

THE SALON DU GOÛT FRANÇAIS 1921-1923

The *Salon du Goût Français* (the *Salon*) holds a unique place in the history of early twentieth-century global fashion. One of several industrial and trade fairs mounted in France after the First World War at a time of economic instability, government debt, inflation, low productivity and falling exports, it was made possible by the Lumière brothers' autochrome process, a ground-breaking development in the science of colour photography and then the most reliable register of colour available. Thousands of luxury commodities from motor cars to umbrellas, were represented in two dimensions on the autochromes' glass plates, exhibited like paintings in one small gallery space, a virtual 'museum without walls' that showcased the best in French manufacturing in vivid colour. Of the two thousand or so images in this little-known collection, most are of fashion: couture, ready to wear, sportswear, fancy dress, menswear, children's wear, hosiery, lingerie, jewellery, furs, feathers, accessories, and textiles, all brought to life in the captivating hues of the autochrome. Even more extraordinary, the *Salon* embarked on two international tours, to North America, and a year later, to Australasia and the Far East, stopping frequently at ports along the way, particularly those in French colonies. Twenty five years before the better-known *Théâtre de la Mode*, a travelling exhibition of miniature wire-framed dolls dressed in *haute couture* that toured Europe and America from 1945 to 1946, the allure of Paris fashion was deployed after the trauma of war to promote trade and to proclaim France's supremacy as the global arbiter of taste.

Part commercial enterprise, part imperial propaganda, diplomatic and 'civilizing mission', the *Salon* was initiated and organized by the publisher Maurice Devriès with the backing of various government bodies, including among others, the *Préfet de la Seine et la Conseil Municipal*, twenty presidents of the *Chambres Syndicales*, sixty presidents of the *Chambres de Commerce* and the Ministry of the Beaux-Arts. It was shown from May to August in 1921, 1922, and 1923, in its Paris venue, the *Palais de Glace* at the south end of the Champs Elysées, a circular building that, as its name suggests, was used as a skating rink during the winter. Dictated by the shape of the building, the circular layout of the interior scheme was designed by the modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens, and featured a fountain at the centre of an octagonal hall surrounded by small rooms, or *salles*, radiating out like the spokes of a wheel in which the autochrome vitrines were mounted in wooden partitions. Backlit by Philipps' light bulbs, chosen for their brightness, the autochromes illuminated the *salles* with jewel-like radiance like that of stained-glass cathedral windows, their mesmerizing effect noted by the newspaper *L'Excelsior* on 3rd June 1921: 'The crowd that gathered each day in these small mysterious chapels lit by coloured glass was seized by real emotion.'ⁱ

Well-known couturiers including Paul Poiret, Chanel, Redfern, Worth, and Lanvin were among the hundreds of exhibitors that took part in at least one of the three years the *Salon* was shown. Alongside these celebrated names, a plethora of lesser-known fashion houses, garment manufacturers and ateliers exhibited a wide range of elegant garments and desirable accessories, from silver *lamé* and coral-beaded evening dresses to pastel pink embroidered stockings, whose quality shines out from the autochromes in the full spectrum of vibrant colour and sensuous texture. The 1921 *Salon* also included a display of French provincial crafts presented by artisans dressed in regional costume, and in 1923, a *souk*

vivant was staged where indigenous artisans from the French colonies of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia could be observed working at their trades.

During the War, several Paris couture houses had temporarily closed and exports across the Atlantic were disrupted: in view of a patriotic drive to promote home-grown American designers, there was concern that American imports of French fashions, on which the couture industry largely depended, would be irretrievably damaged. Despite the success of a week-long *Fête Parisienne* held in New York in 1915 to bolster trade, after the War, it was apparent that the French fashion industry needed to: “impress on the American public the brilliance and vitality of French industrial art, but also to promote business.”ⁱⁱ In October 1921, after the first static *Salon* at the *Palais de Glace* closed, a selection of the plates was packed into a trunk and put on board the SS Paris, bound for America, where it went on show in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. The first venue for this sales *croisade*, as it was described in the catalogue, was the Wanamakers’ New York department store and the next, their flagship store in Philadelphia, where it was installed in the vast Egyptian Hall in which fashion shows had been staged in since 1908. The Wanamakers were masters of merchandising, attuned to every modern innovation and marketing ploy that would encourage customers to enter their ‘cathedrals of consumption’ where mirrored interiors, glittering with light and colour, enticed them into making purchases. Not only did the Wanamakers understand the selling power of colour, a highly developed subject of scientific analysis in America, they knew that art helped to sell fashion and displayed their collection of paintings, bought every year from Paris, in their stores. Drawing on this mutually beneficial combination, the *Salon* was promoted as if it was an art exhibition: the photographers, described in the catalogue as *peintres savants*, artistic orchestrators of the glowing autochrome images whose incandescent colours drew: “oohs and ahs of admiration” at the breath-taking moment when the electricity was switched on and the pictures were brought to life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The *Salon* returned from America in May 1922, and after closing the second Paris show in August, another selection of autochromes set sail on 8th October from the port of Brest in Brittany in a convoy of two decommissioned battle cruisers, the *Jules Michelet* and the *Victor-Hugo*, under the command of navy veteran Admiral Gilly. This tour, purported to be a cruise of diplomatic propaganda, but in reality was another sales drive that would again metaphorically transport Paris to those who could not visit the capital of culture in person: those who ‘had fashion’ would show those who were ‘without fashion’ how to clothe themselves like Europeans and thus become civilized.^{iv} Stopping at French colonial ports along the coast of Africa, the convoy’s arrival proved such a draw that the visits were prolonged to accommodate wealthy Tunisians, Egyptians and the Prince Regent of Abyssinia whose royal court having travelled from Addis-Ababa, was able to “*se Parisianizer*”.^v On reaching Australia, the ships spent Christmas in Sydney where the crews were fêted royally, returning hospitality with a reception on board the *Jules Michelet* where: ‘...guests spent a happy afternoon jazzing on the deck and admiring the illuminated photographs.’^{vi} In January, the convoy split up, the *Jules-Michelet* headed for Japan via New Zealand and Noumea in the French colony of New Caledonia, where a busy programme of ‘banquets, race and sports meetings, balls and entertainments of all kinds’ was arranged. After visiting Adelaide, the *Victor Hugo* sailed northwest via Indonesia and the Philippines to Japan, where the ships met again in Yokohama where the second son of the Emperor, Prince

Chichibu, and his entourage visited the *Jules-Michelet*, the first time that members of the Imperial Japanese family had boarded a foreign vessel in Japanese waters.^{vii} On its journey home, the convoy visited China, Hong Kong, Vietnam (then the 'Pearl' of France's largest and most prized imperial asset of *Indochine*), Singapore and India before passing again through the Suez canal to return to France.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, fashion, as a form of industrial art or cultural product, had been included in world trade fairs and exhibitions, but the *Salon du Goût Français* was a trailblazing exhibition in many respects. It was more innovative in its application of modern French scientific technology than any of its predecessors and indeed, than the much better-known Paris *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* two years later in 1925 that continued in the long-held tradition of world fairs to build a vast arena filled with temporary buildings in the middle of the city. In contrast, the autochrome's unique characteristics enabled thousands of luxury items to be displayed virtually, requiring only the volume of a trunk and a small gallery on a ship, to reach an international audience overseas. Although the Lumières' process was launched nearly fifteen years earlier, the *Salon* was the first exhibition to disseminate fashion in this way and the first photographic display in which the authentic colours of Paris couture and associated fashionable products were transported to a global audience. Not only did the *Salon* showcase France's technological prowess it also acted as a form of soft power on behalf of the government to reinforce France's cultural superiority, especially in the Empire's colonies on which it depended for exports and raw materials.

The *Salon du Goût Français* was a stunning application of the Lumierès' autochrome process, an encyclopaedic *musée imaginaire* in joyful, enchanting colour that the journalist Maurice Prax (1881-1962), in the final entry of the 1923 catalogue expressed his desire to see again in the year 2023: "...un Louvre tenant dans une malle...roulant, voguant, volant" (a Louvre contained in a trunk...rolling, "vogueing" and flying' around the world).^{ix} It is immensely gratifying that a century later, his wish has been granted by this exhibition.

ⁱ Excelsior

ⁱⁱ 1922 SDGF catalogue

ⁱⁱⁱ 1922 SDGF catalogue

^{iv} See Simmel, Georg. "Fashion." *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 6 (1957): 541–58.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2773129>. [Accessed 7.12.2022]

^v SDGF cat

^{vi} Sydney Morning Herald

^{vii} *L'illustration* no. 4124, 12 May 1923

^{ix} 1923 SDGF catalogue