Heritage and Innovation: Charles Frederick Worth, John Redfern, and the Dawn of Modern Fashion

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Charles Frederick Worth's story has been told often and is familiar to fashion scholars. But while Worth has enjoyed a place of significance in fashion history, the story of his contemporary, John Redfern has been ignored, or at best reduced to mere footnote status. Nearly all well-known fashion history survey texts give coverage of Worth, but scant – if any – mention of Redfern. Contini, Payne, Laver, and Tortora and Eubank, all ignore Redfern. Millbank Rennolds, in *Couture, the Great Designers* omits Redfern while including some markedly less important designers. Boucher includes John Redfern, but distills his career to a brief, mostly accurate, paragraph. In *Fashion, The Mirror of History*, the Batterberrys interpret a Redfern plate as: "Another Englishman, working in Paris, the tailor Redfern, had devised a neat "tailor-made" suit with a short jacket for women, but despite his efforts to simplify women's daytime clothes the usual effect was heavily draped and fringed, and as stuffily claustrophobic as the gewgaw-cluttered interiors associated with Victorian English taste".

The Kyoto Costume Institutes 2002 publication of fashions from the 18th through the 20th Centuries includes a short, partially accurate biography Redfern but with erroneous life dates that would have him opening his business around the age of 5.

Recent scholarship creates a different picture of both Worth and Redfern. Pivotal to the history of clothing, Redfern's story is only recently being rediscovered, and only in the past few years has a proper exploration and assessment begun (primarily by the work of Susan North). North (2008) puts forward the thesis that in the late 19th century, Redfern and Sons was of equal importance to the House of Worth. It is even possible to assert that Redfern, and his legacy, were actually of *greater* importance as shapers of 20th Century styles. An examination of Redfern and Redfern Ltd., in comparison to their contemporaries, calls into question not only the preeminence of Worth, but also aspects of the careers of Paul Poiret and Gabrielle Chanel.

The following explores how Worth and Redfern, in different ways, shaped the tastes and fashion system of the 20th Century – themselves, and through the businesses that bore their names after their deaths. Their are intertwined with the major styles of the second half of the Nineteenth Century, and their stories are interwoven with important fashion icons of the time, and demonstrate the power of celebrity clientele to the success of a design house. Both Englishmen, Worth and Redfern founded family businesses; both men died in 1895 and both left there business in the control of sons and junior partners. But in addition to their similarities, their stories emphasize their differences.

Charles Frederick Worth, and Worth & Bobergh

Charles Frederick Worth is acknowledged as the father of couture, rising from the ranks of a notable fabric and dress business in Paris, to leading his own house. As the story goes, Worth was catapulted to success by the court of the Second Empire. The story of Worth's rise to fame, and his associations with Princess Pauline Metternich and Empress Eugenie, is a familiar tale but one that has been embellished, even twisted over time, beginning with the rather mythic memoirs of Metternich herself (1922), and of Worth's son, Jean-Philippe (1928).

Born in 1825, Charles Frederick Worth began his career at a London drapery house. Moving to Paris in 1846, he found employ at Gagelin-Opigez & Cie, a retailer of fabrics and accessories, and a dressmaker. While in their employ, Worth probably began designing in the dressmaking department. Worth married a Gagelin-Opigez employee, Marie Vernet, a model at the store. Leaving in 1857, Worth began his own business in partnership with Otto Gustave Bobergh, with "Worth et Bobergh" on the label, and Mme Marie Worth working at the business. Records indicate that Worth and Bobergh was an emporium, much in the model of Gagelin-Opigez, and sold fabrics, and a variety of shawls and outerwear, with ready made garments as well as made-to-measure couture (Hume, 2003, p.7).

Eugénie de Montijo, the Spanish-born wife of Emperor Napoleon III, was the most important female style setter of Europe during the years of the Second Empire and is associated with many fashions of the time. She encouraged glamour at the French court that contrasted with the reserve of Queen Victoria's Court of Saint James.

According to some accounts, Worth began his association with Princess Metternich, the wife of the Austrian Ambassador to France, in 1859. Worth set his sights on the princess's business; Mme. Worth paid a call to Princess Metternich, and extraordinarily, was received. Mme Worth presented the princess a folio of designs and the Princess ordered two dresses, wearing one to court at the Tuileries Palace. "I wore my Worth dress, and can say… that I have never seen a more beautiful gown... it was made of white tulle strewn with tiny silver discs and trimmed with crimson-hearted daisies… Hardly had the Empress entered the throne-room…than she immediately noticed my dress, recognizing at a glance that a master-hand had been at work." (Metternich, 1922)

Eugenie's admiration of the dress led to her own commissions from Worth and Bobergh, catapulting Charles Frederick Worth to success as other ladies of the court patronized the business.

This well-known story of Worth's meteoric rise to stardom has recently provoked doubt. Worth scholar Sara Hume questions this account on the basis that it is derived from loving, but unreliable secondary accounts. "The legend that has grown up around his name was built up in large part by memoirs by his son and famous clients written well after his death. After Worth had achieved fame, his clients such as the Princess Metternich, nostalgically wrote of his prominence under the Second Empire". (2003, p.80)

Hume also questions that the custom of Eugenie and Princess Metternich came as early in the decade as 1860, or that he held a place of significant importance in the French fashion system prior to mid-decade. She notes that he did not receive mention in French fashion magazines until 1863, and press coverage for the remainder of the decade was not plentiful. In addition, Worth and Bobergh did not use the designation "*Breveté de S. M. l'Impératrice*" until 1865. Moreover, the number of existing Worth

and Bobergh pieces in museum collections from this time is less than what such success would indicate (Hume, 2003).

Worth's status during these years has been inflated retrospectively, and many other dressmaking establishments were successful at the time. In these years, several were well established. Mlle Palmyre, Mme Vignon, Mme Laferrière, and Mme Roger, all contributed to the trousseau or wardrobe of Empress Eugenie, as did Maison Felix, and it was at this time that *La Chambre syndicale de la Couture parisienne* began. Also emerging in these years, was the great *couturier* Emile Pingat, who came to rival Worth's importance in late 19th century French couture.

"The frequent sobriquet of 'inventor of haute couture' gives the misleading impression that…Worth introduced a completely new method of designing and selling clothes. In fact haute couture evolved gradually over the almost half century of Worth's career and represents only a segment of the new fashion industry which developed through the century". (Hume 2003, p.13) However erroneous the traditional accounts are, it is important to note Worth's designs for Eugenie and the court promoted French industry and had a favorable impact on the textile mills of Lyon. Soon the house had an impressive client list, including Queen Louise of Norway, Empress Elisabeth of Austria, along with stage stars and glittering *demimondaines* of Paris. Although men would dominate the fashion industry in a short time, a man in the dressmaking business was still novel: Worth earned the moniker "man milliner," and by transforming dressmaking from women's work to men's work, the activity of designing fashions was taken more seriously as an applied art.

John Redfern of Cowes

Across the English Channel, in the resort town of Cowes on the Isle of Wight, the young John Redfern was transforming his drapery house into dressmaking business. John Redfern began his drapery business during the 1850s. Although his business developed slower than Worth's, he eventually acquired a no less auspicious clientele, including Queen Victoria, Alexandra Princess of Wales, and Lillie Langtry. Growing over the course of the decade, the business was established for dressmaking by the late 1860s, and its subsequent steady growth rivaled the importance of The House of Worth for 40 years.

In Cowes, Redfern was able to take advantage of the presence of Osborne House, one of Victoria's official residences; "the whole island benefited economically and socially from the need to supply the Household and the attending high society (North, 2008, p 146)." His sons John and Stanley joined the business during the 1860s. The first recorded clothing from John Redfern was noted at the 1869 marriage of the daughter of W.C. Hoffmeiter, Surgeon to HM the Queen; Redfern provided the wedding dress and the bridesmaids dresses (North, 2008, p.146). Certainly the aristocracy noticed the high-profile commission, and Redfern understood the power of celebrity to promote his business in the coming years.

At this time a change in dress was underway: more sport and leisure activities were developing specific clothing, and those women who could afford a diversified, specific wardrobe sought more practical attire; clothing for some activities showed the affect of the Dress Reform movement. Ensembles emerged, described in the fashion press of the day as "walking costume," "seaside costume, and "promenade costume." More practical outerwear for women was being introduced, even "water-

proofs" (Taylor, 1999). At the same time, women's equestrian clothes were crossing over into town clothes in the form of a "tailor made" costume. For years men's tailors were producing women's riding habits, with jacket bodices made in masculine forms. As men's tailoring standards developed, women's riding clothes developed similarly, and woolen cloth associated with men's suiting began to cross over into the general female wardrobe (Taylor, 1999). British tailoring establishment Creed enjoyed the custom of both Queen Victoria and Empress Eugenie for riding habits; opening a Paris store in 1850, The House of Creed contributed significantly to this trend. As tailor made ensembles emerged, lighter weight versions developed for summer activities outdoors.

John Redfern continued with success into the coming years as a very fine ladies dressmaker. However, both of these trends – sport clothing and the tailor made – figured prominently in Redfern's career as the 1870s began and his business expanded. While neither activewear nor the tailor made were necessarily his "invention," Redfern would do more to promote these styles than any other designer.

Worth After Bobergh

Worth and Bobergh closed during the Franco Prussian War. Bobergh retired, and Worth reopened as *Maison Worth*. The Third Republic left Worth without an empress to showcase his work, but other European royals continued to give him business. However the backbone of his financial success now came from the wives and daughters of American *nouveau riche* tycoons, who sought the overt prestige of a Worth wardrobe over the work of their local dressmakers. His popularity with the American wealthy is attested to by the large amount of Worth dresses in American museum collections. From all over Europe and North America, customers came to his house, willing to make the trip to Paris. Worth's sons, Gaston and Jean-Philippe, joined the business in these years. His reputation was now so noteworthy that Emile Zola created a fictional version of Worth in 1872. He excelled at the ornate draperies of the bustle period, and he reveled in inspiration from 18th Century modes, especially popular in the 1870s with *polonaise* style drapery in the manner of Marie Antoinette's "shepherdess style."

However, Worth's true creativity in these years (and in general) has been questioned, and his Hume reputation viewed as inflated: "Monographs of celebrated fashion designers, such as Worth, typically focus on individual genius as a primary force in initiating new fashions. As an individual designer, Worth may not have been the creative genius that his reputation may suggest. The traditional view that Worth was a great innovator may be brought into question by a comparison between fashion plates and his designs". (Hume, p.3)

In light of such opinion, it is possible to suggest that his true gift lay not in creating but interpreting trends – already present in such fashion plates – to suit the tastes of his rarified clientele. It is in these years that Worth developed his system of mix and match components of a gown (Coleman, 1989). A series prototypes of different sleeves, different bodices, different skits were available to be put together in different combinations and different fabrics to create a toilette, maintaining for the client the impression of an original creation.

By 1878, a new silhouette was developing. The understructure that enhanced the buttocks went away, and a sleek silhouette emerged, and princess line construction was essential to it. Worth was important to the popularity of this silhouette. Though he is often credited with inventing the princess

line (and supposedly naming if for Alexandra the Princess of Wales) vertical seamed dresses went back to the middle ages. In the late 1850s and1860s, loose dresses with such vertical seams were worn in the as walking costumes, intended for some measure of physical activity. In its application to this new silhouette, this new style *en princesse* used the princess line seams in a smooth, fitted to the body method, and the term was used to describe both dresses (in one piece from the shoulder to the floor) and with bodices with similar construction. A correlation between princess line construction and the increased presence of women's tailor made garments has been made (Taylor, 1999): Charles Frederick Worth, in developing and popularizing the *en princesse* style was applying principles of tailored construction to dressmaking, cannily on top of developments in women's fashions.

Not only did Charles Frederick Worth develop the couture system, he may have truly invented the mystique of the fashion designer as idiosyncratic, exalted artist. Worth needed a personality to suit his fabulous clientele – especially to appeal to the *nouveau riche* Americans – and the "man milliner" affected the role of great artist. He created an outrageous persona, wearing dressing gowns (sometimes trimmed with fur or even tulle) and a floppy black velvet beret. "Such attire satisfied the illusion of a creative genius at work (Coleman, p.25). "Hollander in *Seeing Through Clothes* draws a correlation between Worth's affected look, and images of Richard Wagner, and Rembrandt (1993): such romanticized *deshabille* was a calculated move, and such affection may have been borne of a desire to mask a lack of genuine creativity with the image of a great artist. The 1880s saw remarkable output from the house; the popular garish colors, the continuation of overt historic inspirations, and the extremes of the return of the bustle in 1883, suited Worth's aesthetic perfectly. Extant examples of his work in museums from this time indicate a synchronicity of the prevailing modes of the day with his taste for flamboyant theatricality – the "man milliner" cum *artiste* at his finest.

Although Worth was now at the top of Paris fashion, many elite and moneyed customers sought other designers. Emile Pingat's smaller business attracted the discerning who appreciated the quiet elegance of his work over Worth's less subtle output (Coleman, p.177). Also in these years, Doucet, a decades old emporium of shirts and accessories, launched a couture division headed by third generation Jacques Doucet, and soon rivaled Worth's importance.

Redfern and Sons

As the Third Republic left France (and the fashionable world) without an empress to be a fashion icon, more attention focused on Britain's royals. Alexandra of Denmark became the Princess of Wales upon her marriage to Prince Edward in 1863. Although she was quickly celebrated for her style, her ensuing six pregnancies kept her out of the spotlight until she re-emerged in 1871 (well timed to coincide with Eugenie's absence.) Alexandra's style helped define fashion in the next four decades. Also of importance as a fashion icon was the Prince of Wales' mistress, Emily LeBreton Langtry. "Lillie" Langtry was the most noted of the "Professional Beauties," society women celebrated in the media simply for their looks, and she was, likely, the first celebrity product spokes model. Lillie's hourglass proportions strongly contrasted the lithe Alexandra, but both women were widely celebrated for their beauty, and important to the style of each were the fashions of John Redfern.

By the early 1870s, fabrics from Redfern

were in the wardrobes of Queen Victoria and Princess Alexandra, and their custom was included in Redfern's advertising. More significant was the yachting boom that came to Cowes with the Prince and Princess of Wales' enthusiasm for the sport. British Aristocrats, American *nouveau riche*, and other international elite were drawn to Cowes for the developing regatta, and participated in other outdoor activities. The yachting, the wealthy clientele, and the development of sport clothing combined to place Redfern at the right place at the right time. Redfern became the source for yachting and seaside toilettes, and sailors' uniforms often served as design inspiration. Redfern set the benchmark in this category of clothing. Both the Princess and Mrs. Langtry enjoyed sporting activities often wearing Redfern; as the widely imitated in anything they wore, they set the styles for this type of clothing.

Genteel activities such as croquet and archery were still enjoyed, but more vigorous sports were becoming more popular. These included hiking, golf, and shooting, and often ankle length skirts (without the fashionable bustles of the time) were worn. Tennis also grew in popularity, with special tennis ensembles. Redfern designed jersey bodices and dresses for tennis (and other sports) and although Redfern was not the only house that featured jersey garments, it became associated with him. Both Mrs. Langtry and the princess wore them, and they were documented in *The Queen*, the leading British fashion periodical. Redfern developed a strong relationship with the publication, realizing that paid advertising would lead to more editorial coverage (North).

Redfern continued to popularize the tailor made. The style was a favorite of Princess Alexandra who wore Redfern's, attracted to the combination of style and practicality. Riding continued to be a popular sport for aristocratic women, and the influence from equestrian wear to the tailor made continued. An avid horsewoman, Elizabeth of Austria set styles throughout Europe with her riding habits; a favorite detail was military inspired frogs and braid in the style of the Austro-Hungarian military. This style and other military inspiration quickly found their way into women's tailored costume, including Redfern's.

With royal patronage and coverage in the press, the business grew and expanded internationally. A London branch was the next to be established in 1878, where fashionable gowns were available along with sport and tailored clothes. Managing the London store was Frederick Mims, who took the name Redfern. In 1881 a Paris store opened that took its place in the French fashion scene alongside Worth, Doucet, and Pingat. Leading the Paris store was Charles Poynter, who also took the name Redfern. Under Poynter Redfern's supervision, other stores opened in France, notably a store in the resort town Deauville. By 1884, Redfern and Sons had crossed the Atlantic, and opened a store in New York City managed by Redfen's son Ernest. While Lucile and Paquin are both given credit for being the first transatlantic fashion business, Redfern preceded both of them by more than 20 years. The Paris and New York stores offered the same variety as the London store. Stores in Newport, Rhode Island, and Saratoga Springs, New York catered to the resort customer. While Redfern directly challenged Worth at the Paris store, they also appealed to a broader segment of the market, making the business the more significant. While Maison Worth required its clientele to come to the Rue de la Paix, Redfern and Sons, with branches in England, France, and the United States, brought its product to more of the fashionable world.

Maison Worth after Worth

By the early 1890s Charles Frederick Worth's role in the house had declined, and as both sons were now active in the company, he essentially retired. Worth left the management of the business in the hands of Gaston, who had already assumed much managerial responsibility. The creative side was left to Jean-Philippe. The exact chain of events is unclear, as is also the extent of Worth senior's continued role in the house; many Worth dresses from 1889-1895 are unclearly attributed as whether father of son designed them. "It is not possible to determine at what point Jean-Philippe became the lead designer for the house; however garments after 1889 show differences… that suggest a different designer" (Hume, 2003, p.11).

Nellie Melba, the noted Australian opera star, was a long time Worth customer; Melba was particularly fond of Jean-Philippe saying "Jean himself was a greater designer than his father had ever been" (Coleman, 1989, p.29). The output of the house in the 1890s shows a remarkable synergy between fashion and *L'Art Nouveau* and *Japonisme* styles developing in the other applied arts. Like Redfern, Maison Worth also showed the affect of the Dress Reform movement, however, that affect showed itself in the form of ravishing, languid tea-gowns along the rubric of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic taste. These were "artistic" costume for the artistic aristocratic lady, and did not show the practical affect that had manifested itself at Redfern.

The decade of the 1900s saw the house of Worth maintain continued success with beautiful gowns, but other designers overshadowed its innovations and styles. Gaston Worth's attempt to enliven the house with a young man named Paul Poiret proved short lived and unsuccessful. The client base had grown old, and now the aging house was dressing aging women.

Redfern Ltd.

In 1892, the company incorporated as Redfern Ltd. The death of John Redfern in 1895 had little affect on the continued success of the business; Redfern Ltd. had transformed "from the most successful ladies tailoring business to an international couture enterprise equal of Worth" (North, 2009). Charles Poynter Redfern at the helm of the Paris store, was the most important designer in the company and was equal of Jean-Philippe Worth, Jacques Doucet, and Jeanne Paquin. Featuring designs by Poynter Redfern, the company participated in the Exhibition Universal of 1900. During the 1900s, the focus of Redfern Ltd. was more on couture, moving away from its activewear and tailored roots, although still offering selections in those areas. Underscoring that shift was the closure of the original Cowes store. Royalty still went to Redfern's stores to be dressed, and *Les Modes* joined *The Queen* in devoting a great deal of editorial coverage to the house. North asserts that Redfern Ltd. was the dominant force in Western fashion between the years of 1895 and the 1908 work of Paul Poiret (2009). It is possible to actually establish the pre-imminence of Redfern continued even further into the next decade to 1911. Although these are few years, they are pivotal to fashion history.

Many dress historians treat Poiret's 1908 work as a watershed moment that captivated the fashionable world. One noted fashion historian (Deslandres, *Poiret*, Rizzoli, p.96.) wrote "[as] if women had just been waiting for it, the Directoire line, revived by Poiret, redefined elegance overnight." In light of the fact that Poynter Redfern and Paquin were already doing this line, the extreme nature of such a pronouncement can be easily called into question. Further, the fashion press paid virtually no attention to Poiret until a few

years later, making such an "overnight" impact on fashion impossible. Redfern's output was well documented in the pages of *The Queen* and *Les Modes*. Poynter Redfern advocated soft styles, taking inspiration from the 1780s and 1790s. He featured "Romney Frocks" of *white mousseline* in the manner of Marie Antoinette's *chemise à la reine*, and Empire waist *à la Grecque* styles of Directoire inspiration – all beginning a few years before Poiret's 1908 collection (North, 2009). The commonly held, but retrospective, opinion that this was Poiret's "New Look" in terms of impact on widespread fashion and taste is simply not supportable in this light.

On 3 October 1909, *The New York Times* ran a full-page article on Paris fashions, covering the looks for Autumn and Winter 1910. The article celebrates Orientalist styles for the season, that included Byzantine and Egyptian inspiration, but most importantly Russian styles. Although many designers are mentioned, Poynter Redfern is given the most significance, and the New York Times asserts that the Russian style was his creation: "Redfern is a master at these Russian effects, which he is using very much this season for street costumes. He has just returned from Russia whither he goes almost every summer." Maisons Worth, Doucet, and Paquin are all mentioned along with other houses, but Poiret is not mentioned at all.

The 1910s and Beyond

Paul Poiret became ascendant to Paris fashion, finally by around 1911. His knack for publicity lead to elaborate Arabian theme parties, and the press was hungry for the exotic in the few years prior to the war. Perhaps with Charles Frederick Worth as his role model, Poiret postured himself as the eccentric artist, and put forth his creations as great works of art. His designs of these years, with their ersatz Near-Eastern themes were sensationalist and hype provoking, such as his "Minaret" dress and *robe sultane*; while much less elegant that his elegant languid *Directoire* looks of 1908, they grabbed more publicity. *The New York Times* began including Poiret in its fashion coverage in 1910, and the rest of the fashion press followed, so that during the next three years he dominated the fashion media and was prominently featured in the pages of *Harper's Bazaar, Femina*, and *The Queen*.

Poiret was one of the participating designers in the exciting new fashion journal, *La Gazette du Bon Ton*. In addition to other houses, the roster also included Worth and Redfern. The freshness of *La Gazette du Bon Ton*'s style brought life to the two houses, and their designs as represented in *Les Modes* were still stylish. Redfern's relevance outlasted Worth's by a decade, but by now both houses were starting to decline and the glory days of each house had past. The affect on the aristocratic lifestyle caused by World War I impacted both houses further, yet each carried on for several more years.

Also emerging in this decade was the business of Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel. Starting in millinery, Chanel expanded into sports clothes and couture during the course of the decade. A few aspects of her development and story are worth considering. Her early affair with the English-educated horse breeder Etienne Balsam exposed her to an equestrian set that certainly wore English riding apparel and sport clothes, likely from Creed, Burberry and Redfern among others. This certainly contributed to her very lean and tailored aesthetic that stood in sharp contrast with Poiret's opulence. But of even more importance was Chanel's choice of Deauville as the location of her fist sportswear boutique. Redfern Ltd had a Deauville store for sometime, selling the company's signature sports clothes; the young Chanel

would have unquestionably been familiar with Redfern's product and sport clothes business model. An examination of Redfern designs from the decade underscores the similarity to the Chanel aesthetic. A tailor made costume from Redfern illustrated in *La Gazette du Bon Ton* from 1914, and a sport ensemble from in the collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute, dated c. 1915, both show a marked similarity to Chanel designs that came a short time later. Many of Chanel signature styles, while strongly associated with her today, were actually pioneered long before by Redfern, including, most notably, the use of jersey for sportswear.

As for Worth, he left a legacy into the 20th century was of lavish couture gowns and ensembles that have always been a major feature of the French fashion industry. Edward Molyneux earned the nickname "the New Worth," as an Englishman who conquered Paris, and he showed great prowess for frosting his sleek elegant flapper dresses with glitter. Perhaps his most significant contribution to the fashion industry of the 20th Century was his invention of the persona of fashion designer as flamboyant great artist; and the persona took on even more outrageous form in some of his successors. This can be exemplified in recent years with the personalities and manner of Karl Lagerfeld, Jean Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen, and John Galliano, among others.

The legacy of John Redfern may actually define clothing in the 20th Century. The intellectual lineage of Redfern is monumental and exemplary of the entire history of 20th century clothing: John Redfern mentored Charles Poynter Redfern, who in turn mentored Robert Piguet, who mentored Christian Dior, who lead the line to Yves Saint Laurent. Redfern (and his companies) focus on the emerging market of sports clothes lead the way to the categories of sportswear and activewear of the 20th Century, and the gradually growing casual aesthetic. The Redfern aesthetic could be tied to such influential fashion design minds as Claire McCardell, Vera Maxwell, Calvin Klein, or Norma Kamali, whose work was not typified by runway spectacle but rather by real clothes.

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