

An advertisement for the Escada Heart Bag. It features a central white panel with the brand name 'ESCADA' in large, black, sans-serif capital letters. Below the name, the text 'The new Heart Bag out now.' is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font. Underneath that is the hashtag '#FollowYourHeartFirst' in a similar font. At the bottom of the central panel is a black rectangular button with the white text 'SHOP NOW'. The central panel is flanked by two vertical panels, each showing several red, textured, heart-shaped bags with gold-colored heart-shaped clasps. The background of the entire advertisement is a solid red color.



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## Debunking The Myth Of French Girl Fashion

by Katie Rosseinsky | 19 07 2018



By now, you're surely well acquainted with the headlines. [How To Style A Breton Top Like A French Girl](#). [The Seven Effortless Beauty Secrets All French Girls Swear By](#). [The 10 Pieces Of Clothing A French Girl Would NEVER Wear](#). [This Is How French Girls Shop At Zara \(Or Whatever The French Equivalent Of Zara Is, For The Purposes Of This Article\)](#). In certain corners of the Internet, the fabled French girl is so ubiquitous that you can learn to do almost everything just like 'she' would (don't believe me? As of 2016, New York Magazine's *The Cut* managed to note down [97 Things You Can Do Like A French Girl](https://www.thecut.com/2016/04/63-things-you-can-do-like-a-french-girl.html) (<https://www.thecut.com/2016/04/63-things-you-can-do-like-a-french-girl.html>) in one definitive list). We know that French girls don't wear foundation, and certainly don't contour: all they need is a smudge of eyeliner, a flash of red lipstick and some moisturiser from the pharmacie (perfect bone structure helps, of course). Their hair is messy, but never too messy. They dress simply, in black, white and the perfect shade of stonewashed denim. They don't bother with trends, they probably own investment handbags (Chanel, naturally) and - crucially - they *never* try too hard.

Of course, when we talk about French Girls, we're talking about a handful of women, always thin (as a 2006 diet book tells us, *French Women Don't Get Fat*), always beautiful in a feline sort of way, always white. We're talking about black and white shots of Brigitte Bardot, Jane Birkin, Francoise Hardy, street style photos of Lou Doillon and Julia Restoin Roitfeld, sun-drenched Instagram snaps of model and professional French Girl [Jeanne Damas](https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/shopping/rouje-jeanne-damas-interview/) (<https://graziadaily.co.uk/fashion/shopping/rouje-jeanne-damas-interview/>). If a bona fide 'French Girl' - ie. a female living in France - fact-checked any one of these articles, she'd probably laugh. Because we all know that this homogenous French Girl, always a 'girl' and never a 'woman' because her *jeunesse d'esprit* is part of her appeal, doesn't really exist. But that doesn't stop us clicking on the headlines in search of her elusive secrets - and certainly doesn't stop brands from capitalizing upon on her perpetual charm. But why does this mélange of Breton stripes, messy hair and insouciance have such selling power? And why has this particular fashion myth proved so alluring for so long?



CAROLINE DE MAIGRET, AUTHOR OF HOW TO BE PARISIAN © Shutterstock

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Blame Marie Antoinette if you will. The demand for all things French is by no means a new phenomenon: instead, it dates back to the heady days of the royal court at Versailles, when the French aristocracy carved a niche for themselves as worldwide arbiters of style and taste. It's here that the fashion press was born, distributing prints showing the upper classes in the latest designs to the public. Style soon became one of the country's biggest exports and British designers, seeking to cash in on some Parisian reflected glory, would even create French-sounding brand names: Elizabeth Isaacson, an in-demand court dressmaker of the late Victorian period, used the more glamorous Gallic pseudonym Madame Elise for her work as a society designer. At the turn of the 20th century, *Vogue* magazine solidified this obsession, sending dispatches from Paris to the monied New Yorkers wanting to learn of the latest fashions.

The opening of design houses like Poiret, Chanel, Dior, Schiaparelli and, later, Givenchy only helped to cement this reputation. But if Coco Chanel was the first woman to embody the French Girl myth (bouclé jacket, ballet pumps, maybe don't mention the pro-fascist sympathies), the arrival of nouvelle vague cinema in the 1960s brought a new set of effortlessly stylish heroines, from Brigitte Bardot to Catherine Deneuve to Anna Karina. Half a century later, they're still cited as style icons, now joined in this pantheon by the likes of Charlotte Gainsbourg and Lou Doillon (daughters of first generation French Girl Jane Birkin who, in an ironic twist, actually hails from London), Caroline de Maigret (who literally wrote the book on French Girls, the breezily titled *How To Be Parisian*), actresses Clemence Poesy and Lea Seydoux and influencers like Damas and Camille Charriere. French Girl Style, it seems, begets French Girl Style: the newer generation often namecheck the older as fashion reference points.

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BRIGITTE BARDOT + STRIPY TOP = PEAK FRENCH GIRL © Shutterstock

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Ask a French Girl influencer for their secret and you'll be met with a characteristic insouciance that only further underlines the myth. 'There is no secret!' Jeanne Damas told Grazia last year. 'The only thing you have to do is to move to Paris. For Parisian women, it's not about looks, not about style – it's more about this beautiful city, culture and lifestyle. It's more about attitude.' Morgane Sézalory, founder of cult favourite Sézane, agrees. 'It's really funny because as a Parisian girl, I don't think we are doing anything too different. People characterise French style as effortlessly chic and this fascinates others, but it takes a lot of time and preparation to look effortless. Everything is in the attitude.'

Attitude is hard to quantify, but the financial success of French Girl brands is not. The likes of Isabel Marant, Maje and Sandro are no longer exclusive to the 6th arrondissement: they're global success stories, thanks to the international appeal of their very simple, very chic (and yes, very French) designs. More recently, brands like Damas's [Rouje](https://www.rouje.com/) (<https://www.rouje.com/>) and Sézalory's [Sézane](http://www.sezane.com/en) (<http://www.sezane.com/en>) have become Insta-famous by encapsulating a millennial-friendly version of this aesthetic. What's their secret?



ROUJE'S LATEST CAMPAIGN OFFERS A QUINTESSENTIAL SLICE OF PARISIAN LIFE... © Rouje

'There's a romanticized concept of French style which resonates with customers globally, but especially with shoppers in the US and the UK,' Charlotte Austin, editor at fashion search platform [Lyst](https://www.lyst.co.uk/) (<https://www.lyst.co.uk/>) explain. 'We've found that emails and articles on 'How to get the French girl look' consistently sell product, despite the irony that there's not really a fashion formula to get it right; you're buying into an attitude as much as a Breton striped top or chic white shirt.' In 2017, French fashion campaigns generated 28 percent more interest and revenue than London or Scandi-based campaigns on the search platform. Though quintessentially French labels like Chanel, Dior and Givenchy remain inaccessible for the majority of us, the new guard of French Girl brands sit in the middle of the market: they're aspirational, but achievable. According to Austin, 'the new wave of French indie brands offer an affordable entry point to buy into that insouciant dream. Hero pieces from brands like Sézane and Rouje are covetable because they're hard to get hold of, in limited quantities, only available through their own e-shop, but also because we all want to buy into that "je ne sais quoi."

It surely helps, too, that many of the so-called French Girl staples are genuinely good investments, balancing classic style with good quality. 'What matters for the customer is that we are here to sell a real story,' says Patrice Guinebault, CEO of [Saint James](https://www.saint-james.com/gb/) (<https://www.saint-james.com/gb/>), the brand famed for their authentic Breton tees. 'So we give them that: you can come and visit the factory and see what we do. We could produce very low-quality t-shirts, or make them in the UK, for example, but the brand wouldn't sell.'

But practical considerations can't solely account for the French Girl's enduring popularity. Cliché or not, perhaps there's some truth in Damas and Sézalory's assertion that it's all about a specific attitude – a confidence that's not always easy to embody. Image consultant and personal stylist [Keren Beaumont](https://www.kerenbeaustyling.com/) (<https://www.kerenbeaustyling.com/>) believes that the French Girl myth boils down to learned behaviour. 'French girls are brought up to know who they are, to develop a sense of self-appreciation coupled with a routine of self-care and good grooming,' she says. 'It may not be that we want to wear her exact pair of jeans or her Gerard Darel handbag, but what we do want is her confidence, and her ability to look so natural.'

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