

# Feature



## Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix: Transformation *Deborah Parker Wong*

*An Edwardian costume makes a surprising transformation into an outfit inspired by the first U. S. aviatrix, Harriet Quimby.*

The term aviatrix and its plural aviatrixes came into use in 1910 in reference to female pilots, however, by 1916 the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics decided that an aviator was not defined by gender and the term fell from popular use.

By that time, many of the earliest aviatrixes had themselves met untimely deaths but they successfully paved the way for the women that followed most notably, Amelia Earhart, who in 1923 became the 16th woman to be issued a pilot's license by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI). She went on to set several world records until her highly-publicized disappearance during a transatlantic flight in 1937.

### **A Period of Transition**

The first decade of the 20th century marked a period of profound transition in technology, society and fashion that was

personified by the early aviatrixes; women who were born in the latter part of the 19th century, the steam-powered years of the Belle Epoque (1895). They came of age in the Edwardian Era, named after Britain's King Edward VII who reigned from 1901 to 1910, with the advent of electricity, automobiles and flight; the trappings of modern life much as we know it today.



Aviatrix Harriet Quimby piloting a Bleriot XI in 1912.  
Photo credit: [Birdwoman - The Incredible Life of Harriet Quimby](#).

Although King Edward died in 1910, the era that bears his name endured until the onset of World War I (1914-1918), a time when fashionable women favored empire waistlines, hobble skirts, feathers and exotic details. The Great War itself necessitated

sweeping changes in women's fashion that signaled the demise of the corset and the acceptance of pants for daily wear.

In creating the award-winning costume design "Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix: Transformation" (Best in Class - Novice, Historical Interpretation, Costume-Con 2008; GBACG Rising Star Award 2008), I was inspired by an historic moment of the Edwardian Era - the 1903 flight of Wilbur and Orville Wright – and, in turn, by the first women of aviation whose stylish attire provided the historical context for the costume's design.

### **The First Female Fliers**

Though many women had piloted airplanes before her, French stage actress and balloonist Raymonde de Laroche (1886-1919) became the first female pilot licensed by the FAI in 1910. Laroche was followed by Harriet Quimby (1875-1912), a successful journalist from New York who was the first American to be licensed in 1911, and aviatrixes from Russia, Belgium, Great Britain, Germany and Czechoslovakia.

In 1912, Quimby became the first woman to cross the English Channel but her feat was eclipsed by the sinking of the Titanic (April 14, 1912). She met an untimely death when she was thrown from her Bleriot XI plane a few months after her historic crossing.



Harriet Quimby was an inspiration to Amelia Earhart. She designed her own flight suit of plum-colored, wool-backed satin. Photo credit: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Quimby).

Publicity photograph of Quimby (left) shows her wearing a full-legged flight suit with leather gauntlets and boots. These and similar photographs from the period provided direction for the silhouette, fabric choices and functional details for the design of my Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix.

### ***The Edwardian View***

The silhouette of the Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix begins as a cotton velveteen Edwardian walking suit characterized by a narrow hobble skirt and fly-away jacket accessorized with a large velvet hat copied from an extant original (below).



Edwardian Tule Velvet Hat. Photo source: eBay.

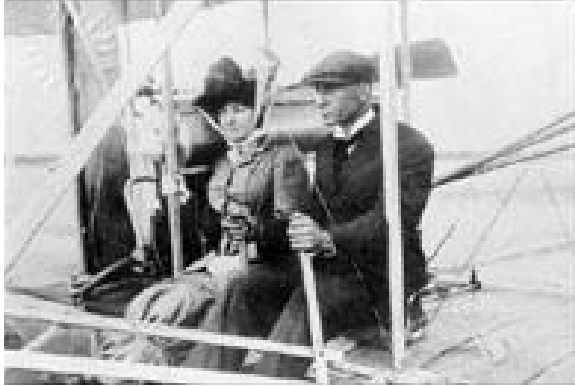


Postcard (circa 1911) depicting a man pointing his thumb at a woman wearing a hobble skirt. Caption says, "The Hobble Skirt: What's that? It's the speed-limit skirt!" since hobble skirts limited the wearer's stride. Photo credit: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobble_skirt).

Narrow skirts first appeared in the 1880s and the term 'hobble skirt' came into popular use in the early 1910s, when a European fashion trend started by French designer Paul Poiret introduced long skirts that were narrow at the hem, thus 'hobbling' the wearer.

Poiret is said to have been inspired by photographs of Mrs. Hart Berg, who in 1908 was the first American woman to fly as a

passenger with the Wright Brothers. To keep her skirts from flying out of control, Berg tied a rope around them below the knees (Katherine Wright, sister of the flight innovators, followed suit shortly after).



Mrs. Hart Berg, with Wilbur Wright, 1908.

While the severely restricted hobble skirt was in fashion for only a brief period, modified versions with side slits, hidden pleats, and drapes continued to be popular until 1915.



Ageless Pattern #1441, Fly-away jacket with velvet sleeves and collar fastened with a single closure at the chest. Image credit: [Ageless Patterns](#).

Designed to be presented during a 60-second masquerade set to a period soundtrack that illustrates the transition from steam-powered transportation by train to air travel, the opening Edwardian view of the costume is accompanied by the sound of a steam engine pulling away from a station and appears as such.

### **Functional Transformation**

As the soundtrack shifts to the haunting music of a French chanson, a tribute to pioneering aviatrix Raymonde de Laroche (below), a functional transformation takes place in the silhouette. The Aviatrix view of the costume is revealed when the Edwardian



Raymonde de Laroche piloting her Voisin aeroplane in 1909. Photo source: [Association marnaise des collectionneurs de cartes postales](#).



Quimby and Matilde Moisant (1878-1964) 1912: Moisat's brother taught them to fly at their Long Island flight school. Moisant is clearly corseted.

walking suit is 'transformed' into velvet flight knickers, like to those worn by French aviatrix Matilde Moisant (above in a publicity photo with friend Harriet Quimby).

The Edwardian jacket and hat are removed to reveal a faux leather underbust corset girdle worn as protective outerwear over a slim-cut turtleneck, a garment that was popular with female fliers for warmth, rendered in metallic fabric to emulate the streamlined metal body of an airplane.

Like the short-lived fad that originally gave the style its name, the hobble skirt was designed as a temporary illusion. Initially constructed as a straight-skirt culotte, the skirt was created using zippers to connect the legs of the culotte at the center front and at the center back. The skirt is unzipped from the bottom up and gathered at the calves with an elastic drawstring encased in the hem of each culotte leg to form flight knickers.

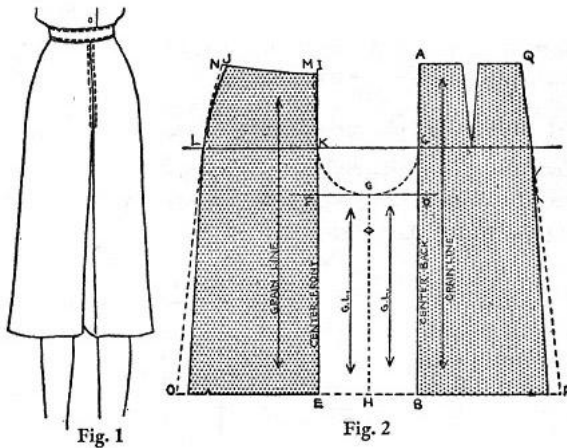


Fig. 1  
Straight Skirt Culotte pattern, 1942. Image credit: [Vintage Sewing](http://VintageSewing.com).

When the final notes of the chanson have faded, the Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix' transformation is completed. The Aviatrix is accessorized with leather gauntlets and boots much like those worn by Quimby, a close-fitting flight cap, and period (1910) protective goggles that were a necessity when flying in an open cockpit. The masquerade concludes with the parting view of the costume disappearing offstage to the receding roar of a biplane engine.



Bausch & Lomb safety goggles, 1910. Photo credit: author.

“Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix: Transformation” attempts to illustrate both the functional nature of the clothing worn by female fliers and the empowered nature of women who first made history in the sky.

*Deborah Parker Wong spent the first 20 years of her career in the fashion industry. She attended FIDM in the late 70s, ran her own garment company during the 80s, and put herself through college as a production fitting model until the early 90s. Today, Deborah reports on the wine industry as Northern California Editor for “[The Tasting Panel](#)” magazine and approaches costuming as “soft sculpture.”*



## How a Woman Learns to Fly

*Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, May 25, 1911  
By Harriet Quimby

"I do feel well qualified to tell a beginner how she must dress and what she must do if she expects to be a flyer. If a woman wants to fly, first of all, she must, of course, abandon skirts and don a knickerbocker uniform. I speak of this particularly, because so many have asked me about my flying costume.

"It may seem strange, but I could not find an aviation suit of any description in the great city of New York – and I tried hard. In my perplexity it occurred to me that the president of the American Tailors' Association, Alexander M. Grean, might be a good advisor; and he was, for it did not take him long to design a suit which has no doubt established the aviation costume for women in this country, if not for all the world, since the French women still continue to wear the clumsy and uncomfortable harem skirt as a flying costume.

"My suit is made of thick wool-back satin, without lining. It is all in one piece, including the hood. By an ingenious combination it can be converted instantly into a conventional appearing walking skirt when not in use in knickerbocker form."

*Editors note: When she created her Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix, the author was not aware that the remarkable Ms. Quimby had anticipated her by over ninety years!*



## The Transformation

The transformation from Edwardian lady to Neo-Edwardian Aviatrix. Counter-clockwise, from top left:

Front view of Edwardian walking suit with velveteen hobble skirt, and jacket with velvet sleeves and collar fastened with a single closure at the chest. Photo credit: Costume-Con 26 staff photo.

Back view of Edwardian walking suit with velveteen hobble skirt and fly-away jacket. Photo credit: [Mike Schweizer](#).

The hat and velveteen jacket are removed to reveal a faux leather underbust corset girdle worn as protective outerwear over a slim-cut turtleneck. Photo credit: Costume-Con 26 staff photo.

The skirt is unzipped from the bottom up and gathered at the calves with an elastic drawstring encased in the hem of each culotte leg to form flight knickers. Photo credit: Costume-Con 26 staff photo.

The back of the aviatrix outfit. Note one of the zippers that aids in transforming the skirt into flight knickers. Photo credit: [Mike Schweizer](#)

The front of the aviatrix outfit; slim-cut turtleneck, popular with female fliers for warmth, is rendered in metallic fabric to emulate the streamlined metal body of an airplane. Photo credit: Costume-Con 26 staff photo.

The aviatrix ready to take flight in a costume reminiscent of ones worn by Harriet Quimby and her friend and fellow aviatrix, Matilde Moissant. Photo credit: Costume-Con 26 staff photo.

*Photos from the Costume-Con 26 Historical Masquerade, San Jose, California, April 26, 2008.*

