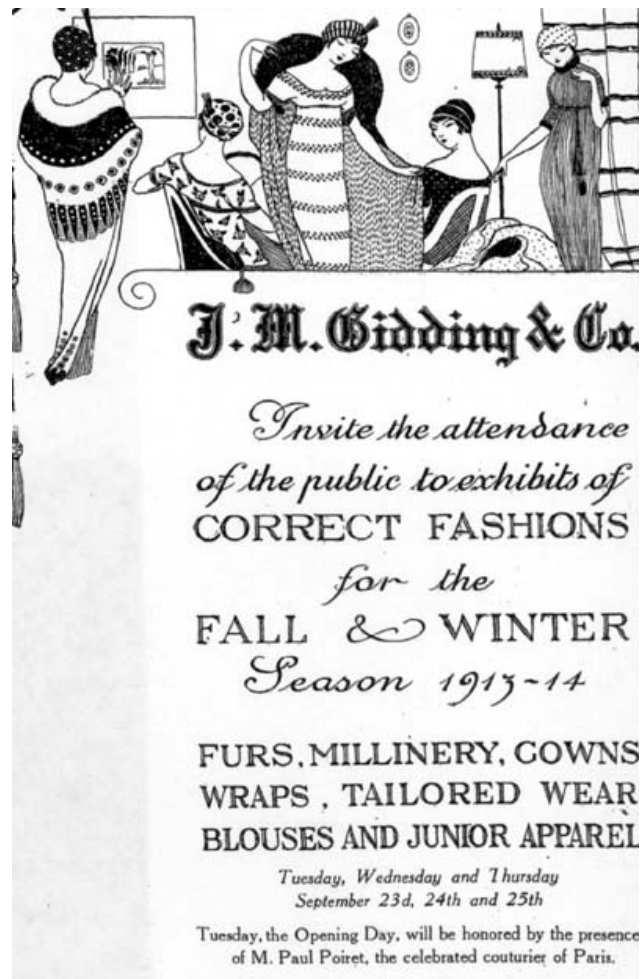


Art Deco Sartorialism in America: Persian Urban Turbans and Other Versions

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A tradition surfacing at the time of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad declares, “the turban is the divider between unbelief and belief.” Although the headwear was around before Islam, it became a symbol of Muslim identity. Besides this religious dimension, the turban was a marker to specify ethnic, tribal, class, and/or professional identity based on its size, shape, color, fabric, ornamental jewelry, and/or wrapping technique. Muhammad sought to make the turban specific to Muslims but it is a general category of head covering and has also been adopted by non-Muslims. French women in 1911 wore turbans designed by Paul Poiret that consisted of “a scarf of satin or metal cloth, tightly wrapped about the head and fastened with a cabochon at the side...[having] style and dash” (Rittenhouse). In the resulting modifications to this French turban model, the American wearer in the 1920s found in it an articulation of fashionability and worldliness. The “divider” to which Muhammad alludes is not always the delineation between the sacred and the secular, and American women donned the turban as a cultural marker to position themselves between East and West, modernity and tradition, past and present. Rather than giving a history of the turban’s development and existence in its original communities, the focus here is instead on the turban being taken up in American fashion. Popular turban types in the American fashion world and advertisements from 1912-1935 include: Oriental, Eastern, Abyssinian, Ethiopian, African, Turkish, Indian, Eastern Indian, Russian, Cossack, Hindu, Sheik, Egyptian, and Persian. The labels are overlapping and imprecise regional, cultural,



Fashion advertisement from September 21, 1913. *New York Times*.

religious, and political classifications. The 1912-1935 time period is an exciting era to study because of the global, political, and social changes taking place. While America enjoys a surge in turban popularity in the mid-1920s, Iranian dress reforms ban turbans in efforts to modernize and become more like Europe. The American turban derives inspiration from an eclectic geographic range, and there is admission in the news that fashions result from world events at this time, but keeping abreast of real-world changes demonstrated by the articles is not the goal of the milliners.



Fashion review from March 11, 1923. *The New York*

The focus here is on period newspaper articles, and not genuine turban fashion pieces. The terms “Orient” and “Oriental” will be knowingly employed to refer to ambiguous and unspecified cultures and provenances that 1920s Americans assume wear turbans. Notions of the turban as sentimental, romantic, mystical, or exotic are not intrinsic to the physical turban but are applied by the American makers, wearers, and fashion writers. This American perception of the Orient, encapsulated by the turban, is independent of a “real” Orient, and does not pay attention to the turban’s significance in its original communities. Therefore the ethnographic accuracy of the costuming derived from foreign sources is not at issue. Instead, one can follow the impact of news and fashion

The 1912-1935 period witnessed an America constructing itself explicitly through other cultures’ elements. The 1920s turbans are worn by flappers who desire independence and the blurring of genders. The decorative styles of the Art Deco era derived inspiration from different regions and different times, creating a modern shape through the juxtaposition of these forms that were interpreted as fusions of the exotic, the spiritual, the fantastical, and the historical. As part of the Art Deco phenomenon, the American turban permutations merged elements permeating social, cultural, political, and gender sectors of the age besides the sartorial. However paradoxical it may seem, by looking to turbans rooted in the past, America builds itself up as being modern in adopting them.



“Hats of Bengaline and Satin \$7.75 for the \$12 Grade” turban advertisement from November 20, 1924.

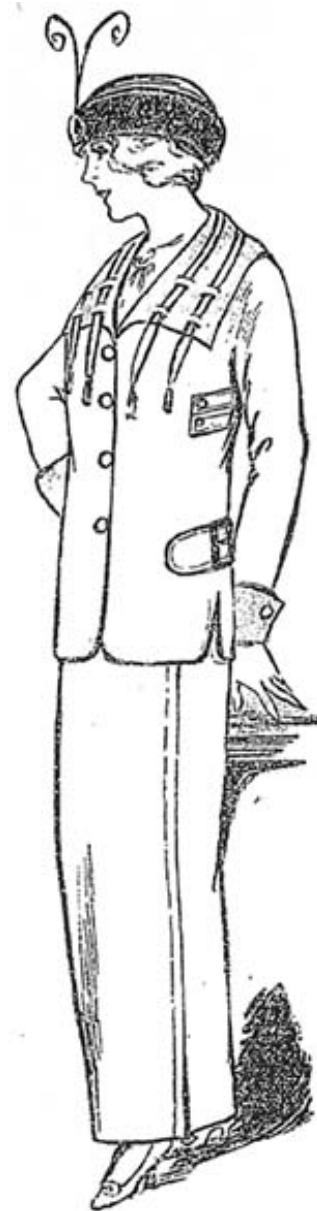
articles in *The New York Times* and other syndicates on American turbans.

American turbans associated with an ambiguous Orient are part of sartorial Orientalism, coined here as Sartorientalism. Indebted to Edward Said's study of Orientalism, my concept of Sartorientalism interprets the American turban popularity as a type of colonialism acting at the subliminal level. A Sartorientalist garment says more about the producer and wearer than it does the society that it seeks to evoke. In Inge Boer's examination of female cultural cross-dressing, she affirms: "cultural cross-dressing has to reveal itself as such, while simultaneously perpetuating the illusion and desire to 'be' an Oriental woman" (Boer 430). By appearing exotic, the American turbans must maintain some connection to an original version rooted in geography in order to trigger a desired association, but they blend reality with fantasy.

Sartorientalism enables America to appreciate an Empire of sorts by appropriating another culture's dress and manipulating it to its desires. Scholars have been quick to deemphasize a reading of colonial politics in American Orientalism because the United States did not have colonies abroad as did the French, British, and Italian. Some view this absence of colonies as offering a degree of colonial detachment, but such an elision of politics is misinformed. The Orient's colonization within the American mind in the guise of pervasive and centuries-old stereotypes proves to be more tenacious than a temporary, physical hold on a geographic region.



Fashion advertisement for turban with jet ornament and black ostrich trimming in "Trimmed Hats at \$10.00" from November 7, 1915. *The New York Times*.



Ensemble illustration of turban and suit from "How to Choose a Hat." February 23, 1913. *The New York Times*.

An article from April 15, 1924 reads: "just as the turbine wheel produces electricity, so does the turban hat give off chic" (Lowe).

Each turban model promises to be chic and new because it is associated with current events, and what can be more up-to-date than a news story hot off the press? The spark of influence for 1920s American turban models could be said to derive from "real" places because designers title them after geographical names appearing in current events and newspapers. The newspaper articles on American turbans

state a linkage between world events and the responses to them by the fashion world, demonstrating that American turban designers have direct access to other parts of the world via the news. On January 6, 1918 one author theorizes: “whether it is due to...peace negotiations between the Russians and the Teutonic allies or not, it is a fact that Turkish turbans are now being shown in the local millinery trade for early spring wear as well as Russian ones” (“Russian and Turkish Turbans”). A headline from March 25, 1923 confirms, “fashion is no longer an arbitrary whim, but is a psychological result of war and other world events” (Comstock).

A news article from August 4, 1935 declares, “whether the initial idea of a hat be taken from Italy, Asia or Africa, its real value and beauty lies in the manipulation of the fabric of which it is made. ...Lamé turbans with jeweled ornaments, suggesting the bazaars of Tehran, are designed for the restaurants of New York, Paris and London” (Pope). Yet by 1935 one would have difficulty to catch a glimpse of a turban on the streets of Tehran given the dress reforms, and this fact goes unmentioned in the article. Naming the Iranian capital is adequate for the journalist to trigger romantic associations of a region based not in the current world, but of yesteryear and the imagination. Like a poorly dubbed talkie, the Persian turban in America is out of sync with what is happening abroad. The latest fashions report the regional influences on turbans as though these other regions are stable, frozen, and existing outside of time, not susceptible to technological or temporal changes. Yet by adapting the traditional headwear of these regions America defends itself as modern, a trait it denies to other regions’ peoples.

Articles of both clothing and newspaper shape a worldview of self and other as fabric and feathers are put to use to conjure distant regions. Together, text and fabric combine news and fashion with politics and geography. American turban-wearers associate the turban with the amorphous East as a means to exoticize foreign regions. A turban from the designer



Black velvet and fur cap modeled on a Russian military cap.

Fashion review from November 18, 1914. The article entitled “Military Caps Have Emphasized the American Fashion for Wearing Small Turbans on the Street and They Rule the New Motor Headgear” states, “All striking events are reflected in the fashions, and although the present war was too sudden to have a strong influence on the early autumn fashions, a military air is rapidly making its way felt in women’s apparel.”

Hartford Courant.

Agnes in October 22, 1935 is “plainly inspired by African headdresses...the most conspicuous novelty among the hat trimmings is the reptilian treatment of feathers, lizardite...and bizarre effect of snakeskin” (“News Inspires African Turban”). The African influence conjures a chain of affiliations embedded in imagination and stereotype, and reflects the popularity of the Jazz Age and Negrophilia at the time. The stereotypes embedded in the African turban serve to build American women’s image of themselves as civilized while dismissing other cultures as savage.



Stern Brothers turban advertisement from September 25, 1927. It reads: “The hat for your velvet costume should be close-draped...in a matching color. For example, the smart turban after Agnes, shown above, with a pin as its only ornament.”
The New York Times.

As an example of America’s ambivalent relationship with the rest of the world, viewing it to be both appealing and repellent, a department store ad from May 20, 1922 alerts the public: “There’s a very new turban. Sheik and chic. Just a little the former. But all of the latter” (“Gimbel Brothers”). The ad deemphasizes the natively “Oriental” component in its play on words in order to not scare away its customer, and directly references Rudolph Valentino’s film *The Sheik* (1921) to help sales.

Encapsulating stereotypes—but also complexity—within its folds, the American turban resists unwrapping. Cross-cultural transfers encourage new associations with the change of contexts. Inevitably, some things get lost in the process of this transmission while other things are gained. The American turban provides insight into the broader phenomenon of cultural encounter. Are constructions of the turban in America to be viewed as reflecting turban-wearing cultures, American culture, European and Oriental influences on America, American influences on the Orient, or all of the above?

Shortly after 9/11, the turban was associated with mistaken identity, hate crimes, fanaticism, and terrorism. Its donning as a statement of faith overrode its appeals to fashion. But the turban can comfortably combine the markers of fashion and faith, and so many others. As we continue in this post-9/11 world, the turban’s demarcating geographical difference has been toned down in contemporary fashion to emphasize temporal difference, as opposed to regional. In a recent article from November 11, 2010, the turban is phrased as “the exotic headdress of a bygone era...linked with Hollywood glamour of the 1920s and 30s” (Oliver). This phrasing emphasizes the American turban’s appropriation and translation that has separated it from geographic origins altogether. In the interwar period full of Orientalized Westerners and Occidentalized

Easterners, and also that of today, generations continue to adopt the turban to flaunt its multilayered meanings.

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