



How Trigère, a Historic Fashion Label Ahead of Its Time, Was Suddenly Reborn

by [Jenny Comita](#)

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AP/REX/Shutterstock. Hair by Christian Eberhard at Management Artists; Makeup by Kathy Le Sant at Open Talent Paris; Model: Justine Asset at Women Management; Produced by Bird Production; Photography Assistant: Pete Hawk; Fashion Assistant: Laetitia Gimenez; Suit: Getty Images; DRes:

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According to Franklin Benjamin Elman, the designer behind the relaunch of **Trigère**, the New York–based *maison* founded in 1942 by the indomitable Paris-born fashion designer Pauline Trigère, you’d be hard-pressed to find a brand whose history aligns more with the present moment. “Madame Trigère was a refugee, a single mother, and a female entrepreneur,” says Elman, a native of Montreal now living in Milan. “What could be more *au courant*?”

Despite her *grande dame* appearance—Trigère acted as her own brand ambassador, never leaving the house without an impeccable coif, major jewelry, and a *soigné* ensemble of her own design—she was also as bold and outspoken as any resistance leader. A Jewish woman who’d fled the Nazis, Trigère built a business out of necessity, and when her husband left her with two young sons five years later, she ran it with steely determination for a record 52 years. She was the first major designer to showcase an African-American model, in 1961, and didn’t

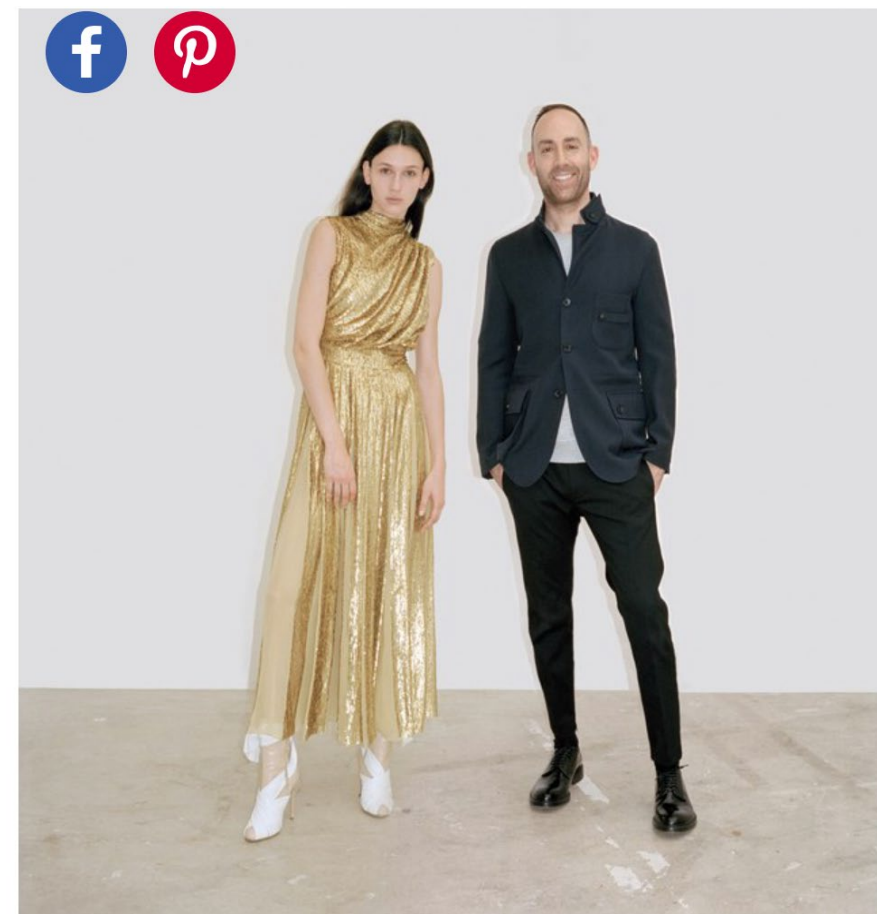


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flinch even when one of her Southern accounts dropped her.

When John Fairchild (the late founder of this magazine) banned her from the pages of *Women’s Wear Daily*, in 1988, after some perceived slight, Trigère took out a full page in *The New York Times’s* fashion magazine to admonish him. “Warned by [designer] Geoffrey Beene and all her pals in the business that the ad would be her ruination,” remembers the legendary adman **George Lois**, who designed her Dear John letter, “she said, ‘Screw it, George. Run it!’ ”



Photograph by Kira Bunse; Styled by Sheila Single.



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Madame's label was shuttered in 1994, but she continued to design a smaller jewelry-and-accessories business until 2000, two years before her death, at the age of 93. The new, reborn Trigère has its roots in what Elman describes as “a very fun homework assignment.” Peter Lewis, an entrepreneur and family friend from Montreal, approached Elman with the idea of using a heritage house as the starting point for a new endeavor. Elman spent two years doing research before coming back to Lewis with a plan for Trigère 2.0. During that time, says the 44-year-old Elman, who has a fashion degree from Rhode Island School of Design and has worked for Costume National, [Rick Owens](#), and Jil Sander, under [Raf Simons](#), he realized he wanted to be more than just an adviser. “I saw that it would be a dream to be able to take something like this in hand, from a creative perspective,” he says. Lewis, who bought the Trigère trademark from her sons before they passed away, agreed that Elman would be a natural fit.

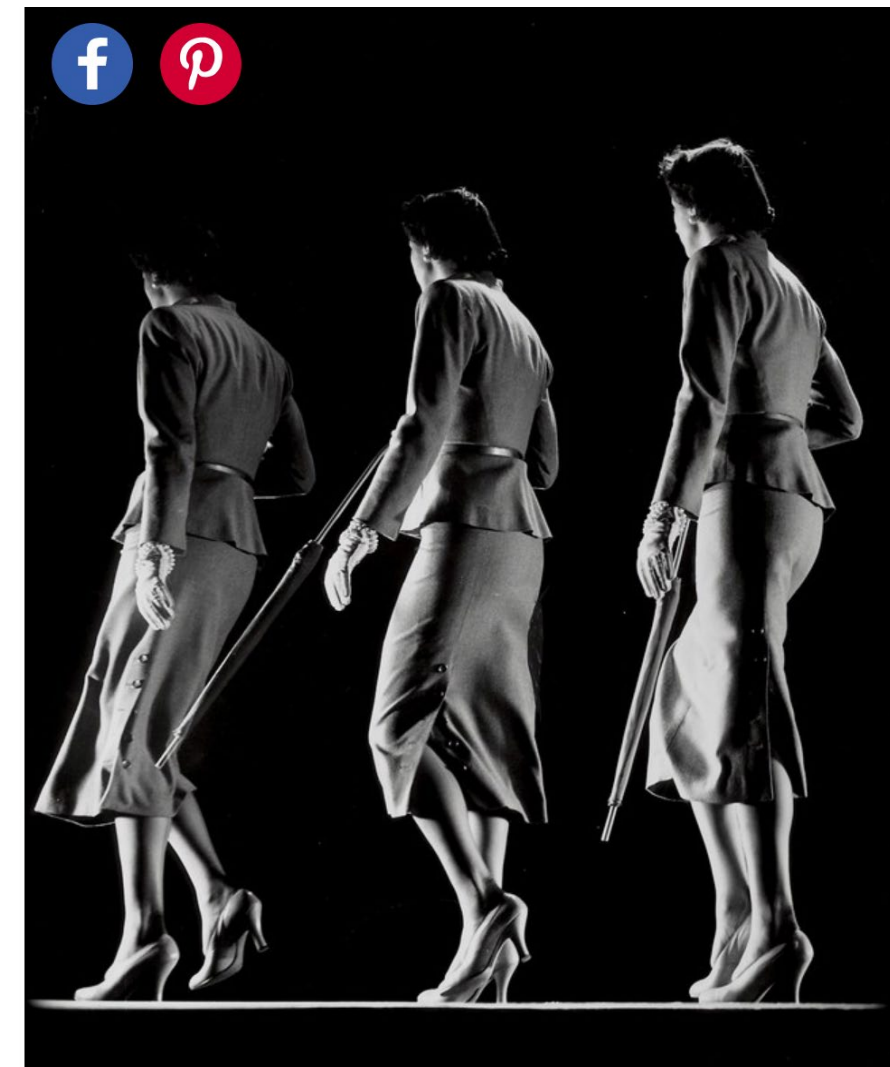
Because there is no central Trigère archive—she donated pieces to a number of institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art,



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Parsons School of Design, Brandeis University, and the Chicago History Museum—Elman set out on a visiting tour to “meet” the clothes. “I quickly realized that she was an architect of clothing,” he says. “I think she had some kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder, because the construction is so detailed and complex. You could see that she thought about these things at night, that she never stopped.”



A 1949 photograph by Gjon Mili of a model wearing a Pauline Trigère suit. Photograph by Gjon Mili/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.



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Elman’s debut collection is an uptown, party-ready grouping of ruffle-edge jackets, neat suits, chic dresses, and high-contrast patterns. Many of Trigère’s sartorial signatures—sheer elements, flashes of metallic—are in evidence. And everything has pockets, even the ballgowns. “She was a woman designing for women,” Elman says. “She knew how important it was to have somewhere to stash a lipstick or to put your hands if you walked into a room feeling insecure.”

Of course, Elman didn’t adopt every element of the Trigère look. Notably missing is one of her most-recognizable trademarks: the turtle. She was besotted with the creatures, forever depicting them on blouses, scarves, and—most famously—jewelry, like the diamond-encrusted gold brooch she almost always wore on her lapel. At her home in South Salem, New York—which she called La Tortue—her collection of tortoise-themed objets numbered close to one thousand. “The turtles are



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very charming, but I think they might be a bit...” Elman trails off, then says, “I hope that Madame Trigère up in heaven forgives me for not including them this time around.”



Keywords

Trigère Franklin Benjamin Elman