

Anne Sebba – Why fashion mattered to Parisiennes

Fashion, even during the last War, was anything but trivial for Parisian women; they believed that looking your best at all times was crucial initially as a way of showing support for their husbands and sons at the front, just as the magazines told them they must, but then, when defeat overwhelmed them, continuing to try and look their best as a way of not succumbing to their German occupiers. It was a form of resistance to show that they had not been ground down and it kept thousands of frightened and impoverished women employed in their ateliers, beading, attaching fur or inserting pockets and linings. So, when shortages of fabrics meant new clothes were almost impossible, women spent hours cutting down old clothes, sometimes the suits of their missing husbands, or turning two bags into one, covering wooden shoes with fabrics and creating extravagant creations on their heads that passed as hats. Many people commented on the vegetables, flowers and cascades of ribbons that appeared on the brims of hats. So keen were they to appear fashionable at all times that, even as they arrived in the brutal camp of Ravensbrück, the other women prisoners already inside muttered and whispered about “Frenchwomen” ...one woman smuggled in a powder compact - an unheard of luxury – while another wore an Hermès silk scarf.

So, I could not have been more thrilled when the scarf designer Emma Greenhill offered to design a scarf based around the themes in this book. Emma started her fashion career in Paris and spent a year there working for John Galliano and Karl Lagerfeld really getting to grips with what it takes to create a **Parisienne!** Having learned that luxury matters, (she subsequently worked in fashion PR for many years for a variety of big names most recently Hussein Chalayan), now that she is setting up her own company she is determined only to use luxury fabrics and have luxury finishes e.g. hand rolled or frayed edges, not machine edged. She has her scarves made in the same Italian factory that manufactures items for Gucci and Alexander Mc Queen and you can tell as soon as you touch them.

The fabulous scarf she has designed for ***Les Parisiennes*** has at its heart a woman on a bicycle since women in wartime Paris went everywhere on bicycles - private cars were impossible to maintain and there was no fuel. Yet women were legally not allowed to wear trousers at the time (too masculine) and so many designers made a form of divided skirt or culottes, which were really trousers in disguise! There are many other symbols in Emma’s beautiful scarf such as the caged bird with plumage in the three colours of the French tricolour which was a brooch designed by Cartier to represent how Parisians felt during the Occupation. But, come the Liberation, the bird was freed as the cage doors were opened.

Les Parisiennes: How the women of Paris lived, loved and died in the 1940’s by Anne Sebba is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson out now.