



Fashion: A Detective Story

by James Laver

As soon as fashion crops up, some hard-headed fellow who takes pride in having no illusions is sure to say: "It's all a romp. Half a dozen men in Paris get together and decide to change the fashion. They want to sell their goods. It's as simple as that."

It is not as simple as that, for if it were, fashion would be

arbitrary and meaningless. But that is just what fashion never is, and one can see this quite plainly when looking at the fashions of the past. Every style seems completely appropriate to its epoch. We cannot imagine Madame de Pompadour, or the Empress Josephine, or the early Victorian lady in anything but the clothes she actually wore. Each represents completely the ideals of her time: elegant artificiality or post-Revolutionary morals, or the prudery of the rising middle class. When seen in retrospect, fashions seem to express their era. Although it is more difficult to draw conclusions from contemporary clothes, the same principles which hold for the clothes of the past must hold for clothes of the present and the future.

I am a social historian, if I may call myself that, a museum official, and my interest in fashion began in a roundabout way. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, we have, I suppose, the largest collection of miniatures in the world, and people are constantly bringing in their family heirlooms for an opinion. "This is my great-great-aunt Augusta who danced at the Waterloo Ball," one might say. I would reply, with growing confidence as the years went by, "I'm afraid there must be something wrong with the family records. This portrait represents a woman of about twenty wearing the clothes of 1840. She couldn't have danced at the Waterloo Ball in 1815."

For this purely utilitarian purpose, I began to assemble a file of fashion. I found that I could date any picture to within a year in the nineteenth century, to within two years in the eighteenth century, to within ten years in the seventeenth. I could, that is, if there was a fashionable woman in the picture.

Men won't do, for men's clothes perpetually formalize themselves and do not follow the principle of fashion. Peasants won't do, because peasant, or regional costume as it is

properly called, changes by place and not by time. Until the fourteenth century, that was how all fashion changed. During the greater part of human history, if you stayed where you were, nothing altered. If you went to the next village, however, everything was different. Today, if you travel the world, everything is the same. If you stay in one spot for a year, however, practically all the women change their hats. We have exchanged the tyranny of place for the tyranny of time.

When I had assembled my file of fashion, I began to make such curious dis-coveries as the strange relationship which seemed to exist between clothes, especially women's clothes, and architecture. It is generally agreed, for example, that the dominant architectural shape of the Middle Ages was the sharply pointed lancet arch. Sharpened still further, it is the pinnacle or the steeple on a church. Similarly, in the fifteenth century, men's shoes were so long they sometimes had to be turned back and tied to the knees. The female headdress, the hennin, was correspondingly steeple-shaped. By 1500 the lancet arch was blunted, and became what we call the Tudor Arch. When Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509, his shoes were not sharp and pointed like those of his father Henry VII, but blunted. The headdress of his wife, Catherine of Aragon, was blunted too --- just like the Tudor Arch.

In the eighteenth century, the dominant architectural motif of the period the French call Louis Seize and the English, Adam Brothers, was the neo-classical pilaster. One can see the same motif as it was interpreted in fashion, in the costumes of Empress Josephine.

Simple, straight, her dress is typical of what I call the post-crisis style. After a great social upheaval like the French Revolution women have a burst of emancipation, sometimes only momentary. When about ten years have elapsed and fashion settles down into a post-crisis style, women's clothes become 'little girl' clothes. They are subconsciously designed to 'to down' the older woman.

If we take the dress of 1925, another post-crisis period, we find that, different as the dresses of 1800 and 1925 are, it is plain that they have certain things in common. The lines are as straight as nature will allow, or even straighter; the waist is the wrong place: very high in 1800, very low in 1925. In both years, the hair was worn short. It seemed to me that in the next post-crisis epoch we would see something similar and therefore, after World War II, I predicted that in approximately ten years we would have a dress with straight lines and a wandering waist. Just about that time

Dior introduced his H-line and his A-line. I think it is fair to say that this style, with the chemises that followed, has a definite resemblance to the clothes of 1800 and 1925.

In violent contrast to these post-crisis styles was the full-skirted dress of the relatively placid mid-nineteenth century. The skirt





was swelled by what might be called a machine age triumph, a steel hoop that substituted for a prodigious number of petticoats. Its size said: "This is an age of male domination, expanding population, social stability, and 'hard' money," just as the skimpy clothes of 1800 and 1925 said, "This is an age of female emancipation, declining birthrate, social instability, and inflation." (Incidentally, the frame of the hoop bore a curious resemblance to the butt-end of the Crystal Palace, which was erected in 1851).

The hoop was hollow and if you are looking for a symbol of mid-Victorian hypocrisy, you could hardly find a better. The hoop seemed to say, "You cannot come near enough to touch my hand," and yet it swayed in every wind. It was also uncomfortable, and a deplorable number of young women were burned to death when their clothes caught in open fires.

Nothing is more revealing of an age than its hypocrisies and perhaps analyzing them can help us to understand how fashion works. There seem to me to be three principles: The Hierarchal Principle, or dressing for class; the Seduction Principle or dressing to attract the opposite sex; and the Utility Principle or dressing for warmth, etc.

Women's clothes follow, on the whole, the Seduction Principle (slightly modified by the Utility Principle) because men largely select their wives by their attractiveness as women. The object of women's clothes is, therefore, to make their wearers attractive to men. Many women say, "I dress to please myself" or even, "I dress to displease other women." Perhaps this is the formula: Women dress, in competition with other women, to please themselves by attracting men.

Women, on the other hand, select their husbands with the hope that they will be able to support a family. Men's clothes, therefore, are essentially hierarchal, or class-conscious. Compared to the constant mutations of women's dress, men's fashions are like fossils. The psychologists have invented something they call "the shifting erogenous zone". In other words, woman as a whole is a desirable object, but the mind of man is too weak to take it all in at once. He must be persuaded to concentrate on one bit of that object, and it is the function of fashion to emphasize and exaggerate that little bit until the whole thing becomes a bore causing the erogenous zone to shift.

In 1925 I wrote in my diary that I found the newly exposed legs of women rather exciting. By 1930 legs were a bore, and attention had to be directed elsewhere. In 1915, however, a woman in 1925 clothes would have been arrested for indecent exposure. This is the game seduction plays with prudery.

We can therefore draw up a chart and say: the same dress is indecent ten years before its time; daring one year before its time; chic (contemporarily seductive) in its time; dowdy five years after its time; hideous twenty years after its time; amusing thirty years after its



time; romantic one hundred years after its time; beautiful one hundred and fifty years after its time. It would have been quite impossible to revive the fashions of the mid-twenties until thirty years had elapsed. Thirty years elapsed and behold! Those fashions or modes very like them, came back again.

If we could understand the full significance of a woman's hat we could prophesy her clothes for the next year, the interior decoration of the next two years, the architecture of the next ten years, and we would have a fairly accurate notion of the pressures, political, economic and religious that go to make the shape of an age. Properly evaluated, fashion is never a frivolity.

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James Laver (1899-1975) was a noted fashion historian and the author of numerous books and articles. Some of these titles are out of print but can be found through used/rare booksellers.

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