Nothing more befuddled first-time tourists and travel writers than the countenance and attitude of ordinary Parisiennes. The unescorted ladies that they saw in the railroad stations and hotel lobbies, in the shops and cafés, on the boulevards and side streets, all seemed hyper-eroticized. These feisty maidens radiated a peculiar savoir faire-like confidence and a smirking tolerance of lecherous male gaze. Even the youngest and the most matronly knew how to captivate with their upturned lips, provocative smiles, rouged faces, insolent postures, and conspicuous fashion sense. To outsiders, the entire female species in this urban paradise looked and acted like they were eminently fuckable.

— Pierre La Mazière, *Paris — City of Glory*, 1931

In Paris strange womankind invites your smile and pouts when you do not yield.


The Parisienne is an exceptional creature. She would be utterly inconceivable in a different atmosphere, outside the air of the capital. She is the most perfect creation produced in Paris.

— Pierre La Mazière, *Paris — City of Glory*, 1931

"Cocottes, Garçonnnes, and Poules"

Paris is a Woman
Consider the plight of the wide-eyed newcomers: only the most experienced or informed could readily ferret out the bourgeois teases from their more commercially available sisters. It was a source of constant embarrassment and local amusement.

The British journalist — and later Vichy collaborationist — Sisley Huddleston blamed the city’s males for this confusion of roles: “Husbands expect their wives to possess the sophisticated charm, in toilette, appearance, speech, gestures, of — the French word must be used here — poules. Modesty has disappeared.” (Paris Salons, Cafés, Studios, 1928)

**FRENCH FLIRT**

Long before the emancipation of middle-class women and the flapper revolution in postwar Anglo-Saxon society, Parisian femmes had established a novel archetype, the stylish and capricious French Flirt. Her characteristics were unmistakable: she was feckless and seductive in her everyday relationships; her revealing attire demanded attention; when not nightclubbing, she spent much of her time ensconced in her perfumed boudoir, primping and beauty-resting; her favored pastimes were casual encounters and the steps leading up to it. The French Flirt had no more abiding interest in child-rearing than a pre-Empire countess or nineteenth-century courtesan. Whether descended from royalty, a petty bourgeois family, salaried employees, or a simple prole from the provinces, she exuded independence and sexual agency. The arbitrators of modernism warmly welcomed her.

This Eve needed no apple to corrupt her Adams.

Popular interest in the French Flirt and her disconcerting traits peaked during the fin-de-siècle era. For muck-raking novelists and intellectuals, this vampress incarnation was intractably linked to urbanism, the inscrutability of female lust, mass culture, gender miscommunication, male sexual anxiety, suffrage proselytizing, colonial guilt, the revival of Black Masses, and Symbolist art. In other words, everything futuristic and socially disruptive.

The French decadent, Joris-Karl Huysmans, described the flirtatious Parisian vamp best in his much-read Satanist masterpiece, *Down Under*, published in 1891: “No longer was she merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust” but “a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning.”

**LA GARÇONNE**

After the Great War, several types of the New Woman were inelegantly re-defined in French men’s magazines. Some were saddled with names formerly associated with streetwalkers, like cocottes, gigolettes, and minettes; other labels borrowed from the lexicon of the Paris music-hall — figurantes, mannequins, and nues. One appellation, however, garnered worldwide notoriety: garçonnes. It was the signature invention of Victor Margueritte (1866–1942), a minor, if respected, avant-garde playwright.

Margueritte’s 1922 novel *La Garçonne* (and its companion volume that was released seven years later) sold over one million copies and was a Jazz-Age succès de scandale. It launched a moderne and enduring category of counter-femininity:
the eponymous Parisian “bachelorette.” Within one year, it was translated into eight European languages.

The storybook heroine, Monique Lerbier, discovered the unfaithfulness of her dandish fiancé and escaped to Paris. There, a den of sophisticated lovers and debonair enablers sweet-talked her into their bedrooms and salons. A self-proclaimed tomboy, Monique hurriedly partook in the au courant thrills of cross-dressing, public carousing, workplace communalism, lesbian sex, and opium binges.

Just a few months after paperback copies of Margueritte’s fiction hit the untidy counters of neighborhood kiosks, the term garçonne entered the daily patois and overnight replaced “flapper” in the French press. A 78 gramophone with the same title decisively secured its place in Parisian popular culture. (Previously, the little-used term delineated an elite class of butchy lesbians who paraded around in high hats and men’s topcoats.)

Even the French film industry heeded La Garçonne’s clarion call for female liberation. Luckily for the studio heads, the lurid pulp had folded the most traditional elements of melodrama into a contemporary urban setting. In 1923, a silent adaptation of Monique’s travails and hedonistic forays was rushed into production and promptly banned by the civic authorities. The motion-picture censors had

less success when it resurfaced in an overwrought 1936 sound version, featuring the scene-stealing femmes du monde Arletty and Édith Piaf. French moviegoers flocked to witness this curious spectacle of new womankind.

Margueritte’s growing international reputation and immense earnings predictably sullied his official literary status. The provocateur’s Legion of Honor designation was revoked in 1923. Margueritte did not even bother to dispute the charges of moral depravity. His racy narrative had broadened the path for anti-puritanical and free-spirited feminism.

FEMALE SUFFRAGE, SEX-APPEAL, AND THE NEW WOMAN

The women’s suffrage movement gained traction in the United States and much of Europe during and immediately following World War I. In enlightened France, however, it suffered numerous setbacks. The National Assembly in 1922 chauvinistically rejected the enfranchisement of any citizens of the fairer sex. Shockingly, the most dismissive were the left-wing Deputies, who claimed that female voters would naturally support the Church and its reactionary partners. As mothers and anchors of familial stability, they were denounced as biologically conservative and opponents of the growing progressive current.

Frenchwomen were not granted the right to participate in any aspect of the electoral process until April 1944. (Even their names were dropped from municipal ballots.) That was when the Jesuit-trained General Charles de Gaulle, Commander of the Free French Forces, issued the grand proclamation of universal suffrage from his London headquarters. This was months before the Allied invasion and widely ignored. Eisenhower’s attachés considered it one more inane Gaullist diversion.

**TYPES OF FASHIONABLE PARISIAN WOMEN (1920-1946)**

- **COCOTTES** (“Hens” in baby talk). Saucy femmes. [Also underworld argot for prostitutes.]
- **ENTRAÎNEUSES**: Hostesses at nightclubs.
- **FIGURANTES**: Showgirls, usually in costumes that exposed their breasts.
- **GAMINES**: Slim, tomboyish girls.
- **GARÇONNES**: Shorthaired flappers or women who wore male clothing and behaved like men. Before 1922, they were assumed to be lesbian or dimly bisexual.
- **GIGOlettes**: Escorts on the lookout for elderly, rich clients. [Also underworld argot for attractive female seducers, who donned garish berets, outrageously high heels, and silk stockings that concealed lethal daggers.]
- **MANNEQUINS**: Models; perfect-looking seductresses.
- **MINETTES** (“Pussies”). Foxy women.
- **NUES**: Nude showgirls.

**ABOVE**: Raymond Cazenave, The Garçonne, 1922

**LEFT**: Georges Pavis, Always So Feminine, 1928

**RIGHT**: Julien Jacques Leclerc, The Future Mode in National Elections, 1925
For the most part, Parisian women, during the interwar years, shrugged off their deflated legal status. They and the flowering expatriate community of like-minded females had discovered new freedoms in the laissez-faire capital. Labor shortages and a breezy permissive attitude had its rewards — financial and moral independence.

Shopgirls could live and work in big-city isolation, unobserved by town gossips or disapproving relatives. Their private recreations, like reading and filmgoing, still depicted sentimental romance but now the stories percolated with an infusion of sexual possibility. Many self-reliant ladies in the smart set — especially well-heeled lesbians — formed their own avant-garde identities. Women’s bookstores, galleries, poetry presses, and salons sprung up in Montparnasse and beyond.

Sex-Appeal was another matter and a growing obsession among Parisians. During the decades when Frenchwomen were rebuffed in the political sphere, their erotic capital markedly escalated. Images of self-assured and unabashed femmes were paraded everywhere — in the revue houses, on the cinema screens, and, most tellingly, in the girly magazines that proliferated throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Soignées Parisiennes possessed some dazzling trump cards. As the newfangled rogue gender, they had the capacity to ridicule their impotent and crestfallen soulmates; to humiliate through cuckoldry; and to shame with public exposure. Even the nudes in their colorful tranquility flashed tempestuous sneers. It was an alternative ludus novus that defined the city’s topsy-turvy social relations and sex-crazed milieu.

Male Parisians responded with a malicious counter-sport. Women’s physiques, their giddy choice of personal constructs, and intimate body parts could be measured and “scientifically” evaluated. This rationalization of female flesh was, to be sure, a comic enterprise. But beneath its playful treatment lurked a subversive coda: raw Sex-Appeal had a purely commercial and mechanical basis. Erotic attraction could be purchased in specialty emporiums, metrically calculated, and subjected to exacting industrial standards.
If we accept the mock-serious commentary, sexist caricatures, and snarky photomontages in Paris’ men’s magazines, the once lofty expanse between ladies of unblemished morality — the weddable sorts — and their trampy cousins had receded in the postwar years and virtually collapsed. All women in the City of Love were perceived as head-turning vipers. At least, the sex-for-pay escorts offered a straightforward exchange of goods. And they were, in the end, far less demanding or costly.

**PROSTITUTES AND STREETWALKERS**

Basil Woon estimated that there were over 70,000 prostitues working the streets, first-floor studios, and apartment houses of Paris in 1925. His account of this rollicking scene (The Paris That’s Not in the Guide Books (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1926)) did not include the employees of the more formal and licensed venues — the 220 brothels. Those institutions increased the aggregate of female sex-workers by approximately 10%. (The official assessment by the city’s Vice Commissioner was between 25,000 and 30,000 women. But few journalists accepted his lowball figure.)

The more brazen independents advertised their services in entertainment journals and cheap risqué weeklies. The back pages of these throwaway broadsheets were principally devoted to this explicit pleasure-market. Overall, some 350 prostitutes announced their availability in these listings, complete with telephone numbers and directions from the closest Métro station. Sometimes they disguised their clandestine intentions with promises of “worldly unions,” “Greek bathing,” etc.
AMAZONES: Hefty sirens. Frequently serviced clients in the back of automobiles.

BELLES DE JOUR (“Beauties of the Day”): Discreet, part-time call girls from good backgrounds. Often housewives working in secret. [Variant name: Demi-castors.]

BERGERONETTES (“Wagtails”): One-legged whores.

BUCOLIQUES: Freelancers who stationed themselves in parks.

CAMELLE (“Trash”): Lowest order of streetwalkers.

CASSE-NOISETTES (“Nut-crackers”): Prostitutes whose vaginas had the contractile strength of a hand.

CHANDELLES (“Candles”): Itinerant bombshells who appeared at set times in front of bars or tourist hotels.

CHOUETTES (“Little Cabbages”): Number One Girls of the mecs. [Variant names: Marmites (“Stewing Pots”) or Girondes (“Tender Ones”).]

CLANDESTINES: Unlicensed hookers. [Variant name: Insoumises.]

COURTISANES: Exclusive kept ladies. High-end and glamorous. [Variant names: Caravelles or Demimondaines.]

ECHASSIÈRES (“Long-legged Birds” or “Stilt Walkers”): Indoor prostitutes who sat on elevated barstools in order to show off their silk-stockinged legs.

ENTÔLEUSES: Bottom-of-the-rung whores who picked the pockets of the michés. Usually worked in pairs. While one serviced the customer, the other emptied his wallet.

ÉTOILES FILANTES (“Shooting Stars”): Young, enticing maidens on the make.

FEMMES DE RESTAURANT: Prostitute-waitresses.

FILLES À NUMÉRO: Licensed streetwalkers. [Variant name: Filles en carte.]

FILLES DE CHAMBRE: Hotel prostitutes.

FILLES DE JOIE (“Daughters of Joy”): Generic term for all manner of prostitutes.

FILLES DE MAISON: Brothel girls.

FLOWERS (“Flowers”): Les Halles floozies who awoke at dawn in order to solicit off-duty forts (porters).

FOURNIERS: (Suppliers): Retinue of pensionnaires in a brothel.

GOGOUX: Lesbian prostitutes.

GROSSES: Teenage virgins, generally found in the Latin Quarter. [Prawn term.]

HIBRONDELS (“Swallows”): Independents who lured men by sitting in front of the windows of their apartments.

HÔTEL LIMPETS (“Hotel Mollusks”): Unscrupulous harpies who plied their trade on foreign tourists.

IRRÉGULIÈRES: Manicurists, masseuses, and amateurs who engaged in paid sex. [Variant name: Occasionelles.]

LOLLIPOPS: Underage prostitutes. [From the English.]

MARCHEUSES: Streetwalkers. [Variant name: Radeuses de nuit.]

MIDINETTES: Hard-partying, working-class tarts.

MONCHES: Late-night predators from Pigalle.

MOUSSEUSES: Preventers, usually addicts, controlled by small-time souteneurs.

PETITES FEMMES: Pretty, dolled-up women who sat patiently in café corners or bars for gentlemen on the lowdown.

PETITES GRUES (“Little Cranes”): Timid or naïve prostitutes. [Variant name: Petites poules (“Chicks”).]

PERROUEUX (“Stones”): Old or diseased whores who masturbated their clients on the curbsides of Les Halles.

POULES (“Chickens”): Fresh-faced prostitutes.

POULES DE LUXE (“Sumptuous Chickens”): Expensive ladies from the Champs-Élysées.

POLICEMEN: Mature damsels who enacted sadist scenes in brothels.

SÉRIEUSES: Mature damsels who engaged in sadist scenes in brothels.

SPÉCIALISTES: Professional dominatrices.

TROTTOIRS (“Sidewalks”): Over-the-hill or hideous-looking hustlers. [Pejorative slang.]

TAXI-GIRLS: Attractive mannequins who were selected by gentlemen at fancy nightclubs and paid in coupons for each dance. Generally considered to be late-night pickups.

VIOQUES: Old harlots.

VISITEUSES: Polite term for Rendez-vous ladies.
“society marriage,” “sensational curiosities,” “transformations,” “intimate fortune-telling,” “full-body massages,” or, bizarrely, “midwifery.”

The vast majority of prostitutes and streetwalkers eschewed the printed word. They dressed in full whorish display and positioned themselves in obvious locales where the traffic in single males or tourists was brisk and unimpeded. Most filles de joie arranged permanent ports of call in seedy cafés or lampposted corners. They were barely visible to the shopkeepers, neighborhood residents, and foot police.

Any taxonomical depiction of the typical Parisian hooker proved to be a stupefying challenge for the interwar abolitionists and social engineers. First, there were tens of thousands of wayward women active at any one time and they came from jarringly divergent backgrounds. Many were born into the unvirtuous trade; some girls abandoned their bourgeois households for underworld adventure; still others, already damaged goods, fled from peasant or working-class communities far from Paris or France. (For instance, after the Falangist victory in 1939, multihued throngs of Spanish brothel-workers suddenly materialized on the streets of Pigalle.)

Nearly every nocturnal fille — for reasons of age, upbringing, physical appearance, training, ethnicity, and professional association — evolved into a distinctive type. Many were known for their specific erotic skills or inviting domiciles. Certain habituées attired themselves as fantasy playmates: there were pretend adolescent bad girls, smutty sisters, frustrated Catholic-school teachers, mistresses, two-timing wives, and wizened stepmothers and grandmothers.

A FRIEND: “Careful, Suzy, your legs will ignite your next client!”

SUZY: “That’s my intention! Let him explode in his pants. It saves me from standing up.”
For the stables of montmartroises controlled by the souteneurs (or pimps), however, roleplay was an impediment to speedy transactions, if altogether superfluous. The unadulterated lure was bargain-basement BJs and feral coupling. Neither the streetwalkers nor their besotted prey had the means or time for imaginative foreplay. Mute porcine rutting was the draw.

**CRITICAL RESPONSE AND ABOLITION**

The obvious effects of prostitution on family life and Parisian women were difficult to assess. Few wives or mistresses publicly complained. If the cavorting was executed in a prudent manner, the results appeared pretty much inconsequential. It certainly provided sybaritic innovations in middle-class boudoirs and enhanced ladies’ daring sense of fashion. (Brassaï later maintained that the mini-skirts and thigh-high boots of the 1960s were merely jeunes retreads of thirties Fleur wardrobe.)

The movement to outlaw commercialized sex had its vociferous advocates within French feminist organizations, the parties of the religious right, and among the leaders of rival reactionary and Communist circles. Yet, the political crusade to end legal prostitution did not pick up steam until after Allied armies liberated Paris in August 1944.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Zelle, The Sérieuse Breaks Her Steed, 1930; Peter on a Les Halles Thoroughfare, 1934; Taxi-Girls at Le Colisée, 1933; A Bevy of Clandestines Off the Rue Saint-Denis, 1945

OPPOSITE: Two Radeuses de Nuit on Pont Alexandre by the Seine, 1939

Opposite top: Montmartroises at the Moulin Bleu, 1932.

Opposite bottom: A Fille de maison, 1935.