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Poiret, the Forgotten Fashion Designer

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French designer Paul Poiret was a superstar during his lifetime, feted for his designs. In Paris, admirers referred to him simply as “le magnifique.”

Parisian style is on show at the Kremlin in an exhibit devoted to French fashion designer Paul Poiret.

Poiret, who founded his own fashion house in 1903, was one of the most famous designers worldwide before World War I. He was called the “King of Fashion” in the United States for creating revolutionary and innovative couture using simple cuts and draping techniques.

More than 150 of his dresses are on show at the Kremlin, along with accessories and illustrations. Some dresses loaned by the Parisian Musee Galliera are on display for the first time since being bought in a recent auction.

“In the process of preparations for the current exhibition, we also had the opportunity to restore some of the garments in our collection to have them on display in a presentable condition,” said Sophie Grossiord, chief curator at the Musee Galliera.

Poiret is best known for freeing women from the bonds of the corset, which he thought disturbed a woman's natural figure.

He designed for aristocrats, cabaret singers and theater ensembles, but his favorite model was his wife Denise, who he often dressed for fashion shows and photographs.

The exhibition marks 100 years since Poiret's visit to Russia in 1911, when he traveled to Moscow and St. Petersburg, where he was a huge inspiration for Russian designers. He himself was equally inspired by Russian textiles and later used them in his folklore-inspired collections. These are on show, along with several evening gowns he designed for a popular Russian actress.

His fashion innovations at the start of the 20th century remain modern even today, and anybody who wears a tunic dress, culottes or a coat with kimono sleeves is following the designer in some way.

Poiret was also the first designer to combine fashion with product and interior design. He designed fragrances, perfume bottles and packaging and decorated rooms to go with his collections.

The exhibition also has colorful illustrations by Georges Lepape on display.

The designer was also famous for extravagant costume balls at his fashion house and for his love of theater and dance. He worked with stars such as the actress Ida Rubinstein and the exotic dancer Mata Hari.

His designs fascinated millions of women around the globe, but he refused to stoop to standardization and mass production of his creations. This ultimately led to the bankruptcy of the Poiret fashion house in 1929 and the fall into oblivion of Paul Poiret's name.

The current exhibition in the Kremlin museum is an attempt to revive the memory of one of the first big fashion designers and honor his early and later works.

"Poiret. King of Fashion" runs to Jan. 15 inside the Kremlin. Metro Borovitskaya, Biblioteka Imeni Lenina. Tel. 695-4146.

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