

Lampshade Dress Analysis

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The fashion industry is built on history. New designs are inspired by decades past. Silhouettes reappear, adapted to reflect the modern times. This paper discusses the lampshade silhouette, focusing on Charles James' 1955 version. The silhouette was originally designed by Paul Poiret in 1911 and continued to reappear throughout the decade into modern 21st century fashion. The core lampshade shape has remained constant through each lampshade design but the free, natural, modern woman Poiret's dress represented was almost immediately forgotten. The successor designs required the shapewear Poiret worked hard to avoid.

Charles James was an innovator and designer in the 1950's fashion industry. Born in Surrey, UK to an American mother and British military officer father he created a career across four decades, two continents, and numerous brands. James believed that fashion is a partnership between gifted designers and adventurous women with good taste. When he was working in Europe, James found acquaintance and early support in like-minded designers Paul Poiret, Balenciaga, and Christian Dior who influenced his approach to fashion and art and connected him to clients in high class English society (Reeder, 2012). After his start in London and Paris, James moved to New York City in 1939 and incorporated under his name. He spent the early 40's working as the design director for his friend Elizabeth Arden who added a custom fashion division to her cosmetic business. In 1945 James left Arden's company to open his pure haute couture salon. He quickly became known amongst America's most fashion minded women for his attention to detail, structural themes and sartorial approach to dress design. Working with lush fabric, understructures, advanced seaming, and geometry James left a memorable mark on the industry despite only creating less than one thousand garments over the course of his career (Cole & Deihl, 2015). James' techniques and designs continue to inspire fashion today.

The American 1950's experienced the effects of two wars. The post World War Two abundance was overshadowed by the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This non traditional war was centered around the clash of communism versus capitalism and their contradicting economic systems. The American capitalist economy thrived when our men came home and re entered the workforce, as the USSR's communist system continued to fail. As the men returned home, the baby boom emerged triggering nicer more fashionable maternity clothing lines. The middle class shifted to the suburban white picket fence American dream with a heavy emphasis on family life. Women transitioned back to their domestic housewives role and relished in the abundance of household inventions including the home television. Many industries, including fashion, began advertising directly to these women who were now purchasing more than ever before. The fashion was influenced by three main points: Post war lifestyle, affordable travel, and the rise of the United States as superior in culture and entertainment (film and music). Although France retained its superior position in the fashion realm, the global interest in American entertainment and Hollywood increased America's influence. There was a continued rise of celebrities (music stars, supermodels, and movie stars) and their fashion choices were closely followed and copied by the middle class public (Cole & Deihl, 2015).

Fashion media was quickly evolving. The continuous rise of supermodels and new photographers meant boundaries for fashion visuals were pushed outside the studio into real life subway, nightclubs, and street sets. This new approach to advertising helped to showcase the practical silhouettes that emerged in the 50's. Following Dior's late 1940's New Look two primary silhouettes emerged, both with the same fitted bodice (Reddy, 2019). The first capitalized on the abundance of available fabric post WWII with a large full skirt that was gathered at the waist. The second was a slim fitted pencil skirt. Both skirts' hemlines fell

below the knee and were available in a variety of fabrics including the newly popular synthetics (Cole & Deihl, 2015).

An interesting piece of 1950's fashion is Charles James' version of the Lampshade Dress designed in 1955. This dress includes many of the trends popular from the decade in a unique way. The silhouette honors the trendy fitted bust and pencil skirt style popular for the decade before opening into the wide lampshade mermaid style at the knee. The pencil skirt was a well-worn option for women's casual and workwear. It was a relatively comfortable and practical choice. The dress also relied on the wearer using shapewear. Shapewear continued to evolve into this decade as technology advanced. Popular options included pushup bras to accentuate the breasts and the modern form of the corset, the corselet, to minimize the waist to balance out wide hips (Delightful, 2021). The torso is constructed to hug the bust, waists and hips with precise cuts, seams, and darts. This geometrical precision and sharp lines is what set James apart from his peers and is a recurring theme in many of his pieces.

James' dress is constructed from two fabrics; rayon and silk velvet (MetMuseum, Lampshade). Both of these textiles further reflect the decade's trends. During the 50's the post war lifestyle was one of abundance and many designers used luxury fabrics in their designs. Synthetics were also popular because of their convenience and durability. Silk velvet was invented in China before or during the thirteenth century. This unique textile is a woven fabric. During the weaving process the warp threads are pulled over rods to create loops. Once the weaving is complete the rods are removed to release the thread pile. Sometimes the loops are cut to create a different texture (Watt, 2011). Rayon is a semi-synthetic fabric often used as a more affordable and durable replacement for silk. The textile is made from a combination of natural materials (ex: wood pulp) and chemicals (Zee, 2022). This dress is paired with matching rayon opera gloves, a popular length for the decade

and classic pairing with the strapless neckline(Vanderbilt, 1958). It is possible the outfit was also paired with coordinating rayon wrapped heels. This matching outfit is another nod to a popular 50's trend, matching sets. On the dress, rayon is used to accentuate the lampshade silhouette. The fabric forms a few pleats from the bubble hem up three quarters of the lampshade and forms a small bustle on the back. The dress features a long zipper closure that would allow the wearer to comfortably get dressed.

Although it appears basic, this unique dress subtly emphasizes the cultural undercurrents and changes occurring in the United States during the 1950's. The aforementioned shifting of gender roles back into traditional forms meant that women were now spending their days back in the home. However the womens' short lived wartime jobs gave them a glimpse into the corporate and industrial workforce and the social experiences associated with it. Women wanted to continue to dip their toes into this world. This desire coupled with the increased abundance of luxury meant dinner parties and other excuses to dress up became a regular on the family calendar.

This dress could have been worn by a housewife who was attending a black tie event with her husband. The coordinated dress, gloves, and shoes would have presented an appealing choice to the busy woman. Escaping everyday life for a few hours at an event would have also given this woman an opportunity to embody a persona different from her mundane self. This outfit sends a strong message; the wearer is bold, feminine, fit, and put together - not typical for the average harried housewife.

The lampshade dress silhouette has been repeated by designers through the 20th and 21st centuries. The silhouette was first designed by French master couturier and designer Paul Poiret in 1911. The tunic and skirt two piece dress is made of silk chiffon and satin. The tunic is embellished with an ornate embroidered glass beads design and the hooped hem is trimmed with fur. The v-neck wrap top meets the gathered bottom with a wide sash at the waist. The

solid colored skirt has minimal gathers at the waist and falls in a slight a-line. This silhouette was designed to free the woman from the restrictive corset popular during the beginning of the 20th century (MetMuseum, 2007). This corset-free fashion revolutionized the fashion industry and represented Poiret's vision for the natural modern woman (V&AMuseum, Sorbet). The second lampshade silhouette dress was the aforementioned Charles James 1950's version.

The third dress was a 1985 Murray Arbeid gown. The 80's decade brought a renewed interest in European royals as fashion icons, spearheaded by Princess Diana (Cole & Deihl, 2015). Her version of the lampshade dress was a she wore to the birthday party of Prince Edward (Auctions, 2021). Another strapless black velvet dress, this time with an ivory taffeta gathered mermaid hem that creates a steep curvature from the knees in the front and up to the waist in the back. The color contrast creates the illusion of wearing a little black dress that ends in the back at the waist.

Lastly, a 2022 Schiaparelli dress. The most modern version of the lampshade dress follows the same strapless silhouette as James' but with a lower cleavage baring neckline. The black technical velvet jersey fitted bodice flows seamlessly into a pencil skirt. The knee length hemline is covered with black sheer curled ribbons in a wide lampshade shape (Schiaparelli, 2022).

As fashion evolves it continues to pull inspiration from history. The lampshade dress is a beautiful example of this phenomenon. Charles James' 1950's version draws on the unique silhouette while also incorporating the decade's trends. The lampshade dress's journey through fashion tells a story, one that is repeated much like history itself.

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