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Madame Lucile: A Life in Style

by Randy Bryan Bigham

The following is an excerpt from the prologue of Lucile - Her Life by Design, Randy Bigham's pending biography of Lucy, Lady Duff Gordon (1863-1935), the renowned Edwardian couturière and Titanic survivor.

To the notes of soft music, a little red-haired woman in grey velvet, arms



Lady Duff Gordon in 1919
 (Courtesy of The Library of Congress,
 Washington, D.C.)

outstretched, slipped through the delicate veilings and crossed to the front of the stage. Applause tittered and the music stopped. "You think," spoke the tiny figure, "that I am nothing but a rubber stamp. You think I cannot design gowns? Pff! You will see!"

So reported the New York Times in its review of the 1916 benefit style show "Chansons Vivantes," as staged in the Plaza Hotel's Gold Ballroom. The little red head's abilities did not fail her conceit for Lucy, Lady Duff Gordon ("Lucile"), herself considered "the best gowned woman in the world" was, as other press accounts averred, no ordinary

dressmaker but regarded faithfully then as "the greatest living authority on how the fair sex should be robed," "a consummate expert, a phenomenon" in the work of the couture "who has had for years the feminine world of fashion at her feet."

A woman of vision, verve and nerve, she achieved what a titled English belle should not have. Overcoming the disapproval with which she met from some factions of high society for betraying her noble rank for the ranks of trade, and ignoring the fact that her very Britishness threatened to handicap her success in a French-dominated fashion world, Lucy Duff Gordon triumphed as an artist, an innovator, and a bona fide media hit. "The more opposition I met with," she

reflected, "the more I enjoyed it." The circumstances which might have precluded one of lesser gifts instead provided for her a special niche.



A Lucile fashion show in New York, 1916

Yet her popularity owed as much to personality as to talent for, quite apart from the luxurious fashions she created, Lucy Duff Gordon's own flamboyant image ensured public notice. Petite and Titian-haired, her regal beauty was seasoned by a seemingly impenetrable hauteur. From her ropes of pearls and hats with cascading veils to her swashbuckling Russian boots and eighteenth century "shepherdess" walking sticks, Duff Gordon cut a striking figure indeed. Such a commanding figure was seldom seen off the stage. Consequently her personal fame, so suited to the picturesque Edwardian era, was unavoidable. True to plucky form, she was far from modest about her rise to prominence. "My star had risen," she airily mused, "I became the rage."

In a fashion hierarchy centered in Paris and traditionally represented by men, Duff Gordon's leadership as a British couturière during the early 1900s was a refreshingly ironic anomaly. Directing one of the highest-priced international couture houses in the world, with swank branches of the palatial London headquarters of "Lucile, Ltd" in Paris, New York, even Chicago, she staffed some 2,000 employees worldwide, grossing a personal income of nearly \$400,000 a

year by 1912 and over \$2,000,000 by 1918. Rivalled only perhaps by beauty mogul Helena Rubinstein, Lucy Duff Gordon ascended to a position foremost among the world's richest and most accomplished businesswomen - and not merely in the fashion industry but in the general corporate sphere.

Even so, her name rings obscurely in the ears of people today for, as is often the case with so many great talents, she, too, faded swiftly from the spotlight during even her own life, her memory now largely confined to the yellowed pages of forgotten magazines wherein sensational copy and photos attest to the renown of a bygone artist, a remotely enduring relic of the blurred past. Her legacy has proven as fragile as were the little chiffon tea-gowns, dance dresses, and negligees with which she was once so identified. And just as ephemeral, oddly in keeping with one of her signature flowers, the lily-of-the-valley, blossoming only briefly before fading. Yet in her heyday, Duff Gordon - "'Lucile,' to all the world," as Vogue proclaimed - was an icon whose steady brilliance surpassed all others in matters sartorial. Although her tenure as the rather incongruous English grande dame of Parisian glitz has since been too frequently dismissed as a delightful anachronism, the fascinating freak of a tangled style world in transition, the success of "Madame Lucile" was regarded by the press of her day as a genuine coup. In 1908 the New York American prophesied the glory of this forerunner of the fashion tycoons of today:



A Lucile lingerie design, 1915

It is believed in various quarters that Mme. Lucile's inspiration in the realm of fashions is so potent that she will, if she deems to, finally become its leader. At any event, if her precepts are greeted with the same respect as is her example,

she will soon carry all Society with her as she aspires to heights not gingerly attempted by more prosaic, if no less fashionable, dressmakers.

She attained this end well enough, becoming within a decade, as a contemporary profile observed, "more talked about and written about than anyone else in her profession in the world." Among the first titled personages in England to enter business on such a scale, she lost little time installing herself as pre-eminent arbiter of style; Vogue even hailed her as "a high priestess at the shrine of clothes." However that may be, she was certainly the most surprising and original fashion force to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although today Lucile is remembered in costume history less for her romantic dress designs than for her influence on fashion as an industry, especially in helping to establish the mega-star standing of the modern couturier and runway model, she was an acknowledged pioneer in restoring grace and freedom to women's dress after the Victorian era. This was an advancement she realized to great effect by discarding tightly-laced corsets and by introducing provocative, filmy lingerie.

"In those days virtue was too often expressed by dowdiness," Lucile confided to her 1932 memoirs *Discretions and Indiscretions*, "and I had no use for the dull, stiff, bone-bodiced brigade. So I loosed upon a startled London, a London of flannel underclothes, woolen stockings and voluminous petticoats, a cascade of chiffons, of draperies as lovely as those of ancient Greece."

To compliment such lush underlay she instituted delicately fluttering and feminine ingenue-inspired gowns, based on fluffy, rococo lines and conceived in diaphanous, soft materials. Hallmarks of her delicate art included billowy sleeves, scalloped hemlines, obi-like sashes, and garlands of the finest and tiniest silk-ribbon rosettes as trimmings. But the coveted "Lucile" look was most accurately defined in her artful use of subtly blended colors - silvery pink, orchid-peach, turquoise over gold, palest lemon and spring green, faded rose with French blue.

"Color has almost been my religion," Lucile confessed, "for I see all beauty in terms of it."

In fact her approach to her work was always that of an artist rather than a dressmaker:

As the sculptor sees his dreams translated into line, so were mine expressed in the drape of a wisp of chiffon or the fall of a satin fold ... For me there was a positive intoxication in taking yards of shimmering silks, laces airy as gossamer, and lengths of ribbon, delicate and rainbow-colored, and fashioning of them garments so lovely they might have been worn by some princess in a fairy tale.

Lucile highlighted the air of mystery her wistful confections exuded with the romantic names by which she called them. Though somewhat comical now, these were earnestly meant to signify various sentiments, even sensual moods - i.e., "The Sighing Sound of Lips Unsatisfied," "When Passion's Thrall is O'er," "A Frenzied Song of Amorous Things," "Red Mouth of a Venomous Flower," etc. It was the ecstatic reception these so-called "gowns of emotion" won among the royalty, nobility and stage stars who comprised her clientele that established Lucile and her clothes emporium in the firmament of fashion. By 1905 her gimmick of "personality dressing" had become more cult than craze as such increasingly exalted figures as Lillie Langtry, Anna Pavlova, the Countess of Warwick, Lady Randolph Churchill, the Duchess of Marlborough, the Queens of Spain and Romania, even the generally conservative Queen Mary, all clamored for Lucile's individualized frocks with the lovesick names.



1912 afternoon gown designed by Lucile

Apart from her much-prized tea-gowns and lingerie, the designs Lucile favored most in her collections were her frothy tulle or gauze "picture dresses," so named for their popularity with society ladies having their portraits painted, and her organdie and lace "garden frocks," perhaps the daintiest and most ethereal of all her creations.

Among other innovations, Lucile fostered a liberating low neckline for dresses and blouses (1907), sponsored the modern brassiere type (1909), and introduced colour-coordinated accessories (1911). In 1910 she also launched the slit skirt, of which she later declared: "If I never did anything else in my life, I showed that a woman's leg can be a thing of beauty, instead of a 'limb,' spoken of only in the privacy of a fitting room."

The principal couture rival of Paul Poiret, Lucile apprenticed through her Paris, London and American ateliers a team of designers subsequently revered in their own right. The most famous of her proteges numbered Captain Edward Molyneux, Sir Norman Hartnell, Howard Greer and Travis Banton.

Lucile is best known, however, for an outstanding series of landmark contributions to the evolution of the couture itself. Not only did she train and employ the first professional fashion models and stage the first "catwalk" style shows (1897), thus laying the foundation for fashion industry public relations, but she was the first designer to cultivate an aura of glamour in sales by developing a social element to shopping. This she executed by decorating her salons in the charming manner of a private drawing room, by dispatching formal invitations to her collections as well as distributing exhibition programmes, and lastly by entertaining her illustrious customers with an orchestra that played light melodies during showings and afterward, when the anticipated climax to this fanciful setting took place - the serving of afternoon tea, a canny capitalization of her British appeal. This was an assured smash in New York with such society clients as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Rita Lydig, Evalyn Walsh McLean, Anne Morgan and First Lady Edith Wilson.

Lucile's troupe of tall and willowy models, whose languid beauty she emphasized by bestowing upon them suitably poetic names (Dolores, Hebe, Corisande, Sumurun, Arjamand, etc), added greatly to the mystique of her designs. This caravan of lovelies - lionized in the press as "Crusaders of the Gown Divine" - also served as prototype for the fashion model as celebrity in her own right.

It was her "frou-frou" belle epoch fashions that brought Lucile to the fore but her free-flowing late Edwardian and First World War styles interpreted her talent best. Her decorative taste had come into its own - floating tiers of Chantilly lace, brocaded taffeta panniers, swaying tunics of beaded net, flounced chiffon, wide sleeves of tulle cuffed in marabou, clinging charmeuse, fur-edged velvet, undulating crepe de chine. Sadly her creative output was very nearly exhausted by the mid-1920s and her influence in the post-war climate of jazz and cocktails was short-lived. The "flapper" was emerging to succeed le grande coquette as fashion's ideal and Lucile refused to concede to her.

Lucile's much publicized creations for the society and entertainment luminaries who made up her world-wide clientele were naturally the backbone of her immense and thriving business but the high-profile sideline ventures she contracted were as lucrative. Lucile was in fact the first haute couture designer to implement diversification in the field, embracing ready-to-wear retail, wholesale and mail-order markets, the most notable of such enterprises being an extensive deal with Sears, Roebuck and Co (1916-17).

But it was the theatre (and later film) that popularized her fashions internationally. The London premiere of Franz Lehar's legendary operetta *The Merry Widow* (1907) assured immortality for its star Lily Elsie as the epitome of Edwardian allure and decreed as the latest style her "empire" dresses and huge hats designed by Lucile. Gertie Millar and Gabrielle Ray were other Lucile-gowned actresses who set the pace of fashion in England while in France, musical hall divas Gaby Deslys and Monna Delza likewise traipsed to the footlights in Lucile

"robes, manteaux, chapeaux et lingerie." On the New York stage Billie Burke and the Dolly Sisters were the rage in their frocks by Lucile as were the "Ziegfeld Girls" whose special finery imbued fashion with an early, dainty form of sex-appeal.

Many of Lucile's own retinue of gorgeous models, noted for their aloof, unsmiling poise, were soon recruited by Florenz Ziegfeld for his cast of beauties and actually provided the pattern upon which the great producer would mould his vision for the ultimate in showgirl glamour as launched in his annual Follies extravaganzas.

The trendsetter supreme of the First World War was ballroom dancer Irene Castle who was dressed almost exclusively by Lucile. With her debut on Broadway in Irving Berlin's ragtime hit *Watch Your Step* (1914), Irene Castle's bobbed hair, uncorseted torso and the short, swirling Lucile dresses that became her signature, redefined fashion and presaged the boyish look of the jazz age.

The reigning stars of Hollywood's flourishing silent cinema - Mary Pickford, Marion Davies, Norma Talmadge, Clara Kimball Young - were similarly devoted adherents to the mode as prescribed by Lucile, who was also often contracted by competing studios to supply costumes for ensemble casts in a number of noteworthy films, including D.W. Griffith's epic *Way Down East* (1920), starring Lillian Gish.

Lucile's prestige proves well the theory that designers are only as influential as their clientele. The French couturier Paul Poiret's customers were surely famous - Gina Palerme, Forzane, Mata Hari, Mistinguett - but these women, each as bizarre as his avant-garde designs, were never trend-setters, at least not outside of Paris, however admired they might have been for their individual taste. Lucile, on the other hand, dressed the three most beautiful and exciting fashion figures of the day - Lily Elsie, Irene Castle, and Mary Pickford. Quite apart from the clothes themselves, it is in the sociological affect that these women had on their times, that Lucile emerges as all the more relevant to the period.

Although her fashions exerted vast appeal (aided in no small way via the haunting, soft-focus lens of Vogue portraitist Baron de Meyer), Lucile's most lasting contribution to couture was the celebrity panache she brought to the career of dress designer. Indeed no other couturier of the day was as frequently quoted, extensively photographed, widely esteemed, or as heartily criticized; not even her arch-foe Poiret exercised more publicity power than Lucile - or "Lady Duff," the pet name ascribed her in the American press.

Fame for her was a natural development. Few other designers permeated their output with characters tangible - and hyperbolic - enough to be touted in such purple prose as "Fashion's Most Famous Disciple" or even as "Queen of Fashion." Thus "Lady Duff and her stuff," as Variety labeled the furor for all things Lucile, impacted culturally on her era as no designer, other than Rose Bertin and Charles Frederick Worth, previously had and as few, apart from Coco Chanel and Christian Dior, have since.



Original Lucile watercolor sketch, Spring 1917.

For all the overtones of British decorum, allied to French polish, suggested by her distinguished title and modish image, Lucile could not escape the crassness of the encroaching media hoopla of America in the twentieth century. Consequently, the formidable symbol of status and style she represented to the public inevitably spawned that surest and most dubious proof of success - the commercial endorsement.

Her imprimatur was sought by manufacturers of every conceivable product from brassieres to automobiles, transforming Lucile into a household name to millions, particularly in the US where her impetus to fashion was greatest. It was there that she promoted herself by penning full-page, illustrated weekly newspaper discourses on dress for the Hearst Syndicate (1910-21), in columns she wrote for Good Housekeeping (1912-13) and Harper's Bazaar (1913-

22), in her own segment of the newsreel *Around the Town* (1919-21), and on a national tour of the vaudeville costume pageant she produced, called *Fleurette's Dream at Peronne* (1917-18), benefiting refugees of German-invaded France.

Such feats of self-publicity propelled the red-headed doyen of "chic" (she reputedly coined the term) and her veritable citadel of style into the social mainstream. In this way (as she also demonstrated by her excursions into ready-to-wear), Lucile stepped farther than ever beyond the customary confines of high fashion, thereby challenging the elitist pedigree of the couturier, inventing as it were, the phenomenon of "pop designer."



Styles from Lucile's Sears Roebuck collection, 1917

But it was not only as a designer that she held forth. As a personality Lucile's impression was felt, too. Surrounded by a bevy of Pekinese and chows as well as a flurry of doting, foppish young men who addressed her reverently as "Madame," Lucile became a vivid and frequently daring figure in the artistic world of her day. Despite her second marriage in 1900 to respectable Scottish landowner and sportsman Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon, she moved solely in bohemian rather than aristocratic circles, counting among her friends such fascinating men and women as Ballets Russe costumer Leon Bakst, decorator and hostess Elsie de Wolfe, illustrator Etienne Drian, dancer Isadora Duncan, Comedie Francaise star Cecile Sorel, and feminist Christabel Pankhurst.

Elder sister to the equally risqué novelist-turned-film producer Elinor Glyn, Lucile's private life was as eventful as her fashion career. The successive mistress of naval hero Admiral Lord de la Warr and painter Sir Philip Burne-Jones, she escaped notoriously from the Titanic in a lifeboat she allegedly commandeered for herself, her husband and her secretary when the great ship struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage in 1912. While the onset of World War I found her the target of a failed espionage attempt by German propagandist Herr Dernburg during a series of campaigns commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm, its end witnessed her as one of only a few women, among more than a thousand dignitaries, invited to attend the June 1919 Signing of the Peace Treaty at the Palace of Versailles, a privilege granted her by the American Embassy in Paris in honor of her charity work during the war.



Lady Duff Gordon with one of her models in her New York design studio, 1916

Lucile's colorful compendium of personal woes, excesses and eccentricities made headlines almost as much as her clothes designs. Estranged from Sir Cosmo after 1915, when he discovered her affair with a dapper young Russian émigré, ostensibly a musician but more adept as a gigolo, Lucile was in the news most regularly as a staunch advocate of the metaphysical 'New Thought' movement and for her seemingly endless legal entanglements, including a precedent-setting US Supreme Court row with her advertising agent who sued her for breach of contract and won. Her fame shortly amounted to a near liability in America where, as a balance to the praise normally accorded her, Lucile had to accustom herself to being mercilessly parodied and cartooned in the press and even burlesqued on stage.

Sharp and dynamic, fiery and determined, quirky and controversial, Lucile evolved into an awesome social force - the ultimate generalissima of style. Her public persona of "brilliant and haughty power" (another Vogue rave), bespoke nothing less.

Reclining in a flowing tea-gown upon a chaise longue in the showroom of her Swiss-gray salons, her trademark bandeau encircling a mass of copper locks and rows of pearls sweeping past her knees, Lucile held court for her flutter of worshipful minions, directed her legion of assistants and received her august patrons. Here, chattering and animated, she smoked monogrammed, scented cigarettes perched in a long, straw-tipped holder, wielded a diamond-studded lorgnette and intermittently lavished silken-gloved caresses upon the ubiquitous swarm of pets which lay contented across her lap or sat protectively at her feet.

As much as her fashions embodied the Edwardian epoch, that rollicking interlude of opulence, ardor and intrigue, so her own carefully contrived image of dash and brains represented the emergent "New Woman" aesthetic in popular culture; though dated now, the example of comparative liberation Lucile became proved a key transitional figure.

Lucile's life and career compose an exquisite study of the indulgent tastes and jaded morals of that vanished, idle world to which she catered. Yet a larger view of this woman of dazzling defiance and genius reveals her as not only a major presence in a number of significant fields beyond her chosen metier, but as a prime player in (or at least a privileged observer of) some of the most important historical events of her time.

Lucile's creativity helped to frame an era. Her personality gilded it. This is the story of the woman and her world.