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COURAGE & ADVENTURE

The Spirit of the Modern Woman

Modernism + Design | Shelley Jackson

Courage & Adventure

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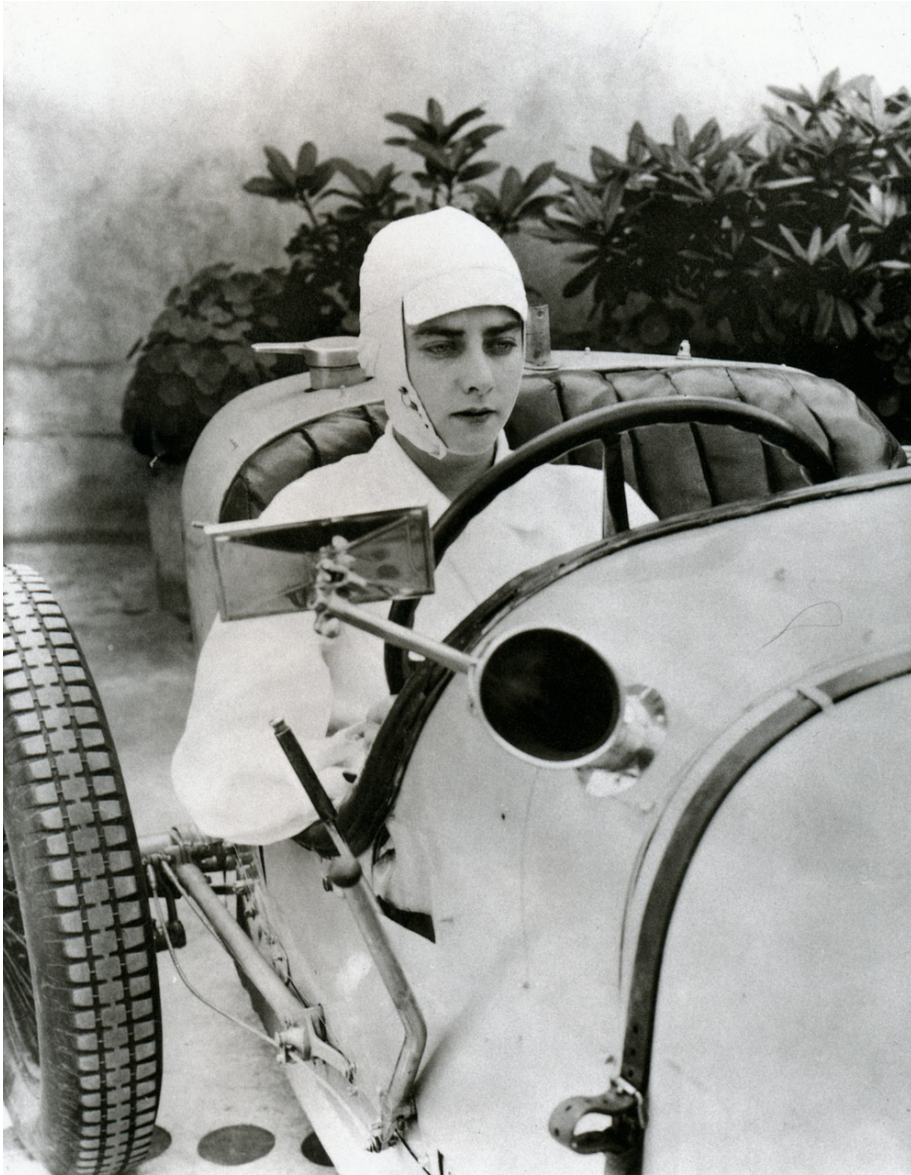


Figure 1. George Hoyningen-Huene, *The Modern Woman*. 1927. Photograph. *Vogue* fashion photograph of the modern woman's spirit.

A t-shirt, of all things, rocked Paris Fashion Week, 2016; though it's hardly surprising when it comes from the first collection of the first female Dior designer, emblazoned with the statement "we should all be feminists." Feminism seems to have different meanings to many people. Even strong, pro-women females will distance themselves from the movement believing it means they hate men, are pro-choice, lesbian, negative or radical, and while different pockets of feminists can mean any, or all, of these things Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated it best as simply, "a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (Hapsis). Now, feminism may have been "...all the rage on the catwalk this season" (Armstrong) but it's hardly the first time the industry has been female forward first.

Flip the pages back nearly ninety years and *Vogue* made another feminist statement as it commissioned fashion photographer George Hoyningen-Huene to photograph actress Colette Salomon in a portrait titled, "The Modern Woman" (fig 1). On a fashion photo shoot you would expect to find an abundance, or at least a feature, of haute couture much like Marlene Dietrich in the film *The Garden of Allah* (fig 2). Especially in a nation whose total wealth had nearly doubled and swept its residents "...into an affluent but unfamiliar 'consumer society'" (History.com). However, the fashion is barely noticeable, I believe, because Hoyningen-Huene was not out to capture a beautiful woman adorned with exquisite clothes, but rather one deftly donning her relentless spirit.



Figure 2. Kenneth Alexander, Marlene Dietrich, *The Garden of Allah*. 1936. Photograph. Dietrich on set displaying her elaborate fashion costume.

Salomon was placed at the helm to take charge of her own direction, or destiny perhaps. Her determined expression facing forward—quite literally—representing her new thinking. Her attire is simple and striking but also more functional than feminine as she sits in a race car ready to take on the world.

Compare her posture, expression and setting to that of Princess Marie of Greece and Denmark (fig 3); the difference of the spirit between the two is unmistakable. Though her actions weren't always true to the expectation of the Victorian era this royal portraiture visually defines the ladies of the era. Women were to wear floor-length dresses

with arms and legs clothed, corsets were worn daily and hair was long and neatly curled and pinned up (Spivack). The Victorian woman was submissive, subservient, demure, delicate, soft-spoken, and elegant.

Then the Twenties roared in like a lion(ess) and continued boldly

right up to the screeching halt of the 1929 market crash. Suffragettes had realized they could create real change through politics and battled for women's right to vote, which was finally realized in 1920. World War I ended sending soldiers home ready to reenter the workforce. However, the women who had kept their households and the country running through their labors outside the home, realized they had just as much to contribute as the men; these women weren't ready to relinquish their new-found independence and freedom. These circumstances, combined with the new mass culture, economic upswing, and technological advances, gave people access to new places and ideas so independence and personal satisfaction became key to living (Spivack). Life changed dramatically and birthed the

modern, feminist spirit of courage and adventure which still shapes the landscape for women today. It wasn't termed modernist at the time but the modernist spirit was alive and well. It "...was a philosophy, a view of life, a state of mind" (Remington 16).



Figure 3. James Sherwood Collection, *Portrait of Prince George and Princess Marie of Greece and Denmark*. n.d. Photograph. Princess Marie quietly propping her husband the Prince.





Come back to the present and it only takes a few clicks through the television channels for it to become “...abundantly clear that the struggle for gender equality is far from over” (Hapsis). However, with the sheer volume of participants in the recent Women’s March that reflected the 1913 National Women’s Party tactics (The Women’s Rights Movement, 1848–1920), Beyonce’s lyrical adaption of Adichie’s definition of feminism plays on the



radio, and the continued courage of fashion powerhouses like Chiuri and Versace, the hope of achieving equality in this lifetime becomes tantalizingly tangible. Perhaps without realizing their power, Vogue, Hoyningen-Huene, and Salomon built on the fight of the Suffragettes empowering women to be strong, audacious, carefree, bold, driven, and adventurous—the embodiment of “The Modern Woman”.



Figure 4. Isidore Montag, Dior fashion model on the runway. 2016. Photograph. Dior’s feminist theme filled the runway at Paris Fashion week.





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Image Citations

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