



Catherine Deneuve, 1963.



Jane Birkin, 1978.



Françoise Hardy, circa 1965.



Street style in Paris.



# French revolution

A new wave of writers are exploring what it means – and looks like – to be a Parisian woman in 2020, calling out an outdated myth about femininity in the process. By Alice Cavanagh.

**THE ROMANCE OF** Paris has captured our collective imagination for centuries – as artists, writers, inventors and style-makers have been seduced by the French capital's elegant architecture, captivating light and, of course, the Parisian woman. The siren who is always so flawlessly stylish, never puts on weight, ages so gracefully, and seems unperturbed by the dangers of lung cancer. She looks like Françoise Hardy, has the sex appeal of Brigitte Bardot, and the intellect of Simone de Beauvoir. There's no other female figure that has become so synonymous with national identity. The bust of *La Marianne*, the figure that resembles France's goddess of liberty and the personification of the French Republic, has even been cast (and this is not a coincidence) from the face of such iconic Parisians as Catherine Deneuve and Inès de la Fressange.

But now that it's 2020, well past #MeToo and an era during which racial and sexual diversity is finally happening, it's time to set the record straight. *La Parisienne*, as you might know her, does not exist. What has been drip-fed into the canons of popular culture – be it via film (Bardot), music (Vanessa Paradis), Instagram (Jeanne Damas) and fashion, is an ideal, an anomaly. Her image, a product of both the male gaze and marketing that marginalises so many, is as staged, airbrushed and as dated as a Victoria's Secret shoot (albeit a little classier).

"Society has reached an impasse in the way women are portrayed universally," writes *New York Times* journalist Lindsey Tramuta in her latest book, *The New Parisienne: the Women and Ideas Shaping Paris*. Tramuta, who hails from Philadelphia but arrived in Paris 14 years ago as a student, found great success with her first book, *The New Paris*, published in 2017, which challenged the notion of the city as a postcard-perfect living museum, and looked at all the young changemakers shaking it up. She hopes this second release will do the same for the city's female inhabitants via the heartfelt stories she tells about 40 diverse women shaping the capital, among them including the celebrated Franco-Moroccan author Leïla Slimani, the visionary young Franco-Vietnamese chef Céline Pham, and the lawyer and disability rights activist Elisa Rojas, none of whom fit the same mould.

I moved to Paris in my late 20s, exactly nine years ago. Like so many young women, especially those who work in fashion, I was drawn to the elegance of the city and by default, its female style icon. For me,

Paris was the 1960s and Yves Saint Laurent; the May 1968 protests – largely thanks to Bernardo Bertolucci's 2003 film *The Dreamers*; Helmut Newton's provocative night-time imagery; and champagne (happily, still my drink of choice). I embraced the city's mood, painted my lips red and, to my shame, even donned a beret on occasion. It was romantic, but not real: I was certainly taken with an image of Parisian femininity that was about as legitimate as a Venetian gondolier.

It might not be apparent at first, but there is a sinister aspect to this charade: "There's a serious problem in the direct misrepresentation of women that defaces what they are actually doing in real life to shape the city and beyond," Tramuta points out when we meet up.

In her 2019 book, *Je ne suis Pas Parisienne*, journalist Alice Pfeiffer takes a more direct swipe at the stereotype by examining the very real threat that it poses to intersectional feminism. "I wanted to try to understand who this woman is that the whole world talks about, but residents have never met," she says, explaining that the issue centres around class, race, sexuality and body size. "The Parisian woman is always white and always thin (because she looks good in skinny jeans); we know she has money because she wears high heels, so that means she can take cabs; she is heterosexual because she wears a 'boyfriend shirt', and she has straight hair because she can leave it 'undone'," she says, shaking her head with frustration.

Pfeiffer, who has a master's degree in gender studies from the London School of Economics, sees this as a reflection of a wider systemic problem in France. "I think France hasn't gone through political correctness, we haven't done that work yet and accepted the fact that this is a multicultural country," she says.

"This population is actually extremely diverse and if you take the Métro you see that," agrees Tramuta. "So what percentage of the population does that uniformity represent? The Parisian woman is a sample, but the message is universal: let's not do this to women."

Of course, this is not just a national problem. The international media have gobbled up *La Parisienne*'s image and turned it into click bait for insecure women the world over. In a recent story for *The New Yorker*, Paris-based writer Lauren Collins called this 'French-girl capitalism', a reference to the countless articles and tomes that have been written, and the campaigns that have been shot, around





the prowess of this woman – who is, by the way, so much better than you at everything.

Author and former luxury executive Mireille Guiliano capitalised on the phenomenon for her book *French Women Don't Get Fat*, which she serialised further to include *French Women Don't Get Facelifts: the Secret of Aging with Style and Attitude*.

Inès de la Fressange wrote *Parisian Chic: a Style Guide*, and fashion muse Caroline de Maigret, along with Sophie Mas, Anne Berest and Audrey Diwan, produced a witty, tongue-in-cheek self-help book, called *How to be Parisian Wherever You Are* (along with the just-released follow-up *Older, but Better, but Older*). Even the US-expat and *New York Times* journalist Pamela Druckerman got in on the game with her bestseller *French Children Don't Throw Food*. (As if mothers the world over needed another reason to feel bad about themselves.)

I also, come to think of it, have banged out my fair share of articles on French-girl secrets. Journalism is anthropologic, and working in women's media attuned my focus accordingly. What I soon realised, of course, is that so many of these stories are anecdotal. There is no magic formula for anything. What I gleaned from interacting with the likes of de la Fressange, de Maigret and Damas – all of whom I have interviewed – is that keeping up this mirage is far from effortless. In reality, French women dress down (wearing heels is truly fallacy), and while they favour discreet fashion and embrace a more natural look, there are complex cultural reasons behind this – they don't necessarily want to draw attention to themselves. French culture has strong Latin roots and Catholic ties, which means that if you are not covered up on the Métro, you will be ogled at. It's such an issue that in 2018, the government made any kind of sexual harassment in public places – including wolf-whistling – a crime.

Of course, there is money to be made here: think about all the countless influencers who appear to be so effortlessly turned out in that 'French way', and have cashed in with their sepia-filtered, baguette-toting, vintage-bike-riding personal brands. "Social media has turned those Parisiennes who were just muses into real businesswomen," agrees Pfeiffer.

"By the hundredth article I read about why the French do everything better – which, by the way, is conflating French women

"The Parisian woman is always white and always thin ... she has money because she wears high heels so that means she can take cabs ... she has straight hair because she can leave it 'undone'"

with Parisian women as though they're all the same, which they're not – I was like: 'You've got to be kidding me,'" Tramuta said on what fuelled her to write the book. "When they call it 'French-girl chic', they don't mean Toulouse," retorts Pfeiffer.

"I don't even know what they are talking about; I don't know this woman. It's not my life, it's not my friends' life," agrees Christelle Kocher, whose Paris-based label Koché rose up with a troupe of new generation designers, like Marine Serre and the team at Vetements, who have embraced a more diverse image in fashion, be it via casting or a gender-neutral style. Kocher and her contemporaries have established a fan base by challenging the status quo and projecting an image that is much more modern and true to life. "Most of my team comes from all over the world: Paris is cosmopolitan with such a mix of cultures." (Thankfully, the fashion industry has woken up and the spring/summer '20 season of women's shows was the industry's most racially diverse to date.)

All this is not to say that women living in Paris, as with anywhere around the world, should not be celebrated and that they don't have something that unifies them. For her 2017 book *A Paris*, French journalist and podcaster Lauren Bastide wrote with model and influencer Jeanne Damas and spoke with countless women from all backgrounds. "It would be a shame to say it's not there, because we found these people do have something in common – a certain vision of life, and a hope, there is something special," she says. "I think it's also okay to say the Parisian is awesome, as long as you remind us that she is not necessarily born in Paris, she's not French, she's not just white, she can be handicapped, she can be poor." Tramuta agrees: "It's more like, enough with the stereotypes, enough with this myth. Here are the women who are doing things: let's celebrate them for what they're doing and not what they look like." ■