

Fashion's Role in the 1920s

Haley Schultz

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Professor David Geraghty

The 1920s woman was no longer bound to the restricted style of clothing, or societies outdated characterization of her. The female image eventually modernized and became what is known today as a “flapper”. Women changed their image as they started advancing in society, the workplace, and the economy. Makeup was being used, long hair is being cut into short bobs, and clothing is becoming more comfortable and revealing. Women were becoming an iconic image of advancement and progress of the female gender through fashion.

A major fashion change in the 1920s was hemlines that rose to or above the knee. The dresses were made to be comfortable and practical for the working woman. The more scandalous look was not for men; however, its purpose was to show the independence of the woman herself. Shortening the dress length showed how women could choose what they wanted to wear, and how they wanted to portray themselves. The new fashion trends allowed women to “achieve self-fulfillment by constantly recreating themselves through consumption.”¹ The woman's identity was an independent and personal decision, and was no longer under male or societal scrutiny.

The dress and skirt lengths started rising little by little starting in the early 1900s. This trend was thought to fluctuate by the economy. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, H.W. Gossard said that “when a business is bad and national income down, skirts drop and waistlines have a tendency to tighten. When business is good and national income up, skirts are short and waistlines are not only loose, they are often nonexistent.”² From then on the design of skirts were

¹ Kendra Van Cleave, “Fashioning the College Woman: Dress, Gender, and Sexuality at Smith College in the 1920s”, *The Journal of American Culture*, 32, (2009), 4-13.

² Ken McKenna, “Skirt Lengths Hint Slump Ending”, *New York Herald Tribune*, (1958), 6

also considered a consequence of the economy. After the Panic of 1908, the length of skirts began to rise at a steady pace. In 1915, as the economy got better, the skirt length reached “a shocking eight inches above the ground.”³ Once the early to mid 1920s hit, the length of dresses and skirts rose to above the knee. A dress or skirt above the knee had never been seen before, and was seen by business men as “meaning prosperity.”⁴ When a man saw women and advertisements of really high skirts, they knew that the economy was or is bustling.

The new design of a loosened short skirt was made by a French designer named Paul Poiret in the early 1900s. His striking fashion designs soon became popular in the early 1900s. When the 1920s hit, the style of skirts and dresses “incorporated comparatively looser construction, shorter skirts, and more relaxed foundation garments” which is what Paul Poiret's known for⁵. A 1920s trend was the use of trimmings on dresses, hats, headbands, and skirts. Trimmings were made from ribbons, flowers, ruffles, fringe, beads, and many other things. The use of trimmings made women's clothing fashionable, and since “each frock had a trimming of its own it made it distinctive and original.”⁶ For instance, fringe trimmings could hang from dresses and when a women would move the fringe would move with her. This movement of a dress was very popular. Also, things such as flowers and beads would be sewn into dresses or hats. Braiding fabrics was common, “nothing could be simpler than braiding strands of organdie loosely and using them to border a pink satin negligee and to finish the sleeves.”⁷ Sometimes beads were woven in the braid to add accent to the clothing piece. Trimmings were a very

³ McKenna.

⁴ Ibid.,6.

⁵ Cleave

⁶ Sara Marshall Cook, “Variety is Fashion’s Keynote”, *New- York Tribune*, (June 13, 1920), 3

⁷ Ibid.,3.

fashionable part of the 1920s and caused women to still have a feminine touch to their new sense of style.

In addition to shorter dress lengths and trimmings, women also resorted to a new hairstyle. Long hair had always been an inconvenience for women, due to its upkeep and styling. So, to prove women's progress, the bob hairstyle came into play. Women cut their hair to their neck or chin length and styled with a ribbon or headband. When a woman went to get the style of hair it “was often celebrated as a crowning achievement for women’s equality.”⁸ The bob hairstyle was considered to be a freeing experience; however, it resulted in more upkeep in order to keep it trimmed and styled. Women did not mind the upkeep though, since the hairstyle was a symbol of progression. Women saw that cutting their hair was a way of showing society that they did not have to follow the traditional look of a woman. For example, Lisa Tickner said that women “did not argue for the right to be unwomanly, but for the right to define its terms.”⁹ They now could metaphorically cut not only their hair, but the ties to what society thought women should look like.

Another form of women's progression through fashion was the use of cosmetics. Instead of a natural makeup look, women chose to wear “visibly obvious cosmetics.”¹⁰ Using makeup can change many features of someone. Whether it be to enhance specific features or the whole face. Women in the 1920s saw this as a way to “break from tradition” and to change their physical image from what they are born with¹¹. Wearing makeup helped women intensify their

⁸ Cleave.

⁹ Sarah J Moore, “Making a Spectacle of Suffrage: The National Suffrage Pageant, 1913,” *The Journal of American Culture*, 20, (1997), 89.

¹⁰ Cleave.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-13.

sexuality because “the beauty products became fundamental to their construction and expression of public and personal identities.”¹² Women needed to show that they are capable of moving up in society while embracing their gender.

One woman that put all of these trends together was Zelda Fitzgerald. She was the first woman in America to be considered a flapper. Zelda Fitzgerald wore all the new fashions together and made a statement. During the 1920s Zelda Fitzgerald modeled these new trends for women with confidence¹³.

Along with women’s progression, fashion was one of the components of acquiring woman’s suffrage. One significant example of this was the female suffrage pageant in 1913. The pageant was put on by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The pageant was put together, on “March 3, 1913, the day before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration.”¹⁴ Women came from all over the United States to participate in this pageant. The pageant was put together from women to march through the Capitol to get the right to vote. It was unusual at the time for women protest like this, it “stood completely outside of conventional standards of feminine behavior and propriety while negotiating new definitions and boundaries of women’s role in society.”¹⁵ The pageant was another symbol for women's progression, it demonstrated change of how women portrayed themselves and where they belonged in society.

Organizers used the pageant to make a memorable spectacle outside of the capital. Symbolism was a main component of this march. For example, women in the pageant held a banner with a quote from Abraham Lincoln stating “No country can exist half slave and half

¹² Cleave.

¹³ “Zelda Fitzgerald, the ‘First American Flapper.’”

¹⁴ Moore.

¹⁵ Ibid.,89.

free.”¹⁶ As they marched to the Capitol “nine women dressed in white represented the enlightenment of the nine states with equal suffrage while thirty nine woman dressed in black represented those states in which women had no political voice.”¹⁷ These women made an iconic statement to society through articles of clothing. The National American Woman Association set “the pageant apart was its use of traditional pictorial rhetoric and iconography as a political instrument.”¹⁸ This was an interesting way to make a statement about women's suffrage, because they took fashion, something that was already pushing the progression of women, and used it as a means of gaining suffrage. The pageant wanted to show that the “representations of women as elegant, graceful and above all decorative objects, the allegorical tableaux at once drew upon and challenged conventional notions of bourgeois femininity.”¹⁹ Women wanted to be seen as more than a housewife or object, they wanted to show what they could contribute to society.

Women who made it into the Capitol and became members of the House of Representatives had a very professional wardrobe. The typical work day outfit for these women were “uniformly dressed, most of them preferring black or dark silk dresses cut in simple but fashionable style.”²⁰ Being in Congress was a major step for women; however their attire was still judged by men in their offices and even portrayed a certain way by cartoon artists. Typically, cartoonists drew “women who entered the arena of public affairs as either ultramanishly dressed or with curls and flounces and many hampering details of clothes.”²¹ This was an untrue vision of women, they were always dressed conservatively and appropriate for the workplace. Those

¹⁶ Ibid.,89.

¹⁷ Moore.

¹⁸ Ibid.,89.

¹⁹ Ibid.,89.

²⁰ Vylla Poe Wilson, “Fashions of Capital Women”, *The Washington Post*, (1929), 9

²¹ Ibid.,9.

woman worked hard to get to their positions in Congress and they still “dress comfortably and still can be as smartly and modishly dressed as the woman who stays by her fireside.”²² Even though those women were in Congress they still kept up with the trending styles of the 1920s average women. This shows how much fashion played a role in the progression of women.

Women’s fashion played a major role in the advancement and progression of women in the 1920s because it symbolized change. The change of women's clothing showed that women can chose what they wear instead of being told by society. Women could finally be comfortable and stylish at the same time. Traditional womens clothing and hairstyles were holding women down and not letting them progress or expand their roles in society. So when women started breaking the structured rules around them, then they could progress and be more than a housewife or an object.

²² Wilson.

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