

## **Why do we love to look like a soldier? From combat chic to camouflage prints – from rebellion to new feminism.**

Ilse Bogaerts, Head of the collections of uniforms, art and their restoration workshops. War Heritage Institute, site Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History. Belgium

### **Abstract**

The author shows that the military uniform and in particular camouflage patterns are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for fashion designers.

This cultural cross-fertilization between military camouflage outfits, street fashion and high fashion is a widespread western phenomenon to this day. Ilse Bogaerts touches history with khaki and camouflage patterns in western armies, and she shows that these army uniforms inspire subcultures in the past and present.

It's certainly true that military clothing has fundamentally influenced women's fashion by giving it power. And it increased the popularity of utilitarian clothing, a crossover of male and female fashion. Most important is that camouflage fashion motifs, contrary to military inspired fashion, gives designers greater creative freedom, because the camouflage motif can be disconnected to the notion of military uniform. Camouflage patterns have the capacity to imply multiple layered meanings, rather than its original association with war.

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### **History of khaki and camouflage**



*Fig. 1 & 2. Teenagers in camouflage print, Antwerp, 2019, © Nic Peeters.*

Concealing means masking, hiding something. In the Dutch dictionary van Dale, 'camouflage' was not included until around 1925, and the first meaning is 'masking military objects'. 'Camouflage' refers in the first place to war equipment such as tanks and warships, which are covered with camouflage nets and are painted in dazzle motifs to make it difficult to detect by the enemy.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 3.** dazzle painting on a scale model of a merchant ship, WOI, © WHI, collection WHI

It is from the First World War that camouflage was widely used, because for the first-time balloon flights and airplanes could explore enemy territory from the air. It became important not to be discovered, to deceive, to become invisible.

Yet camouflage as a military tactic has existed since ancient times. Just think of the Trojan Horse and the camouflaged deception of the Greek warriors. And look at the prehistoric hunters who organized diversionary tactics towards their prey: they masked themselves with animal skins and they dug traps. More recently, in the nineteenth century, there are several examples of camouflage techniques in the shipping industry: fake gunner's gates were painted on merchant ships to scare off pirates; and on the Mississippi, warships, were covered with clay and the masts were replaced by trees in order to be confused with the muddy banks of the river. The English and German navies started painting their night fighters in black from around 1870 to make them totally invisible at night.<sup>2</sup> Around 1900 there was a similar camouflage development by the army 'land forces'. Also, with regard to the uniform, it became more and more important to make recognition as difficult as possible. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the first camouflage uniforms appeared.<sup>3</sup>

In 1910 the German soldiers were given a *feldgrau* (grey-green) combat uniform (decreed on 23 February 1910), which made them less noticeable in the landscape<sup>4</sup>. The German army was better prepared because they had learned their lessons from the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 and from the Russian-Japanese conflict 1901-1902. In the same period the Italian soldiers (1909) received grey-green uniforms, Serbia and Austria also opted for *feldgrau* field uniforms.

The British army had, a decade before 1914, a *khaki* long uniform jacket (1902) in their uniform regulations. The officer Harry Lumsden is commonly referred to as the one who first dressed his men in khaki uniforms. He was ordered in December 1846, in Peshawar, to equip his Scout Corps. Following the example of the inhabitants of the region, he dressed his men in light coloured cotton, which was rubbed with mud from the river. The result was a colour identical to its surroundings. The Regiment was soon nicknamed 'karkees', which means 'colour of the earth/dust' in Parsi or Urdu. More than likely the name 'Karkees' was changed to 'khaki' by the English pronunciation. The

dyeing of the light tropical uniforms in khaki was generally applied when, in India in 1857, the Great Mutiny broke out during the hot monsoon (a hot season during which there was normally no fighting). It was not until 1896 that khaki was regulated for overseas troops, when it was finally possible to produce sustainable khaki dye.<sup>5</sup> The first time that khaki was worn outside India was in 1868 when an expedition was sent to the Emperor of Abyssinia. During the storming of Magdala, which ended the campaign, the 33rd, 45th, and 4th regiments (King's Own) wore shaggy-grey uniforms. In 1887 the Italian troops in their colonies were also provided with khaki uniforms. But it was not until 1909 that Italy would have its troops carrying grey-green khaki on its own soil.

From 1902 the entire British army, including in the motherland, received khaki combat uniforms. The production of khaki uniforms on such a large scale demanded serious financial input and also efficient production methods, hence it took so long.

When the war finally broke out, all other European armies soon understood that their men had to switch to combat uniforms in a camouflage color. For most armies it became 'olive green' or a variant of it.



**Fig. 4.** Uniforms in camouflage colors offers more concealment, © WHI, collection  
**Left:** British army: khaki drab; **Center:** French army: blue horizon; **Right:** German army: field grey

The French and Belgian army, on the other hand, switched to *bleu horizon* in December 1914, but by the end of 1915 their soldiers finally got mustard-khaki-green uniforms.<sup>6</sup>

### History of camouflage pattern

The German stormtroopers were the first to paint by hand on their Stahlhelm (introduced in 1916) a disruptive camouflage pattern (the pattern was specified in a regulation in 1918), worn in France during the Third Battle of the Aisne, between Montdidier-Noyon, in June, 1918.<sup>7</sup> The helmets used a variety of bright colors and random geometric diamondlike patterns, in an effort, to diminish their silhouette, as they looked over a trench parapet.



**Fig. 5.** Camouflage painted stahlhelm (left) and artillerie (right) © WHI, collection WOI of WHI,

Patterned camouflage began in the First World War as a method of disguising ships, aircraft, tanks, and artillery to protect them from the view of observation aircraft. Real camouflage sections and studios were set up for this purpose. The French were pioneers in the use of battlefield camouflage and they were the first to have such a military camouflage section. Belgium followed this example. Fake observation posts, painted and camouflaged as trees, were used on the front.



**Fig. 6.** Observation posts (fake tree), made by the Camouflage Section of Belgium, c. 1916-1918. © WHI, collection WOI of WHI,

The following camouflage technique: net covered helmets with branches and green inserted - changed the silhouette of the infantryman completely. When he painted his face with charcoal black and green, he limited the danger of being noticed by the enemy. There were some experiments during WW I, but most of the studies and experiments to apply camouflage uniformly took place in the thirties, after the First World War, by Germany, US, Italy, France, etc. The most advanced results were achieved by the *German Waffen-SS* who applied printed camouflage in its most varied form and on a very large scale.

The success of this German camouflage meant that most of the armies switched at an accelerated tempo to camouflage printed uniforms. As a result, from the Second World War onwards, camouflage suits were added to the combat equipment. Finally, each NATO country developed its own camouflage prints (*North Atlantic Treaty Organization*). That's why the NATO army had more than fifty different types of prints around 1975.<sup>8</sup> But all over the world there are now more than 350 camouflage patterns in use in army field clothing. They are not only a part of the military camouflage tactics, but are also a kind of identity statement of the nations, perhaps, however contradictory, as the colored uniforms were in the nineteenth century.

The camouflage pattern commonly associated with fashionable camouflage today was derived from the large variety of German army and *Waffen SS* camouflage patterns created before and during the Second World War: the geometrical shaped Splinter pattern, the multi dotted Pea pattern and the high quality Leiber pattern. Also, the US Woodland print (regulated in 1980), known as "M81", conquered the fashion scene.



**Fig. 7.** *Leiber* pattern fabric, © Werner Palinckx

But most popular in fashion to this day is the American *ERDL* pattern (Engineer Research & Development Laboratories), also known as the leaf pattern, developed in 1948. The *ERDL* was not used until the Vietnam War, when it was issued to elite reconnaissance and special operation units through early 1967, followed up by the *Woodland* pattern issued to the United States Armed Forces, from 1981 until its replacement in the mid 2000's. This *Woodland* pattern is identical to *ERDL*, but is printed from an enlargement of the original.

During World War II, the Belgian paratroopers wore a camouflage coat with specific prints that consisted of large stains, called the *Denison* motif, a copy of the uniform of the British airborne troops, designed by Captain Denison in 1941. The *Denison* motif consists of a light green base on which dark green and chocolate brown spots have been drawn, which seem to be interrupted by broad and dark brush sweepings. These camouflage suits were complemented with make-up and caps that reached to the shoulders. By 1942, after Great Britain had developed the unique *Denison* pattern, the United States followed with the short-lived *Frog-skin* pattern. The development of each of these discreet prints points to one of the most paradoxical aspects of camouflage theory: although the main purpose of camouflage is to make the wearer invisible in a specific environment, camouflage immediately also becomes an ID card of the wearer: nationality, name, rank, geographical and environmental characteristics can be read.

The paradoxical ability of military camouflage to both 'distinguish and conceal,' to create both 'equality and order,' made it possible that in later decades camouflage could be used by fashion for subversive purposes. The fact that the manner in which the military uniform is worn, is laid down in strict legislative regulations in which the soldier is held personally responsible for his correct appearance, made it easy for civil subgroups to protest by wearing parts of the army uniform, which is actually unlawful.

### **History of camouflage pattern, from the sidewalk to the catwalk**

In 2010 at the Camouflage Congress in Brussels, Sarah Scaturro quoted the great slogan of fashion icon Claude Sabbah: "*god is camouflage*".<sup>9</sup> We understood the meaning of this wonderful statement as follows: fashion makers use materials and designs precisely to change, conceal or camouflage the reality of the human body. Fashion designers make us look bigger or thinner than we really are. And by camouflaging our imperfections we can take on a new identity and reject the old 'I'. This is a philosophical theoretical approach that fits the former definition of camouflage in warfare: namely hiding something by misrepresenting or disguising something. But the relationship between camouflage and fashion is complex and deep, going beyond a copy of a military or a camouflage pattern. Dress and appearance are in a field of tension between the individual and society. The society that has standard and conformity, and the individual that seeks identity and self-expression.

René König (1906-1992), a German sociologist, sees clothing as an ambivalent phenomenon, which is kept alive by complementary but at the same time contradictory mechanisms: imitation-distance, conformation-discrimination and normative-self-expression.<sup>10</sup> In daily life, we are both: an individual and a member of society and both aspects are inseparably linked. Clothing and appearance can convey many meanings and perform several functions, both in personal and social life. People pass on messages to each other through their outer appearance.<sup>11</sup> It is a non-verbal communication, but it must not be abstracted or disconnected from historical aspects, contrary to Roland Barthes (1915-1980), French essayist and cultural critic of the twentieth century, who analyzed clothing semantically as a whole of meaningful symbols like a language). In addition to socio-cultural factors, the organization of daily life and the economy - particularly the mass production and mass distribution of clothing - also play a role in the development of dress behavior.

Good examples are the youth groups in the 1950s in western society, who claimed their place in western civilization. Because of the post-war baby boom, they were more numerous than before, they were able to go to school longer than before, and they were the first to have leisure time.<sup>12</sup> It was a new social group that was trying to manifest itself in society. Each country had its own rebellious youngsters. Belgium had its nozems, The Netherlands knew the quiffs, France the existentialists. In Germany the hemiplegics made themselves heard, while in England the teddyboys and the mods woke up the youth. And in America there was a movement around writers like Allen Ginsberg, the beatniks. From now on, young people would always be taken into account. They all had their own music, their own heroes, their own fashion.

Characteristically, these youth groups borrowed large numbers of pieces of clothing from the American and British soldier's wardrobe: marine coats, army-green parkas, t-shirts, Chinos (US Airforce cotton khaki trousers), black army boots, Clark's desert shoes (suede shoes with a crepe sole developed for British officers stationed in desert areas during the First World War) etc. The beatniks even wore complete military uniforms in black, in khaki and in camouflage prints.<sup>13</sup> They can be regarded as the predecessors of the revolutionary generations of the 1960's and of the more politically engaged subgroups of the seventies and eighties (20<sup>th</sup> century). But in addition, these subsequent young generations, especially in their pop music scenes, embraced the camouflaged army uniforms: from the Stones, Michael Jackson, and Madonna, to William Pharell.<sup>14</sup> The last-mentioned even recently bought the fashion brand, G-Star Raw, which now reigns supreme and is successful thanks to all the possible designs in camouflage prints.

The camouflage streetwear motif was picked up over time by the haute couture. Very well-known is the camouflage wedding dress of Jean-Paul Gaultier from 1999. But in the last decade all known haute couture houses like Chanel, Burberry, Moschino, Gucci, Valentino, Christian Dior, Marc Jacobs, and Prada, all experimented with camouflage patterns and colors with amazingly great results (see also the many camo-designs of pop singer William Pharell for G-STAR RAW *Elwood* x25 and for ADIDAS). Camouflage patterns were never as popular as today. Camouflage has even been adopted from the fashion scene by the whole product-design scene. Like a tsunami, camouflage printed products are flooding the market: from sofas, wallpaper and photo frames, to toothbrushes, swimsuits, and suitcases. The object list has become endless.

## **Conclusion**

In a century there has been an evolution from a military use of the camouflage motif, applied manually, to a collective application on leisure clothing by subcultures sold in mass production. It shows that the military look with camouflage print as inspiration is not a one-year craze, but a trendy fashion style of medium duration. The continued popularity of chic combat style in the fashion field, is not unequivocal or easy to explain. Does it have anything to do with the fact that there has been no compulsory military service in the national armies for several generations? In western society, the number of soldiers has fallen sharply and most young people do not know a soldier in their immediate vicinity, so there is a disconnection between the look and feel of a uniform and the idea of armed combat.

The military wearing uniforms expresses respect, discipline and force. But does the civilian who wears uniform-based fashion express the opposite? Like disrespect, disorder, misbehavior? Or do they just want to be cool?

Coats, uniforms and other military clothing have fundamentally influenced women's fashion by giving it power. A more recent occurrence is the popularity of utilitarian clothing, a crossover of male and female influences. But camouflage, on the other hand, gives designers greater creative freedom, because the camouflage motif can be disconnected to the notion of military uniform. Camouflage patterns have the capacity to imply multiple layered meanings, rather than its original association with war. Sarah Scaturro hints at the inherent flexibility that camouflage was beginning to take on as a pattern able to cross gender and class barriers in the seventies and eighties.<sup>15</sup> More than just a malleable textile pattern used in fashion, camouflage is an interactive process of becoming one with the world, while remaining distinct from it. It is a process of losing our identity, while reaffirming it. Neil Leach states that the role of camouflage is not to disguise, but to offer a medium through which to relate to the other. Camouflage constitutes a mode of symbolization and operates as a form of connectivity.<sup>16</sup> That is why fashion, as a system that simultaneously enforces conformity while conferring a unique identity, embraces camouflage as a device that can both create and destroy.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Roy R. Behrens, *Ship Shade, a dazzle camouflage sourcebook* (Iowa: Roy R. Behrens Bobolink Books, 2012). Cover: to most people the word camouflage is synonymous with low visibility, mostly through background matching. But in World War I, when the primary threat to the Allies was from hugely successful torpedo attacks by German submarines (called U-boats), other approaches to ship camouflage were introduced. Foremost among these was “high difference” or “disruptive” camouflage, a counter-intuitive method in which ships were painted in brightly-colored abstract shapes, which made them conspicuous but difficult to aim at. The camouflage artists made use of misleading shapes and vivid hues that made it difficult to determine the speed and direction of a distant target.

<sup>2</sup> I. Bogaerts, “Camouflage,” in *Ons Heem*, (s’Gravenwezel: ed. Heemkunde Vlaanderen vzw, Jg. 58, nr. 1, 2005), pp. 47-54.

<sup>3</sup> Ilse Bogaerts organized the international congress about ‘Camouflage’ in 2010 in the Royal Military Army School in Brussels where 23 specialists - from generals, textile engineers, historians, art historians and anthropologists to fashion specialists - unraveled their camouflage studies. See I. Bogaerts and W. Palinckx (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Camouflage takes centre stage'* (Brussels: ed. KLM-MRA, 2010), pp. 221.

<sup>4</sup> L. Berrafato, “Le fantassin de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918 (2nd part),” in *La Gazette des Uniformes*, hors série n° 4, (Paris: ed. Librairie Le Hussard, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> H. Toorenvliet, *Uniformen, spiegels van hun tijd* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 2001), pp. 76-89.

<sup>6</sup> I. Bogaerts, “De Belgische piot aan het IJzerfront (1914-1918). Een studie van zijn uniform tussen theorie en werkelijkheid.” In *Actes du colloque de Namur novembre 2010: La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre, une icône, des images*, (Namur: ed. B. Rochet et A. Tixhon, la presses universitaires de Namur, 2012) pp. 257-275.

<sup>7</sup> T. Newark, Q. Newark, J.F. Borsarello, *Brassey's book of camouflage* (Londen: Brassey's, 1996), p. 15.



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- <sup>8</sup> J.F. Borsarello, *Camouflaged Uniforms of the Nato Forces* (Londen: iso-galago publications, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Ilse Bogaerts organized the international congress about Camouflage in 2010 in the Royal Military Academy of the Belgian Defense in Brussels, where 23 specialists - from generals, textile engineers, historians, art historians and anthropologists to fashion specialists - unraveled their camouflage studies. See *Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Camouflage takes Centre stage'*, (Brussels: ed. I. Bogaerts and W. Palinckx, 2010), pp. 221.
- See S. Scaturro, "God is Camouflage," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Camouflage takes Centre stage'*, (Brussels: ed. I. Bogaerts and W. Palinckx, 2010), pp. 155-160.
- <sup>10</sup> K. De Leeuw, *Kleding in Nederland 1813-1920* (Hilversum: ed. Verloren i.s.m. Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen van Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1993), p. 62, 63.
- <sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 70.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Pool, *Dressed to kill* (Zwolle: ed. Waanders i.s.m. Legermuseum Delft, 2000), p. 108.
- <sup>13</sup> The role and influence of the American lifestyle and of the economy was substantial because mass consumption, mass production and mass communication facilitated the new youth subcultures. See J. Mollo, *Military Fashion* (London: ed. Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), p. 44.
- <sup>14</sup> See M. A. Langkjaer, "Camouflage as communicator of survivor' mentality in contemporary popular music: Destiny's Child on the cusp of gender, urban-combat attitude, fashion and politics," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium 'Camouflage takes Centre stage'* (ed. I. Bogaerts and W. Palinckx, Brussels, 2010), pp. 109-119.
- <sup>15</sup> S. Scaturro, *From combat to couture: camouflage in fashion*, Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts with Masters Program in Fashion and Textile Studies: History, Theory and Museum Practice, NY , 2011, p. 34, 35.
- <sup>16</sup> N. Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge: ed. MIT Press, 2006), p. 240.