

Style through Silk and the Silent Silver Screen: “Irene Castle Corticelli Fashions”

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“If there is a person in America who hasn’t heard of Irene Castle, he is a recluse living on some mountain top or in the back-waters of the Florida Cyprus swamps. And even then it seems as though some word must have reached him of this famous sprite whose name has been carried to every corner of the civilized world,” reads text on a production still from the 1922 silent film, *French Heels* (RMC #2277). By the early 1920s, Irene Castle had long been a household name. She gained popularity in the early 1910s with her first husband, Vernon Castle, through “modern dancing,” Broadway productions and their signature “Castle Walk.” They co-authored the book, *Modern Dancing*, and Mrs. Castle soon after became a leading lady in silent films. She promoted new aesthetics: flowing frocks, Dutch bonnets, bobbed hair and a healthful, strong body. Newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals followed her every fashion move and often referred to her as “America’s Best Dressed Woman” (Figure 1). “She is regarded by members of her own sex as the ‘glass of fashion,’” claimed one journalist, “her dresses always being the last word in taste and modernity” (*The Sketch*, November 20, 1918, RMC #2277). This paper explores Irene Castle’s influence on dress reform and ready-to-wear design of the 19teens and early 1920s. We contend that Irene Castle shaped popular ideas about beauty and style, which contributed to dramatic change in women’s appearance in the 1920s. She was also the first film actress to design and promote a self-named fashion line, Irene Castle Corticelli Fashions, a practice that has become commonplace among today’s film celebrities.

Research was primarily archival-based and we examined materials from the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection (CCTC) and the Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collection at Cornell University, including the Irene Castle papers 1916 -1946 #2277, Ithaca movie industry photograph collection 1915 – 1965 #2959, and the Robert E Treman papers (Castle’s second husband) #945. Content analysis of popular women’s periodicals from the time period,



Figure 1. "Best Dressed Woman in America." Photo by Ira Hill. Courtesy of RMC, #2207



Figure 2. Irene Castle Corticelli Fashions, dress and jacket, ca 1923. CCTC.

including *The Delineator*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Vogue*, were searched for any feature of Castle or advertisement of her self-named fashion line. Object analysis was conducted of one Irene Castle Corticelli Fashions dress (Figure 2).

Castle's interest in design and fashion emerged from the physical and aesthetic requirements of modern dancing. "Modern dances are reformers of fashion," she claimed, arguing that both trains and long, boned corsets must be abandoned in order to facilitate dancing (Castle & Castle 1914: 148). However, Castle did not entirely renounce the corset, she simply reinvented it using new materials. "It is known as the Castle Corset," she explained, "made almost entirely of elastic, very flexible," intended to support the dancer and her figure (142). Castle also shifted ideas about the relationship between beauty and the female body: "health is the only real beauty," Castle believed, "and it is health that dancing gives to us" (153). In addition to stage performances and the publication of their book, the Castle's and their dancing gained widespread visibility through newsreels and silent films. As the public began to adopt the Castle's ideas and dance, they needed fashionable clothing to accommodate vigorous movement.

Fashion companies capitalized on Castle's stardom and fashion-forward thinking. As early as 1914, Castle modeled for Mallison Silk's 1914 *Mexixe* line, which also featured other American starlet personalities (Shaw 2003). Castle appeared frequently in styles by Lucile (some of which, they claimed, she designed) and Premet. Around the time she starred in the serial, *Patria* (1917), she began a ready-to-wear clothing line with Corticelli Silks, a brand of silk thread and fabric produced by the Nonotuck Silk Company of Massachusetts. "Mrs. Vernon Castle takes a keen interest in the designing of every one of her gowns," reads a 1917 advertisement. When Nonotuck and Brainard, Armstrong Company merged in 1922, they adopted the name Corticelli for the entire company and emphasized their women's fashion lines, including Irene Castle's. Her gowns were promoted as limited edition "duplicates" of garments Castle wore publicly. In 1924, "Irene Castle Frocks: High Class, Stylish, Well Made" sold for as much as \$62.97 (\$864.35 in 2015 USD), and as little as \$21.97 for "the matron" (\$301.57 in 2015 USD). By the end of the 1920s, Castle's star had faded and Corticelli was out of business by 1930. Castle's avant-garde appearance, film notoriety, health advocacy and the success of her RTW line in the early 1920s all paved the way for tremendous change in beauty ideals and women's dress in the 1920s.

References

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