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## 'Schiap' is coming back into style: the great return of Elsa Schiaparelli

„Schiap” wraca do mody: wielki powrót Elsy Schiaparelli

**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to analyze the work and artistic legacy of Elsa Schiaparelli, one of the most innovative fashion designers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particular emphasis is placed on her collaboration with representatives of French Surrealism and the influence of this artistic movement on her designs. The article presents Schiaparelli's biography, tracing her journey from Italian aristocracy to becoming one of the leading figures in interwar French fashion. A detailed examination of her fashion house (1927–1954) is provided, including its rise to prominence, peak success, and the reasons for its closure. Furthermore, the study explores Schiaparelli's impact on later decades of fashion, particularly on designers such as Thierry Mugler, Hussein Chalayan, Marc Jacobs, and Alexander McQueen. The article also discusses the 2012 revival of the Schiaparelli brand and its gradual return to international fashion recognition. This research is based on an analysis of existing literature and case studies of selected Schiaparelli designs, offering insight into her significance in the history of fashion and art.

**Keywords:** Elsa Schiaparelli; Surrealism; fashion history; haute couture; fashion design; Schiaparelli fashion house

**Streszczenie.** Celem artykułu jest analiza twórczości oraz artystycznego dziedzictwa Elsy Schiaparelli – jednej z najbardziej innowacyjnych projektantek mody XX wieku. W szczególności podkreślona zostaje jej współpraca z przedstawicielami francuskiego surrealizmu oraz wpływ tego nurtu na jej projekty. Artykuł przedstawia biografię Schiaparelli, ukazując jej drogę z włoskiej arystokracji do grona czołowych twórców mody międzywojennej Francji. Szczegółowo omówiony zostaje rozwój jej domu mody (1927–1954) – proces zdobywania pozycji na rynku, szczyt popularności oraz przyczyny jego zamknięcia. W dalszej części analizowany jest wpływ Schiaparelli na późniejsze dekady mody, w tym na twórczość projektantów takich jak Thierry Mugler, Hussein Chalayan, Marc Jacobs czy Alexander McQueen. Artykuł porusza również kwestię reaktywacji marki w 2012 roku oraz jej stopniowego powrotu do międzynarodowego obiegu mody. Badania opierają się na analizie literatury przedmiotu oraz studium przypadków wybranych projektów Schiaparelli, co pozwala ukazać jej znaczenie w kontekście historii mody i sztuki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Elsa Schiaparelli; surrealizm; historia mody; haute couture; projektowanie mody; dom mody Schiaparelli

**F**orgotten for decades, constantly in the shadow of her biggest rival: Coco Chanel, Elsa Schiaparelli has recently been rediscovered, and her legacy is slowly regaining its former glory. This is evident by the return of the French version of her autobiography to bookstores after 68 years, as well as by the display of her designs in an exhibition *Shocking! Les mondes surréalistes d'Elsa Schiaparelli* at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris, available to the public until January 2023. Considered by some as one of the most important fashion designers of the French interwar period, in recent years Schiaparelli has aroused the interest not only of vintage fashion enthusiasts, but also of researchers in various fields of science. To what extent, can the life of this outstanding individual serve as an inspiration for future generations of artists, and did she leave her mark in the works of later fashion designers?

## 1. The humble beginnings

Elsa Luisa Maria Schiaparelli was born on 10 September 1890 at the Palazzo Corsini in Rome. Her mother came from a wealthy aristocratic family of de Dominitis. Elsa's grandmother was a Scot, daughter of the British governor in Malta, and her grandfather, Alberto de Dominitis, was a marquis and became the Italian consul in Malta<sup>1</sup>. Her father, Celestino Schiaparelli, was an accomplished academic scholar. The rest of the paternal side of the family was no less respected and inspiring: her close relative, Celestino, was a famous Egyptologist who discovered the tomb of Nefertiti and her grandfather, Giovanni, was an astronomer who discovered the so-called Martian canals<sup>2</sup>. Elsa's early life did not indicate that she would become a major fashion personality in the future. Like many young ladies at the time, she spent her time learning languages, going to parties, making friends in the right circles. Her priority at the time was to find a wealthy husband and become a housewife, devoting her life to the well-being of her husband and children<sup>3</sup>. Her parents arranged for Elsa to marry a rich (but unattractive) Russian man. To escape a fate she didn't want, she decided to leave home in 1913, at the age of 23. She then moved to London and within the year she married Count William de Went de Kerlor<sup>4</sup>. After two years, the newly-wed couple moved to New York, where they welcomed to the world their daughter. Here Elsa met for the first time with the local representants of Dada/pre-Surrealism: Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Shortly after the move, the Count abandoned the family

1 SECREST 2014, p. 6.

2 THE TIME 1934, p. 55.

3 SECREST, *op. cit.*, s. 16.

4 SWEENEY-RISKO 2015, p. 310.

for the actress and dancer, Isadora Duncan<sup>5</sup>. Left penniless and estranged from her Italian family, Schiaparelli was forced to take care of her child on her own and become the only provider for the family. Wanting to start over, she moved with her little daughter to Paris<sup>6</sup>. In the beginning she took up various jobs to support her sickly child. In 1922 her life was about to change forever, when her friend Gaby Picabia (the wife of Francis Picabia) was hired by the famous fashion designer Paul Poiret to be a hostess at his private theatre on the elegant grounds of his eighteenth-century residence. Picabia, lacking funds for a new outfit, was in desperate need of a new evening gown. Her friend Elsa “came to her rescue” with yards of richly colored fabric, wonderful ideas and a mouthful of pins. Between them they pulled, draped and cut directly onto Gaby’s form. Subsequently, she greeted the public in the first Schiaparelli and her employer admired and complimented her unusual dress. This event was a milestone in Schiaparelli’s life that led her to change her career path and begin her fashion work<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. The fashion imperium in progress

After being noticed by Paul Poiret it would not be an exaggeration to say that Elsa was getting serious about designing and inventing clothing. In 1930 she opened her first boutique at 21 Place Vendôme, it became a foundation of her future dominance over the course of the 1930s<sup>8</sup>. What attracted the customers to her outfits was the universality and, paradoxically, how easy they were to copy. Shortly after the emergence of her new collection the ‘inspirations’ were easy to spot on the Champs-Élysées. From Paris new fashions travelled all the way to New York, where *millions of shop girls who had never heard of Schiaparelli were proudly wearing her models*<sup>9</sup>. Some of the knitted dresses designs were sold in the United States in a form of authorized knitting patterns<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, another feature of Schiaparelli’s fashion house that turned out to be of importance to its clients, was comfort which often went beyond what emancipation already entailed. The artist frequently set her sights on bold, innovative and, as it would later prove, revolutionary solutions. One of them, was the incorporation of zippers into her designs for the ease of removal<sup>11</sup>.

5 WHITE 1986, p. 38.

6 SECREST, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

7 *Ibidem*, p. 71.

8 MERLIN, year unknown, p.1.

9 THE TIMES 1934, *op. cit.*, s. 52.

10 BUSCILLA 1935, s. 19.

11 O'BRIAN 2020, p. 10.



1. Schiaparelli knitting patterns, 1930s.  
[https://i.etsystatic.com/5206364/r/il/3244e1/2418310321/il\\_570xN.2418310321\\_gjqg.jpg](https://i.etsystatic.com/5206364/r/il/3244e1/2418310321/il_570xN.2418310321_gjqg.jpg)



2. Schiaparelli knitting patterns, 1930s.  
[https://i.etsystatic.com/5474486/r/il/872foc/452664919/il\\_fullxfull.452664919\\_4vie.jpg](https://i.etsystatic.com/5474486/r/il/872foc/452664919/il_fullxfull.452664919_4vie.jpg)

Moreover, her clothes reframed the woman's body toward a more active role in the world. In the early years of her career her emphasis was on practical clothing for women such as trouser skirts, bathing suits and travel clothes<sup>12</sup>. The vision of fashion proposed by Schiaparelli reflected the changing social mood and the increasing emancipation of women in French society of the interwar period. The "Schiaparelli" woman was a woman who prioritized comfort and the practicality of dress, without sacrificing their craftsmanship and elegance at the expense. Through fashion, she showed that the woman of the 1930s was an ambitious individual who was not only professionally but also socially active<sup>13</sup>.

Since 1935, Schiaparelli had been presenting thematic collections at her salon, theatrically staged with dramatic lighting, backdrops and music. A fashion editor who regularly attended these events recalled that the front rows were filled with royalty, politicians, artists, film stars who pushed towards the models "as if it were rush hour"<sup>14</sup>. Despite the theatricality, the seemingly strange designs and

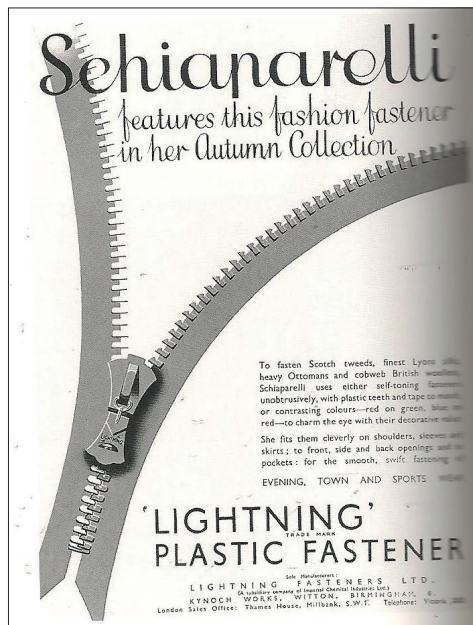
<sup>12</sup> SWEENEY-RISKO 2015, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>14</sup> PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART 2003, p.10.



the rather emancipated vision of the woman, Schiaparelli's designs enjoyed general acclaim and the interest of her contemporaries. Newspapers were spreading the word about her latest collections, her resume, her trademark shocking pink colour or the perfumes for men and women branded with her name. In less than a decade of business, she has created a reputation and a good name for herself not only among artists, but also the rest of the world. However, one day, September 1, 1939, not only changed the course of history, but also the direction of the rising tide on which the designer was on.



3. Schiaparelli 'lightning' fastener from Autumn collection, 1930s. <https://trimlab.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/schiaparellizipadvert.jpg>



4. Schiaparelli zippers, late 1930s. <https://trimlab.wordpress.com/2014/01/21/the-house-of-schiaparelli-and-the-zipper/>

### 3. The decline of the 'Schiap'

Despite the now legendary duel and, so to speak, “arms race” between her and her rival Coco Chanel, the Schiaparelli fashion house did very well until the late 1930s. The harbinger of the downward turn turned out to be the outbreak of World War II. Throughout the conflict, the designer tried to remain professionally active. Relatively calm “The Phoney War” in France (an eight month period during which there was only one limited military land operation on the Western Front),

she launched a Spring 1940 collection, the last that she made in pre-war France<sup>15</sup>. The main theme was military, with “trench” brown and camouflage print taffetas and even the handbags for carrying the gas masks<sup>16</sup>.

In July of 1940, Schiaparelli sailed to New York to begin a lecture tour called “Clothes and the Woman.” At the beginning of 1941, she sailed back to Europe only to return to New York in May. She lived in the city until the end of the war where she volunteered at various war-relief organizations<sup>17</sup>. In 1945, when the war ended, she returned from her refuge in New York to find out that in Paris the mood of fashion had changed. She tried to keep up with the gravely changed styles, needs and sensibilities of the post-war fashion but she couldn’t stop the ongoing downward spiral of her fashion house’s popularity. In 1954 she published her autobiography *The Shocking Life* and then lived out a comfortable retirement between her Paris apartment and her house in Tunisia. She died on 13 November 1973, at the age of 83 leaving behind a legacy that, as it turned out, was not to be forgotten.

#### 4. The posteriority and conclusion

For researchers the impact that Schiaparelli made on the fashion of the next decades is undisputed. Changing the way people think about clothing, encouraging people to push ever new creative boundaries, or theatricalizing and turning fashion shows into a spectacle are among the many subsequent fruits the designer’s work has produced. Many later designers manifested the hallmarks of Surrealist fashion in later years and which were influenced by Schiaparelli’s innovations in design. For example, Thierry Mugler notably made waves with his designs of SS97 “insects’ motif,” which featured intricate, insect-inspired elements. Hussein Chalayan also made surreal history with his FW00 “table skirt,” a piece that seamlessly transformed from a table into a wearable garment, blurring the lines between art and fashion<sup>18</sup>.

Equally, Marc Jacobs’ 2008 *Backwards* collection was designed to proceed in reverse, featuring witty accessories like hats adorned with eyes and bags that were dissected and patched together in unexpected ways, adding a playful twist to his runway show<sup>19</sup>. The topic of surrealism in fashion cannot be discussed without mentioning Alexander McQueen, whose illustrious career was characterized

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> YASSER 2023.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

by his dramatic and roaring aesthetic. For one of his earliest collections in 1997, McQueen's *La Poupée*, he sent models down the runway adorned with feathers, shells, birds, and butterflies, creating a mesmerizing collision of fashion and surrealism that continues to inspire future generations<sup>20</sup>.



5. Thierry Mugler ss 1997 Collection, 1997. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/39/fa/cf/39facf3cce11fo794ecae7e1ac2f5f5f.jpg>



6. Hussein Chalayan FW 2000 table dress, 2000. [https://assets.vogue.com/photos/5a1c48b028c66f109ab5db10/master/w\\_1280%2Cc\\_limit/CHALAYAN-FALL-2000-RTW-56-NATALIA-SEMANOVA-2C897907.JPG](https://assets.vogue.com/photos/5a1c48b028c66f109ab5db10/master/w_1280%2Cc_limit/CHALAYAN-FALL-2000-RTW-56-NATALIA-SEMANOVA-2C897907.JPG)

Schiaparelli's designs from the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century also had a strong influence on the popularization of shocking the audience through fashion. One of the crowning examples of fashion that shocks and causes disbelief is Lady Gaga's Franc Fernandez dress made of meat in which she attended to MTV Video Music Awards gala in 2010. Clad in flank steak, she managed to outdo even herself. Slashed to the thigh, and featuring a cowl neck, the dress came with matching beefy boots, hat and meat clutch<sup>21</sup>.

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21 THORP 2023.





7. Alexander McQueen, *La Poupée*, 1997. <https://glowbalfashion.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/debra-shaw-for-alexander-mcqueen-ss1997-la-poup-c3a9e.jpg?w=640>



8. Marc Jacobs, *Backwards*, 2008. [https://blogger.googleusercontent.com/img/b/R29vZ2xl/AVvXsEjU3ogljGEsO84IKc8QdoSMcxDR-kcOZgFRiF12a6Y6wWF2lSm\\_M4h7bdLhqJoi8udk4wbTmoqOZ\\_lAI-CoIsFPLmAoAJaa6ZcSKgWReOPv-dONZOtwTKKT-io3VxwepwauDZolTdQ\\_MEiME/w1200-h630-p-k-no-nu/Marc+Jacobs+backwards+heels+Spring+2008.jpg](https://blogger.googleusercontent.com/img/b/R29vZ2xl/AVvXsEjU3ogljGEsO84IKc8QdoSMcxDR-kcOZgFRiF12a6Y6wWF2lSm_M4h7bdLhqJoi8udk4wbTmoqOZ_lAI-CoIsFPLmAoAJaa6ZcSKgWReOPv-dONZOtwTKKT-io3VxwepwauDZolTdQ_MEiME/w1200-h630-p-k-no-nu/Marc+Jacobs+backwards+heels+Spring+2008.jpg)





9. Franc Fernandez „The Meat Dress” designed for Lady Gaga for the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards. <https://francfernandez.blogspot.com/2010/09/lady-gaga-at-vmas.html>

Afterwards, the brand regained their official Haute Couture label, recognized by French Couture Federation, and appointed its new artistic director, Daniel Roseberry<sup>24</sup>. Thus, it has become an A-liner again, with designs created under the brand's name appearing at major American and foreign fashion events.

The revival of Schiaparelli was a complex process. After all, how does one rebuild a brand that has been closed for more than six decades? The first hint of this fashion “resurrection” took place in 2012 when Farida Khelfa confirmed the return of the brand and became its new ambassador<sup>22</sup>. Her efforts were extremely effective and the fashion house rose like a phoenix from the ashes. In 2014, after 60 years Schiaparelli launched at Paris Fashion Week the first haute couture runway show since 1954<sup>23</sup>.



10. Dua Lipa wearing Schiaparelli, 2023. [https://media.vogue.co.uk/photos/659b4b4ed805ef4620532770/2:3/w\\_2560%2Cc\\_limit/1908162064](https://media.vogue.co.uk/photos/659b4b4ed805ef4620532770/2:3/w_2560%2Cc_limit/1908162064)

<sup>22</sup> *Schiaparelli set to relaunch*, *FashionUnited*, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2012, <https://fashionunited.com/v1/fashion/schiaparelli-set-to-relaunch/201205093648>, [access date: 14.07.2024].

<sup>23</sup> *The story of the house*, Maison Schiaparelli official website, <https://www.schiaparelli.com/en/21-place-vendome/the-story-of-the-house/>, [access date: 14.07.2022].

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

The Schiaparelli dresses and ensembles were worn by the world's most famous pop culture stars such as: Dua Lipa (the modern re-interpretation of the 1938 Skeleton Dress worn at the 81<sup>st</sup> Annual Golden Globe Awards in January 2024)<sup>25</sup>, Taylor Swift (the 66<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy Awards in February 2024)<sup>26</sup>, Jennifer Lopez (MET Gala in May 2024)<sup>27</sup> and, most recently, Kylie Jenner (Paris Fashion Week in June 2024)<sup>28</sup>.



11. Kylie Jenner wearing Schiaparelli, designed by Daniel Roseberry, Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2024. <https://www.schiaparelli.com/en/news/2024-06-24-kylie-jenner-wore-schiaparelli-to-the-haute-couture-fall-winter-2024-25-schiaparelli-show>

One of the honours that went down in the history of the fashion house was in 2021 when Lady Gaga sang the national anthem at the inauguration of President-Elect Joe Biden, wearing a Schiaparelli Haute Couture gown with a gilded brass dove holding an olive branch as a symbol of harmony and peace.

25 Dua Lipa wore custom Schiaparelli Haute Couture to the 81<sup>st</sup> Annual Golden Globe Awards, January 7<sup>th</sup> 2024, Maison Schiaparelli official website, <https://www.schiaparelli.com/fr/actualites/2024-01-07-carey-mulligan-wore-custom-schiaparelli-haute-couture-to-the-81st-annual-golden-globe-awards>, [access date: 14.07.2024].

26 E.G. Coyne, Taylor Swift Wears Custom Strapless Schiaparelli Dress on the 2024 Grammys Red Carpet, *Women's Wearily* website, <https://wwd.com/pop-culture/celebrity-news/taylor-swift-schiaparelli-dress-2024-grammys-1236164497/>, [access date: 14.07.2024].

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12. Lady Gaga wearing a Schiaparelli gown 2021. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gaga\\_inauguration\\_Schiaparelli\\_gown.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gaga_inauguration_Schiaparelli_gown.jpg)

The reappearing of the brand confirms that the great talent and the legacy of the surrealist fashion is timeless and can overcome all adversity. The future, therefore, paints a bright picture for the fashion house, showing that even after years of absence, Schiap's artistic spirit is still alive and her work, despite being nearly a century old, continues to inspire and delight the modern viewer.



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