

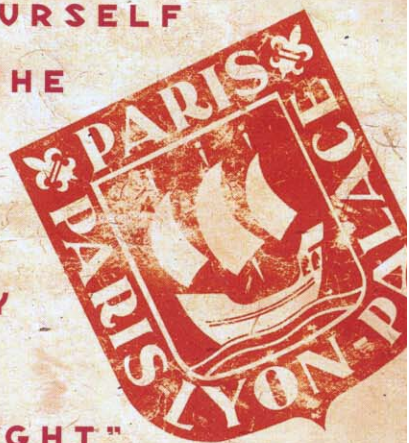
THE COLLECTED TRAVELER

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COLLECTED BY BARRIE KERPER

French Twist

BY LAUREL DELP



editor's note

LAUREL DELP is a features writer whose work has appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines. She is also a contributing editor for *Travel Holiday*, where this piece originally appeared. Additionally, Laurel has just completed a novel, which is set in Laos at the end of the 1950s. I neglected to ask her if she's still tying scarves like a pro, but my own skills improved dramatically with a little book small enough to fit in your purse called *Sensational Scarfs: 44 Ways to Turn a Scarf into a Fabulous Fashion Look* (Carol Straley, Three Rivers Press, 1995).

Early dusk and chill winds off the Seine had driven me into the deco bar at the Hôtel Lutétia in St.-Germain-des-Prés, which was jam-packed with people lounging in overstuffed, jewel-hued chairs, talking and laughing in the amber lamplight that glinted off glasses and teacups and warmed the patina of polished wood. Suddenly an elegant woman with regal cheekbones dropped her shopping bags and sank into one of the seats opposite mine, absent-mindedly shrugging off her coat. She was dressed very plainly in an olive sweater and skirt, but somehow the black, red and gold scarf twisted around her neck transformed the outfit into something inefably chic. It might have been the artful slash of color against the dull background, but more, it was the way she had tied the scarf, so that it had become a twisted rope of silk sculpture.

I couldn't help leaning over to ask her how she'd done it. She laughed, loosened the scarf, held it out like a magician, then without looking looped it back around her neck and retied it with a few deft flicks.

So many Parisian women have style that it's tempting to think they're born with it. The rest of the world has always been a bit intimidated by their chic. But what is the secret? It's certainly not money, nor is it age or conventional beauty. When pressed, most Parisiennes say it's nothing more than a gift for accessories, an ability to put on just the right thing to finish a look. And if accessories are the key to chic, then the scarf is the linchpin of the look.

In fact, walking the streets of Paris is like having a scarf epiphany. Parisiennes collect scarves the way Imelda collected shoes. The big three department stores, Galeries Lafayette, Au Printemps and Au Bon Marché, have scarf sections that rival entire accessory departments in their American counterparts. At the Kenzo counter at Galeries Lafayette, bold flowers are printed on chiffon. Down the the way at Idea Plus, rust-colored Indian silks are folded neatly beside metallic kerchiefs. When the store is busy, counters are buried in brilliant mounds of silk, and women line up at mirrors, scarves held to their cheeks as salesgirls squint in appraisal and pull out more samples. The scarf section is a tumble of colors, a mad garden of clashing blooms, the occasional square fluttering off the counter like a butterfly descending for a drink.

Of course, the great virtue of the scarf is its democracy—unlike the rest of high fashion, the scarf exists outside the exclusive realm of the wealthy. Men and women have been wearing scarves since the dawn of weaving; from the Assyrians to Mme. de Pompadour to Isadora Duncan. They've come in and out of style, grown into shawls and shrunk into kerchiefs. They've warmed necks, softened décolletages and distinguished military rank. The scarf's contemporary history dates from the late twenties into the thirties, when French couturiers began producing signature scarves to go with their collections. Suddenly, even if you could not afford a Schiaparelli gown, you could at least wear one of her scarves.

During World War II, women working in factories in Europe

and America tied their hair into scarves for protection against the heavy machinery. Then in the postwar years, as fashion grew progressively more informal, the scarf came to replace the hat. The fifties and sixties were a golden age for the scarf. Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret wore them. So did Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, and Elizabeth Taylor. Diana Vreeland was a fervent believer. In the seventies they had a brief resurgence as part of Saint Laurent's luxe peasant look. Now, in the nineties, they're once again an essential part of any stylish woman's wardrobe.

"Scarves are having a revival," concurs Corinne Delattre, a marketing director at Kenzo, sitting in one of the fashion house's warren of offices on the place des Victoires. "We sell a lot, both with the collection and on their own. People buy more accessories now because you can change them more easily to adapt to the latest trend. For me, to use a scarf to create your look is the difference between following fashion and having style."

"Accessories make the difference," said Chantal Jacob firmly, dismissing the idea there's any mystery to French chic. "You don't have to spend a lot of money, just a good scarf, a good belt, and good jewelry with a simple dress." Jacob, one of only five female hotel managers in France, is a woman with great personal style. During one of Paris's coldest winters in memory, she went out and bought scarves to protect her female desk clerks from the arctic blasts that swept in from the streets with the guests.

Scarves are also the universal gift in France. During the Christmas season the Hermès flagship store on the rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré sells a scarf every fifty seconds. Customers line up three deep at the counter, and a bank of salesclerks unfurl scarf after scarf in swirling flashes of color.

Hermès scarves, like all designer scarves, are made in Lyons, France's silk capital, and the elaborate color schemes can take up to forty-eight separate silk screens to achieve. They are then hand-

rolled and stitched. In 1995 the company sold 950,000 of them. And twice a year, in the third weeks of January and June, Parisiennes totting folding chairs and picnic breakfasts start gathering on the sidewalk at 4 A.M., waiting for the doors of Hermès to open for the sales.

I love scarves, but I can't bring myself to spend \$260 on an Hermès *carré* (as they call their scarves) even though the words *Hermès* and *scarf* have long been synonymous. In Paris, designer scarves can run anywhere from \$80 to \$300. But if you have doubts about making this kind of investment, you can visit one of a dozen stores on the rue de Rivoli opposite the Louvre, or one of the couple of souvenir shops on the place de la Madeleine, where you'll find knockoffs of designer scarves priced anywhere from \$10 to \$30. These scarves won't be silk, and their edges won't be hand-rolled and stitched, but they're a good way to start practicing your tying techniques before you take the big plunge.

There's no better place for learning how to tie a scarf than the imposing Hermès headquarters on rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. Stephanie Peigne, who travels Europe demonstrating the proper technique for tying Hermès scarves, gave me a few quick pointers. She draped one of the oversized square *carrés* over the counter, then folded two diagonally opposite corners in so that they formed triangles that met at the center. She continued folding each of the sides to the center until the scarf had become a neat four-inch-wide oblong. Then she carefully tied a loose flat knot in the center, placed the knot at her throat, and wound the ends around her neck, tucking each end through the knot. Voilà! The scarf looked at once flowing, shapely and devil-may-care. Why hadn't I thought of that? Next she folded the scarf in half and seized diagonally opposite corners in her fingers. She held the scarf behind her neck, then tied the ends together. At once the scarf formed a neat square across her chest, the ends of the knot at her collar.

I ran back down the rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré to my room at the Hôtel Bristol, where I lined up my own scarf collection and began practicing. Already some of my notes were incomprehensible (do what?), but I mastered enough so that for the first time my scarves, rather than hanging limply from my throat, had become a statement. As I wore them in the days that followed, French people began coming up to me in the street to ask for directions.

Inside the temples of couture on the Right Bank—Dior, Lacroix, Saint Laurent, Ungaro, Chanel—colorful squares of silk hold pride of place, and outside the passing parade of women is a demonstration in imaginative ways of wearing them. On the more relaxed Left Bank and in the yuppified Marais, young women wrap themselves in ethnic silk, chiffon, velvet, or flea-market finds.

“Commercially speaking, accessories are a really good item,” said Philippe Bonan, co-owner of Idea Plus, a fast-growing scarf and accessory design firm with counters in all of the big French department stores. “People keep their clothes and change accessories—change the scarf and you change the whole look.”

We wandered through Bonan’s warehouse in the Bastille area. Scarves drooped off shelves and fell in heaps on the floor, a mix of colors and styles from the most elegant to the wildest and most playful. Deep wholesale bins were filled with the previous year’s designs. Bonan held up a scarf from the spring line dotted with big artificial flowers. “We have no limit,” he laughed. He and his partner began their business importing ethnic scarves from India, then started designing. Now their line is a favorite of European fashion magazines.

Like so many of the Parisiennes I met, Claire Hubert, a manager and part-owner in designer Marcel Marongiu’s atelier on the rue Scribe by the Paris Opera, has a monumental scarf collection. Her partner, on the other hand, is a minimalist.

“For me the garment is much more important,” he said, as

Claire stood in the doorway, arms crossed, one eyebrow raised indulgently. "Accessories make boring items look better," he added. "That's a bit like cheating, isn't it?"

I watched as Claire prepared to go out to lunch by wrapping an exquisite Indian scarf around her neck. "This way of tying came from polo players," she explained. The silk fabric now framed her face, the fine gold threads in the deep maroon shimmering like a necklace.

Suddenly it all started to make sense. Tied properly, a scarf can transform any outfit into a statement of personal style. Now I understood why the souvenir shops on the rue de Rivoli were packed with imitation designer scarves. In addition to the mini Eiffel Towers and the Mona Lisa T-shirts, that thirty-five-inch-square of silk is part of the national psyche.

People go to Paris for many reasons. They go because they love architecture, because they love food. They go for the fashion collections, or for business. They go for the museums. You may go for all those reasons, or for none, but whatever you do, don't forget your scarf.

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