costumes evolved from the cumbersome layers, which included not just the bloomers and overdress but also a cap, stockings and shoes to more streamlined suits that actually enabled swimming.

**Blue and white bathing suit**
American, ca. 1915
Cotton overdress, wool bloomers,
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Raymond R. Myers, KSUM 1985.42.9 ab

**Navy blue and white swimsuit**
American, ca 1919
Cotton knit
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.224 ab
Women’s sportswear often drew inspiration from nautical styles. The middy blouses worn as a part of gym suits were virtually identical to those worn by sailors in the Navy. The influence of nautical styles could also be seen in color choices. The vast majority of bathing suits at this period were black or navy with white trim. Elements such as sailor collars became popular not just for athletic wear but in a variety of fashionable dresses and blouses.

**Every girl pulling for victory:** Victory Girls
Edward Penfield
American, 1918
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota

**Gee!! I wish I were a man**
Howard Chandler Christy
American, 1917
Color lithograph poster
War Posters Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis, Minnesota
To achieve the slim, columnar styles fashionable between 1910 and 1914, women wore corsets that extended well down the thighs. An ad for American Lady Corsets in 1913 promised that their product would ensure “the smart low bust, the long straight hip, the modish uncorseted effect.” By the early 1920s, the fashionable silhouette had broadened and clothing was sized to fit more loosely. Many young women had abandoned corsets all together, and those who continued to wear them sought to maintain a smooth, tubular shape rather than to cinch in the waist.

(above) Advertisement for Gossard corsets, El Paso Herald, September 18, 1917, p. 3.

(left) Advertisement for the corset department at Gimbel Brothers, Evening Public Ledger, Philadelphia, October 16, 1922, p. 16.

Corsetry

The emerging interest in exercise accompanied an evolution in attitudes toward the body, particularly in the body’s relationship with clothing. Rather than imposing structure on the body through corsetry, women began to shape their bodies through exercise. The war itself was one factor that contributed to the decline in corset use. Once the United States entered the war in the spring of 1917, the War Industries Board called upon women to give up purchasing new corsets so that steel could be used in the war effort. The continued advertisement of corsets throughout the war indicate that sales of corsets may have been reduced but did not completely stop. Shortages and high prices for steel encouraged the gradual replacement of heavy steel boning with elastic panels. The corsets of the early 1920s were neither as long nor as stiff as their predecessors.

Corset of cotton eyelet
American, 1914
Cotton
Gift of Warnaco, Inc., KSUM 1983.3.52

Pink “corselette” with lace
American, 1923
Net, lace
Gift of Warnaco, Inc., KSUM 1983.3.61
Green silk hat with feathers
American, 1910s
Silk, ribbon, feathers
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Dorothy A. Jones, 1957 1995.17.427

Green hat with pleated trim
American, late 1910s
Straw, ribbon, pleated silk
Gift of Robert and Melody Liberatore, KSUM 2010.19.15

Black velvet hat with wing-like bow
American, mid 1910s
Velvet, artificial flowers
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Gottlieb, KSUM 1984.1.173

Hat with lace brim and silver silk crown
American, late 1910s
Lamé tissue, velvet, lace, artificial flowers
Gift of Rebecca Turkle Donaldson, KSUM 1986.18.5
Hats

As the silhouettes for women's fashion became increasingly tubular, headwear became dynamic and oversized. During the first decade of the 1900s, hats were as wide as the body could support. The exaggeratedly wide brims fell out of favor during the course of the 1910s, but the decreased width was offset by increased height. Bows and feathers shooting upward from the crown balanced out asymmetrical, angular brims. The pompadour styles from the turn of the century gave way to styles that were almost as large but were parted in the middle and full at the sides and back. By the early 1920s these styles deflated and women began to bob their hair. The reduction in the size of the hair accompanied closer fitting hats.

Fashion plate from *Journal des dames et des modes*, 1914.

Black straw hat with lace crown

Label: New York/Stern Brothers/Paris, “$18.50”

American, 1910s

Horsehair braid, lace, satin, silk

Gift of The Youngstown Playhouse, in memory of Paul H. Kimpel, KSUM 1999.44.41
Black leather pumps
American, 1914–5
Leather, metal
Gift of Betty Parks, KSUM 1984.7.10 ab

Black leather oxfords
Label: Vitality Shoes
American, 1920s
Leather
Gift of Dick and Isabel Kertscher, KSUM 1986.104.30 ab
Shoes

The predominant footwear for the first two decades of the twentieth century were boots. As skirts started to rise after 1914, boots began to give way to shoes. In particular, lace-up oxford-style shoes replaced the boots for daywear. Evening shoes continued to be pumps that were often quite plain. Throughout the 1910s toes became extremely pointed and into the 1920s the heel became higher and less curved.

Brown leather boots
Label: Wagoner & Marsh, Akron, Ohio
American, 1905-1909
Leather
Gift of Katherine Evans Woolf, KSUM 1986.68.1 de

Canvas and leather boots
American, ca. 1910
Wool canvas, buttons, leather
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.411 ab
These two purple dresses show the evolution of women’s styles between 1912 and 1918. The long, narrow silhouette of the earlier dress gave way to a looser fit, lower waistline, and shorter skirt. The dress above was worn by the mother-of-the bride to a wedding in 1912. The dress on the right was worn by Marion Heusner Crossen as her going away dress in 1918.

**Purple wool and chiffon dress**  
American, 1912  
Wool, velvet, lace, silk, chiffon  
Gift of Jean B. Gibson, KSUM 1986.20.1 a-c

**Purple velvet and chiffon dress**  
American, 1918  
Silk velvet, chiffon  
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Marion Heusner Crossen, Oberlin College Class of 1917, 1957, KSUM 1995.17.86 ab
Women at home

The period between 1912 and 1922 saw tremendous change in women's fashion. Fashions on the eve of war were long and slim. Skirts reached the floor and in their most extreme tapered towards the ankle in a ‘hobble.’ As the decade progressed, skirts became shorter but also fuller. In seeming defiance of expected restrictions on clothing, skirts became very full in a style known as the ‘war crinoline,’ which emerged as an effort to bolster the fashion industry. Despite the tremendous disruption that the war imposed on the clothing industry particularly in Paris, fashion did not come to a screeching halt. The importance of the fashion and textile industries to the French economy persuaded authorities to allow couture houses to operation throughout the course of the war.  

Silver lace evening dress trimmed with fur and purple silk with tassel  
American, ca. 1912  
Net lace, satin, chiffon, mink, velvet  
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.304

Brown tulle and velvet evening dress with silver lace  
American, ca. 1916  
Chiffon, velvet, net  
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.294
Hemlines for evening dress during the 1910s were not simply floor length but actually pooled onto the floor in a train. In just a few short years, by 1915, hems had risen to the ankles. The four dresses on this spread show the gradual rise of hemlines into the 1920s.

Pale green silk and lace evening dress with black velvet ribbon
French, ca. 1912
Silk, machine net, lace, velvet, rhinestones, black jet, artificial flowers
Gift of the Helen O. Borowitz Collection, KSUM 2004.25.2

Lace and green silk dress
American, ca. 1915
Embroidered organza, embroidered tulle, taffeta, silk
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.391
Ultimately the volume of the skirts slimmed down as the overall silhouette became more cylindrical. The loose fit of the delicate cotton dress above foreshadows the styles of the 1920s, but the dress’ construction continues to depend on a fitted waistband and complicated underbodice. Not until the 1920s did the dresses, like the one above right become simple tubes that could be pulled over the head.

**Fine white cotton dress with polka dots**
American, ca. 1917
Cotton muslin, ivory net, lace (installation sash)
Gift of Patricia Jean Patrick in memory of Patricia Lasky, KSUM 1999.43.1

**Summer dress of white cotton gauze**
American, early 1920s
Cotton gauze, lace
Gift of John V. Frank, in memory of Frances Halbert Frank, KSUM 1998.78.8
This dress created from layers of tulle features the flared skirt which became popular at the beginning of the war. Mary Janet McConahey of Mt. Pleasant, OH wore this for her wedding to John McKelvie on June 10, 1916.

**Wedding dress**  
American, 1916  
Tulle, silver lace  
Gift of Nancy McKelvie Miller’s family, in memory of Mary Janet McConahey McKelvie, KSUM 2012.7.1 a-h
Weddings during and immediately after the Great War took on a particular poignancy. Indeed the tremendous loss of life among young men greatly reduced the marriage prospects of young women of that generation. The four wedding dresses included in this exhibition mirror the changes in fashionable dress at the time. The silk tulle that was fashionable in the 1910s was used in abundance in wedding dresses and the hemlines were just as short as those of other dresses for day or evening.

This columnar dress forshadowed the straight silhouettes of the 1920s. Although the dress was probably ample enough to simply slip over the head, the underdress fastens with a complicated row of hooks-and-eyes starting at the left shoulder and extending to the hip.

Wedding dress
American, 1918
Silk crepe, soutache
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Marion Heu- snner Crossen, Oberlin College Class of 1917, 1957, KSUM 1995.17.1762
Notes


Wedding dress
American, ca. 1921
Silk, satin, lace, net
Gift of John V. Frank, in memory of Frances Halbert Frank, KSUM 1998.78.7

(Back cover)
Olive wool coat with fur trim
American, ca. 1915
Wool, beaver fur
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Gottlieb, KSUM 1984.1.94
Further reading

General histories of World War I


Women in World War I


World War I Propaganda Posters


Women’s Sportswear
