CHAPTER VI

COLOUR IN WOMAN’S COSTUME

COLOUR is the hall-mark of our day, and woman decoratively costumed, and as decorator, will be largely responsible for recording this age as one of distinct importance—a transition period in decoration.

Colour is the most marked expression of the spirit of the times; colour in woman’s clothes; colour in house furnishing; colour on the stage and in its setting; colour in prose and verse.

Speaking of colour in verse, Rudyard Kipling says (we quote from an editorial in the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Jan. 7, 1917):

“Several songs written by Tommy and the Poilu at the front, celebrate the glories of camp life in such vivid colors they could not be reproduced in cold, black, leaden type.”

It is no mere chance, this use of vivid colour. Man’s psychology to-day craves it. A revolution is on. Did not the strong red, green, and blue
of Napoleon's time follow the delicate sky-blues, rose and sunset-yellows of the Louis?

Colour pulses on every side, strong, clean, clear rainbow colour, as if our magicians of brush and dye-pot held a prism to the sun-beam; violet, orange and green, magentas and strong blue against backgrounds of black and cold grey.

We had come to think of colour as vice and had grown so conservative in its use, that it had all but disappeared from our persons, our homes, our gardens, our music and our literature. More than this, from our point of view! The reaction was bound to come by reason of eternal precedent.

Half-tones, antique effects, and general monotony,—the material expression of complacent minds, has been cast aside, and the blasé man of ten years ago is as keen as any child with his first linen picture book,—and for the same reason.

Colour, as we see it to-day, came out of the East via Persia. Bakst in Russia translated it into terms of art, and made the Ballet Russe an amazing, enthralling vision! Then Poiret, wizard among French couturières, assisted by Bakst, adapted this Oriental colour and line to
woman's uses in private life. This supplemented the good work of *le Gazette du Bon Ton* of Paris, that effete fashion sheet, devoted to the decoration of woman, whose staff included many of the most gifted French artists, masters of brush and pen. Always irregular, no issue of the *Bon Ton* has appeared of late. It is held up by the war. The men who made it so fascinating a guide to woman "who would be decorative," are at the front, painting scenery for the battlefield—literally that: making mock trees and rocks, grass and hedges and earth, to mislead the fire of the enemy, and doubtless the kindred Munich art has been diverted into similar channels.

This Oriental colour has made its way across Europe like some gorgeous bird of the tropics, and since the war has checked the output of Europe's factories, another channel has supplied the same wonderful colours in silks and gauze. They come to us by way of the Pacific, from China and from Japan. There is no escaping the colour spell. Writers from the front tell us that it is as if the gods made sport with fate's anvil, for even the blackened dome of the war
PLATE IX
A Velasquez portrait of the Renaissance, when the human form counted only as a rack on which was heaped crinoline and stiff brocades and chains and gems and wigs and every manner of elaborate adornment, making mountains of poor tottering human forms, all but lost beneath.
zone is lurid by night, with sparks of purple, red, green, yellow and blue; the flare of the world-destroying projectiles.

The present costuming of woman, when she treats herself as decoration, owes much to the prophets of the “new” theatre and their colour scale. These men have demonstrated, in an unforgettable manner, the value of colour; the dependence of every decorative object upon background; shown how fraught with meaning can be an uncompromising outline, and the suggestiveness of really significant detail.

Bakst, Rheinhardt and Granville Barker have taught us the new colour vocabulary. Gordon Craig was perhaps the first to show us the stage made suggestive by insisting on the importance of clever lighting to produce atmosphere and elimination of unessential objects, the argument of his school being that the too detailed reproducing of Nature (on the stage) acts as a check to the imagination, whereas by the judicious selection of harmonics, the imagination is stimulated to its utmost creative capacity. One detects this creed to-day in certain styles of home
decoration (woman’s background), as well as in woman’s costumes.

*Portable Backgrounds*

The staging of a recent play showed more plainly than any words, the importance of background. In one of the scenes, beautiful, artistic gowns in delicate shades were set off by a room with wonderful green walls and woodwork (mignonette). Now, so long as the characters moved about the room, they were thrown into relief most charmingly, but the moment the women seated themselves on a very light coloured and characterless chintz sofa, they lost their decorative value. It was lacking in harmony and contrast. The two black sofa cushions intended possibly to serve as background, being small, instantly disappeared behind the seated women.

A sofa of contrasting colour, or black, would have looked better in the room, and served as immediate background for gowns. It might have been covered in dark chintz, a silk damask in one or several tones, or a solid colour, since the gowns were of delicate indefinite shades.
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One of the sofas did have a dark Chinese coat thrown over the back, with the intent, no doubt, of serving as effective background, but the point seemed to escape the daintily gowned young woman who poured tea, for she failed to take advantage of it, occupying the opposite end of the sofa. A modern addition to a woman's toilet is a large square of chiffon, edged with narrow metal or crystal fringe, or a gold or silver flexible cord. This scarf is always in beguiling contrast to the costume, and when not being worn, is thrown over the chair or end of sofa against which our lady reclines. To a certain degree, this portable background makes a woman decorative when the wrong colour on a chair might convert her lovely gown into an eyesore.

One woman we know, who has an Empire room, admires the lines of her sofa as furniture, but feels it ineffective unless one reclines à la Mme. Récamier. To obviate this difficulty, she has had made a square (one and a half yards), of lovely soft mauve silk damask, lined with satin charmeuse of the same shade, and weighted by long, heavy tassels, at the corners; this she throws over the Empire roll and a part of the
seat, which are done in antique green velvet. Now the woman seated for conversation with arm and elbow resting on the head, looks at ease,—a part of the composition. The square of soft, lined silk serves at other times as a couvrepiéd.