

*Fashion in the Formative Years of Parisian Surrealism:
the Dress of Time, the Dress of Space*

Krzysztof Fijalkowski
Norwich University of the Arts

La mode y sera traité selon la gravitation des lettres blanches sur la
chair nocturne.

Preface to *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 1

Surprisingly limited attention has been paid to the forms and meanings of Surrealism's encounters with fashion, and most scholarship in this field concentrates on crossovers between Parisian Surrealism and the fashion industry during the 1930s.¹ In contrast, this essay regards the first period of Surrealism in Paris—including its prehistory as it emerged via Paris Dada and the journal *Littérature*, spanning the decade of the 1920s—with as much focus on written as on visual evidence. It asks two related questions: what was the presence and status of the discourse of fashion for the Paris surrealist group during these formative years; and in what kinds of fashion practices did its members engage?

Any inquiry into these relationships can be a delicate matter. On the one hand, both the proximity of individual Surrealists to the fashion world dating, as we shall see, from the early 1920s, and the influence of Surrealism on fashion design and promotion during the 1930s, point to a host of shared concerns at the very moment when French fashion itself emerges in recognizably modern garb: the body, gender, identity, beauty, mystery, desire and their complex relationship to the everyday are central themes for both parties. Yet on the other, a gulf separates a profession that for some epitomizes the idea of the “culture industry” and a movement that for all its prominence is not a branch of the visual arts, but a profound intellectual and social engagement with freedom, for whom the very idea of style and the vagaries of fashion are usually anathema.² Disdaining the fashionable, problematizing style and insisting on its ethical dimensions, Louis Aragon's 1928 polemic *Treatise on Style* identifies fashion, in its wider but perhaps also narrower sense, as the place where

Krzysztof Fijalkowski: k.fijalkowski@nua.ac.uk

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great ideas go to die: “These ideas little by little become axiomatic, or thematic, quite different from their original intent. They become idiocies. Fashion then takes possession of them. Tyrannically.”³ The following year he would be even more forthright in his condemnation of fashion as a dangerous lure: “the name those who love weakness and those who love reassuring divinities have invented as a mask to disfigure what is to come [...] that worrying and frivolous history of changes in hats [which] might become the vulgar symbol of that which one day disqualifies all activity.”⁴ Yet a decade later, as the spectacular “International Surrealist Exhibition” of 1938 cemented public acclaim for surrealist ideas in the visual realm, attended by *tout Paris*, this possession seemed to some to have become irrevocable. Matta, a mercurial young recruit to Surrealism, would recall: “It was impossible to get in due to all the people, all the jewelery and wigs... I could not really understand what Surrealism had to do with fashion.”⁵ As if to defend this vulnerability and prioritize its ethical dimensions, especially in subsequent years, surrealist groups would tend to avoid overt references to fashion and the fashion industry; most scholarship on Surrealism has likewise sidestepped this conjunction as trivial compared to the movement’s grand themes.⁶

In the face of these challenges, this essay attempts to consider the place of fashion and clothing within the early Parisian surrealist group from the moment when the very concept of Surrealism was identified, established and elaborated. Here, two significant precedents should be acknowledged for its dual focus: on the theoretical location of fashion for the European avant-garde, Ulrich Lehmann’s *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* sets up a framework for grasping fashion’s key contribution to modernism, including specific reference to early Surrealism.⁷ Meanwhile, for the close investigation of the actual fashion habits of surrealist participants, a chapter in Alistair O’Neill’s *London: After a Fashion*, scrutinizing British Surrealism of the mid-1930s, opens a path to contextualized investigation of Surrealism’s everyday practices that promises rich pickings for future scholarship.⁸

Before we consider the material in detail, it’s worth briefly reviewing its parameters. The 1920s, of course, is the era of the founding and formation of Surrealism in France. For the purposes of argument, this essay adopts the view that the period between 1920 and 1924, usually presented as a gradual transition between Paris Dada and the formal establishment of Surrealism, can be viewed in terms of a nascent but already fledged surrealist activity.⁹ In terms of a broader concern with questions of design, one significant aspect of Surrealism in France during this period is a marked attention to popular culture and the everyday urban experience, particularly as characterized by the languages of advertising and consumer economies, bound up within the frameworks and complexities of modernity.¹⁰ No doubt largely the result of its growing political maturity, these interests would either be steered in other directions by the group during the second half of the 1920s, or be left by the wayside altogether.¹¹ All the same, an element of fascination with the

forms and undercurrents of modernity, including fashion, might be seen to remain in the DNA of the group's subsequent debates and positions.

Just as importantly, however, the 1920s is also the decade most commonly associated with the rise of modern fashion, tailored for a broad public, sympathetic to more diverse tastes and aspirations than those of conservative elites, and driven by the parallel growth in popular fashion publishing.¹² If the 1920s can be seen as a pivotal moment for French fashion, however, the change did not emerge from nowhere; Valerie Steele, for example, argues persuasively that the reorientation began in the 1910s, predating the impact of the First World War.¹³ For the first generation of Surrealists, this was the decade of their own youth and early maturity, and as we shall see it is a period in fashion to which several among them remained sensitive. Do we need, moreover, to be reminded that in this era Paris is universally viewed as not merely the epicenter of fashion but the single defining location from which the Western garment industry and its public took its sartorial cues—even if in men's fashion the nineteenth-century vogue for "English" style still held some sway?

Is the focus here "fashion," dress or clothing? Arguments could be made and approaches developed in more than one direction, particularly since for the most part this is not a conversation about couture innovation but everyday apparel and the broader social and cultural locations of dress and style. But as we will see, evidence among first-generation Surrealists not only of an awareness of the languages and media of fashion, but also of its characteristic property as constantly changing style (and hence as a transformation of ideas), including its specific relationship to modernity, would suggest that this is a fertile perspective.¹⁴ As Elizabeth Wilson argues, part of fashion's distinctive identity is to sit on the threshold between art and not-art, and to qualify and question the relationships between individual and collective identities, core problems also explored by Surrealism.¹⁵ All the same, to look at early Surrealism through the lens of fashion means as often as not to scrutinize materials against the grain, to work with scarce or anecdotal evidence and risk tendentious generalizations. This essay makes no claim to displace existing readings of Surrealism, and it would be important not to overstate an aspect of the early group's activities that are, in the end, just one pocket of its concerns. But there are also possibilities at hand here, supported by the growing accessibility of documentary materials from early French Surrealism, for a closer understanding of its histories, alert to the intimate detail and nuance of day-to-day experiences, preferences and values among the group's protagonists.¹⁶

Fashion Networks

The most obvious place to begin is to consider direct personal connections between Parisian Surrealists, the couture fashion world that had Paris as its global headquarters, and the Parisian elites (some of whom would become Surrealism's patrons) as its customers. As is well known, this relationship came to prominence in

the 1930s; while connections were far fewer in the 1920s, they were nevertheless still present, and from early on in the movement's history. Best known among them is the case of Man Ray, whose dual activity as both artist and high-profile commercial photographer began soon after his arrival in Paris in 1921. Particularly distinctive is the mobility with which he was able not only to move deftly between these roles, but also to encourage osmosis between them, notably in the way that examples of his non-commercial practice were published in leading fashion magazines as well as avant-garde journals; unlike similar instances by others in the following decade, his collaborations with the design industry were not just tolerated but tacitly approved by the surrealist group.¹⁷

In later recollections, Man Ray himself was careful to maintain a discreet distance between his “more serious” activity as an artist and what his friend and biographer Roland Penrose would later dismiss as “hackwork.”¹⁸ All the same, Man Ray's autobiography *Self Portrait*, while compartmentalizing his recollections about working as a fashion photographer into a single section of writing, offers a lively description of his first entry into this arena, all the time emphasizing his lack of expertise and professional awareness of both commercial photography and the fashion world at this moment. Newly arrived in Paris, Man Ray secured a meeting with leading couturier Paul Poiret brokered by Gabrielle Buffet, wife of Francis Picabia, though without any clear idea of what the designer might be able to offer him.¹⁹ Poiret suggested that Man Ray take photographs of his models and gowns, offering him facilities and materials. While Man Ray describes the learning curves, technical challenges, and chance elements that contributed to this first assignment, he also emphasizes the extent to which Poiret—himself a connoisseur of contemporary art—wished to encourage a more experimental and intimate approach to fashion photography, blending fashion and portrait genres; indeed, Man Ray notes that the success of his first attempts was the result of being more interested in the models than the clothing.²⁰ This first experience helped him to establish the relevant networks and reputation, and within a few years he was overwhelmed with work for fashion houses, advertising and magazines such as the French and U.S. editions of *Vogue*, even as he “hoped someday to devote [him]self to [his] own needs and desires.”²¹

Just as Poiret would be a bridge to success for Man Ray, another leading name in Paris fashion, Jacques Doucet, would in a quite different way be significant for surrealist founders Aragon and André Breton. A bold patron of the contemporary arts and among the most celebrated French designers of women's couture in previous decades, Doucet hired first Breton, then Aragon, to act as advisors and personal secretaries in relation to his establishment of a literary archive that exists to this day as a unique research resource.²² For Breton, the relationship also included helping Doucet to purchase artworks, notably Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. The arrangement lasted from January 1921 until the end of 1924—despite

growing exasperation with his role, as evidenced in correspondence with his wife Simone— and enabled Breton to support himself in a manner not too much at odds with his ethical and creative priorities, effectively making their marriage possible. Just as importantly, Doucet acted repeatedly as an invaluable patron to the whole group, giving financial help to its journal as well as to individuals in need, and supporting artists and writers with purchases.²³ True, Breton's engagement with Doucet, often involving daily interactions, does not appear in any significant way to have broached the topic of fashion, even if many meetings were held at Doucet's premises on the rue de la Paix. But the two men were introduced by another fashion professional, the couture milliner Jeanne Tachard (known as Suzanne Talbot). Considering just how much their two realms might have overlapped socially, the idea that the fashion world helped to bankroll the birth of Surrealism is perhaps not too far-fetched.²⁴

The Modern Spirit

"In this journal one will also find regular columns on inventions, fashion, life, art and magic. In it, fashion will be dealt with according to the gravitation of white letters on nocturnal flesh..." announced the preface to the inaugural issue of the group's founding journal *La Révolution surréaliste*.²⁵ A photograph of Man Ray's mysterious object *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* illustrated this text: a sewing machine wrapped in a rough blanket and tied up with string. While Man Ray may have privately contemplated the work as an echo of his own family background of émigré tailors, other Surrealists would have recognized the allusion to Lautréamont's celebrated watchword: "as beautiful ... as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella," in which precisely an infernal collision of fashion, inventions, art, life and magic might be said to have occurred.²⁶ This signal that fashion was from the outset an integral thread in the network of Surrealism's concerns is confirmed by the fact that several of its ancestors shared this interest: prose writings by poets Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé (who even briefly ran a fashion magazine), and Guillaume Apollinaire all explore this theme as an often overlooked subtext.²⁷

Subtle but repeated references to fashion can be discerned in both of the early group's journals *Littérature* (1919-1924) and *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929). Man Ray designed the recurring front cover for the first three issues of *Littérature*'s second series in 1922, with the journal's title in ornate cursive script and calligraphic flourishes, emerging as if by a magician's trick from a grand, upturned top hat. By 1922, a top hat might have been more theatrical prop than style accessory, but in this context the nod to a recent aristocratic past helps pile on the irony of the journal's title. Back in issue 11 of the first series (1920), Breton had already noted that Lautréamont and Apollinaire counted the top hat, the umbrella, and the sewing machine among the symbolic "treasures of the imagination," marvels of a "veritable modern mythology."²⁸ Subsequent, more cartoon-like covers were drawn by Picabia,

and again sometimes featured clothes and accessories: gloves (no. 6), shoes (no. 7) or acrobats' shorts and leotards (nos. 9 and 11-12). But another series of twelve small drawings by the artist dated August 1923, intended for *Littérature* but not published, gives the appearance of having been copied from a department store catalogue: among other items, men's and women's hats, women's shoes, and men's ties are all sketched hastily, along with a brief line of description and prices, occupying the realm of everyday fashion commodities with no hint of sarcasm.²⁹

It's this same, seemingly unremarkable domain that is scrutinized in a group inquiry into personal preferences, for which participants were asked to list their favorite colors, smells, historical periods and so on, including a favorite item of clothing. The eleven (all male) contributors' answers were diverse but down to earth: woolen culottes (Aragon), black blouses (Breton), silk stockings (Paul Éluard), hats, ties, scarves and dressing gowns.³⁰ This interface between personal choice and group dynamics, attentive to the eloquent but mysterious access clothing gives to public identities in the context of modernity, had already cropped up in the previous issue, in an anonymous account entitled "The Modern Spirit." It recounts how Breton and Aragon had independently observed a young woman on the streets of the Left Bank whose behavior was strangely fascinating; specifically, her description at the outset is noted as "wearing a beige and brown-checked tailored jacket and wearing a fur hat that matched her dress," as though it's a private detective's eye that's needed to understand the enigmatic forms of the modern age.³¹ Finally, issue 17 of the first series featured what appears to be a whole-page advertisement for a child's dress, featuring an image of a coy but distinctly un-childlike female figure; Doucet, who helped finance *Littérature* and presumably took this as a sly reference to his trade, had to be appeased.³²

Several covers of *La Révolution surréaliste* also offered links to fashion and clothing contexts, of which the most obvious was on the fourth issue, July 1925 (Fig. 1). The central image was yet again by Man Ray, but this time had been cheekily borrowed from a fashion assignment: captioned "and war on work," the photograph showed a female figure in a long evening gown at the foot of a grand, curved staircase. The image was part of a commission for French *Vogue* to document the Pavillon de l'élégance, part of the huge "Exposition des Arts décoratifs" whose celebration of contemporary design and the applied arts would be ridiculed by Aragon in the journal's next issue.³³ On closer inspection the image featured not a model but a mannequin, linking it to the pervasive theme of the uncanny mannequin in 1920s Surrealism as presented repeatedly in the earlier paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and in documentary images of Paris boutique and department store windows by Eugène Atget (whose photograph of an old-fashioned corset-maker's shop would appear in issue 7 of the journal). Its elongated body and partly abstracted face and hair lent Man Ray's photograph an air not so much of elegant grace, but of a gesture frozen in time—even if in other ways this was a very contemporary picture,

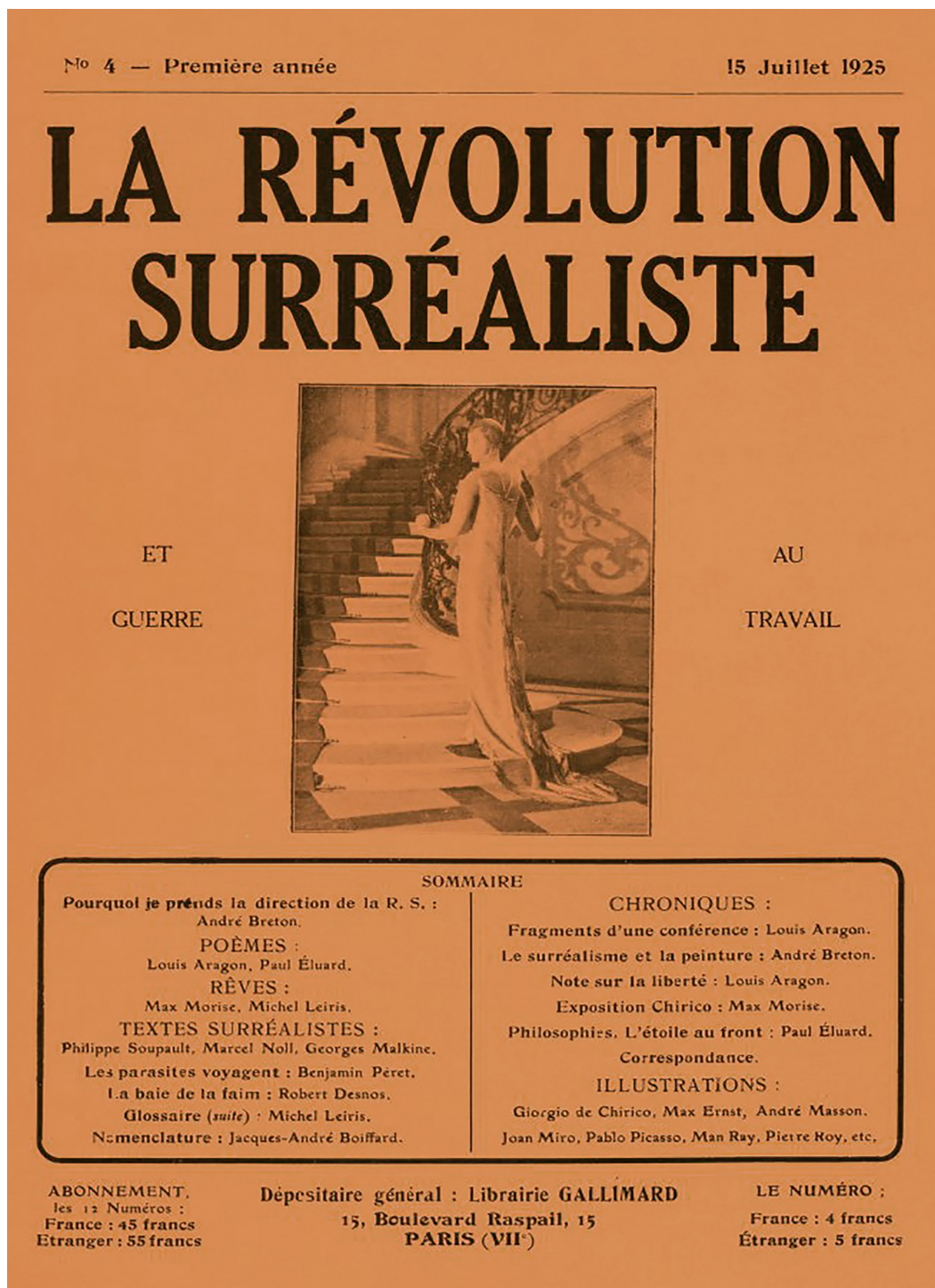


Fig. 1. Front cover, *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.4, July 15, 1925, Private collection

both in the distinct design of the mannequin and the fact that until the mid-1920s, photography was still the exception rather than the rule in fashion publishing, as opposed to illustration.³⁴

If *Vogue* had paid for the image to exemplify the height of current fashion, aspects of it told a different story. According to some sources, the dress on the mannequin may have been by Poiret; but looking back, Man Ray would recall that the designer's star was waning by 1925, his designs too intricate for the spirit of the age, and that not long afterwards his empire would collapse.³⁵ Man Ray's photograph, commentators point out, is in many ways unremarkable, as indeed were many of his first fashion images before he established a signature style; as the caption and link to the "Exposition des Arts décoratifs" makes clear, it is used on the cover of *La Révolution surréaliste* for irony, not celebration.³⁶ The choice of this photograph, then, is telling, especially if it is a Poiret dress: in contrast to *Vogue*, in the context of *La Révolution surréaliste* it is a *détournement* of fashion towards social and aesthetic critique—charged with memory (a recent but inevitably lost heyday of elegance), political tensions around labor and class ("and war on work"), and the anxious status of the *démodé* as opposed to the latest rage: of the soon-to-be past, as much as the present or future.³⁷

Though this was the only overt visual reference to the fashion industry in the journal, regular readers might nevertheless have sensed a theme forming, in which images of clothing should be read in a critical vein. The cover of issue 2 (January 1925) had featured a photograph, captioned "French art of the early 20th century," of a forlorn scarecrow made from an old greatcoat and tattered hat on a stick, while page one of issue 3 that April showed a forbidding suit of armor, above an unsigned article pouring scorn on the tyranny of reason, logic and truth.³⁸ Elsewhere, images of attire likewise took a playful, acerbic or unexpected turn: silent screen star Phyllis Haver in a swimming costume (issue 3); another Man Ray photograph, this time of a windswept washing line, titled "La France" on the cover of issue 6; a line-up of the ostentatious *grandes dames* of the Prix Fémina jury in their pearls and furs, captioned "no comment required," in the same issue; the well-known images of "hysterical" female patients at the Salpêtrière clinic, where the conspicuous disarray of nightclothes and bed sheets signals the expression of troubling neurological symptoms (issue 11); and perhaps most strikingly, a reminder of just how domesticated Eurocentric ideas of fashion might be compared to a large documentary image of a "ritual scene" tableau featuring dramatic woven masks and hairy coir costumes from New Britain (issue 7).

"We register new ideas about wearing clothes"

As the choice of images in these journals suggests, early Surrealism's fashion contexts are not so much cutting edge couture as the ways in which everyday, lived fashion sits within critical frameworks, often either to express or problematize

modernity—that “absolutely capital question,” in the words of Aragon: “What is modern today?”³⁹ Writing to Doucet in 1921 about the importance of understanding the modern spirit, Breton notes that history only ever acknowledges key works and dates, not the ephemeral changes in ideas and fashions that help grasp the origins of today’s modernity.⁴⁰ As fashion historian Valerie Steele notes, studying fashion offers a perfect key to an epoch’s spirit; certainly Surrealists like Aragon were alert to hints of the new around him, as Jacques Baron recalled, observing “fashion, a new color, a new neckline, a waist clasped in a novel bodice, everything a less well-off girl might invent to make herself look lovely.”⁴¹ An acute sensitivity to the nuances of modernity as expressed through fashion, more eloquent than “high” art forms, characterizes several key moments of Surrealism’s engagement. For early Surrealism, fashion’s presence on shop window mannequins, in advertising and magazine culture, and of course on everyday bodies made it a privileged route into the mystery of modernity, along those lines later documented by Walter Benjamin in which dream world and consumer economy exist in symbiosis. Breton’s typographic poem “Le Corset mystère” for example, published in *Littérature* in June 1919 and seemingly assembled from newspaper snippets or advertising captions, took its title from a Belle Époque shop sign for corsets on the rue de la Paix, home to the most prominent Paris fashion houses.⁴² Breton’s plans in May 1922 for a novel entitled *L’Année des chapeaux rouges* (*The Year of the Red Hats*) came to nothing, but his choice of title was a specific reference to the trend in hats that spring.⁴³

Central here is the sense of the city all around the Surrealists, bustling with the jazz age innovations of the *années folles* and the rich seams of the social, cultural and economic milieu. For the Surrealists as for the world at large, the place for fashion to be seen was first and foremost in the street, just as Aragon and Breton had recounted in “The Modern Spirit.” Their search for ideas and encounters, particularly emotional ones, and for the way they might be garbed, assumes an availability to dally and observe every detail of the urban realm. Linger on the rue Lafayette, as Breton would recall in *Nadja*, on the late afternoon of his first encounter with the book’s enigmatic and troubled heroine, “already there were more people in the street now. I unconsciously watched their faces, their clothes, their way of walking. [...] Suddenly, perhaps still ten feet away, I saw a young, poorly dressed young woman walking toward me.”⁴⁴ This aptitude isn’t confined to Breton alone: while Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926) is constructed entirely from this patient scrutiny, notably of boutiques for clothes and accessories in the Passage de l’Opéra, Jacques Baron would remember walking with him and watching a woman “with that slightly romantic air thanks to her feathered hat, and the color of her dress that came more or less from the same plum tree as that of *Madame de Senones* [by Ingres]”.⁴⁵ Notable, too, is the predilection among the early Surrealists, particularly Breton, for those commercial areas of the Right Bank, particularly around the 2nd and 9th arrondissements, that were home to the retail outlets, department stores and *maisons*

de couture at which the most up-to-date fashions were available; the passages off the *grands boulevards*, the location for a host of smaller clothing shops; and le Sentier, bounded by the Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle to the north, the rue Saint-Denis to the east, in which clothing and textiles manufacturers and wholesalers had their premises. Several haunts of the early Surrealists, in other words, can be mapped against the geography of the Paris fashion industry.⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, the majority of references in the early surrealist group are to women's fashion, as an aspect of the intense, sometimes obsessive constellation of themes around representations of women, love and eroticism among a set of overwhelmingly male participants. Aragon's book *The Libertine* gathers early literary texts, several of which specifically make connections between amorous experiences and clothes; and the monologue "The French Woman," dating from 1923, has its female narrator proclaim: "I love clothes! Clothes and you! I spent hours with my dressmaker. She was laughing like a maniac." While a central part of the story describes a sexual encounter between the narrator and her lover, itemizing clothes and underclothes as they are taken off one by one, elsewhere the theme of watching and evaluating the tiny nuances of fashion is laid out:

We notice new dresses and old ones. Our eyes grow accustomed to looking at dress trimmings. Bit by bit our minds stop thinking about anything which hasn't to do with fashionable materials. We become adept at grasping the essence of an object, what makes it fashionable. We register new ideas about wearing clothes. There you are. Oh, we're proud machines! And we craftily keep ahead of men's periodic whims.⁴⁷

This attentiveness to clothes and their subtle meanings is also present in Breton's *Nadja*: he notes the initial "wretchedness of [Nadja's] appearance" but on meeting her again finds her "rather elegant today, in black and red, with an extremely pretty hat [...] silk stockings and shoes which, unlike yesterday's, are quite presentable."⁴⁸ Like magic tokens or lovers' messages, a coded language of accessories, hairstyles, or the touch of a dress are scattered through the narrative. This sense of mysterious communication through clothes intensifies with the apparently irrelevant episode of the appearance of an unnamed woman (Lise Meyer, for whom Breton harbored an unrequited passion) who visits the Surrealist Research Bureau wearing "remarkable sky-blue gloves." To Breton's consternation she is asked to leave one of them behind, but returns to deposit instead a bronze cast of a glove. This might seem trivial were it not for the repeated and unexplained echoes of this erotically-charged accessory in the form of a poster featuring a hand (red this time), a reference to the Hand of Fatima painted in red on doors, hands or gloves in paintings by de Chirico (red again) and Max Ernst, and specifically in *Nadja's*

repeated references to hands or gloves in her own drawings and in her gestures of touch.⁴⁹ Georges Sebbag sees the recurring motif of “the fairy with the cap of light” from Mallarmé’s poem “Apparition” as Breton’s augury for the first appearance of love, an evocation accompanied by images of clothes: writing to Meyer, he notes the correspondence of her apparition with “those ever-changing dresses that I see you [*sic*].”⁵⁰ If on Breton’s part this emotionally or erotically charged attention to clothing is embedded in the poetic and conceptual structures of his psyche, it is present in his day-to-day relations as well. Letters to his wife Simone make repeated reference not only to her clothes, recalled within the fabric of memories of their meetings when they are separated (“I need to know where you are, which dress you are wearing, etc.”), but also to photographs of her in which particular items are evoked, and it would seem that in some instances at least these photographs have been taken specifically to document both wearer and attire, within the context of an unfolding spiritual and emotional intimacy.⁵¹

This affective and erotic daily language of fashion takes on a sharper, and probably more predictable allure in the countless scattered references across early surrealist poetry and prose, including automatic and dream texts, to clothes within gendered and sexual contexts. In this vein, probably the most flagrant instance of the erotic charge of clothes comes in Robert Desnos’ *Liberty or Love!* of 1927. The extravagant, sometimes violent tale of Louise Lame and Corsaire Sanglot, its narrative features repeated reference to characters’ appearance, but throughout the novel, especially its opening chapter, it is above all the evocation of Louise Lame through the fetishistic seduction of her sumptuous clothing – leopard fur coats, suede gloves, silk dresses and of course the nudity that lies always just a whisper away beneath them – that drives the book’s passions. The protagonists’ encounters, as well as the appearance of other characters, often include an inventory of attire and, needless to say, of the constant promise of a stripping bare.⁵²

If this gendered array of fashion in 1920s French Surrealism may not particularly surprise us, it also features representations that steer it towards themes of time, memory and desire as a display of the early movement’s fascination with a kind of spectral modernity revealed in surrealist representations of the outmoded. Ernst’s collage novels, launched at the end of the decade with *La Femme 100 Têtes* but prefigured in *Les Malheurs des immortels* of 1922, appropriate late nineteenth-century book and catalogue engravings; many pages depict bourgeois figures or stock characters in which long-abandoned fashions feature prominently, as if to evoke the trends and tastes of this generation’s childhood age. An acute perception of the way in which recently outdated fashion can spark vivid associations is also in evidence in René Crevel’s fiction and auto-fiction writings of the mid-1920s. “The dress of time, the dress of space, so may my life pass from royal blue to bishop’s purple, from bishop’s purple to cardinal red, from cardinal red to canary yellow” he writes in *Mon Corps et moi* (1925), as if to mark the shifting identities of his destiny in each

year's tastes. A shorter text of 1923, with the air of a personal memoir, begins with an evocation of death; yet "all the same, I cling to life. First of all [...] because every season, women transform themselves. Their dresses are the state of their souls; mine too, I like to think, as waistlines stretch thinner and smiles grow more refined." The text recounts the narrator's childhood infatuation with "the woman with the bare neck," a sign of loose morals in 1914 when women still wouldn't show their necks in public, and for this very reason all the more likely to enflame a teenage heart. While women today may wear their necks bare, Crevel writes, none realize that they were only copying her ("those old women and their pretenses, they think they have invented the gestures and dresses you find at the couturiers"), or notice that this fleeting moment has gone: "it really is over, the season of tulle."⁵³

The most intricate and extensive surrealist documentation of the revelatory charge of the recently outdated fashion, however, remains the first half of Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, in which the boutiques and encounters of the soon to be demolished Passage de l'Opéra are described in minute detail. Among the many pages devoted to descriptions of the small fashion-related businesses in this microcosm of the urban economy, accounts of hairdressers and barbers, purveyors of canes, handbags and umbrellas, or a once celebrated but now dusty tailor's premises, the narrative homes in on a boutique filled with "hopelessly unfashionable" handkerchiefs and petticoats, along with the proprietress, a "mature lady" still dressed in the style of 1917 and whose clothes are the subject of lengthy consideration.⁵⁴ Aragon's account captures all the marvelous but material aura of these spaces and objects, itemizing a modern mythology that would in turn encourage Walter Benjamin to understand the arcades, but also especially their link to fashion, as that prism of history revealing the hidden or unconscious elements of desire, memory, novelty and dream in recently abandoned modernity.⁵⁵

"A red tie on a rainy day"

What did Surrealists in the early years of the movement actually wear? This obvious question has hardly been asked, and in direct form is really only posed by a few first-person memoirs of the period. These offer one potential source for an answer; correspondence and documentary photographs are two more, but even combined together they supply only partial evidence, making it difficult to draw succinct conclusions. Meanwhile it's notable that there seem to be no relevant artifacts in the form of actual clothes conserved in collections and archives to provide more physical reference.⁵⁶

Early French Surrealism, of course, was made up almost exclusively of men, though significant women were also present in the group and its networks, and the important contributions of figures such as Simone Breton have often been overlooked. Adding to the group's skewed balance, it is often noted that the majority of its members came from bourgeois backgrounds, though in this period

participants, generally aged in their early to mid-twenties and still striving to establish themselves as writers or artists, were rarely comfortably or even adequately off: certainly in most cases their fashion choices were unlikely to run to extravagance. That said, we can also find aspirations for refinement. Along with a general disdain for the more casual or louche appearance among bohemian circles, particularly notable was the presence of a number of style-conscious, even overtly dandy figures within early surrealist circles, such as Max Morise with his “British elegance” as noted by Victor Crastre, or Jacques Rigaut—“always dressed in stylish British clothes and wearing rich cravats,” the “best dressed” of the group according to Man Ray, and who would apparently steal other people’s buttons on the sly.⁵⁷ Aragon’s “touches of dandyism” were noticed by Matthew Josephson, as was a penchant for “black string or bow neckties.” Breton, astounded, recalled Aragon’s collection of 2,000 ties and his habit of taking them all on holiday, while for the period of 1923-’25 Maxime Alexandre gives a vivid portrait of his friend wearing antique Provençal scarves as though they were shirt fronts, collecting canes and gloves—for a while donning surgeon’s rubber gloves—and changing all his clothes several times a day.⁵⁸ Young recruit André Thirion would recall the easy-going demeanor of the group of Surrealists living in a distinctively decorated house in the rue du Château around 1927, all of them “elegant, relaxed and self-confident. The English clothes, the carefully chosen neckties, the ease of the young women contrasted with the dreary garments worn in the provinces.”⁵⁹ While there were dandy precedents aplenty in the prehistory of Surrealism, the most significant for Breton was the mercurial figure of Jacques Vaché, whose tastes in clothes were conspicuously reflected in his drawings, in which “men’s fashion took up nearly all of his imagination.”⁶⁰ During the war Vaché would walk the streets of Nantes disguised variously as a cavalry officer, pilot or doctor; one extraordinary costume, if Breton is to be believed, was divided down the middle with one half an Allies’ uniform, the other half enemy uniform, held together with pockets, belts and multi-colored scarves. Breton’s last memory of this intransigent character was a somber silhouette walking away, “a huge traveller’s coat thrown over his shoulders.”⁶¹

Men’s fashion, in France as elsewhere in this period, tended not to change a great deal from season to season, though over the course of the 1920s more formal items such as stiff false collars and cravats were abandoned.⁶² At the very end of the decade, a well-known group portrait in *La Révolution surréaliste*, featuring an all-male line up of sixteen black and white photomaton photographs around René Magritte’s painting *The Hidden Woman*, shows at first sight unremarkable and similar attire: dark suits, ties, the occasional sweater, overcoat, or scarf.⁶³ Perhaps above all the signals of collar and tie—the latter darker in some cases, lighter in others, hints of stripes or patterns and just one bow tie, but especially the range from impeccable to negligent presentation—give some room for interpretation. A more careful visual essay on fashion and identity had been offered the previous year in Breton’s *Nadja*, in which

successive portraits by Man Ray showed a formal Éluard (dark suit, pocket square, striped tie), then a more relaxed Benjamin Péret (lighter suit, spotted bow tie), then Desnos, deep in a mediumistic trance, slumped in a chair with shirt collar and jacket open, suit crumpled and collar askew.⁶⁴ Such subtleties wouldn't have escaped the author: "what a good idea to wear a red tie on a rainy day," Baron specifically remembered Breton commenting to him at the café.⁶⁵

While it's hard to gauge Surrealists' day-to-day choices and tastes, snippets of written exchanges suggest clothing and grooming as not entirely frivolous subjects for concern. Breton, writing to Simone, or Éluard writing to Gala, both from time to time drop in references to visits to the barbers, shopping for clothes, and ordering new suits.⁶⁶ Even more common in these two bodies of correspondence are references to their partners' clothes and new purchases; in Éluard's case these can be frequent and detailed, and reveal not merely a day-to-day interest in his wife's outfits, but his active involvement in ordering, organizing or even designing them.⁶⁷ Sources like these, and contemporary memoirs, can be gleaned for vignettes of surrealist style preferences. Josephson, present for the transition from Paris Dada to Surrealism, saw the group as "very bourgeois in appearance and dress" in contrast to other French literary circles of the time.⁶⁸ Group photographs such as the one described above might suggest a very conventional picture, in which everyone dresses more or less alike, yet quirkier preferences start to emerge, especially if color can be reinstated. Pierre Naville noted in his diary for December 6, 1924 how a group of Surrealists drove to Alençon to print issue 1 of *La Revolution surréaliste*: "in the car was Aragon in a black shirt, a leather *casquette* and a lemon yellow woolen scarf, Breton in a jade green sweater, a red tie, a black shirt and *casquette*, and [Max] Morise in a blue shirt and monocle."⁶⁹ Aragon's style is remembered by Josephson as "rather sober; [...] always clad in black or navy blue," while Baron remembers his leather briefcase and short-lived moustache.⁷⁰ Péret, on the other hand, was "not so well turned-out in appearance," painter André Masson is described as "perhaps not very clean, wearing an old sweater," while Roland Tual wore "a frock coat from before the war he must have found in some second-hand store. [...] Always dressed up to the nines, he was more or less a tramp, but with a tramp's supreme elegance."⁷¹ Raymond Queneau always sported a black felt hat, while sculptor Jean Arp, "something of a fetishist about shoes [...] wore very heavy and costly English brogues."⁷² Éluard's letters report him ordering a suit from Burberry's or, holidaying in Marseille, choosing "two blue ties. And in the Maison du tricot, a little sleeveless pullover, a lovely shade of plain blue and very cheap: 24 Swiss francs. It goes so well with my suit and ties. I also found a blue hat. I ran like a madman."⁷³

Surrealists from abroad were liable to stand out: on meeting Ernst, Victor Crastre recalled that "people laughed at his old-fashioned straw boater," while Joan Miró "always dressed with the elegance of a peasant in his Sunday best [and] a derby hat."⁷⁴ Naturally, everyone would have been well aware that when it came to

fashion, Paris was a law unto itself; writing to Denise Lévy in the summer of 1924 to suggest which items to pack for a holiday, Simone Breton reminds her cousin that of course, “it’s much less important than it is in Paris.” Three years earlier, her husband had complained to her that “what’s most scandalous in Lorient is the way women dress.”⁷⁵ Photographs from the 1920s of the couple on countryside or seaside holidays show that, like other Parisians at leisure, dress codes here were very different, especially for men: not suits and ties but casual clothes, lighter tones, espadrilles, sweaters and slacks.⁷⁶ Snapshots of the rue du Château surrealists such as Yves Tanguy and the Prevert brothers on holiday in Brittany show them variously in casual attire, swimsuits and especially in matching striped Breton shirts.⁷⁷ There would have been occasions for dressing up too: fairs, carnivals, and the popular costume balls which passed a height of popularity over the 1920s. Meanwhile, in the first half of the 1920s at least, one external context impinged upon this generation: military uniforms, so recently seen everywhere in Paris but in that decade still obligatory for those men completing their military service, even in civilian environments, and which given the group’s pronounced hatred of militarism must have been a conspicuous way in which attire and ethics clashed in surrealist contexts.⁷⁸ Crastre lists Naville and Jacques-André Boiffard wearing uniform to group meetings in 1925, for instance, while Josephson recalled meeting Roger Vitrac “in the handsome blue uniform of an *élève-officier*,” and Desnos “in a shapeless blue uniform and a red fez, recently discharged from the Army of Morocco.”⁷⁹ Finally, we mustn’t neglect one extraordinary instance of eloquent but ambivalent attire: the appearance among Surrealists of the defrocked priest Ernest de Gengenbach, who still wore a cassock in public, as he did in the portrait published alongside his letter to them in *La Révolution surréaliste*.⁸⁰

For all this variety, when the group came together it could also create an impression of a serious and united community, through its dress as much as its attitudes. Prime examples are the iconic group photographs taken by Man Ray at the Bureau de Recherches surréalistes—the so-called “Centrale” office that was the group’s public headquarters during the first months following Surrealism’s launch in October 1924, coinciding with publication of the Manifesto (Fig. 2). The formality of the images make them something of a visual manifesto in their own right, and it seems plausible that they were taken as a public statement of the group’s existence and membership.⁸¹ Man Ray has lined up fourteen subjects, twelve men and two women with the latter, Simone Breton and Mick Soupault, seated at a desk on either side of a more relaxed-looking Morise (jacket unbuttoned and a cigarette in his mouth). Behind them is a row of eleven men, and what strikes the viewer first is the consistency of their look: dark suits with jackets buttoned, waistcoats, in most cases dark or striped ties, along with some stiff poses while Man Ray presses the shutter. We can just see that Breton, head high, wears a monocle. Some prints of the photographs make it appear that most of the men to the right of the line have



Fig. 2. Man Ray, *La Centrale surréaliste*, 1924. © Man Ray 2015 Trust/DACS, London 2021, Image courtesy of Association Atelier André Breton

paler suits: could Man Ray have arranged the group by the color of their clothes? But all in all this is a fashion image of formidable, united convention, as sartorially authoritative as any board meeting.

Things get more complicated when we scrutinize the appearance of the two women. Soupault, looking a touch wary at the edge of her chair, wears a plain dark long-sleeved dress over a pale camisole, buttoned across the waist and with lapels that in this monochrome image make her look for a moment as though she, too, might be wearing a suit like her male colleagues. Simone Breton, in contrast, stares uncompromisingly at the camera, her make up vivid, her crossed legs leaving a touch of skin visible above her long socks, wearing a plain knee-length, long-sleeved black dress, in softer fabric than Soupault's; the neckline is high, with a dark silk scarf around it, but most striking is what looks like a long, thick, faux-leopard fur stole that tumbles to one side of her body from neck to knee.⁸² Of all the women participants in early French Surrealism, Simone is the individual whose fashion interests are best

documented, both in terms of visual and written evidence. Photographs show her transitions in step with the times, from more formal and conventional clothes, hair and makeup of the start of the 1920s, when she herself was in her early twenties, to an array of bolder, elegant, sometimes striking attire and presentation as the decade continues.⁸³ Together they document a great variety of clothing and accessories from which it would be hard to generalize, perhaps beyond Simone's eye for details of finish and fabric (quite a few items feature patterns, contrasting collars and cuffs or layers, integral belts or other detailing); a no doubt widespread preference for darker wear in Paris, lighter on holidays; and perhaps overall a leaning towards the dramatic allure of 1920s cinema stars, rather than the "sporting" look that was also very popular in this decade.

This view is supported by the evidence of her letters to Denise Lévy, studded with references to clothing. While the two cousins swapped ideas, Simone seems to have taken Lévy's day-to-day fashion choices in hand, especially since the latter lived in Alsace-Lorraine and had fewer opportunities for keeping up-to-date. Simone anticipates preferences, orders clothes to be sent on, considers details of colors or combinations, while the two women also lend each other items to borrow or copy, and discuss arrangements for their delivery.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Simone's own wardrobe is also a matter for frequent attention in the letters. While the budget isn't clear, the suggestion is that her purchases come not from couture fashion houses, but are ordered from dressmakers, giving the opportunity to copy other designs, or select colors, fabrics and styles to taste, perhaps sometimes quite daringly, such as an idea for a blue rep suit with lizard skin details.⁸⁵ There are also suggestions that Simone may sometimes have made her own clothes.⁸⁶ The fact that on one occasion at least she is making an overtly progressive purchase—a hat from Sonia Delaunay—indicates how these decisions are being made in full knowledge of contemporary fashion trends.⁸⁷ It's important, however, to read these details not just as confidences between friends, but in the context of an awareness that participates fully in Surrealism's thinking: "there is probably enough," she writes to Lévy in April 1924, "in the play of everyday appearances to found a new mythology, one more subtle than those of fairytales."⁸⁸

Finally, and no doubt inevitably, we might wonder how to grasp André Breton's day-to-day fashion choices. While many accounts of those who met him concur about his magnetic but sometimes intransigent personality, some present him as highly conventional in his attitudes, a view perhaps borne out by photographs of Breton in the Paris Dada years, looking stiff and conservative with his false collar and cane.⁸⁹ The teenaged Jacques Baron, whose first encounter with Breton came in 1921, was less than impressed: "At this first meeting I noticed he wasn't very well dressed. Rather childishly, I found it deplorable that his clothes didn't conform to my idea of an avant-garde poet. My own tastes in this regard ran to English style and sporting attire. I found my great man to be a bit too closely fitted, a bit too Frenchly

starchy.”⁹⁰ Others found him wanting too: a friend of Simone recalled the hilarity of his arrival at her bourgeois family home during their courtship in “a floppy cravat and shabby suit.”⁹¹ Aragon, meanwhile, presents him in fictionalized form in his novel *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* as “this colorless passer-by” of whom “one might never suspect he was a member of a secret society.”⁹² These accounts all seem to find different fault; but in other ways a picture emerges of someone who is not immune to sartorial questions nor indeed to the mystery of identity that haunts so many of his writings.

Despite the household’s tight finances, with the best of the budget going on artworks, André’s and Simone’s letters tell of ordering a suit after a windfall or discovering a wonderful pair of dark glasses—an accessory Breton seems to have favored.⁹³ Another signature item in this period was Breton’s cane, of which he eventually acquired quite a collection; one of these, African or Asian but “of dubious origin” according to Aragon, featured exotic carved reliefs.⁹⁴ Snippets of information suggest that Breton did indeed take care in his clothes and presentation; above all, what the monochrome photographs fail to capture is his marked inclination for clothes to be green (a color preference extended to other items too), noted disparagingly by Baron, who recalled Breton ordering “a somewhat inadvisable bottle green suit,” more encouragingly by Naville, who saw the poet as “devoted to green: his dark glasses, his spinach-colored jacket, and that meadow-colored ink.”⁹⁵ If this look might have been distinctive, so were others. Even as he claimed to detest travel and vacations, images of Breton on holiday show him in relaxed, even dapper attire: snapshots of him with Simone and friends on the promenade in Nice in 1925 have him striking a pose in a white open-necked shirt, wide high-waisted trousers, white shoes and socks, dark glasses and a cane, topped off with a white pith helmet.⁹⁶ Slightly more alarming is the vision painted by Germaine Everling of Breton at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille in November 1922, clad in a “sumptuous squirrel fur-lined cloak” borrowed from Doucet and a leather flying helmet, carrying a stuffed armadillo.⁹⁷ One final, tantalizing piece of evidence is a surprising but little-known image, dating from the days of Paris Dada performances and purportedly of Breton and Éluard in full and convincing drag and make up.⁹⁸ Even if this last document is uncertain, there’s room here for a picture of Breton as highly conscious of his presentation through fashion, and much more flexible in the projection of his persona through clothes than we might have allowed.

Breton’s fashion choices continued to evolve after the 1920s, and there would be more to say on this subject, beyond the scope of this essay. Pursuing the traces of fashion, clothing and dress not only in later iterations of Surrealism in France but in other surrealist centers as well—Brussels, Prague and New York spring to mind—with the support of detailed scrutiny of works, documents and correspondence, could yield equally fertile avenues of research. In turn, this approach might begin to open up fresh and nuanced perspectives, with wider implications than the remit

of fashion history and theory alone, bearing both on the abundant, complex and everyday relations and attitudes within the movement and its members, and on those that locate Surrealism in its broader social, cultural, material and intellectual contexts.

- 1 The majority of research on Surrealism and fashion relates to exhibitions, notable examples being Richard Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988); Ghislaine Wood, ed. *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* (London: V&A, 2007); and Matteo Kries and Tanja Kunz, eds. *Objects of Desire: Surrealism and Design 1924-Today* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2019). These projects focused predominantly on the 1930s and beyond, something that also characterizes François Baudot, *Mode et surréalisme* (Paris: Assouline, 2002) and Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fetish and Fashion* (London: V&A, 2007). There have, of course, been a number of very interesting monographic studies in this area, particularly in relation to the work of Man Ray, Lee Miller, Meret Oppenheim, Dora Maar and Dorothea Tanning, and it's significant that so many of these figures are women.
- 2 There are some notable exceptions to this position, for example Tristan Tzara's 1933 *Minotaure* essay on fashion as a form of social automatism ("Concerning a Certain Automatism of Taste," in *The Surrealists Look at Art*, ed. Pontus Hulten (Venice, CA: Lapis Press), 198-213). Space does not allow a fuller examination here of the scope of the word "fashion" as referring at the same time to clothing; to trends in style and taste; to a particular course of action; and (as a verb) meaning to make. The French word *mode* is similarly used both to refer to clothing (often in the plural, *modes*) and to wider ideas of something "fashionable," but also corresponds to the English word "mode," a way of doing something, though note that *mode* is feminine in the former usage, masculine in the latter. The associated resonances of the *démodé*, the "outmoded," will become useful later in this essay.
- 3 Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. Alyson Waters (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 33 (translation modified).
- 4 Louis Aragon, "Introduction à 1930," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929): 57-64 (57). The bitter reference to the season's "changes in hats" might, as we shall see, be a dig at Breton.
- 5 Matta, "Recollection of a Crowd," in *CasaMatta*, ed. Germana Matta Ferrari (Milan: Corraini Edizioni, 2012), 57. The text is dated 1938, though it reads as a later memory.
- 6 In turn, despite some intellectual roots that have some relevance to Surrealism's own sources, the scholarly study of fashion has itself had a hard task in asserting its legitimacy; see for example the commentary on challenges to the emergence of fashion studies in Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), Chapter 3.
- 7 Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), chapter 5.
- 8 Alistair O'Neill, *London: After a Fashion* (London: Reaktion, 2007), Chapter 3. One other study that opens up possibilities for a scrutiny of 1920s Parisian Surrealism's day-to-day social, economic, cultural and intellectual relationships and attitudes—though it does not broach the topic of fashion—is Norbert Bandier's *Sociologie du surréalisme 1924-29* (Paris: La Dispute, 1999).
- 9 This view could certainly be contested or nuanced (for example, Lehman takes care to distinguish between Paris Dada and early Surrealism in relation to fashion). But while my model is broadly the perspective adopted by the Surrealists themselves, the evidence laid out here strongly suggests continuity rather than rupture between Dada-period and surrealist positions, at least until the late 1920s.
- 10 André Breton's failed attempt to assemble an "International Congress to Determine the Directives and Defense of the Modern Spirit" in 1922 is just one telling instance of this concern. Its founding statement inquired specifically about the modernity of the top hat: see Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 372ff.
- 11 At the very end of the decade, and in the final issue of the surrealist group's first journal, Louis Aragon would argue that what had changed above all was modernity itself. Far from expressing the subversive possibilities of surprise as it once did, "Today's modern is no longer in the hands of the poets. It is in the hands of the cops;" in all its forms, for the crushing modernity of the late 1920s "everywhere there arises the phantom of repression" (Aragon, "Introduction à 1930," 64).
- 12 For background on this period, see for example Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Chapters 10-12, and the catalogue *Les Années folles 1919-1929* (Paris: Musée Galliera/Musées de la ville de Paris, 2007). As is common for much of

the available literature, this latter exhibition presented only women's fashion.

13 Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 219ff. The early 1910s is also the period covered by Nancy Troy's study of the interactions between Paris couture and the art world, *Couture Culture: A Study in Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

14 For some discussion of the distinctions between fashion and its adjacent terms, the sense that privileging "fashion" over clothing and dress is partly the result of fashion history's indebtedness to the "high" and "low" distinctions promoted by early art history, and the insight that fashion "is dress in which the key feature is the rapid and continual changing of styles," a crucial point in the context of surrealist attitudes, see Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3-5 and 48-49 (3). A useful overview of the distinctions and relationships between the history and theory of fashion and those of dress, for example, is offered in Lauren Downing Peters, "Fashion or dress? Pedagogical issues in fashion theory," *Cuaderno*, no. 48 (2014): 113-127, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a5af/201b9e1a7c99b8cce464448d071c9622c29c.pdf> (accessed Sept. 12, 2021).

15 Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, vii and 2-3.

16 My sincere thanks here to the anonymous reviewer of the first draft of this article, whose attentive reading and suggestions for the methodological implications that might ensue from the research—only hints of which I have been able to incorporate here—have given me invaluable help towards future directions for inquiry.

17 An especially well-known example of this cross-over from the 1920s is his portrait of Kiki de Montparnasse (Alice Prin) with an African mask, *Noire et Blanche*, first published in French *Vogue* in May 1926. The best overviews of Man Ray's fashion photography and its relation to his other work is Willis Hartshorn and Merry Forresta, *Man Ray in Fashion* (New York: International Center of Photography, 1990) and Claude Miglietti et al., *Man Ray et la Mode* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2019), though there is scope for further research in this area.

18 Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (London: Bloomsbury 1988), 106; Roland Penrose, *Man Ray* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 73.

19 The detailed account of his work with Poiret is in Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, 100-115; the rest of his extensive activity as a fashion photographer is condensed into just a few lines within this chapter. This meeting appears to have taken place in 1922.

20 Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, 109.

21 Ibid., 112. While this account rather suggests a seamless progression from the episode with Poiret and the launch of his fashion activity, the evidence suggests that it may have taken at least two years before he began to have regular work as a fashion, rather than portrait, photographer (see Miglietti et al., *Man Ray et la mode*, 197-98).

22 For details of Breton and Doucet's relations, see François Chapon, "Une série de malentendus acceptables," in *André Breton: La beauté convulsive* (Paris: Musée nationale d'art moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991), 116-20; and the introduction to André Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, ed. Étienne-Alain Hubert (Paris: Galimard, 2016).

23 See for example Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 11, 14, 26 and 96. Kahn's parents were only persuaded to agree to the marriage on condition that Breton had suitable employment.

24 Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 12; André Breton, *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, ed. Jean-Michel Goutier (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), 138. It would seem that Doucet made a point of keeping his engagement with art and literature and his fashion business interests as separate as possible: see Troy, *Couture Culture*, 32-36. But there are also other avenues for investigation of direct links between Surrealism and the fashion world. Artist Valentine Hugo, who would become a close friend and collaborator with the Surrealists at the end of the 1920s, had been a prominent fashion illustrator in the 1910s, and perhaps also collaborated in writing a regular fashion column during this time (Anne de Margerie, *Valentine Hugo 1887-1968* (Paris: Jacques Damase éditeur, 1983), 28-29); writer André Thirion was employed as an editor for a fashion house during the later 1920s (André Thirion, *Revolutionaries*

Without Revolution, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Cassell, 1975), 85). Some individuals who joined the group in the 1930s had been active in fashion contexts in previous decades, notably Claude Cahun and Marcel Jean.

25 Jacques-André Boiffard, Paul Éluard and Roger Vitrac, "Préface," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no.

1 (December 1924): 1-2. In fact, though the journal would indeed feature a section of varying "Chroniques" at the back of each issue, notably on art, none of them would be devoted to fashion.

26 Isidore Ducasse, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 233-4; note that this passage is set in the commercial districts of Paris' *rive droite* that were also spaces for fashion and haunts for surrealist wanderings. For more on this object and Ducasse's aphorism in surrealist fashion contexts, see Martin, *Fashion and Surrealism*, 11-14.

27 Marcel Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1960), 277; Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 53ff. Mallarmé's activity in this area would be the subject of an essay by Henri Charpentier in issue 3-4 of the surrealist-oriented journal *Minotaure*.

28 André Breton, "Giorgio de Chirico—12 Tavole in Fototopia," *Littérature*, first series, no. 11 (January 1920): 28-29. Lehmann pays extensive attention to the top hat in relation to Dada and Surrealism (*Tigersprung*, 372ff.). According to Matthew Josephson, in this period Max Ernst designed a cover for the new literary journal *Secession* showing a fetus in evening dress and top hat that perhaps not surprisingly was judged inappropriate. Matthew Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 182.

29 The drawings are reproduced in Jean-Jaques Lebel, *Soulèvements* (Paris: Fage/La Maison rouge, 2009), 120-21.

30 Untitled group inquiry, *Littérature*, second series, no. 2 (April 1922): 1-4.

31 Anonymous, "L'Esprit nouveau," *Littérature*, second series, no. 1 (March 1922): 21-22. In more sinister vein, issue 3 featured a long and meticulous account of a crime scene ending with a detailed description of the male murder victim's clothes as forensic evidence: Philippe Weil, "Au Clair de la lune," *Littérature*, second series, no. 3 (May 1922): 3-6.

32 Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 74-75 and 80. The image probably came not from a magazine or catalogue but from a sewing pattern; the prominent caption "Les Patrons favoris" refers to a successful and long-established fashion journal and its series of sewing patterns, part of the larger, generally traditional fashion publishing concern Mode nationale.

33 Hartshorn and Forresta, *Man Ray in Fashion*, 16-17 and 46; Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, 110 (Man Ray mistakenly gives the date as 1926); Louis Aragon, "Au bout du quai, les Arts décoratifs!," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 5 (October 1925): 26-7.

34 On the conspicuous modernity of the mannequins in the Pavillon de l'élégance, and the then very recent rise of fashion photography, see for example Miglietti et al., *Man Ray et la mode*, 193 and 197-98.

35 Hartshorn and Forresta, *Man Ray in Fashion*, 46; Wood, *Surreal Things*, 139; Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, 110. It seems that Poiret was ruined in part by his lavish contributions to the "Exposition des Arts décoratifs"—see *Les Années folles*, 95; it should be noted, against my reading, that it isn't clear if Poiret's work was present in the Pavillon de l'élégance at all (see 92ff.).

36 Miglietti et al., *Man Ray et la Mode*, 31 and 44.

37 Perhaps for this very reason it's possible that Poiret's work enjoyed a certain prestige among Surrealists. Writing many years later, Marcel Jean began his discussion of the relationship between Surrealism, fashion and art—dubbed a 'chapter of frivolities'—with a somewhat tangential elegy to Poiret's impact on the culture of the early twentieth century (Jean, *The History of Surrealist Painting*, 276). Breton's correspondence notes sourly that Aragon and Philippe Soupault have "started their evening at Poiret's. How woeful," meaning presumably the popular café-cabaret hosted in the gardens of Maison Poiret (*Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 134).

38 Compare this list to the watchwords of the aesthetics of the "Exposition des Arts décoratifs," which opened that same month, of logic, truth and harmony; see Hélène Guéné, "L'Exposition des

Arts décoratifs de 1925,” in *Les Années folles*, 28-32 (28). In this context, the suit of armor could stand as both the grim gatekeeper of these values, and a sardonic riposte to the Exposition’s spurious claims for modernity.

39 Aragon, “Introduction à 1930,” 62.

40 “As for getting attached to fashions, for example, this is judged as being in vain, and we even have axioms to explain that all that matters for us is what *remains* (as if we too could remain)” (25 January 1921). Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 72-73.

41 Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 11 ff.; Jacques Baron, *L’An 1 du surréalisme* (Paris: Denoël, 1969), 61.

42 André Breton, “Le Corset Mystère,” *Littérature*, first series, no. 4 (June 1919): 7; Breton described the source in 1930 as “a very beautiful sign that can still be seen on the balcony on the first floor in rue de la Paix” (André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 1098). An advertisement in *Femina* from 1902 can be viewed which includes an advert for this “marvel of elegance and hygiene known as the King of Corsets” by Mme Guillot at 10, Rue de la Paix—see Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_corset_mystere1902.gif (accessed Sept. 12, 2021).

43 Breton, *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 149 (May 4, 1922); Baron, *L’An 1 du surréalisme*, 86; this link to a contemporary fashion trend for bright red or green hats was later confirmed by Simone (in Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, vol.1, 1392). The automatic text with this title, in which brief references to clothing appear, was first published in *Littérature*, no.3 (May 1922): 8-14, and would eventually be included (without the title) in the collection *Poisson soluble* in 1924.

44 André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1999), 63-64.

45 Baron, *L’An 1 du surréalisme*, 52-53.

46 On key locations of the Paris fashion map, see for example Agnès Rocamora, *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 35-53; Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 137 and 144. For a sense of the urban fashion commerce contexts of Paris in the mid-1920s, especially as amplified by the 1925 “Exposition des arts décoratifs” within a discourse of modernity, see also Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), particularly Chapters 2 and 3.

47 Louis Aragon, *The Libertine*, trans. Jo Levy (London: John Calder, 1987), 164, 173-75 and 181.

48 Breton, *Nadja*, 65 and 72.

49 *Ibid.*, 92, 55-56, 100-01 and 128-29. *Nadja* also included another memorable and sexually-charged erotic clothing encounter (152): a vision of a wax mannequin at the Musée Grévin adjusting her garter in the shadows. A photograph of the mannequin would only appear in late editions of the book (and not in the translated version cited here), and reveals that once again, the figure is wearing gloves.

50 Georges Sebbag, “L’Amour-folie d’André Breton,” in *Au Grand jour. Lettres (1920-1930)—un album: André à Simone Breton*, eds. Katia Sowels and Jules Colmart (Paris: Éditions rue d’Ulm, 2020), 152-59 (153-55).

51 See for example references to clothes and to photographs in Breton’s correspondence in *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 123, 133 and 253. In April 1924, Simone asks her cousin Denise to take a photograph of her dress, and says she has taken a whole roll of film of her own. Simone Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, ed. Georgiana Colville (Paris: Joelle Losfeld, 2005), 181. Examples of photographs of Simone, and of the couple, are found throughout this volume and in Sowels and Colmart, *Au Grand jour*.

52 Robert Desnos, *Liberty or Love!*, trans. Terry Hale (London: Atlas Press, 1993); see notably Chapters 2, 4, 5, 9 and 10. The obsessive focus on details and lists of clothes is also found in Desnos’ earlier automatic text *Deuil pour deuil* of 1924. The theme of the nudity beneath women’s clothes is, unsurprisingly, something of a cliché in surrealist texts of this period; in terms of fashion, however, it might be contrasted with the rapid relaxation of the ethics of women’s everyday attire in the 1920s, particularly the revelation of bare flesh of the arm, legs and back, that would have been unthinkable in this generation’s childhood years (see for example the discussion in *Les Années folles*, 17-18).

Meanwhile another recurring reference of sexualized clothing for the early Surrealists, silent screen star Musidora as Irma Vep in *Les Vampires*, had her signature head-to-toe black bodystocking designed by Poiret (*Les Années folles*, 237).

53 René Crevel, *Mon Corps et moi* (Paris: Pauvert, 1979), 37 and 212-15. Of course, the access to memory and desire via an evocation of recently changed fashion has a far more famous precedent in this period in the works of Marcel Proust. For a discussion of Proust and fashion in Paris, see Steele, *Paris Fashion*, Chapter 10.

54 Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Pan, 1980), 94-100. Aragon's interest in the arcades as a space of the marvelous, including references to fashion retail, is already present in his earlier work *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), Chapter 2.

55 On Benjamin, the arcades, and fashion, see for example *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), "Convolute B: Fashion"; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 97ff.; Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, Chapter 4.

56 The nearest the substantial archive of André Breton's possessions gets to more personal items is, for example, a number of canes and smoking requisites (all classified under "objet usuel" on the archive website, André Breton, <https://www.andrebreton.fr/fr/tag/objet%20usuel>, accessed May 7, 2021). This is in contrast, for instance, to the Freud Museum archive, London, which still holds Sigmund Freud's overcoat and walking shoes. The other evidence at hand here is almost all problematic: where the memoirs supply only brief information, and were composed long afterwards, the correspondence also only gives sporadic insights, usually as brief asides to the main subjects at hand. The visual evidence seems more reliable, but can also be limited: the photographs are often amateur snapshots, details of the clothing are not their main purpose, and naturally the images are monochrome.

57 Victor Crastre, *Le Drame du surréalisme* (Paris: Les Éditions du Temps, 1963), 83; Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, 92. Lehmann (*Tigersprung*, 313ff. and 364ff.) is careful to distinguish Dada dandies such as Rigaut and Vaché from the surrealists, but the situation is more complex: Rigaut's work, for instance, would be published in *La Révolution surréaliste*.

58 Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists*, 110, 120 and 144; André Breton, *Entretiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 145; Maxime Alexandre, *Mémoires d'un surréaliste* (Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1968), 39, 45, 96 and 169. Alexandre recounts a story told by Breton of visiting Aragon on holiday in Biarritz, his luggage literally overflowing with ties; he also notes how provocative it was of Aragon, in 1923, not to wear a hat in public. One might note that the trend of changing clothes several times a day, standard practice in previous decades among the bourgeoisie, was largely abandoned by the 1920s. For more on Aragon as *flâneur* and fashion aficionado in the context of Paris commerce, see Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 323 ff.

59 Thirion, *Revolutionaries Without Revolution*, 89.

60 Breton, *Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 55; the main contents of this letter would be reprinted as "La Confession dédaigneuse" in 1924, but in this context it is interesting that Breton should have first offered this account to Doucet, who would no doubt have been alert to these references.

61 Ibid., 57-59; Jacques Vaché, *Lettres de guerre, précédées de 4 essais d'André Breton* (Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1970), 17-18 and 23; see also Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 315ff. Apropos of Vaché, Breton would write: "The forms of masculine elegance go beyond the norm. The cover of [the fashion magazine] *Miroir des modes* is the color of the water that bathes the skyscraper in which they print it" (Vaché, *Lettres de guerre*, 10).

62 Steele, *Paris Fashion*, 230ff.

63 *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12 (December 1929): 73. The montage is widely available to view online, for instance at "Vis-à-Vis: Artists' Portraits Capture Collaboration and Friendship," Phillips, last modified May 19, 2016: <https://www.phillips.com/article/3880061/vis-a-vis-artists-portraits-captures-collaboration-and-friendship>. Magritte, whose self-portrait is included in the montage

even though his relations to the Paris group remained somewhat distant, moved from Brussels to Paris between 1927 and 1930 (his return was sparked precisely by a row about a piece of Georgette Magritte's jewelry); a whole other essay might be written on his relationship to clothes and fashion.

64 Breton, *Nadja*, 26, 30 and 33. Other formal portraits in *Nadja* that could be looked at in this way include photographs of actor Blanche Derval, medium Madame Sacco, psychiatrist Henri Claude, and Breton himself. For more on this theme, see Ian Walker, "Her Eyes of Fern: The Photographic Portrait in *Nadja*," *History of Photography* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 100-113.

65 Baron, *L'An 1 du surréalisme*, 79.

66 See for example Breton, *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 203; Paul Éluard, *Lettres à Gala 1924-1948* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 26, 41, 44, 62, 67 and 68.

67 See for example Éluard, *Lettres à Gala*, 30 (March 1928): "I also went to see your dressmaker, all morning. She's a bit scared about putting beige lace against a blue background. Well, I'll go back on Tuesday to see how it looks. I also ordered you a yellow afternoon dress. But it won't all be finished until next Friday." References to the ordering and organization of Gala's clothes are scattered throughout his letters of the 1920s.

68 Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists*, 107; contrast his description of the older generation of Symbolist poets in Montparnasse, 80.

69 Pierre Naville, *Le Temps du surréel* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), 105.

70 Josephson, 110; Baron, *L'An 1 du surréalisme*, 46.

71 Baron, *L'An 1 du surréalisme*, 127 and 190; Georges Limbour, cited in Simone Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, 273.

72 Baron, 198; Josephson, 181.

73 Éluard, *Lettres à Gala*, 41, 44 and 67.

74 Crastre, *Le Drame du surréalisme*, 67.

75 Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, 199; Breton, *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 133.

76 See for example photos in Sowels and Colmart, *Au Grand jour*, 7 and 129-32.

77 For a selection of these holiday images, see Agnes Angliviel de La Beaumelle and Florence Chauveau, eds., *Yves Tanguy: Retrospective 1925-1955* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982), 178-79.

78 See for instance Aragon's bitter rejection of the uniform, the army and everything they stood for in *Treatise on Style*, 117-18.

79 Crastre, 69; Josephson, 138 and 216.

80 Ernest de Gengenbach, *L'Expérience démoniaque* (Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1968); E. Gengenbach, "Une Lettre," *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 5 (October 1925): 1-2. De Gengenbach, sometimes known as Jean Genbach, claimed to have been wearing his *soutane* on his first meeting with Breton at Troyes, not far from Paris, in 1925; his memoirs also propose that Breton had described this meeting in an introduction to de Gengenbach's public lecture in Paris, 1927, in which Breton is quoted as remembering that "what floated above him [de Gengenbach] that evening was the promise of a white robe [...] kept by a man who wore a black robe" (*L'Expérience démoniaque*, 24-25 and 64-65). Though the precise text of Breton's speech is surely apocryphal, the repeated reference here and elsewhere to de Gengenbach's priestly robes is telling as a physical sign of the tensions and provocations at stake among the surrealist circle, sworn enemies of all clericalism. In a long letter to Breton about religion and justifying his occasional return to the church published in *La Révolution surréaliste* (no. 8 (December 1926): 28-30), his attitude to the cassock says much about his ambivalent and scandalous positions: "As for the ecclesiastical costume, at the moment I'm wearing it as the whim takes me, since my suit is torn [...]. I find it also has a certain use in planning out sadistic amorous adventures with American women who take me to the Bois [de Boulogne] at night."

81 The fact that the Bureau's formal daily log-book makes no mention of this photo session suggests that the images might have been taken before its official opening on 11th October 1924—see Paule Thévenin, ed., *Bureau de Recherches surréalistes: Cahier de permanence octobre 1924—avril 1925* (Paris:

Gallimard, 1988). Certainly, the participants in the images are very close to the set of those whom Breton lists in the Surrealist Manifesto, published a few days later, as having “performed acts of absolute Surrealism” (André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26). A few individuals are missing, notably Péret; but also absent is Antonin Artaud, a key group member and soon named director of the Bureau, but whose first appearance in the *cahier de permanence* comes on November 1 (Thévenin, *Bureau de Recherches surréalistes*, 135), suggesting that the image predates his arrival in the group.

82 Another famous Man Ray image from 1924, which given the participants in common must surely have been taken in the same session, shows ten standing surrealists surrounding Simone seated at a typewriter; this allows us to confirm her neckline and silk scarf, see the bold Marcel wave of her hairstyle, and notice that she wears a heavy, distinctive triangular bracelet, though there’s no sign here of the stole.

83 The best selection of images of Simone Breton during the 1920s is found in Sowels and Colmart, *Au Grand jour*. For a broader sense of French women’s fashion during this decade, see for example the Musée Galliera catalogue *Les Années folles*. My thanks to Sue Chowles for helping identify items in some of the images discussed here.

84 Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, see for example 68, 70, 72, 74 and 77, but also many other references throughout.

85 Ibid., 182. References to Simone’s clothes are also found in André Breton’s letters to her, showing that these questions are not simply a concern between female friends.

86 Ibid., 57; “Tomorrow I absolutely must make [*il faut que je me fasse*] a dress. I’m stifling in all the ones I have. It will take me three days” (226); Simone also mentions knitting, saying she had to stop when André arrives as her hands are trembling in anticipation (57).

87 Ibid., 94. Georgiana Colville (14) notes Simone’s stylish haircut, clothes and accessories, linking this to British Surrealist Eileen Agar’s claim (made for the 1930s) that women Surrealists treated their appearance, including the adoption of couture fashion rather than bohemian garb, as a conscious, autonomous and critical aspect of their identity. Eileen Agar, *A Look at My Life* (London: Methuen, 1988), 120.

88 Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, 184.

89 See for instance the photograph of him from 1920 reproduced in Breton, 83. Breton’s mother, with whom he had a troubled relationship, had worked as a seamstress. For discussion of some of the anxious resonances of this background with reference to the figure of the sewing machine, see Didier Jonchière, “Le surréalisme : ‘beau comme la rencontre fortuite d’un traumatisme et d’une machine à coudre?’,” *Mélusine*, <http://melusine-surrealisme.fr/site/astu/JonchiereDidier.htm> (accessed Sept. 12, 2021).

90 Baron, *L’An 1 du surréalisme*, 16.

91 Constance Coline, cited in Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, 16.

92 Aragon, *Anicet, ou le Panorama, roman*, 133.

93 Simone writes to Denise in March 1923 that money received from the Lévy’s has been spent on “a ravishing pearl grey suit with big pockets that André wears marvelously” (Breton, *Lettres à Denise Lévy*, 122); in 1924 Breton tells his wife of buying “a marvelous pair of spectacles with amber lenses” (Breton, *Lettres à Simone Kahn*, 203).

94 Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 163. The cane apparently came from an antique dealer in the rue Saint-Sulpice, and featured erotic motifs of figures and animals reminiscent of Gauguin’s carvings. In the brawling Dada years, Breton’s cane came into use as a formidable weapon, on one occasion breaking Pierre de Massot’s arm.

95 Baron, *L’An 1 du surréalisme*, 16; Naville, *Le Temps du surréel*, 207. The telling adjective Alexandre uses for Breton (Alexandre, *Mémoires d’un surréaliste*, 56) is “debonair.” One morsel of evidence for Breton as prepared for significant sacrifice when it came to attire is a letter of 1934 from Éluard to

E.L.T. Mesens, held in the Getty Research Institute archives, claiming that Breton was in the process of trying to sell a painting by de Chirico so as to buy a suit (cited by Alice Ensebella, “Surrealist masterpieces from Paris to New York. The Breton/Éluard/Barr/Matisse Affair in 1935,” conference paper, *Surrealisms*, ISSS Conference, University of Exeter, August 31, 2019).

96 See Sowels and Colmart, *Au Grand jour*, 129 and 131.

97 Germaine Everling *L’Anneau de Saturne* (Paris: Fayard, 1970), 161. Everling mistakenly gives the year 1924 for the exhibition, but the date is confirmed by Breton’s letter to Doucet from Barcelona, thanking him for the loan of “your marvelous coat” (*Lettres à Jacques Doucet*, 136).

98 In Robert Valette, *Éluard, livre d’identité* (Paris: Tchou, 1967), 35. It must be said that if this is an image from the staging of Breton and Phillipe Soupault’s Dada-era play *S’il vous plait*, then this might be Éluard and Soupault instead—interviewed in 1971, the latter recalled them both borrowing clothes from their mothers for the performance. Anabelle Melzer, *Latest Rage the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research press, 1976), 183. Nevertheless, the caption for the image is “Paul Éluard et André Breton travestis, vers 1921.”