

Turbans, ersatz, and ingenuity. Women's hairstyles in Occupied France: an affordable luxury?

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Abstract

The study of French women's hair practices during the Occupation of France by the German Third Reich (1940–1944) can provide an interesting perspective on the importance of beauty and fashion in such a wearisome context. With the shortage of beauty products, newspapers offered recipes to make shampoo or brilliantine at home, whereas hair salons found alternatives to face power cuts. Despite restrictions, hairstyling appeared as one of the only ways for women to show a little originality and elegance: "the only accessible luxury," as Paul Gerbod wrote in his *Histoire de la coiffure et des coiffeurs*. Indeed, with a few tricks, it was possible to counterbalance a faded outfit with an elegant hairstyle. In addition, the wide variety of turbans, hats, and headgear, sometimes made of surprising materials (newspaper, used stockings, or handkerchiefs) were all possibilities for women to bring novelty and originality to their outfits.

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Introduction

Fashion and appearance during the Occupation of France were rather unexplored subjects until Dominique Veillon's founding work, *La Mode sous l'Occupation*, published in France in 1990, providing a real study of this era through the lens of fashion practices. The Military Administration of France by Germany was established with the Second Armistice, signed on June 22, 1940, by the French government and the Third Reich, and ended in the Summer of 1944, with the gradual liberation of the territory by Allied troops. During these four years of collaboration between the Vichy regime and Nazi Germany, most French people continued living, working, and consuming, but also dressing and taking care of their appearance, including their hair.

Far from being trivial, the subjects of fashion and beauty were at the heart of many French women's daily lives during this period and played economical, moral, and ideological roles. Indeed, a few months after France's defeat against Germany in 1940, the women's magazine *Pour Elle* wrote: "It is an obligation, and even more a duty, to keep yourselves well-groomed, to remain charming and to take care of yourselves, despite the current worries, concerns and difficulties" (*Pour Elle* 1940, 11). Therefore, the study of women's hairstyles during the Occupation of France can provide a perspective on the expression of French elegance and luxury, despite restrictions and shortages.



LA BRILLANTINE ROJA est devenue chose rare, explique le chimiste des laboratoires Roja, à cause de la rareté des huiles minérales, importées d'outre-mer avant-guerre.

Roja maintient sa qualité du temps de paix, mais s'excuse de ne plus pouvoir satisfaire toutes les demandes.

MAIS si ! madame, c'est toujours la même brillantine composée des mêmes huiles irradiantes ricinées qui venaient en temps de paix des pays d'outre-mer, vendue dans les mêmes flacons et possédant les mêmes propriétés ! Toutefois, la rareté des matières importées, nous empêche de satisfaire toutes les demandes comme par le passé. C'est pourquoi nous avons mis sur pied un système de répartition équitable entre les fournisseurs — parfumeurs, coiffeurs et pharmaciens, — répartition proportionnelle aux commandes d'avant-guerre, afin de permettre au plus grand nombre de clients de continuer à l'employer, même parcimonieusement.

N'oubliez pas que la brillantine Roja que vous pouvez encore trouver dans le commerce est fabriquée avec les mêmes huiles précieuses et les mêmes soins méticuleux qui ont fait son renom mondial. Et restez fidèle, madame, aux marques qui comme la nôtre font actuellement de grands sacrifices pour maintenir, malgré les difficultés de l'heure, la finesse traditionnelle de la Parfumerie Française.

"La Roja" fait rayonner la chevelure et "remet en plus" sans graisser.



Economie...



Economies sur toute la ligne !
Même sur le dentifrice ? Pourquoi pas ? Utilisez donc de préférence un savon dentifrice. Et, tant qu'à faire, prenez le meilleur : Gibbs. Il n'est pas plus cher ! Avec le savon dentifrice Gibbs, votre brosse en prend juste assez pour obtenir un savonnage parfait. Ainsi, vous faites pour vos dents tout ce qu'il faut en dépensant **JUSTE CE QU'IL FAUT !**



SAVON DENTIFRICE

Fig.1. "Publicité pour la Brillantine Roja," *Marie-Claire*, January 1, 1942, 2. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

Hair product shortages

Like many other commodities, hairdressing supplies were impacted by shortages and rationing. Like many other industries, the production of soap-based products dropped from 27,500 tons before the war to only 3,020 tons in 1941. As soon as Spring 1941, a national committee—appointed by the Vichy regime—established quotas for each hair salon regarding a variety of products such as shampoo, soap, hairpins, and towels, as well as coal and wood supplies for their heating systems (*La Coiffure de Paris* 1941, 5). To prevent shortages, hairdressers and beauty operators were encouraged to reduce waste and make their products last longer. In March 1941, an advertisement for Dop shampoo in *La Coiffure de Paris* advised hairstylists to use less shampoo and even dilute it with hot water, to make their bottles last longer and prevent shortage (*La Coiffure de Paris* 1941, 44-45).

Similarly, women's magazines invited housewives to reduce their shampoo consumption. A common solution was to make their own produce at home, following recipes such as one published in *La Mode du Jour* in 1941 (page 17):

Use your bar soap scraps: shred them with a cheese grater. Dissolve two tablespoons of this soap powder in a small hot pot of water, add a teaspoon of trisodium phosphate, which is an excellent degreaser. Your shampoo is ready and did not cost you much.

As for brilliantine and pomade, which were missing already in the early days of Occupation, magazines advised to substitute them with solar oil, if available (*Pour Elle* September 1941, 9). The brilliantine brand Roja even used its rarity as a sales pitch in its advertisements and announced: "Roja maintains its peacetime quality but apologizes for no longer being able to satisfy all requests" (*Marie-Claire* January 1942, 2). In consequence, the brand announced that it had established "a system of equitable distribution between suppliers [...], to allow as many clients as possible to continue to use it, even sparingly" (*Marie-Claire* February 1942, 22) (**Fig. 1**).

Power cuts and energy restrictions

Adding to the scarcity of hair products, power cuts also impacted hair habits, especially in big cities such as Paris or Marseille, where a vast number of households and beauty salons underwent power cuts or faced coal and gas shortages (*Le Journal* 1941, 1). Therefore, during particularly cold winters, hot water was widely unavailable, and hygiene was reduced to the bare necessity (*La Mode du Jour* 1941, 27). Most women's magazines advised their readers to wash their hair every two or three weeks. In between washes, daily hair brushing was recommended to maintain good hygiene (*La Mode du Jour* 1942, 14).

With the frequent power cuts, hairdressers were compelled to find alternatives, so that their devices, including perm machines or dryers, could continue to function. Apparatuses such as the *Régulator* were used to regulate the voltage's variation and guarantee a constant heat for perms (*La Coiffure de Paris* 1941, 4). More original solutions included cyclists and pedal-powered turbines, as described in an article and photograph published in *Le Petit Parisien* in August 1944 (page 1) (**Fig. 2**):

We lack electricity, and so do hairdressers. But women have their own demands, even in wartime. And Figaro, anxious to keep his customers, called on cyclists; it is thus possible for him to exercise his art. A few pedal strokes behind the scenes and our *élégantes* [...] will get the hot air required for their perms.



du cabinet, a annoncé l'ouverture de deux salles de cinéma où, à partir d'aujourd'hui, les actualités seront projetées en permanence tous les jours de 14 heures à 23 heures. Ce programme d'actualités doit être en principe augmenté d'un documentaire inédit et d'un dessin animé.

Le choix des salles a été déterminé par des questions d'ordre matériel: ce sont celles du Normandie et du Palais-Rochecrouart.

Une troisième salle ouvrira incessamment dans les mêmes conditions.

D'autre part, en cas d'événements importants, des éditions spéciales pourront avoir lieu.

Plus de 35.000 spectateurs pourront ainsi chaque jour suivre les projections de la presse filmée.

La projection, qui doit durer environ cinquante minutes, sera différente pour chaque salle, dont le prix d'entrée a été uniformément fixé à 10 francs.



Nous manquons d'électricité, et les coiffeurs aussi. Mais les

Fig. 2. *Le Petit Parisien*, August 2, 1944, 1. Ce document est extrait du Site RetroNews et est accessible à l'adresse www.retronews.fr / Toute réutilisation de ce document doit s'inscrire dans les conditions d'abonnement prévues par le site RetroNews.

When it was impossible to make electric devices function, hairdressers could use curling irons instead of perm machines (*La Coiffure de Paris* 1944, 1), and would let clients' hair dry naturally, inside or outside the salon, as depicted in Robert Doisneau's series of photographs of René Garraud's Parisian hair salon (Doisneau 1944).¹In their war memoirs, the Vallotton sisters confirmed this practice: "Hairdressers and pedicurists would work on their doorstep to see clearly, feet and hands outstretched towards the light. The [clients'] curled heads [...] would dry at home" (Vallotton 1995, 287).

The "only accessible luxury": coquetry and creativity

During the Occupation, fashion faced plenty of restrictions: textile cards, established in July 1941, controlled the fabrics and clothes supplies. In this context, ingenuity and creativity were required, as depicted in various *Marie-Claire* articles inviting housewives to transform old trousers into skirts or make dresses out of a small yardage of fabric (*Marie-Claire*, August 1941, 14-15; *Marie-Claire*, September 1941, 8-9). Thus, despite the shortage of hair products and equipment, hairstyling appeared as one of the few ways for women to show a little originality and elegance—"the only accessible luxury", as Paul Gerbod writes in his *Histoire de la coiffure et des coiffeurs* (Gerbod 1995, 228).

Indeed, an article published in *Votre Beauté* in July 1941 (page 27) noted that "women, no longer having the opportunity to dress, are happy to take more care of their hairstyle than ever before and to adorn it with accessories that allow them to contribute to a refined elegance." With a few tricks, rolls and curls could be used to create tall hairstyles, counterbalancing a faded outfit with coquetry and creativity, even though it could create a rather eerie silhouette, as described by Annie Vallotton: "The Parisienne wears all kinds of extravagant hairstyles that would go with long skirts at a push, but are ridiculous with calves and bare knees" (Vallotton 1995, 276) (**Fig. 3**).



Fig. 3. Photograph of a woman, 1940s. Bar-le-Duc, Archives départementales de la Meuse, Fonds Grandidier, cote 201 Fi 1/3377.

¹ Photograph by Robert Doisneau, *Séchoir solaire*, Paris, 1944. The photograph can be found in the International Center of Photography's collections. The photograph has been digitalized and is freely available on the Internet in English at the website of ICP: <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/outside-rene-garraud>.

Some hairstyles displayed in professional magazines consisted of exuberant pilings of braids, hairpieces, curls, and rolls. This type of hairstyle was, of course, not offered to all customers, as they were often technical demonstrations and creations by great hairdressers—such as Antonio or René Rambaud—which, like *haute couture* designs, were only accessible to a limited clientele. Nevertheless, with these extravagant models, far from the preoccupations and restrictions of the war, a new vision of French elegance was displayed, based not only on clothing but also on hairstyles.



Fig. 4. “Une coiffure fantaisie”, *La Coiffure de Paris*, April 1944, 13. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

Substitute hairstyles

When it was impossible to style their hair properly due to the lack of time, money, or suitable products, magazines encouraged elegant women to adopt what Dominique Veillon called "substitute hairstyles". The wide variety of turbans, hats, and headgear were possibilities for elegant women to bring novelty and originality to their outfits while hiding their hair partially or totally. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Prime of Life*:

Because of electricity cuts the hairdressers worked at odd and irregular hours, and an ordinary set became a hazardous ordeal, with the result that turbans came into fashion; they formed a simultaneous substitute for a hat and a permanent. I had worn them occasionally myself, both for convenience and because they suited me (De Beauvoir 1960, 518).

Thanks to their lightweight and practicality, headscarves and turbans were popular among cyclists as well. With the petrol shortage, cycling was one of the most used means of transport in Paris, and women adapted their outfits—and consequently their hairstyles—to this new way of life (Veillon 2014, 61).



ROGER-VIOUET 208-4 (c) LAPI / Roger-Viollet
Guerre 1939-1945. Journée de l'élégance à bicyclette, Paris, juin 1942.

Fig. 5. *Journée de l'élégance à bicyclette*, Paris, June 1942. Credits: LAPI / Roger-Viollet.

Beyond their functional aspects, turbans were used as well in an attempt to create a more slender silhouette, as confirmed by the *Album de la mode Figaro*: "A breath of the Orient brings the turbans dear to the Mamamouchis, erases the hair, and by contrast slenderizes the faces" (*Album de la mode du Figaro* 1942, 31).² These turbans were not worn like simple

² In Great Britain and USA, where women were more largely part of the workforce, turbans were used to prevent machine accidents (Summers 2015, 161).

headscarves: magazines like *Marie-Claire* offered tutorials to teach their readers how to elegantly tie the fabric around their heads and even make their base structure out of newspapers or plaiting materials, to achieve a tall and steady hairstyle (*Marie-Claire* September 10, 1943, 10-11).



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 6. "Une leçon de turbans," *Marie-Claire*, September 10, 1943, 10-11. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

More accessible options could include fabric scraps simply tied on top of the head, but sometimes more original materials were used. *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* (Fig. 7) thus offered a tutorial to make a turban from used stockings (1941, 5), while *Pour Elle* advised using two handkerchiefs to create "graceful and easy to drape turbans in five minutes" (May 1941, 14)

Conclusion

The interest in appearance, beauty, and elegance did not disappear during the Occupation years; still encouraged by creations and trends invented by the great Parisian hairdressers, hairstyle fashions circulated notably thanks to the popularity of women's magazines. Even though most French women had to adapt and overcome the shortages and rationing, their attempts to wear elegant hairstyles, despite the economic and moral crises, proved a certain desire to keep a touch of elegance and coquetry in their outfit. Hairstyling and, broadly speaking, beauty, were therefore significant moral supports, while also playing a part in the construction of the image of womanhood valued by the Vichy regime (*Pour Elle* May 1941, 14)—an elegant expression of femininity, maintaining the beauty and luxury sectors' economy (*Votre Beauté* 1943, 8). However, hairstyles and hats could also be used by women as a rather exuberant manifestation of coquetry in a wearisome context, as witnessed by the author of an article published in *Marie-Claire* in June 1943, criticizing the excessive hat styles emerging in Paris (page 4-5). Thus, it is apparent that hairstyles were an accessible form of creativity, ingenuity, and even luxury under the Occupation.

Fig. 7. Right: "Vos bas même usagés sont devenus chose précieuse," *Le Petit Echo de la Mode*, December 28, 1941, 5. Private collection of Sylvie Caillard.

Fig. 8. Below: "N'exagérez pas Mesdames!..." *Marie-Claire*, June 10, 1943, 4-5. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.



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