

Behind the Seams: Frances S. Spingold of Madame Frances

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In conducting research for the forthcoming exhibition *Roaring Twenties: The Life and Style of Marjorie Merriweather Post*, I was propelled into the dazzling environment of New York City during the 1920s. I discovered that Hillwood had five dresses and gowns from Madame Frances of 10 West 56th Street. Many of these smaller outlets had loyal followers, sterling reputations, and received lavish coverage from fashion and society papers of the age. Unfortunately, they have been lost to the annals of early twentieth century American costume history. This article introduces the mystery of Madame Frances to reveal a perceptive and stylish businessperson, collector and philanthropist not unlike Post herself.

During the early twentieth century, the transition from working with custom tailors and dressmakers to embracing the still-evolving “ready-to-wear” retail market resulted in an interesting, often confusing style of shopping. Americans were still looking to Paris and its new wave of celebrity couturiers for their high fashion. In major cities, especially New York, hybrid shops like Madame Frances emerged. Here, clients had the option of purchasing imported French couture models, copies of these models created by in-house dressmakers, or completely new designs originating from the salon’s team. All of these were customizable in house, and the challenge of successfully locating the French couture “inspiration” remains a favorite parlor game of fashion historians everywhere. One visionary woman with impeccable taste and business acumen capable of recruiting talented workers often headed these small ateliers.



The Madame Frances label seen in a green silk cape (48.50.1-3) worn by Post in 1927.
Photograph courtesy of Melanie D Sanford,
Conserving Threads.

For dress historians, a label is always an initial clue into uncovering more about a garment’s story. In this instance, all but one of the gowns in Hillwood’s collection feature a label contained in the side seams of the skirt. In an attempt to learn more about the company, I began with the address. The shop was located between Fifth and Sixth Avenues which would have been just around the corner from the Duveen Brother’s gallery, where Post acquired many of her furnishings, choosing fine European antiques for her New York residence. I found several articles and historical sources revealing that Madame Frances’ atelier was located in the former private home of Frederick Edey (1865-1926), a prominent banker, and Sarah Birdsall Otis Edey



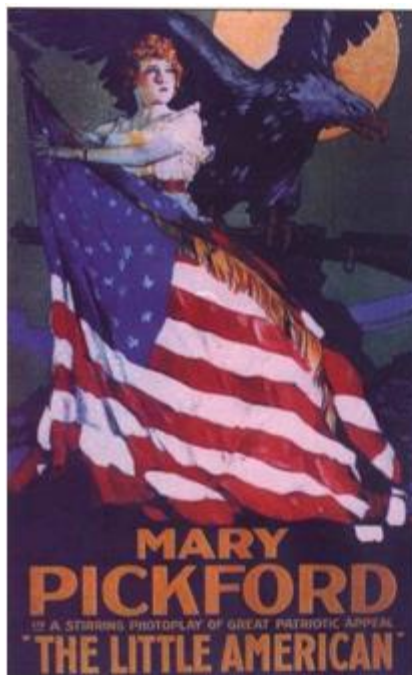
RESIDENCE, MRS. FRED'K EDEY, 44 WEST 54th ST. Warren & Whitmore, Architects. Wurtz Bros., Photo.

View of The Edey Residence by the Wurtz Brothers, ca. 1903. Public Domain.

(1872-1940), a leading Suffragist and Girl Scouts of America President, who commissioned the French Revival limestone townhouse from the illustrious architectural firm, Warren & Whitmore. By 1917, the Edeys sold their home to a Frances Schwartzburg Spingold (1881-1976) who had established a specialty dress shop, Madame Frances, seven years earlier elsewhere in the city. The Spingolds also owned a home in fashionable Palm Beach. Their estate, Las Puertas, designed by Addison Mizner, featured a saltwater swimming pool and a marble master suite. The trend of acquiring grand private homes for luxury retail spaces and galleries in New York was just emerging with the changing social and economic structures of the city during the early twentieth century. The midtown locale of these establishments was transitioning from residential to commercial as wealthier New Yorkers moved to the quieter Upper East Side. The advantage of setting up shop in a former grand home with splendid architectural details was to create a couture-like, personalized and exclusive environment for clientele. An article in an October 1920 edition of *Vogue* titled "Salons of the French Mode" describes Spingold's "Renaissance House" as having a "light and gracious touch" with "a fine curving marble staircase...[as a] delightful introduction to the French Salon above."

Details about Frances Spingold's origins are murky. She immigrated to the United States from Russia some time prior to 1910 and married Nathan B. Spingold of Chicago, then involved with media and newspapers. Bridge aficionados might recognize "Spingold" from the eponymous trophy for the World Championship Masters Team-of-Four. He was the eventual Vice President and Board Member of Columbia Pictures, which aligns well with his wife's early career working with the burgeoning film industry in New York.

Many specialty dress shops in the city provided costumes for stage and early films during the 1910s and 1920s, including Lucile, another favorite source of fashion from Post during the period. Spingold's salon supplied dresses for the 1917 post-war drama *The Little American* starring actor Mary Pickford (1892-1976). During the



Poster for the 1917 feature film, *The Little American*. Actor Mary Pickford's costumes were created at Madame Frances. Public Domain.

collaboration, Spingold's design assistant, Travis Banton (1894-1958) struck up a friendship with the star that led to Banton creating Pickford's wedding gown under the Madame Frances label for her 1919 marriage. Banton would soon transition exclusively to the film industry and even designed Marlene Dietrich's famous tuxedo of the later '20s, photographed by Alfred Eisenstaedt! Madame Frances also supplied ensembles for the 1923 film, *Potash and Perlmutter*, all examples of early product placement.

Media coverage of the Madame Frances atelier in publications like *Vogue* and *Women's Wear Daily* describe the outlet as popular with brides and their parties, debutants, and for other formal occasions. One 1929 *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" feature declared jokingly that none of the salon's bridal clients were ever divorced! Stylistically, Madame Frances pieces rejected the modern, linear silhouette, "La Garçonne" in favor of more romantic fashions, especially the "robe de style," popularized by French couturier Jeanne Lanvin. This style often featured a lowered waistline, but combined nostalgic details like fullness achieved by layers of tulle or lace at each hip evocative of eighteenth century panniers worn at French court. Details and trim were similarly feminine—florals, silk ribbons, and fine lace and embroidery adorned the pieces.

All but one of Hillwood's Madame Frances pieces are traceable to important events for Post and her daughters during the 1920s. For middle daughter Eleanor's December 1927 debutant ball, Post wore a fluttering green silk gown beaded with pearls, crystals, and rhinestones in delicate vegetal and floral motifs. The gown was finished with an accompanying cape of the same soft green silk and a sumptuous rabbit fur collar. The following year, Eleanor herself wore a Madame Frances confection for her presentation at England's Court of St. James to King George V and Queen Mary of Teck in 1928. This gown is of silk satin teal blue, trimmed with complementing silk tulle forming the straps and a soft overlay of the skirt, extending to a full train as required by the Lord Chamberlain. Eleanor's gown also features crystal and rhinestone beading at the waist, and scattered across the skirt and train. Finally, a soft silk velvet cape with a scallop-cut hem finishes the look. The third gown was worn by Post herself in 1929 for her own Court of St. James presentation. This gown is also of a similar soft green silk and was recently reattributed to Madame Frances. Like her daughter's, this ensemble includes a full train, extensive beadwork, and similar fine silk tulle overlays. All three were worn with complimentary headpieces, bandeaus, fans, and other accessories.



Evening dress and cape worn by Marjorie Post to Eleanor's debut, December 1927. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 48.50.1-3. Photographs courtesy of Melanie D Sanford, *Conserving Threads*.



Left image: Evening dress of silk velvet, about 1925. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 48.44.1-2.



Right image: Evening dress of silk tulle, 1929. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 48.66. Photograph courtesy of Melanie D Sanford, *Conserving Threads*.

Another Madame Frances gown is more suited to a winter night at the Opera and features more rhinestone floral designs—here combining cream and sapphire blue silk velvet for a shorter evening dress complete with a matching wrap and handbag. Finally, Post wore a blue silk tulle tiered gown of gradating colors to a family friend's debutant ball in 1929. Many of these occasions were memorialized by Post through portraits (images on following page) and reported on extensively by the contemporary fashion press who often accompanied its descriptions of the Post women with sketches illustrating these looks.

It is unsurprising that Post should seek out a fellow Palm-Beacher to outfit herself and her daughters for these occasions. Additionally, the Spingolds were also serious art collectors—focusing particularly on French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Today, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art both hold Picassos, Manets, and Modiglianis from their collection. The couple's dedication to the performing arts, first evident in Frances' atelier outfitting early actresses and ending with Nathan's Hollywood career is memorialized at Brandeis University, with the Nate B. and Frances Spingold Theater Center.

Look forward to learning more about these pieces in the upcoming exhibition, *Roaring Twenties!*



Left image: Portrait of Eleanor in her Court Presentation gown, painted by Giulio de Blaas, 1929. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 51.147. The ensemble is in Hillwood's collection (48.63.1-4) and is slated for future conservation.

Right image: Portrait of Marjorie Post in her Court Presentation gown, painted by Giulio de Blaas, 1931. Bequest of Marjorie Merriweather Post, 51.149. The ensemble is also in Hillwood's collection (48.64.1-2) and is slated for future conservation.

Recommended further reading:

[Gray, Christopher. "One Dances the Cancan, the other the Minuet" in the *New York Times*, April 8, 2007.](#)

Rennolds Millbank, Caroline. New York Fashion: The Evolution of Style. New York: Abrams, 2006.

Tolini Finamore, Michelle. Hollywood Before Glamour: Fashion in American Silent Film. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.