



## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Womenswear Innovators

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There have been many controversial designers throughout the fashion industry. But two of the controversial designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel and Paul Poiret. Both of these designers were claimed for inventing 20<sup>th</sup> century women’s fashion. Some say it was Gabrielle and others say it was Poiret. Without a doubt, they both made innovations in women’s fashion.

On August 19, 1883, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel was born. She was the second child born in her family. As a child, Gabrielle and her family would move throughout France and never quite settle down. Unfortunately, on 1895 when Gabrielle was twelve years old her mother died, and her father abandoned the rest of the family. This led to her being out into a charity ward, where they taught Gabrielle how to sew. Although Gabrielle knew how to sew, she didn’t immediately want to become a designer. At first, Gabrielle wanted to become a chanteuse (Romplske 1998). This is where she received her nickname “Coco” and meet a rich admirer, Etienne Balsan. Balsan offered Gabrielle to be his mistress and Gabrielle accepted. It wasn’t until 1913 when Gabrielle opened her first shop in Paris with the help of Balsan. The shop consisted of selling hats and a couple of garments made by Gabrielle (Krick 2004).

Gabrielle’s ambition for designing grew after opening her shops and having clients. This led her to create other garments like the evening dress shown in Figure 1. The cut of the garment in Figure 1 is a sleeveless swing shift dress with an illusion u-neckline. The dress has a loose drape, it hangs freely on the body. The dress is made up of three colors; navy blue, black and gold. The whole dress is made up silk. It’s also made from metallic thread which is embroidered throughout the dress and gives the black and gold a metal finish. An embellishment this dress has is sequin, it’s added to the navy-blue hits on the dress to give it shiny look. According to the

MET Museum, Gabrielle created this dress in its pattern and color palette because it “resembles the Asian lacquered screens which the designer loved and collected.”

Paul Poiret was born on April 20, 1879 in Paris France. In 1898, Poiret was working for Jacques Doucet, where he created his first design which sold 400 pieces - a red wool cloak with gray crepe de chine lining and revers. The one garment that helped Poiret take off was a mantle he made for an actor named Réjane for the play *Zaza*. By 1910, Poiret was widely known and famous, in the US he was the “king of fashion” and in Paris he was referred as “Le Magnifique”. It is said that Poiret established modern dress and laid out the blueprint for the modern fashion industry (Koda & Bolton 2008).

The evening dress shown in Figure 2 was created by Poiret in 1922-23. According to the MET Museum, the dress is consisted of two squared shaped cloths; one of the cloths was for the upper part of the dress, which was made into some sort of poncho and the other piece of cloth was made into a cylindrical skirt for the bottom part of the dress. The cut of the dress is a gown with the upper part of the dress having a boat neckline. Having a classic silhouette, the drape of the dress hangs loosely on the body. The color of the dress is a navy blue with scarlet red going across the dress. The dress is made from silk. For this dress, Poiret was inspired “simply configured garments of the ancient world” as stated by the MET Museum. The MET Museum also mentioned in their 2007 exhibit for Poiret that he told Vouge that "my wife is the inspiration for all my creations; she is the expression of all my ideals.”

These dresses created by Gabrielle and Poiret are similar and different. One similarity the dresses have is they're made for evening wear. Another similarity is the drape of the dress, both dresses hang loosely on the body, leaving them room. As for the differences, Gabrielle's dress is one piece while Poiret's dress is two pieces. Another difference is the neckline, Gabrielle's dress

has a u-neckline and Poiret's dress has a boat neckline. Another difference is the fabric each dress is made up. Gabrielle's dress is well thought out and extravagant, it's made of silk and metallic thread embroidered throughout the dress with sequin touches. Meanwhile, Poiret's dress is made of silk and nothing else, simple and modern. Another difference is the length of the dress, Gabrielle's dress goes a little below the knee and Poiret's dress goes below the ankles and reaches the floor.



Figure 1:  
Gabrielle Chanel  
Evening Dress  
1926-27  
Silk, metallic thread, sequin



Figure 2:  
Paul Poiret  
Evening dress  
Silk  
1922-23  
C.I.43.85.2a, b

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