

Crochet Sweaters in the Model A Era: The Russian Influence

By Peggy Gill

Do You Crochet? A handmade outfit was more common than not in the Model A era, and many women had needle work skills that included crocheting and knitting. In the March 1931 *Women's Home Companion*, an article titled "In Lacy Stitch: A crocheted sweater-blouse and beret" written by Merle Munn shows what was referred to as the Russian blouse.

A lacy wool sweater and matching beret was still in vogue in the smart shops. The photo shown at right sports a becoming square neck. This sweater and beret ensemble could be worn with any sports skirt making it a completely acceptable costume for golf, motoring, or walking. The blouse could also be worn with a suit—in which case a hat appropriate to the suit would take the place of the beret.

The work for this sweater was done with a bone crochet hook size 3 ½. Eight balls of zephyr or any other fine yarn were needed for the blouse, and one ball was needed for the beret. The wool could be found in white and pastel colors such as pale blue, pink, lavender, pale green and yellow, and according to Ms. Munn these colors were "very much the thing" in March of 1931.



The sweater above looks like it could be the one described in the Australian newspaper, *The Canberra Times*, dated 5 February 1931. It stated that a knitted "fairy-like" woolen blouse made of the "thinnest wool yarn, pouched at the waist above the skirt, and completed with a tight band that fits closely over the skirt" was popular, especially among younger women or those with a "slim, graceful figure."

What exactly is a "Russian" blouse? Upon doing some research I was unable to find anything conclusive, but based on descriptions in a variety of sources, I believe that perhaps it was named due to its similarities to the Russian national costume back in the 1920's and early 1930's. Sources referred to "full loose sleeves that tightened at the wrist." Some sleeves were described as "drop shoulder" or "dolman sleeves" and necklines were described as both rounded and square. Prominent in most references was a hip-length tunic look below a cinched waist. One source suggested that the exact look depended upon the region of origin.

Parisians were the first to adopt the Russian influence into clothing styles. In fact, Coco Chanel is attributed to using a belted blouse based on Russian peasant wear as early as 1922. She continued to use similar attributes in her designs, especially in sleeve styles and the use of the peplum according to an article in the *Pittsburg Press*, on July 28, 1931 with the headline, “Russian Theme Seen in Blouse.” In 1929, *D’Alessio* a prominent dress designer for women’s, misses, and juniors “waists and dresses” refers to a “Russian blouse with puff sleeve and cape sleeve” in draft designs. According to *The Canberra Times* article entitled “Frills, Fads, and Foibles,” the Russian blouse was being adopted to transform the boredom Parisians were facing with the current woven and wool pullovers. This look was attributed to the “blouse-jumpers like a Cossack’s tunic.” The blouse is described as “very plain in line, fastening up the side with groups of buttons; and the neck is low, round, and collarless. There is a belt at the waist, and the basque¹ below reaches to the hips. The sleeves are full to the elbow, and fit tightly from there to the wrist with buttons and loops of silk.” The article went on to explain that the blouses are plain and have no trimming, intended to coordinate with suits; because of this, they were made “of very good material” such as heavy crepe de chine Moroccan or satin in white or a pale tint.



Figure 1

For comparison, I looked for traditional “Russian blouses.” Although not of model A era, you can see some similarities between the descriptions above and these pictures.

Figure 1 is a photograph taken between 1909 and 1915 by Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii of three young Russian peasant women. Notice the fullness of the sleeves, and the cuffs on the long sleeved blouse on the left.

Figure 2 is a men’s Kosovorotka. A kosovorotka is a traditional Russian shirt, long sleeved and reaching down to the mid-thigh. The shirt is “not buttoned all the way down to the hem, but has several buttons at the collar (unfastened when the garment is pulled over the wearer’s head), though these are positioned off to one side (regional styles vary between left and right), instead of centrally, as is customary with a typical Western 20th and 21st century man’s shirt. If left unbuttoned the collar appears skewed, which accounts for the garment’s name. The collar and sleeves of kosovorotka were often decorated with a traditional Slavic ornament.”



Figure 2

During my research, I came across some pictures and patterns online on Pinterest and Etsy. Advertised as being “1930’s,” I have been unable to document the actual date by year on the two photographs so these cannot be used as documentation in the judging room. However, the picture on the far left is very similar to what is seen in Ukrainian traditional costume, and the dolman sleeve was seen in 1931. The picture at the far right was listed on Etsy, an online vintage retailer. The shirt was described as “a Russian linen Cossack shirt.”



The patterns caught my eye due to similarities in style to the sweater shown at the beginning of this article. I contacted Janet Gundlach, a MAFCA member from the Gallopin’ Gertie Model A Club of Tacoma, WA, and past Era Fashion Committee member and chairperson. She is a wealth of information on patterns and reproduction clothing for the Model A era. According to her direct resources, the Butterick pattern dates to 1934; she was also able to date the Pictorial pattern to after June 1931 but not later than 1932.

The patterns then led me to take another look at MAFCA’s pattern catalog. Helen Christensen and her team working on the Pattern Project spent numerous hours researching and documenting the dates for these Model A era patterns. The following patterns were taken from MAFCA’s Pattern Catalog. Notice the similarities of styling to the photos above, as well as the crocheted sweater at the beginning of this article.



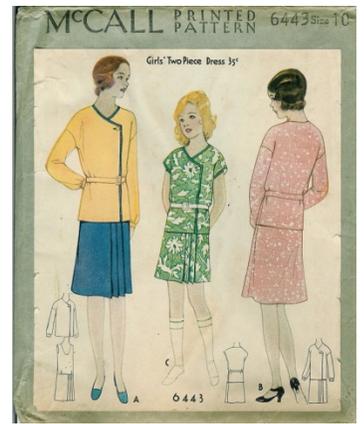
1930 McCall 6415



1928 McCall 5460



1928 McCall 5466



1930 McCall 6443

It would appear that the “Russian Influence” spanned more than a decade in the fashion houses during the 1920’s and 1930’s. It has surfaced again and again in fashions since then, and I am sure we haven’t seen the last of it. Nevertheless, for me, it is interesting to compare the similarities in styling to photographs and documentation of known Model A era items. So for those of you who are handy with the needle, be it sewing, knitting, or crocheting, you might like to work the Russian influence into your Model A wardrobe.

¹*Basque, as a term for women’s clothing is of French origin and refers to a short extension below the waist to the bodice of a woman’s jacket or blouse. It is characterized by a close, contoured fit and extending past the waistline over the hips. The name is believed to be adopted from Basque traditional dress, initially by the French and then throughout Western fashion.*

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www.pinterest.com