

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 245

“Les Années Folles”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

New York had its neon and its skyscrapers. Berlin had its bars and cabarets. But ah, Paris...

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 245. *Les années folles*.

I want to talk about Paris today: Paris after the war, the Paris of the Roaring Twenties, or, as the French like to call them, *les années folles*, The Crazy Years.

I've touched on France's economic situation elsewhere in the podcast, especially in episodes 239 and 240. To summarize it briefly, the Great War left France in a difficult position, economically. France owed large sums to the UK and the US, and paying off those war debts would have been challenging enough on its own, but France had also loaned large sums to Russia, debts which the new Bolshevik government refused to pay. And even beyond that, the French government had the additional expenses of pensions for the wounded and for widows and orphans of those who had died in combat. When you consider all the war costs the French government was stuck with, it becomes easy to understand why the French were such sticklers in return about getting those reparations payments from Germany.

The French went in the opposite direction from the British, in terms of economic policy. While the British government and financial sector were keen on putting the pound back on the gold standard at the prewar exchange rate, the French opted instead to allow the franc to devalue before finally returning to the gold standard in 1928. By then, the franc was worth only about 18% of its pre-war value.

As John Maynard Keynes had pointed out, the choice of economic policy between deflation and devaluation isn't one of the “right” or “wrong” answer. Both choices come with costs; it comes down to this: which segments of your society do you want to saddle with these costs? Deflation is good for people who hold currency, or debts denominated in that currency, or who want to buy

imports; it is bad for people who are indebted, or whose wealth is in illiquid assets, like land, or who want to sell exports. Devaluation is the other way around. The British chose the path of deflation; the French chose devaluation. Devaluation helped the government pay those huge war debts. It also helped France's balance of trade. French exports boomed, especially benefiting French manufacturing. On the other hand, devaluation meant workers' wages were worth less than before, prompting many strikes. The devalued franc made France a bargain for tourists, especially from the US, as we have discussed, and France generally and Paris in particular, was flooded with foreign tourists and residents, many of them Americans. Whether this was a good thing or a bad thing depended on your perspective. If you were one of those French people selling goods and services to the Americans, you were probably happy. If you were one of those French people whose only contact with the foreigners was wealthy Americans lighting their cigars with French banknotes while ostentatiously proclaiming that French money wasn't worth the paper it was printed on—and yes, that did happen—then you were probably not so happy.

Devaluation was definitely good for French industry though, and the biggest success story in French manufacturing of this era was the industrialist André Citroën, who had made a name for himself managing arms production during the war. Even before the war was over, he'd begun thinking about what he would do afterward. He chose to follow in the footsteps of America's Henry Ford, designing a car that would exceed the specs of anything else available at the time and could be mass produced for a lower cost. The first Citroën Type A rolled off the assembly line in May 1919, even before the Treaty of Versailles had been signed, and a decade later, Citroën had surpassed the established Peugeot and Renault companies to become the world's largest automobile manufacturer outside the United States. The company became so big that from 1925 to 1934, it used Paris' iconic Eiffel Tower as a billboard, hanging on the tower illuminated letters that spelled out "Citroën" at night. In 1934, hard hit by the Great Depression, the company went bankrupt and was taken over by its chief creditor, the French tire company Michelin. André Citroën died of stomach cancer the following year, at the age of 57.

I haven't said anything about the Olympics on this podcast since 1912, all the way back in episode 67. Back then I told you that Berlin won the nod to host the 1916 Olympics. Needless to say, the Great War interrupted that project. Belgium won the honor of hosting the 1920 Olympics. These were held in Antwerp. Twenty-nine nations competed, most of them European nations or British Dominions plus India. The US team took the most medals, including 41 gold medals, more than a quarter of the total. It was the first Olympics for Argentina and Brazil, and Brazil even won a gold medal, in a shooting competition, so well done, Brazil. The newly created nations of Czechoslovakia, Estonia, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes competed. Not represented at the Olympics: Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland, or Russia.

The next time around, in 1924, the Olympics were held in Paris, making Paris the first city to host a modern Olympics for a second time. Forty-four nations competed in Paris in 1924, including first appearances by China, Ecuador, Haiti, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Philippines, Poland, and Uruguay. Austria and Hungary were back in the competition, although Germany was

still not invited and the USSR declined to participate. The 1924 Olympics included an arts competition, which seems appropriate, given the venue. The USA again took the most medals at this Olympics. Probably the most famous athlete to emerge from the Paris Olympics of 1924 was a swimmer born in what was then Hungary and later Romania to ethnic German parents. His birth name was János Weißmüller. His parents emigrated to the United States while he was still an infant, and by his teen years he had made a name for himself as a swimmer, now known as Johnny Weissmuller. He would win three gold medals in the 1924 Olympics, just weeks after he turned 19, and two more in 1928, although he is probably best remembered for the film career that followed and specifically for playing the Edgar Rice Burroughs character Tarzan in the hugely successful 1932 film *Tarzan the Ape Man* from MGM, co-starring Maureen O'Sullivan as Jane and giving Tarzan a chimpanzee sidekick named Cheeta, who does not appear in the books. The film would spawn eleven sequels and made the name Johnny Weissmuller inextricably associated with Tarzan. And vice versa.

France has been a center of fashion since, well, the reign of Louis XIV, probably, but French fashion was never more influential than during the Jazz Age, and *the* name in Paris fashion at the time was failed cabaret singer turned fashion designer Coco Chanel. First in Normandy, then in Biarritz, the playground of the wealthy, she struck it big selling her own designs of fashionable casual clothing for the aristocrat on holiday. She had many affairs with rich Frenchmen, English aristocrats, the occasional Russian Archduke, and, rumor has it, a one-night stand with the Prince of Wales. By 1915, the American fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* was proclaiming that "[t]he woman who hasn't at least one Chanel is hopelessly out of fashion."

Chanel's celebration of the casual style really caught on after the war, and helped introduce the flapper look of the 1920s. It turned out that women preferred looser, more practical clothing to the corsets and floor-length skirts favored in the Belle Époque. Who could have guessed?

In 1918, Coco Chanel opened a boutique in Paris where she sold clothing, hats and other fashion accessories, including her signature product, a perfume called *Chanel No. 5*. It was her first perfume, but it was formula number five during the development process. That was the one she liked best, she had already considered the number five to be her lucky number, so the rest, as they say, is history.

Her perfume was as notable for the bottle as for the scent, a clear, rectangular shape inspired by whiskey decanters, a radical departure from the elaborate cut-glass containers favored during the Belle Époque, and maybe one of the earliest glimmerings of the style that will come to be known as Art Deco. In the twenties, Chanel introduced the little black dress, or cocktail dress, a look that is still in fashion a hundred years later.

She hobnobbed with the rich and famous. She designed costumes for the Paris stage, and that's how she got to know Sergei Diaghilev, impresario of the *Ballets Russes*. Everything comes back to Sergei Diaghilev sooner or later. Diaghilev introduced her to composer Igor Stravinsky, who

had abandoned Russia after the October Revolution and needed a place to stay in Paris. She put up Stravinsky and his family at her house in Paris for seven months until they found their own place to stay. In the 1920s, Chanel donated money to the *Ballets Russes* and designed costumes for their productions.

[music: Offenbach, “Galop infernal” from *Orphée aux enfers*]

In 1925, Paris hosted the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, organized to showcase the new postwar architecture and design of clean, cool lines like that *Chanel No. 5* bottle. Please don’t make me try to recite the full name of the exhibition in French, but it includes the words *arts décoratifs*, from which we English-speaking people derive the term Art Deco, although people didn’t start calling it that until the 1960s, well after it was over.

Art Deco was influenced by Cubism, hence the emphasis on geometrical shapes, and Art Deco architecture by the introduction of reinforced concrete as a building material. Art Deco buildings tend to be tall, with smooth facades. You might find them decorated with classically inspired figures, but these figures are typically stylized reliefs rather than naturalistic free-standing statues. Art deco interior design and furniture heavily favored inlay, often of geometric forms. It favored expensive materials and labor-intensive construction, so Art Deco tended to be expensive.

And as befit a modern, international, postwar society, it borrowed heavily from the styles of other cultures. Archaeology was big. With the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb three years earlier, episode 191, and ongoing excavations at Pompeii in Italy, designers took elements from artifacts uncovered in these archaeological investigations, as well as inspiration from the ongoing interest in Asian and African art and in the Futurism and Constructivism developing in Italy and the Soviet Union. We’ll touch on some of that in a future episode.

And it wasn’t built in the Art Deco style, but I’ll mention here that in 1920, the French National Assembly allocated Fr 500,000 for the construction of the first mosque in France, the Great Mosque of Paris. This was done in honor of the Muslim French soldiers from France’s African possessions and to affirm the secular nature of the French Republic. The mosque was built by workers from North Africa in a North African style and was inaugurated by the President of the Republic, Gaston Doumergue and by Sultan Yusef of Morocco in 1926.

In the realm of the visual arts, the end of the Great War saw the emergence of Dada, perhaps the strangest artistic movement since...ever, and in Dadaism you see the ultimate in the general rejection of traditional values and authority figures engendered by the war. Dada was anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-war, anti-nationalist, and anti-rational. It was essentially anarchism in art. Even the name is nonsense. There’s no agreed-upon story for the origin of the name, but its sound, evocative of a small child babbling, is as good a representation of the movement as any.

Dadaists made paintings and sculptures, they wrote poems that were more about the sound than the meaning, they created writing by cutting up and rearranging existing texts, and they made collages. I'd say the collage is probably the most Dada art form of them all. And they loved to offend. Dada was an international movement. You found it in the US, Italy, Japan, Switzerland, and many other places, although especially Germany and France.

In 1917, Dadaist Marcel Duchamp offered up a signed urinal as a fountain, which is about as Dada as it gets. He submitted it to an art show in New York City, but they refused to display it on the grounds that it wasn't art, which provoked a controversy over what art really is, which was Duchamp's whole point. In 2004, that urinal-fountain was voted the most influential artwork of the twentieth century by a group of artists and historians. That might be overstating it a little, although it might be fair to say, as some have, that Duchamp was the third most influential artist of the twentieth century, after Picasso and Matisse, whom we've already met.

Duchamp is also famous for taking a reproduction of the Mona Lisa and adding a mustache and goatee, because of course he did. Not that Dada was his only style. He first gained notoriety back in 1912 with his Cubist painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. Later he dabbled in Futurism, Surrealism, and then seemingly gave up art altogether for the last 25 years of his life. After his death in 1968, it was revealed he had spent those years developing an elaborate tableau called *Given*, visible only through a peephole in a wooden door. It's installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art along with several other of Duchamp's most notable works, and I have spent quite a bit of time there puzzling over them.

As for Picasso and Matisse, they skipped the whole Dada thing. They were among a separate group of artists whose reaction to the Great War was to embrace a more realistic neoclassical style. But that didn't last. By 1921, Picasso was back onto Cubism. That was the year he created *Three Musicians*, my personal favorite of his works. There are actually two versions, one in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the other in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. I should also give shout-outs to the Russian expatriate painter Marc Chagall and the Italian Amedeo Modigliani.

Dada did not so much end as evolve into Surrealism. Surrealism was a bit more disciplined than Dada, although it still relied on surprise and non sequitur for its dreamlike effect. By 1925, the Surrealists were even claiming Picasso as one of their own, although his work still looks pretty Cubist to me. A typical example of Surrealism is the Belgian artist Rene Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images*, which consists of a realistic oil painting of a pipe, under which are written the words "This is not a pipe."

But the artist whose name is most closely associated with Surrealism is of surely that of the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí, and especially his 1931 painting, *The Persistence of Memory*, with its unforgettable images of multiple droopy pocket watches, including one hung over a tree

branch like a blanket, and another flowing over the edge of a platform. It has been suggested that Dalí was inspired by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, episode 114.

Les années folles was a vibrant time for literature. The novelist Marcel Proust had begun his most important work in 1909, the seven-volume *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which in my day we rendered in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*, though the kids today like to call it *In Search of Lost Time*. Proust had not yet finished it when he passed away in 1921, at the age of 51, though it did eventually see publication. Please don't ask me to summarize it; as I'm sure some of you know, there's actually a Monty Python sketch titled "The All-England Summarize Proust Competition," so I'll just refer you over there. I'll mention the author and poet Anatole France, who won the 1921 Nobel Prize in literature. One of the characters in *À la recherche du temps perdu* is based on him. In 1922, the Catholic Church put all of France's works on the Index. He passed away in 1924, at the age of 80. To those of us who've studied the law, France will always be remembered best for his observation, "In its majestic equality, the law forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under the bridges, beg in the streets, and steal loaves of bread." Honorable mention to the philosopher Henri Bergson, awarded the 1927 Nobel Prize in literature and the French Legion of Honor.

The literary scene in Paris wasn't only about French literature. The American expatriate Gertrude Stein and her lover Alice B. Toklas lived together in Paris during this period. I talked about them a bit in episode 67. They continued to be influential figures in the French art scene, promoting the careers of the major painters of the era. Stein herself wrote poetry, novels, and stories in a style noted for its quirky, playful use of repetition, as in her famous line, "A rose is a rose is a rose," and her remark, purportedly about her home town of Oakland, California: "There is no there there."

In 1932, Stein published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which is more of an autobiography of Stein than anything. It became a bestseller in the United States, enough so to induce Stein to leave Paris for the first and last time to return to her home country, where she enjoyed celebrity status during her six-month book tour.

The Stein and Toklas home in Paris was a haven not only for painters but for American writers in Paris, including Sinclair Lewis, Ezra Pound, Thornton Wilder, Sherwood Anderson and particularly Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote his best-known novel, *The Great Gatsby*, in Paris.

Ernest Hemingway, born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1899, was rejected by the US Army during the Great War on account of his poor eyesight. So he joined the Red Cross instead and served as an ambulance driver, where he was severely wounded at the tender age of 18. In 1921, Hemingway married Hadley Richardson and got a job as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, which landed the two of them in Paris. Hemingway became a regular at the Stein-Toklas home, and Gertrude Stein became a literary mentor to him, as did Ezra Pound. Gertrude Stein in an oft-

quoted remark, told Ernest Hemingway that he and his cohort were a “lost generation.” The name “Lost Generation” came to be applied to this generation of new writers, people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Pound, who came of age during and just after the Great War, and later on would be applied generally to people born in the final years of the 19th century. Hemingway published his first novel during his time in Paris, *The Sun Also Rises*, which included as an epigraph the “lost generation” quote from Gertrude Stein.

And I would be remiss if I didn't note the Irish writer James Joyce, who'd published his first novel, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in 1916, while he was living in Zürich. In 1920, after the war, he moved to Paris, where he finished and published his most noted work, the epic avant-garde novel *Ulysses*, in 1922, a landmark in twentieth-century literature. There was also the English writer, Eric Blair, who would later become renowned under his pen name of George Orwell, who spent a couple of years in Paris working as a dishwasher, an experience that would inform his first book, a study of poverty in the midst of prosperity titled *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published in 1933.

[music: Offenbach, “Galop infernal” from *Orphée aux enfers*]

Long-time listeners may recall episodes 44 and 45, in which I talked about the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, the *Ballets Russes*, and Vaclav Nijinsky. I took that story up as far as the war years, during which Diaghilev struggled to keep the *Ballets* going.

Vaclav Nijinsky's relationship with Diaghilev ended abruptly when he married Romola de Pulsy. He was reunited with the *Ballets Russes* for the company's American tour, episode 118. Nijinsky danced in public for the last time during a South American tour on September 30, 1917, in Montevideo, Uruguay, with Arthur Rubenstein performing on piano. Nijinsky was not himself that night, and reportedly Rubenstein was moved to tears by Nijinsky's struggles. The Nijinsky family lived in Switzerland afterward; Vaclav was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1920 and institutionalized for the rest of his life. After the Second World War, the family moved to England, where he passed away in 1950. He was 60 years old. Or maybe 61.

Sergei Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes* went on for another decade, with Leonide Massine replacing Nijinsky both as the company's principal male dancer onstage and as Diaghilev's companion backstage. Diaghilev's gift for identifying and cultivating talented artists had not failed him, although the company would never regain the heights of artistic accomplishment it had reached in the years just before the war. Even so, the list of composers and costume and set designers hired by the company during the 1920s reads like a *Who's Who* of the Paris art scene. For example, in 1917, the *Ballets Russes* put on *Parade*, an original ballet with music by Erik Satie and costumes by Pablo Picasso, with choreography by Leonide Massine. Picasso created Cubist costumes with elaborate cardboard appurtenances, which is hardly the kind of thing you expect to find in a ballet, but there you go.

Later there were more ballets done to the music of Erik Satie, who passed away in 1925, and two new, younger French composers, Francis Poulenc and Darius Milhaud, as well as Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla. After the October Revolution, the new Bolshevik government, like the Provisional Government before it, tried to lure Diaghilev back to Russia with the promise of a state position in the arts. Diaghilev turned it down; the Soviet government got its revenge by condemning him as hopelessly bourgeois and decadent, which meant that Diaghilev's legacy would be ignored and forgotten in his native Russia until the end of communist rule there.

Sergei Diaghilev died in 1929 in Venice, his favorite city, from complications related to diabetes. He was 57 years old. The *Ballets Russes*, which never made money and was usually in a chronic state of financial disaster, did not survive his passing. Still, the *Ballets Russes* boosted the artistic careers of many of the greats of the time, and alumni of the company, like Vaclav Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava Nijinska, Anna Pavlova, Leonide Massine, and George Balanchine would remain influential figures in the world of ballet for decades to come.

The Russian dancer Ida Rubenstein was also among the influential alumni of the *Ballets Russes*. She left Diaghilev's company to found her own, which is best known today for having commissioned Maurice Ravel's *Boléro* in 1928. Ravel's score for *Boléro* was a harbinger of things to come in the music world; it is essentially one melody, albeit a very insistent one, played seventeen times over about fifteen minutes, with a louder and increasingly elaborate orchestration every time. Much to the composer's surprise, it quickly became his most popular work, and is often performed even in our day, although seldom as a ballet; almost always as a concert piece.

In my day, *Boléro* had this reputation as being the perfect music to play in the background during moments of supreme intimacy, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. And—what can I say?—it absolutely is. Trust me on this.

By the time *Boléro* premiered, Maurice Ravel was already showing signs of some sort of neurological disorder, which appears to have been exacerbated by a serious head injury he suffered in 1932. He went into a decline afterward and passed away in 1937, at the age of 62.

A number of foreign composers lived and studied in Paris during this period, including Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and de Falla, whom I have already named, as well as Americans in Paris George Gershwin and Aaron Copeland. There were also the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, and the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos.

The elite of Paris may have been attending the performances of the *Ballets Russes* and concerts of works by Milhaud and Ravel, but an awful lot of other Parisians spent their evenings at music halls like the Folies Bergère, the Casino de Paris, and the Moulin Rouge, which burned down in 1915 and was rebuilt in the Twenties. The biggest thing in popular music in Paris during the Crazy Years was, of course, *le jazz hot*. The French infatuation with American jazz led to a

larger interest in African-American entertainment generally, the most obvious example of which is Josephine Baker, an African-American dancer born in 1906 in St. Louis.

Baker danced in Harlem and on chorus lines on the Broadway stage in the early 1920s, when she was still a teenager. I mentioned last week how she was in *Shuffle Along*. Her specialty was to perform as the last dancer at the end of the chorus line and to stumble through the show as if she found it challenging to perform the steps correctly. Then, after the show, during the curtain calls, she would surprise and delight the audience with a far more difficult encore. In 1925, when she was still just 19, she sailed to Paris and became an overnight sensation. She was noted for her daring performances; her most famous costume consisted of a skirt made from artificial bananas and not much else. She became the toast of Paris. Hemingway called her “sensational” and Picasso painted her. She taught Paris the Charleston and toured Europe throughout the 1920s and 1930s to great acclaim, but never achieved comparable success in the country of her birth. She came to New York City for a role in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1936 to poor reviews. They replaced her with Gypsy Rose Lee. Afterward, Baker returned to Paris, married a Frenchman, and gave up her US citizenship.

Maybe it’s a little outside the scope of this episode, but I can’t resist mentioning two other figures in the Paris music scene. One is the French actor and entertainer Maurice Chevalier, who began his career as an entertainer before the war, but only achieved success afterward, with the arrival in France of jazz. He traveled to the United States, where he appeared on stage and screen, but sometimes returned to Paris to perform at the big music halls. The other is Edith Piaf, who first appeared on the scene in 1935, at the age of twenty, and became perhaps the most famous French singer of all time.

Alas, in Paris as elsewhere, the vibrant live stage entertainments of the Jazz Age fell victim to increasing competition from radio and silent films, then talking pictures, all of which offered alternative entertainment for a lower cost, especially attractive once the Great Depression struck.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Phil and Alan for their kind donations, and thank you to Robert for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Phil and Alan and Robert help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show. Follow the podcast on Twitter @History20th.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the state of atomic physics in the Roaring Twenties. Physicists were developing tools that allowed them to begin to pick apart the structure of the atom, and the results were...unexpected. The Great Debate, part two, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I can't leave you without mentioning that Josephine Baker, now a citizen of the Republic of France, was recruited by French military intelligence at the beginning of the Second World War. After the fall of France, she lived in the Dordogne in southern France and continued to operate as a clandestine Allied agent, traveling under the cover of her celebrity to Portugal, Spain, and North Africa, where she would pass on information to Allied diplomats. After the war, the French government awarded her the Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre.

Unable to have children of her own, Josephine Baker adopted twelve children of different races and ethnicities, including European, African, Asian, and Latin American. She called them "The Rainbow Tribe" and presented them as a demonstration of the principle that people of different races and ethnicities could still be sisters and brothers.

Josephine Baker died in 1975, at the age of 68.

[music: Closing Theme]