

**Fig. 1.** Maclean's cover of the Canadian modern girl 1924 from Jane Nicholas; *The Modern Girl: Feminine Modernities, the Body, and Commodities in the 1920s*; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2015.



# 1920s BROCADE OPERA COAT REFLECTING FEMINISM & THE “MODERN GIRL”

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The 1920s became a time of prosperity and new beginnings for most women, especially in Canada. The “modern girl” (See Fig. 1) emerged as women engaged in a society with more freedom, better working conditions, and a place in politics. According to Alys Weinbaum et al., the “modern girl” is someone who is “up-to-date and youthful femininity, provocative and unseemly in its intimacy with foreign aesthetic and commodity influences” (9). During this time, fashion is considered to be a representation of these new ideas for the “modern girl.” Women’s fashion evolved into loose and masculine styles, symbolizing their freedom and the start of the rise to equality of men. One can see that the construction of this 1920s brocade opera coat (See Fig. 2) from Toronto Metropolitan University’s Fashion Research Collection is an example of the “modern girl” and the start of their new lifestyle.



**Fig. 2.** Brocade opera coat, ca. 1920s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.003. Photograph by Dianna De Angelis, 2019.



**Fig. 3.** Theodore de Banville, Faute de s'entendre. c 1880 from Valerie Steele; *The Corset: A Cultural History*; Yale University Press, 2001.

### **WOMEN BEFORE THE TWENTIES**

Before reaching this idea of a “modern girl” in Canada, one must look at the expectations of women before the twenties to understand their significance. Before the twenties, some of the clothing women wore reflected their duties as an obedient housewife to their husband specifically women in the upper and middle class. Their clothing was very constrained and restricted some women from getting involved in activities such as work, and their abilities to play sports. For example, Patricia Warner states that tennis clothing for women in the 19th century had some give in their garments, as women were “not actually expected to run for the ball” (46). This was deemed a “blessing” since women still had to wear tight corsets as they began to play tennis, while still conforming to the fashion trends and ideologies of the 19th century (Warner 46-47). Some scholars have argued that the purpose of the Victorian corset was to emphasize the women’s figure and reflect submission to men (Evans 365 and 366) (See Fig. 3). Thus, the Victorian corset is one example of clothing that conveys a message of limitation and restraint of women during the 19th century.

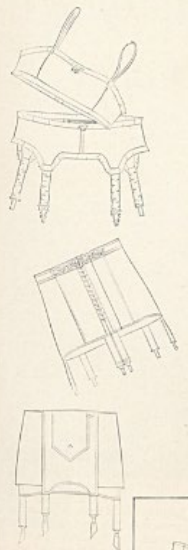




**Fig. 4.** Canadian Women wearing their suffrage sashes in Washington D.C. from *Historica Canada*; "Women's Suffrage in Canada Education Guide"; *Women's History*; [Historicacanada.ca, http://education.historicacanada.ca/files/108/Womens\\_Suffrage.pdf](http://education.historicacanada.ca/files/108/Womens_Suffrage.pdf).

### **POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE TWENTIES**

Women's suffrage was a slow process in Canada. By 1918, women in all provinces in Canada could vote if over the age of twenty-one (See Fig. 4) (*Historica Canada* 3). By 1922, suffrage continued allowing black and white women to vote; except in Quebec (*Historica Canada* 4). However, not all women received the right to vote during this time. Indigenous and Asian women were given their right to vote much later on in Canada (*Historica Canada* 3). There was also an increase of women looking for work and aspired to have a job in Canada due to the better working conditions they were given (Strong-Boag 132). Women of the middle class began to receive jobs in clerical work and in department stores (Nicholas 95). As one can see, women began to go through political and social changes throughout the twenties. This political and social change was reflected through their clothes as they gained independence and freedom. Women began to move away from containment, where this idea metaphorically can be seen through their clothes.



The adjustable, over-abdominal control belt; a feature of the Modern Combination Model "Libra" illustrated



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**Fig. 5.** The Girdle. Advertisement: Modart Corset Company (Modart Corset Company) from *Vogue*; <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/vogue/docview/879190760/147498B35D1441D3PQ/79?accountid=13631>

### 1920s FASHION IN CANADA

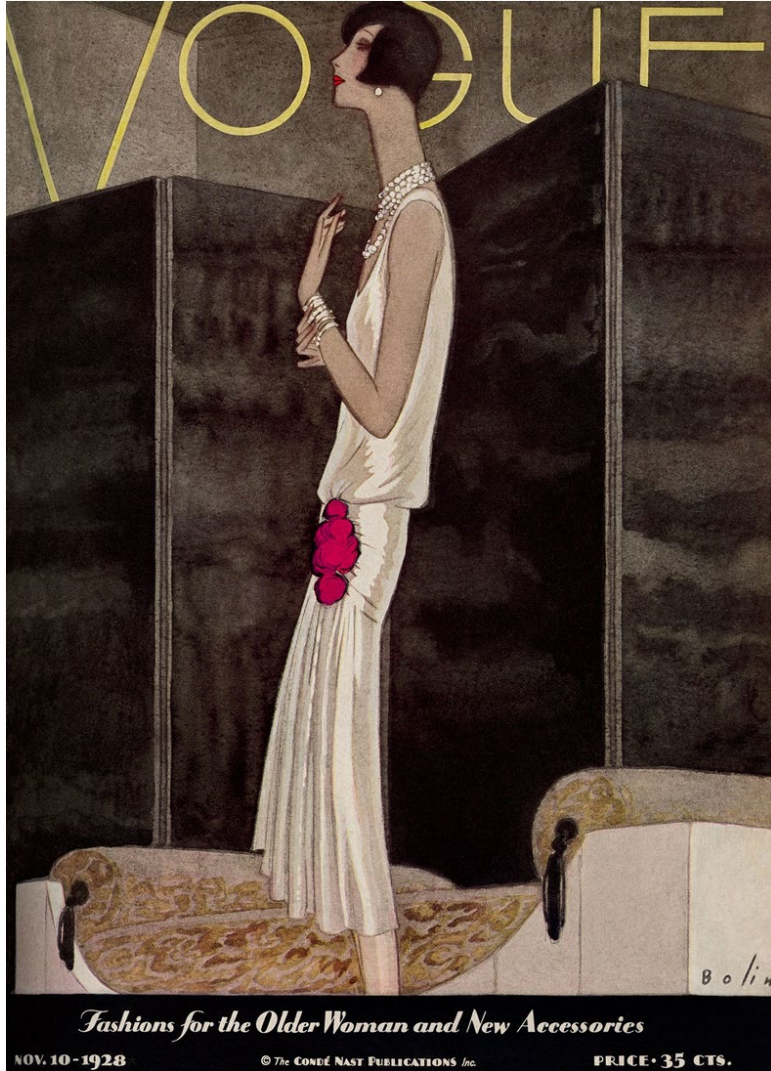
One example of this metaphor previously mentioned, can be seen through the newer styles of the corset. Women, especially the “modern girl,” were not necessarily required to wear constricting garments like the Victorian corset in the twenties anymore. This idea of women having freedom of movement with their clothes “waged war on the corset” (Zeitz 150). Jill Fields recites a 1917 article of *Vogue*, saying women refused to wear corsets and eventually fashionable women and couturiers reached a compromise that waists would be taken in, but not by much (362). There became a lot of pressure and paranoia for corset manufacturers. Corset makers constantly had to update and create multiple types of corsets to adapt to women’s new lifestyles in order to stay in business (Fields 364). The corsets of the early 1900s and 1920s followed the new structure of women’s clothes and roles in society (Fields 364). The corset was altered to a less defining body shape and allowed for more flexibility in the 1920s. In fact, trade journals in the twenties debated if they should just rename the corset to girdle to cut it away from its original meaning so women would still purchase one (See Fig. 5) (Fields 364). The newly defined corset in the twenties reflects the ideas of women during this time. Both the corset and women were altered to an idea of less restriction. The corset never truly went away in the twenties, but women were no longer expected to wear one. If a woman did, it did not limit their abilities compared to the Victorian corset.





**Fig. 6.** An example of freedom of movement from Giphy; <https://giphy.com/gifs/black-and-white-dancing-113IVDUBnaHOMY>

Beyond the corset women's clothing continuously went through changes to meet the new standards of the "modern girl" in Canada. New styles emerged that had an emphasis on freedom of movement similar to the corset (See Fig. 6) (Evans 370). Art Deco style aided freedom of movement through several key elements. Art Deco is a design style that flourished during this time. It was inspired by architecture and cityscapes, causing this movement to consist of geometric, sleek, and stylized forms (Duncan 7-8). Art Deco's relation to fashion is that it inspired the flapper style. It consisted of sleek, elegant garments that symbolized wealth. Additionally, it inspired garments to include embellished embroidery, beading or appliques, geometric designs, metallic colours, and newer cuts to women's dress (Duncan 10). In Canada, flappers were found in public spaces, sporting this new type of style of freedom of movement. Fashion embodied the idea of the "flapper," which is rooted in the idea of the "modern girl" (Nicholas 97). Flappers were rebellious girls in society and became "a political choice" for women to sport in the twenties (Evans 370). Often flapper style consisted of straight cut dresses that fell to the knee, a drop-waist along the hips, long loose narrow silhouettes and arms exposed (See Figs. 7 and 8). This style presented a boyish look, as it resembled men's clothing (Drowne and Huber 99). Flappers also tended to be slim as this became the expectation of weight for women, since it emphasized the loose fit and the boyish look. To look the part of a flapper required much effort, since ready-to-wear fashion catered specifically to smaller and slim sizes (Peters 170). Although, the flapper look demanded for much work, fashion in the twenties strayed away from constraint and unpractical (or even difficult) garments to put on, as ideologies of women evolved to a more frivolous, free woman.



**Fig. 7.** Flapper Style from William Bolin; "As a Jazz Age Exhibition Opens in London, We Celebrate the Era With 11 Vintage Vogue Covers"; Vogue, 4 Sept. 2016; <https://www.vogue.com/article/from-the-archives-1920s-jazz-age-illustration>.

**Fig. 8.** Flapper Style and Art Deco from Vogue; "From the Archives: Art Deco in Vogue"; Vogue, 14 May 2013; <https://www.vogue.com/article/from-the-archives-art-deco-in-vogue>.







**Fig. 9-12.** Brocade opera coat, ca. 1920s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.003. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

**CONSTRUCTION OF THE BROCADE 1920s OPERA COAT**

The brocade opera coat is an example of the Art Deco movement. The construction of the coat consists of a very loose fit and bias cut. The sleeves of the coat flow off the shoulders where they grow large and wide at the cuffs, making it fit loosely. The silhouette of the coat falls straight to the knees. There is also a seam that runs along the coat where the hips would be. This seam is considered as a drop-waist that emphasizes the straight cut and loose fit (See Fig. 9 and 10). The construction of the coat would simply hang off from the woman’s body of who owned it. It flowed freely as she would move, which is a major design feature of the coat. In addition, the coat is constructed with two buttons in order to close it and remove from the body easily (See Fig. 11 and 12). Thus, the buttons are a practical feature of the coat as it pertains to the idea of being able to move freely.



**Fig. 13-14.** Brocade opera coat, ca. 1920s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2017.05.003. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood, 2019.

**Fig. 15.** Evening Coat 1924-1926 from Mrs Hywell-Jones; V&A; <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O366045/evening-coat-unknown/>.

**OTHER OBSERVATIONS**

The coat consists of intricate details as it showcases a gold-feathered pattern all over the royal blue brocade material. As well, the coat includes fur-cuffs on the sleeves and a fur scarf that is detachable and reversible (See Fig. 13 and 14). Lastly, the coat has a silvery gold silk material lining. Due to its design and to a similar example found from the V&A, this coat was worn in the evening on a night out (See Fig. 15).





**Fig. 16.** Charles Frederick Worth's Women's Evening Coat 1890 from the House of Worth; The Metropolitan Museum; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/159337>.

The overall design of the coat is very simple and functional. The coat is a perfect example of the idea of freedom of movement. It is evident that this garment embodies the "modern girl," since the details of the coat relate to this concept of freedom. This provides the "modern girl" to have little restriction while wearing this garment. Looking at the construction of Charles Frederick Worth's women's evening coat from the 1890s, one can see how in this period the coats were more structured and fitted to the body (See Fig. 16). In Figure 16, Worth's coat includes a more fitted structure at the waist. The seam emphasizes the hourglass figure women were expected to have during this time. The sleeves are also tight fitted to the arms and shoulder. In addition, the coat falls to the feet, which would cover a woman from neck to toe. Worth's coat emphasizes the constraint and ideologies of women during this time. Unlike Worth's coat, the brocade coat is completely opposite and allows for more movement and freedom. Thus, one can see how the 1920s brocade coat is more practical compared to Worth's garment.

The details of the coat such as the colours, accessories, and brocade weave reflect the idea of the "modern girl" as well. It presents this idea of fun that women are finally encountering, as they begin to experience new activities. Additionally, the details of the opera coat reflect an elite lifestyle. The coat is made out of luxurious materials that indicate a woman's wealth. According to Katherine Drowne and Patrick Huber, materials for women's evening wear that consisted of satin, silk, and metallic embroidery present an elite status (101). Fur was also an indication of wealth since it became a booming industry after World War I (Manno 59). Raccoon, muskrat, and fox fur were popular for an elite women to wear on their coats and scarves, especially during the winter evenings (Manno 59). Thus, one can observe that the "modern girl" existed in the elite class of the twenties due to the details of the opera coat.



**Fig. 17.** Process Work 1  
from Dianna De Angelis;  
SketchBook; 2019.

**Fig. 18.** Process Work 2  
from Dianna De Angelis;  
SketchBook; 2019.



## CONCLUSION

To conclude this blog, fashion throughout the twenties symbolizes the Canadian “modern girl.” Taking a deep look at the brocade opera coat, it reflects larger ideas of feminism in the twenties. It represents the “freedom of movement” as clothes became more transitional and functional for the newly woman. It was only fitting for women’s clothing to evolve as they gained freedom in society. The clothes allowed them to work, play sports, and participate in new activities that were taboo before the twenties. Thus, fashion is a very important function for the Canadian “modern girl” in the twenties. It is ultimately a true representation of what they went through on their journey to reach their achievement of independence, rights, and better working conditions during this time.

## CREATIVE COMPONENT

For the creative component, I wanted to recreate this coat by using an application called SketchBook on my iPad. I used several techniques such as blending, and layering in order to create this digital image. Before I started this art piece, my process work consisted of several sketches I did on my iPad (See Fig. 17 and 18). I did this to visually see the different proportions and variations of the coat I could use within my final piece.

The setting of this image was inspired by a quote I found while doing my research by Jane Nicholas. Nicholas states that the Canadian “modern girl” is stereotypically “depicted rosy-cheeked in winter settings” (5). I wanted to use this idea to capture the essence of a first winter snowfall and incorporate it with this stereotype of the “modern girl” in Canada. With this image I also wanted to incorporate the concept of feminism to connect it to my research topic. This is why I depicted the Canadian “modern girl” on her own on a wintery night. To add to this point, I wanted to keep it accurate to when this coat would be worn which is in the evening. I also kept in mind an Art Deco feature, the cityscape, which can be seen in the background of this image. I depicted Toronto during the twenties as I used the Old City Hall (clock tower) as a landmark (See Fig. 19).





**Fig. 19.** The Canadian “Modern Girl” in a Winter Night from Dianna De Angelis; SketchBook; 2019.

Overall, I wanted to create this strong free-willed “modern girl” reflecting my research on the construction of the opera coat and the larger ideas of feminism in the twenties.

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