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Lacey Johnson

Ouachita Baptist University

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THE EVOLUTION OF FASHION

Clothing of Upper Class American Women from 1865 to 1920



Lacey Johnson
Senior Honors Thesis
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Introduction

Changing economic, political and social pressures throughout history have impacted the way human beings live their daily lives. One of the many basic areas affected by these historical changes is the area of the wardrobe. The way a person dresses has traditionally shown his or her social status, occupation, and even political views. Political and social pressure particularly influence the clothing styles favored by women. In what way, however, does the average wardrobe reflect the cultural considerations of the time, and what can the prevailing fashions of bygone eras reveal about the pressures of those days? Specifically, what do the frequent and drastic style shifts throughout the late 1800's and early 1900's reveal about the nature of American society between the Civil War and World War I?

Arguably the most visible aspects of Victorian society revolved around the ideals of external morality and social status. While Victorians are stereotyped in modern society as uptight and moralistic, in reality their perceived moral values often applied only to their public lives. Society did not care what its members did in private, so long as they did not get caught. This is strikingly evident in many of the business practices of the era, which is marked by the rise of the corporation as both a business model and an important influence in national politics. Rather than achieving success through hard labor and being content with what they earned on their own,

"[a]spirating men, thirsty for wealth and power, demanded special privileges from the national, state and local governments, and cared not about the means they used to gain their ends. They embarked upon their schemes at a time when the country was suffering a moral relapse from the lofty idealism of war days, and when the upswing of prosperity continuing from the war made people careless as regards

official rectitude."¹

The corruption hiding beneath the surface of many social and political elites was mirrored in the fashion industry during the late 1800s and early 1900s. While most upper-class men and women chose to have their clothing custom-made specifically for them, those of the middle class increasingly purchased ready-made clothing crafted in sweatshop conditions. Their fashionable exteriors came at the expense of the working-class laborers forced to live and work in squalid conditions, much as the wealth generated by upper-class businessmen often came at the expense of working-class employees.

Social status was the main concern of most Victorian middle- and upper-class individuals. "In effect, the Gilded Age was also a gilded age,' a rapidly evolving 'credentialed society' in which individuals and groups reinforced and codified their status,"² and Victorians constantly sought to raise their status. Many times it fell to the wives and daughters of wealthy men to accomplish this rise in social status. "The pursuit of leisure"³ and excessive consumption characterized the social elite of this era, "especially on the part of the newly rich eager to vault into the ranks of the exclusive,"⁴ and fashion was one of the more visible ways in which a woman could flaunt these ideals.

It is important to note that women's clothing, rather than men's, attained this importance as an image of social standing due to a number of reasons specific to women's roles in society at the time. Prevailing gender norms dictated that men should work outside of the home while women oversaw the domestic sphere. This meant, firstly, that men were expected to dress in a

¹ Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *Political and Social Growth of the American People, 1865-1940*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 75.

² Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: 1876-1915* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 252.

³ Schlesinger, 213.

⁴ *Ibid.*

very specific, practical, business-like manner that changed very little over the course of the Victorian era, while women could dress in restrictive clothing that limited movement in favor of appearance. Secondly, the growth of wealth and its corresponding increase in leisure time meant that society women – who did not have to aid in providing for their families – now had more time to spend on their appearance. The wealthier a woman was, the more servants she could afford to employ and, thus, the more complicated her wardrobe could be. As one social reformer wrote, speaking of the late 1800s,

The society woman must have one or two velvet dresses which cannot cost less than \$500 each... She must possess thousands of dollars' worth of laces ... Walking dresses cost from \$50 to \$300; ball dresses are frequently imported from Paris at a cost of from \$500 to \$1,000... Then there are traveling dresses in black silk, in pongee, velour, in pique, which range in price from \$75 to \$175. Then there are evening robes in Swiss muslin, robes in linen for the garden and croquet playing, dresses for horse races and for yacht races ... dresses for breakfast and for dinner, dresses for receptions and for parties....⁵

The importance of obvious display of wealth in women's clothing as exhibited by this listing is magnified when it is realized that during the same period “the average middle-class man”⁶ earned approximately \$10 a week.⁷

Because of its importance to a woman's image, and, thus, to her family's social standing, Victorian fashion developed a very specific etiquette. "To be fashionable, without taking it to the extreme, implied an easy familiarity with the capital and a participation in the best social

⁵ Kristina Harris, ed., *Authentic Victorian Fashion Patterns: A Complete Lady's Wardrobe* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), iii.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

activities,"⁸ and fashion soon demanded specific clothing for specific times of day. This began merely with day dresses and evening dresses and evolved into nearly a dozen different types of dress for different hours and occasions. The emergence of standardized railroad time in the United States in 1883 further increased the number of types of dress required by allowing the day to be divided more specifically into periods of time. Generally speaking, dress became more formal as the hour grew later, and more revealing as it became more formal.⁹

Women's clothing was not only codified by time of day, but by the age of the woman. Younger, unmarried women dressed in "youthful and innocent" (19th Century Fashion 117) clothing, meant to reflect the Victorian ideal of pure femininity. White, the most popular color especially for evening dresses, further symbolized purity and availability for marriage. Single women's clothing was often less expensive than that of married women, as cheaper clothing was thought to be a symbol of thrift, which would hopefully attract a husband. In an era where the end goal of many mothers was to achieve for their daughters "a brilliant international marriage,"¹⁰ attracting a husband would have been one of the main concerns with a young woman's wardrobe.

Married women had more freedom in their dress. Their garments were usually constructed of heavier fabrics, richer colors, and more elaborate decoration. It was the married women who bore the greatest weight of social scrutiny, as their appearance in society reflected on their husbands' positions. Beading, embroidery, and expensive laces emerged as obvious ways to exhibit wealth and position through wardrobe. These women, the "young and fashionable

⁸ Penelope Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1992), 118

⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰ Schlesinger, 213.

few,"¹¹ generally set the trends that filtered down through the levels of society. Once a woman reached later middle age or became widowed, however, her wardrobe became extremely restricted. Widows and older women generally limited their clothing to somber shades, such as black and gray, with more reserved embellishment.

Despite the strict rules governing what was socially acceptable for a woman to wear, the style of women's fashion changed drastically throughout the Gilded Age. The reason for this is twofold. First, fashion has always been and will always be a constantly changing phenomenon, based solely on creative innovation. According to Stella Blum, former curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's extensive costume collection,

"Fashion entails constant change, but the manner in which it changes varies according to a general pattern. At first a new silhouette is quickly evolved. During its evolution, it is worn simply, with little trimming. Once the form has established itself, the development of the silhouette slows down, and the process of decoration begins to build up a fresh aspect to the fashion. Then the silhouette changes again."¹²

This constant evolution in silhouette is certainly one of the most striking aspects of late nineteenth and early twentieth century clothing. More importantly than the organic change internally inherent to the institution of fashion, however, is the societal change which exerts an external force upon this institution, and few periods of history demonstrate the effects of this change as vividly as the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the United States. Without a doubt, the developments in American women's fashion between the Civil War and the end of World War

¹¹ Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 2: Englishwomen's Dresses and Their Construction, c.1860-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 3.

¹² Stella Blum, ed., *Victorian Fashions and Costumes From Harper's Bazar, 1867-1898* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), vi.

I mirrored the changing role women played in American society. In order to correctly understand precisely how this relationship played out in a practical sense, it is necessary to thoroughly investigate each of the major changes in high fashion throughout this period of history, and understand the underlying philosophies that informed each of these changes.

The Crinoline Era (to 1869)

The iconic hoopskirt silhouette began with Empress Eugénie of France. Married to Emperor Napoleon III, a man with dubious claim to any sort of French throne, Eugénie sought to legitimize her husband's rule by consciously relating the fashions of her court to those of Louis XIV. The enormity of the skirt set off the fashionably narrow waist, created through the use of steel- or whalebone-stiffened corsets. While the sheer size of the most fashionable crinolines, which expanded with the wearer's income and social status, prevented most physical activity, the corsets of this period did not. This is evidenced by the fact that a large portion of working-class women wore corsets throughout the Victorian period. Rather than actually preventing labor, the corset served to provide a fashionable silhouette and “to impress upon the beholder the fact (often a fiction) that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work.”¹³ In other words, the corset was first adopted by upper-class women as a means of displaying their ability to avoid manual labor, and then co-opted by middle- and working-class women who wished to imitate the fashionable appearance of their social superiors.

In much the same way as the corset, the hoopskirt became popular among the working class. This led upper-class women to increase the size of their skirts, especially in evening dresses, to impractical dimensions, making it apparent to any observer that they could not engage in any sort of manual labor. These enormous skirts demonstrated their wearers' wealth in other ways as well. They were nearly impossible to don without assistance, which implied that any

¹³ Valerie Steele, *The Corset* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 49.

women who appeared in one could afford to keep domestic servants. Wide skirts also, by necessity, contained more fabric than narrow ones, which drove the price of a dress up and made it less attainable to the lower echelons of society. Thus, the width of one's skirt became a status symbol, with wealthier women donning wider skirts, and evening gowns dwarfing the crinolines of day and afternoon dresses.

The immense dimensions of the most fashionable crinolines “not only enhanced the natural contours of the feminine form but also underlined women's dependent status,”¹⁴ indicating that a woman dressed in this style conformed to the Victorian ideal of femininity, which was restricted to upper-class women. This ideal included a slender waist, seen as a “natural sign of superior 'race' or hereditary class status,”¹⁵ in contrast to the more burly figures of working-class women, who were “envisioned as being



*Fig. 1: Silk taffeta dress, c. 1865.
Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles
County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).*

large and strong like men.”¹⁶ The fashionable woman concerned herself far more with appearance than with her own comfort, for, in the 1860s, fashion served to beautify rather than to enhance one's lifestyle.

This mindset began to change, however slowly, toward the middle of the decade. Charles Frederick Worth, arguably the single most important influence on women's fashion in the mid-Victorian era, introduced the walking dress. Worth, a British national living in Paris, secured the

¹⁴ Byrde, 54.

¹⁵ Steele, 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

coveted position of dressmaker to Empress Eugénie in 1860¹⁷ and went on to become the most celebrated couturier of the Victorian Era and the first fashion designer in the modern sense. In 1863, Worth debuted a day dress on which the hem had been shortened by the amount of ten centimeters, or approximately four inches. This seemingly insignificant alteration allowed a woman much more freedom of movement and peace of mind, as she no longer had to worry about muddying her expensive skirts by allowing them to drag on the ground when walking. Another popular version of the walking dress looped floor-length dresses up over a brightly-colored underskirt, protecting the dress material and providing a fashionable two-colored toilette.¹⁸ These innovations provided some of the first instances in which Victorian fashion trended toward practicality rather than merely appearance.

Yet another of Worth's innovations came in the form of gored, rather than straight gathered skirts. Beginning in 1860,¹⁹ dressmakers chose to cut skirts as angled panels of fabric, rather than merely gathering the top of a wide rectangle. This practice reduced bulk in the waistline – a key point in the desired crinoline silhouette – and allowed the skirt to flow smoothly from waist to hem. While developed to enhance the crinoline silhouette, the gored skirt actually contributed to its demise by reducing the bulk of the skirt, thereby reducing the need for a sturdy supporting frame. The reign of the plain gored skirt was brief, as it was soon supplanted by layered “double” skirts, which evolved into pannier dresses by the end of the decade.²⁰

Worth and his creations were not the only important influence on American women's

¹⁷ Diana de Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1980), 37-38.

¹⁸ Christina Walkley and Vanda Foster, *Crinolines and Crimping Irons* (London: Peter Owen, Ltd., 1978), 22.

¹⁹ Byrde, 63.

²⁰ C. Willett Cunnington, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Dover, 1990), 231.

fashion in the years following the Civil War. Multiple technological innovations drastically changed the face of women's clothing in the mid- to late 1860s. The first reliable transatlantic telegraph cable, laid in 1866, allowed rapid communication between Europe and the United States. This allowed American dressmakers and socialites more rapid news of changing trends in England and France, traditional seats of fashion, which, in turn, influenced their fashion choices. The development of American fashion periodicals, such as *Harper's Bazar* in 1867 and *Godey's Lady's Book*, published from 1830 until 1898, also influenced popular fashion. These magazines featured fashion plates – some even in color – illustrating what well-dressed women should wear in the upcoming months. Plates were based off of French designs, but “altered to meet American tastes and needs.”²¹ *Harper's Bazar*, in particular, appealed to women who had the luxury of domestic help, as many of the garments pictured in its pages could never have been donned without assistance.²²

The growing popularity and availability of the sewing machine also contributed to development of fashion in the 1860s. Patented by Elias Howe in 1846, the lockstitch sewing machine was improved upon by Isaac Singer, who founded its first mass production company in 1851.²³ I. M. Singer & Co. developed the first sewing machine powered by a foot treadle rather than hand cranking, and utilized the industrial idea of replaceable parts to speed manufacturing time. This allowed the company to reduce the price of its machines, which in turn allowed more American households to purchase their own. The sewing machine allowed seamstresses to craft garments much more rapidly than in previous decades, which in turn increased the amount of fabric that went into a wealthy woman's dresses and the amount of trimming layered atop them.

²¹ Blum, vi.

²² *Ibid.*, vii.

²³ Sandra Ley, *Fashion for Everyone* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 7.

The invention of the sewing machine also allowed for mass production of clothing, leading toward the democratization of fashion. “It was impossible to distinguish the mistresses from the maids”²⁴ in some cases, forcing wealthy women and their dressmakers to constantly innovate if they wished to keep their clothing styles exclusive. In particular, the corset began to be mass-produced, especially following Edwin Izod's 1868 invention of steam molding. This process involved placing a starch-soaked corset onto a heated metal form, shaped like an “ideal” woman's torso. The corset was then allowed to dry into the correct shape. Steam molding allowed seamstresses to manufacture corsets without fitting each one to a specific owner, and consequently greatly increased production.²⁵

The silhouette popular in the 1860s among fashionable women depended heavily on the use of corsets. Stiffened with strips of steel or whalebone, the corsets of the 1860s were designed to fit comfortably in the bust and hips. Only the waist area was laced tightly enough to reduce the natural body size, providing contrast between the enormous skirts and a slender waist. The silhouette of this decade allowed for shorter corsets that only covered a few inches of the hips, as anything below the waist was well hidden beneath the skirts. Corsets were constructed of either cotton jean, similar to modern denim, or of coutil, a tightly-woven cotton fabric designed specifically for corset construction. Often they were colored, with red and black being two of the most popular color options, and many times trimmed with lace or ribbons.

Corsets were worn over chemises – long, sleeveless or short-sleeved undershirts constructed of cotton or linen. Chemises served as a barrier between the skin and the corset, as such a plain garment was much easier to launder than a complicated corset and cheaper to replace when and if the fabric finally wore out. They generally hung about to the knee. A corset

²⁴ Steele, 47.

²⁵ Ibid., 46.

cover came between the corset and the outer layer of clothing, allowing the bodice to lay smoothly and preventing the corset bones from showing through.

The huge skirts of the crinoline era owed their shape and volume to a specially-constructed support system hidden beneath the outer layer of clothing. The “as many as six or seven cotton or linen petticoats”²⁶ of the 1850s gave way to cage petticoats – a network of steel hoops made possible by the invention of Henry Bessemer’s steel refining process in 1855. These newfangled devices provided relief from the stifling heat produced by layers and layers of petticoats while still allowing for skirts of tremendous dimensions. The cage was covered by



Fig. 2: Woman's cage crinoline, c. 1865. Cotton-braid-covered steel, cotton tapes, and cane. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

one or two ordinary petticoats in order to ensure that dress skirts lay smoothly upon it. Cotton, linen, and flannel – particularly during wintertime and in shades of red – were all used frequently in petticoat construction. To cover their legs, women wore long silk, linen, cotton, or wool stockings in a variety of colors, together with drawers. These, like the chemises, were generally made of cotton or linen, and resembled modern capri pants. Most commonly they remained split down the middle in order to facilitate use of the privy. Layered with the crinoline and multiple petticoats, these items formed the foundation for any fashionable woman's wardrobe.

Day dresses in the crinoline era featured high necklines and long sleeves, characteristics of daytime wear that would endure for the remainder of the century. The high-waisted day bodices, which could be either attached to or separate from the skirts, fitted close to the torso and

²⁶ Walkley and Foster, 42.

generally fastened up the front by means of buttons or a series of hooks and eyes. The cinched-in waistline was often accented with a sash or belt. Sleeves of daytime dresses became progressively more fitted throughout the 1860s as bell-like “pagoda” and “bishop” sleeves gave way to narrow jacket-style sleeves. Day dresses generally did not feature trains, in order to facilitate walking, and could be looped up over a decorative underskirt – often of a bright, contrasting color – during inauspicious weather to protect them from dirt, in a manner similar to a walking dress. They were generally constructed of cotton, or, as the price of cotton dropped and the fabric became more accessible to the working class, of silk or fine wool fabrics.

In contrast to day dresses, evening dresses throughout the Victorian era had shorter sleeves and deeper necklines. Skirts increased in width with the formality of the occasion, commonly reaching five or six yards around the hem.²⁷ Evening gowns featured elaborate and extravagant trimming, including hand or machine-made lace, fringe, ribbons, and flowers. They were generally constructed of more expensive silk fabrics, ranging in texture from heavy velvets to lightweight tulle, though the heavier fabrics were generally reserved for older women.

The prominence of wide skirts prevented women from donning long coats in cold weather. Instead, capes, cloaks, short jackets, and shawls became popular, as they could be worn over regular clothing without crushing the dresses beneath. These garments were often edged with lace or fur and crafted of velvet, sealskin, flannel, quilted silk or “plush” – a long-napped silk or cotton fabric resembling fur.²⁸ Both shoes and boots were common as footwear, generally with a slight heel. Boots were made of leather and could fasten with either buttons or lacing, while shoes generally laced or merely slipped on and were constructed either of leather or, in the case of evening shoes, of a fabric to match the dress they were worn with. These styles of shoe

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ Cunningham, 434.

remained popular throughout the remainder of the century. Kid gloves, longer for evening than for day wear, covered the hands. Caps or small decorative headdresses were worn indoors, while small bonnets and hats, usually with veils, were worn outdoors over complicated hairstyles. A varied assortment of brooches, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and decorative buttons completed the well-dressed woman's toilette.

Clothing colors became increasingly more striking and vivid throughout this decade due to the invention, in 1856, of synthetic aniline dyes. These dyes were easier and cheaper to produce than traditional organic dyes, could be created in a brighter range of colors, and held these colors without fading for a much longer time. Among the first aniline colors produced were such new shades as mauve, fuchsia, and magenta. Dresses in bright colors, and particularly in more than one shade, became more and more popular throughout the 1860s.²⁹ Even dresses that did not feature garish colors usually exhibited some sort of contrast between dark and light or between two different patterns of fabric. White remained popular for summer dresses due to its coolness, and for evening dresses due to its visibility in the low-light conditions found in most ballrooms. Queen Victoria's fondness of Scottish tartans created a vogue for plaid fabrics that continued for the next several decades, and her decision to wear all black after the death of her husband Prince Albert in 1861 elevated black to the position of a fashionable color.

The crinoline silhouette, popular in some form or another since the 1840s, began to fall out of favor in the years after the Civil War. Beginning in 1865, the skirt's fullness began a steady migration toward the back, due mainly to the influence of Worth and his distaste for the enormous crinolines.³⁰ Worth found huge, round crinolines impractical and absurd. He led a movement toward a more elliptical-shaped skirt silhouette, flattening out the skirt front and

²⁹ Byrde, 62.

³⁰ de Marly, 81-85.

“thereby enabling the wearer to be able to make some human contact with her hands,”³¹ as a woman was no longer surrounded by masses of skirt that isolated her from the rest of the world. As with the walking dress, it was the practicality of this change that inspired women to adopt it. For the rest of the decade, the fashionable silhouette featured an elongated, rather than round, skirt with a flattened front, anticipating the rise of the bustle in the 1870s.

The Early Bustle (1869-77)

Worth's influence on women's fashion in general, and American fashion in particular, was interrupted briefly from 1870-71 by Napoleon III's defeat at the hands of Prussia and the rise of the French Third Republic.³² While the couturier quickly returned to his position as the most influential man in the fashion world, his two most important clients, Empress Eugénie and Princess von Metternich, were forced out of Paris and no longer available to model his latest designs. Eugénie's place as foremost royal in the fashion world was taken by Alexandra, Princess of Wales, the wife of the future Edward VII of England. Alexandra's most notable contribution to popular fashion was the retaining of extremely high necklines and the advent of choker necklaces, which she adopted in order to conceal a scar on her neck.³³

A brief downturn in the world economy, begun in the United States by the Panic of 1873, seems to have had little effect on women's fashion of the period. The only really noticeable effect is the increase of inferior fabrics in garment construction,³⁴ but these did not entirely replace the luxurious textiles preferred in previous years. This is likely due to the fact that fashion in the period was set by the decisions of the ultra-rich, who used it as a status symbol. "The height of

³¹ Ibid., 82.

³² Ibid., 121-23.

³³ Harold Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 26.

³⁴ Walkley and Foster, 27.

fashion was worn by women who had servants to help them dress and keep their clothes clean, who walked on soft carpets, and who were rarely troubled by dirty pavements or the rain, because they traveled everywhere by private carriage,"³⁵ and these women cared little for the economic state of the working classes. High fashion continued on its own course, undeterred and unimpacted by the end of Reconstruction or the labor unrest caused by rising unemployment and falling wages. Indeed, Worth remarked to a contemporary that "some of the Americans were certainly the greatest spenders, and all the American women he had met seemed to love dress."³⁶

Among Worth's clients was the wife of financial magnate J. P. Morgan.³⁷ One of the more visible "robber barons," Morgan enjoyed more financial clout than arguably any man in the world. The robber barons were businessmen who became inordinately wealthy through their use of monopolies and incorporation, led by John D. Rockefeller's incorporation of Standard Oil in 1870. As the Second Industrial Revolution continued and the gap between the very rich and the very poor increased, a consumerist culture that valued money and possession above all else developed. The newly wealthy thus rose to the level of traditional societal elites, for men like Morgan and Rockefeller possessed the financial means to acquire anything, and the *nouveau riche* thus began to dictate fashion in a way formerly reserved for aristocrats and those of established families.

One effect that the recession of the 1870s did have on fashion related more to the middle class than to upper-class women. The poor economy hastened the rise of urbanization and industrialization in the United States, as agricultural workers flocked to the cities in search of jobs. This in turn provided a labor force for the garment industry, which utilized these workers

³⁵ Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 96.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁷ de Marly, 137.

and expanded the ready-made clothing market. Mass production of clothing was aided by the invention of cloth-cutting machines that could cut out multiple garments at once.³⁸ While ready-made clothing was not manufactured from the same fine fabrics as the dresses worn by the wealthy, it offered a relatively inexpensive way for middle-class women to keep up with fashion trends. This, in turn, prompted wealthy women to change their clothing styles in an attempt to preserve their unique appearance as a higher social stratum.

One of the most noticeable aspects of this attempt to outdo social inferiors can be seen in the excessive trimming of most dresses throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Any flat surface that could bear ornamentation was generally subjected to it, giving rise to the fussy aesthetic popularly associated with the Victorian Era. Another way in which upper-class women attempted to retain the uniqueness of their social level was through the establishment of different types of dress for different social functions and times of day. While day dresses and evening dresses had been separate articles of clothing for decades, beginning in the 1870s wealthy women possessed specific clothing for receiving guests, visiting others, traveling, attending church, and attending weddings, just to name a few. While this seems extreme to modern eyes, it must be remembered that life for the wealthy in this period hinged almost entirely upon social status. As women's historian Joan Perkin reveals,

There were infinite gradations in status, expressed not only in dress, style and location of house, number of servants, and possession of personal transport in the form of a riding horse, a carriage and pair, or a pony and trap, but also in the intangible rules about who spoke or bowed to, called on, dined with or intermingled with whom.³⁹

³⁸ Gary M. Walton and Hugh Rockoff, *History of the American Economy*, 11th ed. (Mason, OH: South-Western/Cengage Learning, 2009), 305.

³⁹ Perkin, 100.

Preserving one's social status was of utmost importance to the Victorian woman. Their clothing was not selected for practicality. Rather, as Worth himself said, Victorian women dressed "for the pleasure of making themselves smart, and for the still greater joy of snuffing out the others."⁴⁰ Those of the upper class were not alone in attempting to protect their social superiority; the middle class was equally as stringent. Working-class women who dared to imitate the latest fashions were often "criticized by middle-class moralists for dressing garishly or above their station."⁴¹

While women's fashion in this period was certainly informed mainly by appearance, practicality did enter into consideration in a few specific areas. No longer spending all their time lounging about the house, wealthy women now began engaging in outdoor physical activity, which required the ability to move about. Thus, special sporting costumes emerged for activities such as tennis, croquet, and bathing. Women's riding habits, always slightly more masculine than the general fashion, became "severely tailored,"⁴² but still featured long skirts.

Worth had introduced the bustle in 1869, as a means of narrowing and reducing the crinoline, and the new silhouette quickly caught on. Rather than appearing as a large bell, women now exhibited "softly undulating curves"⁴³ that culminated in a mass of drapery on the backs of their skirts. The new silhouette earned the name of a "Grecian bend,"⁴⁴ as it forced the upper body forward to compensate for the weight behind, thereby creating a posture that made fashionable women constantly look as if they would fall over. While "fashionable and widely

⁴⁰ de Marly, 134.

⁴¹ Perkin, 97.

⁴² Lucy Barton, *Historic Costume for the Stage*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Walter H. Baker, Co., 1961), 480.

⁴³ Walkley and Foster, 23.

⁴⁴ Byrde, 66.



Fig. 3: Silk taffeta dress of the early bustle period, c. 1876. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

adopted,”⁴⁵ the posture was “unnatural and highly artificial,”⁴⁶ augmented by the return of high heels as fashionable articles of clothing. It did not last long, however, being replaced within the decade by the silhouette known as the “natural form.”

Crinoline cages did not disappear entirely with the advent of the bustle, but migrated to the back of the skirt and became known as crinolettes. In addition to or instead of a crinolette, fashionable women now wore a bustle cage, known as a *tournure*, or a bustle pad stuffed with horsehair. This puffed out the back of the skirt, creating emphasis

on the hips and the derriere for the first time in the nineteenth century. Corsets changed shape as well as the crinoline. They became longer and tighter, as the flat-fronted skirts of the early 1870s revealed more of the abdomen and hips than the wide skirts of the 1860s. The invention of the spoon busk in 1873 – a corset fastener that assisted in flattening the abdomen – aided women in achieving the desired line.

Bodices remained tightly fitted with the advent of the bustle. The first real change came with the development of pointed or “basque” bodices instead of the formerly popular round waist. As the 1870s progressed, the bodice began to lengthen, and eventually the smooth, tight lines of the bodice encompassed most of the hips in addition to the torso. These new longer bodices were dubbed cuirass bodices, due to their resemblance to armor. They held their smooth

⁴⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

form by aid of whalebone or steel bones inserted into the seams, and through the aid of the longer, tighter corsets.

Day dresses retained their high necklines, which, if anything, became higher under Princess Alexandra's influence. Two popular styles for the sleeves of day dresses emerged – sleeves were either tightly fitted to the wrist, or three-quarter length and somewhat looser. Three-quarter sleeves were generally trimmed with ruffles or lace, while long sleeves often remained plain. The necklines and short sleeves of evening dresses remained relatively unchanged from the preceding decade, though some necklines were cut a bit higher than previously considered fashionable. The skirts of this era demonstrated the greatest shift. They featured flat fronts, generally consisting of only one panel of fabric, with wide, gathered backs that fell in elaborate swags. The double skirts of the late 1860s evolved into multi-layered confections often consisting of an underskirt and multiple overskirts, which might add to the bustle or provide a decorative apron in front. Evening dresses featured long, elaborately-trimmed trains.

A new garment emerged as a result of the longer bodices and layered skirts popular during this period. Called the polonaise, it combined the overskirt and bodice into one item of clothing and called to mind the fashionable clothing of the 1700s. Polonaises appeared specifically in a popular form of dress called the “Dolly Varden” costume, after a character in Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*. Generally, the Dolly Varden “consisted of a polonaise of a striped or printed cotton (usually brightly coloured flowers on a dark ground) looped up over a plain underskirt and worn with a cap or a straw hat in the *bergère* or shepherdess style.”⁴⁷ It was worn informally, as might be expected from a dress constructed of a common material like printed cotton.

As previously referred to, high-heeled shoes became fashionable once more during this

⁴⁷ Byrde, 68.

period. The actual style of shoe did not change much from the previous decade, as both boots and shoes continued in vogue. Shawls fell out of fashion, replaced with capes, mantles, cloaks, and paletots – a sort of fitted coat. Hats remained small and perched atop the head, often bedecked with feathers, ribbons, and jewelry. Gloves continued to be a necessity, as evidenced by the words of one contemporary fashion magazine: “We are told that several ladies have actually appeared in public without gloves; no gloves! Do not these two words imply a verdict of vulgarity?”⁴⁸

Colors of women's clothing moved away from the garish shades often seen in the crinoline era toward hues that were “soft and subtle, with a preference for pale shades such as grey and mauve.”⁴⁹ Trimmings appeared in contrasting colors, either a darker shade of the dress color or something completely different. In fact, nearly every dress of the period contained at least two colors. Black commonly appeared, either in contrast with other shades or on its own, as an exception to the rule of softer colors. In fact, many women who could not afford multiple fine dresses chose a black silk as their best dress, as it could serve for formal occasions as well as for mourning. White remained popular for evening wear, though other pastel shades could also be seen in the ballrooms of the period.

As bodices grew longer and tighter, the main fullness of the skirts began to migrate downward. Eventually fashionable skirts fit tightly to the knees, then fanned out into elaborate trains. One of the earliest hints of this development can be seen in the introduction, in 1873, of tapes beneath the bustle that served to pull the front of the dress tighter, providing a smooth line.⁵⁰ This new style led to the abandonment of the bustle as women emphasized smoothness

⁴⁸ Cunnington, 272.

⁴⁹ Walkley and Foster, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

from the shoulder nearly to the knee, creating a vertical line that remains one of the most aesthetically pleasing silhouettes of the nineteenth century.

The Natural Form (1877-83)

The new style of dress that emerged in the late 1870s developed as the skirt's fullness migrated downward. It featured a smooth bodice that fit tightly all the way through the hips, somewhat similar in many ways to the modern sheath dress. Skirts still contained many yards of fabric, but now featured tapes – generally in the vicinity of the knees or even the ankles – that kept the skirt's front tight, creating an illusion of slenderness,⁵¹ and caused the pleated backs to lay correctly. These skirts greatly limited the wearer's movements, and, in addition to the tight bodices, composed "a style that was one of the most restricting in the history of women's fashions."⁵²

One of the strongest influences on the development of this new style, other than Worth's work in Paris, was the fact that tight clothing required excellent tailoring in order to fit correctly. This meant that wealthy women, of course, would be able to pull off the new silhouette much better than those who could not afford a dressmaker with the skill level necessary to create a fashionable dress with a perfect fit. Often well-made bodices of this period did not exhibit as much embellishment as those from the immediately preceding and following years, as a perfectly-fitted bodice would have been flaunted by its wearer, rather than covered with trimming. Perfect fit was made easier with the use of princess seams, which allowed a bodice or polonaise that fit through the hips to be constructed without a waist seam, adding to the smooth line that was fashionable in this period. As one women's publication from the era remarked, "The ideal at present is the greatest possible flatness and straightness: a woman is a pencil covered

⁵¹ Barton, 475.

⁵² Walkley and Foster, 24.



Fig. 4: Silk dress, 1878. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

with rainment."⁵³

The increased tightness of every part of a woman's dress resulted in a smooth vertical line, which, in turn, caused the disappearance of the bustle. A few women continued wearing small bustle pads beneath their skirts, usually because of dissatisfaction with their own body shape,⁵⁴ and all women still wore petticoats. The extreme tightness of many dresses caused a shift in the makeup of underclothing, and a new type of garment called a "combination" emerged. Combinations merged

chemises and drawers into one jumpsuit-like undergarment that reduced the number of layers a woman had to wear. While they certainly made sense in the context of the fashionable silhouette, they were by no means universally adopted. All underclothing, however, was constructed out of lighter weight materials during this period in order to cut down on bulk beneath the external dress layer.

The new vertical silhouette caused corsets to change as well. They grew longer and tighter, fitting well down over the hips in many cases, and constricting areas of the body that had been allowed to breathe in previous decades. The spoon busk, a wider-on-the-bottom corset fastener which had been first introduced in 1873,⁵⁵ helped create a smooth line by keeping the stomach from protruding. Cuirass bodices remained popular, as did polonaises. Sleeves became

⁵³ Blum, 77.

⁵⁴ Barton, 475.

⁵⁵ Lucy Johnston, *Nineteenth Century Fashion in Detail* (London: V&A Publishing, 2009), 144.

just as tight as the bodices, losing any sort of fullness and often preventing women from raising their arms beyond a right angle. They "were generally plain and narrow, trimmed at the wrist with a simulated cuff."⁵⁶

Skirts, as previously mentioned, became tight around the legs, generally with some sort of train attached in order to increase the illusion of vertical length. Fishtail and fan trains were extremely popular in the early years of this silhouette,⁵⁷ though walking dresses remained trainless. The extreme tightness of these skirts made it very difficult for women to walk. Once again, this shows that high fashion belonged to those who did not work for a living, as working women could never have functioned with the limited mobility these styles provided. Indeed, it can be argued that women's clothing of the natural form era "perpetuated the pattern of idleness which was in itself a status symbol"⁵⁸ Skirts throughout the period were so complicated that one author wrote,

It is now quite impossible to describe dresses with exactitude; the skirts are draped so mysteriously, the arrangement of trimmings is usually one-sided and the fastenings are so curiously contrived that after studying any particular toilette for even a quarter of an hour the task of writing down how it was all made remains hopeless.⁵⁹

Apron overskirts, coupled with extremely elaborate trimming and draping, complimented the fairly simple underskirts. "Seventy to eighty yards of trimming might be employed on a skirt

⁵⁶ Byrde, 72.

⁵⁷ Walkley and Foster, 26.

⁵⁸ Byrde, 114.

⁵⁹ Walkley and Foster, 25.

alone⁶⁰ and these trimmings might include puffing, velvet, ribbons, bows, ruching, fringe, feathers, lace, embroidery, beading, or the ever-popular pleating.⁶¹ Toward the end of the period, as skirts began to widen again, pannier puffs became popular once more.⁶² Skirts were further complicated by the emergence of asymmetry in design, which would remain popular throughout the 1880s.

The tight fit and smooth line of the natural form era brought with it a “preference for heavier fabrics and darker colors,”⁶³ though cream maintained a steady status as a popular color for day dresses. This was probably partially due to the difficulty inherent in cleaning such a light colored dress, which could only be worn a few times before it was beyond repair. Thus, an impeccable cream-colored dress would have been a visible status symbol above and beyond the degree of fashion the dress represented. “Fabrics had a very definite status”⁶⁴ throughout the fashion world at this time. Wool became the most popular fabric for women's daytime clothing, and silk for women's evening dresses. Satin, velvet, brocades, and some cottons also appeared in wardrobes of this time period. Muslin remained acceptable for some evening dresses. In many cases, “the vertical silhouette was emphasized by the use of two different materials or two different colors.”⁶⁵ Stripes, checks and plaids were all popular patterns, as well as “'pompadour' flowers alternating with stripes of plain color.”⁶⁶

While the restrictive silhouette of this period might have been fashionable, it was by no

⁶⁰ Ibid., 26.

⁶¹ Byrde, 72.

⁶² Ibid., 76.

⁶³ Blum, 77.

⁶⁴ Ley, 31.

⁶⁵ Walkley and Foster, 25.

⁶⁶ Barton, 485.

means universally accepted. The Artistic Dress Movement in England, sometimes referred to as the Rational Dress Movement or the Arts and Crafts style,⁶⁷ campaigned for less restrictive clothing based on Greek, medieval and Regency fashions. While this movement had little to no success among high fashion in the United States,⁶⁸ it did influence the adoption of one garment – the tea gown. Tea gowns appeared in the United States “in the 1870s as easy, comfortable garments appropriate for taking five o'clock tea.”⁶⁹ Constructed of layers of silk, ribbon and lace, they were originally meant only for married women, and could only be worn in the company of other women or possibly male relatives. The most revolutionary facet of the tea gown was its unboned bodice, which, in the eyes of contemporary fashion critics, made it less of a dress and more of a formalized dressing gown.⁷⁰



Fig. 5: Silk satin tea gown, late 1870s. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

Not only did tea gowns provide a less restrictive garment for women to wear in an informal setting, but they added yet another garment to the long list of those a fashionable woman was expected to have in her wardrobe. Each social occasion required a different dress. The introduction of electric and gas lighting further increased the required wardrobe by allowing social functions to continue later into the night. By the 1880s a society lady's wardrobe would include morning dresses, walking dresses, visiting dresses, tea gowns,

⁶⁷ Johnston, 58.

⁶⁸ Blum, 77.

⁶⁹ Johnston, 100.

⁷⁰ Byrde, 74.

evening dresses, traveling clothes, tennis or croquet dresses, and daytime party dresses, as well as accessories, underclothing, outerwear, and shoes. In a way, these large wardrobes in themselves expressed high social status, regardless of their makeup, as they required large numbers of servants to maintain them. "Servants and clothes were two obvious examples"⁷¹ of status symbols in the Victorian era, "and were a means of presenting an acceptable front to the world."⁷²

Accessories throughout this period remained very similar to those of the preceding few years. Small, elaborately-trimmed hats, often bedecked with feathers, perched on top of elaborate updos for general occasions. Older, married women frequently wore lace caps while indoors. Most women wore wide-brimmed hats or carried parasols (or both) when outside in the summer months, to prevent tanning or freckling. During the winter, fitted jackets were popular, as well as a type of mantle known as dolmans, which were "characterized by loose, sling-like sleeves cut with the body of the garment so that they resembled half-jacket, half-cape."⁷³ Gloves remained a staple of any well-dressed woman's wardrobe. Many women pierced their ears, and both pearl and jet jewelry were popular – the latter due to the influence of Queen Victoria – along with brooches and watches on gold chains.

One area that developed some minor influence on the fashion of the 1870s, '80s and '90s was the elaborate costuming seen in the theatre of the era. Chief among the actresses who were watched for their clothing were Sarah Bernhardt, a French diva, and Lillie Langtry, an American theatre actress who became mistress to the Prince of Wales.⁷⁴ Costumed by Worth, Langtry soon

⁷¹ Ibid., 114.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Johnston, 134.

⁷⁴ Byrde, 69.

became a household name, with multiple articles of clothing named for her. Indeed, “the Langtry bonnet, the Langtry shoe, even the Langtry dress-improver”⁷⁵ became stylish articles of clothing. While actresses such as Langtry and Bernhardt did not eclipse couturiers like Worth as the trendsetters of the era, they paved the way for the immense influence motion picture stars would have on fashion in the twentieth century.

Return of the Bustle (1883-89)

“One of the prime forces of change is ennui,”⁷⁶ and by 1883 women had become bored with the restricting styles of the natural form era. Once again, Charles Frederick Worth led the movement away from the prevailing fashionable silhouette by bringing back the bustle in the mid-1880s. “Allowing fashions a life of about five years at a time,”⁷⁷ Worth chose to revive the bustle silhouette because skirts had attained dimensions that could scarcely become any narrower.⁷⁸ The beginnings of this revival can be seen in 1881 and 1882 with the popularity of panniers,⁷⁹ breaking up the slim vertical line prevalent in most women's clothing and leading to a renewed emphasis on the hips. While these garments were nowhere near as tight around the legs as the preceding styles, they remained impractical due to their sheer weight. The combination of structural supports, elaborately ornamented skirts, and heavyweight fabrics created monstrosities, so that “some dresses alone weighed over ten pounds.”⁸⁰

The new bustle silhouette differed from that of the 1870s in that it was narrower and

⁷⁵ Gail Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12.

⁷⁶ Blum, 149.

⁷⁷ de Marly, 143.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁹ Byrde, 76; Walkley and Foster, 26.

⁸⁰ Blum, 149.

projected out more sharply from the hips. This gave the effect of a projecting table or a shelf⁸¹ rather than of a soft curve, and led to “an unfortunate tendency to wobble.”⁸² While some dresses still required bustle cages beneath them, others had the bustle wires built directly into the skirt.⁸³ Many of these bustles were designed to be collapsible, so that women could sit in the elaborate dresses without damaging their fashionable silhouette. The return of the bustle also meant that corsets no longer had to be as long and as tight as in the years of the vertical line. Instead, they gradually shortened back to the length of the early 1870s.



Fig. 6: Women's undergarments, c. 1885. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

Wool became a popular fabric for underclothing in the 1880s⁸⁴ due to the health benefits touted by Dr. Gustav Jaeger, a zoologist who advocated clothing made of animal fibers. Dr. Jaeger denounced "the wearing of linen, cotton and silk"⁸⁵ - evidently excluding silk as an animal fiber - as “injurious to health because they chilled the skin, quickly became saturated with perspiration and absorbed noxious vapours from the body.”⁸⁶ His claims impacted the fashionable world enough that by the mid-1880s, all underclothing worn next to the skin was composed solely of undyed wool. Dr. Jaeger eventually allowed the use of red-dyed underclothing as well,

⁸¹ Walkley and Foster, 26.

⁸² Byrde, 76.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Walkley and Foster, 46.

⁸⁵ Johnston, 150.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

but wool remained popular for many years.

Skirts remained floor length, as they had for decades previously, and skirts of the later bustle period remained the indisputable focal point of the entire toilette. "Little more than a foundation skirt smothered in draperies and trimmings,"⁸⁷ they were composed of multiple fabrics, multiple colors, and yards and yards of trimming. Asymmetrical draping remained popular and, indeed, increased in popularity as the decade progressed. While these skirts appeared extremely difficult to put on, in reality they were usually composed of underskirts with draperies and trimmings sewn directly onto them. This made the dressmaking process easier and created less of a reliance on perfect cutting and fitting.⁸⁸

The extensive period of economic stagnation the United States experienced in the 1870s and 1880s, an extended result of the Panic of 1873, probably explains some of the fashionable tendency toward excessive ornamentation. Tariffs increased as a result of the recession, in order to protect domestic interests, and textiles – especially woolens – were one of the areas taxed most heavily.⁸⁹ Because wool fabrics increased so much in price, many women chose to have their clothes crafted from inferior fabrics, or by inferior dressmakers, and disguised this fact with excessive ornamentation. The embellishment decreased toward the end of the period, however, and by 1887 evening dresses began to feature simpler, vertically-pleated skirts.

As the skirt remained the focal point of most outfits, bodices throughout this period became simpler and more tailored. They were tight and heavily boned. The high-necked day bodices popular in the preceding decades retained their status as the clothing of high-class women, with evening necklines remaining decollete. As in the earlier bustle period, sleeves could

⁸⁷ Walkley and Foster, 26.

⁸⁸ Johnston, 136.

⁸⁹ Schlesinger, 79-80.

be either long and tight, or three-quarter length and looser, with three-quarter sleeves generally featuring some sort of ruffle or loose cuff. Sleeves on evening gowns, however, remained short, and, indeed, grew shorter as the decade progressed, culminating in simple shoulder straps.⁹⁰ During this period, a garment appeared known as the “Jersey.”⁹¹ Jerseys, inspired by the woolen knits worn by British fishermen, were pullover sweaters that fit like long bodices. They first appeared in fashionable wardrobes due to the influence of Lillie Langtry and became popular because of the freedom of movement they offered, which differed greatly from the tight, tailored bodices that still remained in fashion.⁹²

Women's clothing throughout the 1880s was composed of darker colors and heavier fabrics, similar in many cases to upholstery fabrics.⁹³ Wool, serge, brocades, velvet, and plush were all popular for general wear, and velveteen and sateen for day dresses,⁹⁴ with multiple fabrics generally used in one costume. Stronger color contrasts often appeared, with dark reds, purples, blues and browns all popular as base colors. Good taste did not always prevail in color choices, however, with some dresses featuring “such alarming color combinations as pink and red, pink and yellow, or scarlet and green.”⁹⁵ Many bodices were trimmed with braiding, and lace, fringe, bows, frills, pearls, sequins, feathers, and even insects and stuffed birds all figured prominently in dress decoration throughout the period.

Accessories in the later bustle period remained similar to those of the preceding few years. Long gloves became especially stylish during the 1880s, with black gloves appearing as

⁹⁰ Walkley and Foster, 27.

⁹¹ Barton, 474.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Byrde, 77.

⁹⁴ Walkley and Foster, 26-27.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 27.

well as white. Gloves, which served throughout the Victorian Era to prevent suntanning, freckling, and callousing, were worn tight so as to keep hands smaller. Small hands and feet were considered marks of beauty and good breeding.⁹⁶ Small bonnets emerged as the most popular form of headgear, with masculine high-crowned and wide-brimmed hats becoming stylish as well. Many younger women wore forms of toques. Dolmans and mantles remained popular as outerwear, and by 1889 tea jackets had joined tea gowns as part of a woman's informal wardrobe.



*Fig. 7: Cotton tennis dress, 1885.
Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles
County Museum of Art
(www.lacma.org).*

Sporting clothes, which continued to rise in popularity as time wore on, did not feature any sort of real reduction in the fashionable silhouette for practicality or comfort. As they needed to be serviceable, however, they were constructed out of tougher fabrics so that they would not be destroyed by the physical activities in which their wearers engaged.⁹⁷ Hats and parasols were utilized at all times to keep away the freckles that plagued fashionable pale complexions.

The first hints of practicality in women's clothing appear in this period of fashion with the development of the "tailor-made suit,"⁹⁸ first produced by the couture house of Jacques Doucet.⁹⁹ Originally developed in heavy, rougher cloths for traveling, these garments consisted of a skirt and bodice, or skirt, jacket, and shirtwaist, blouse, or waistcoat. By

⁹⁶ Byrde, 117.

⁹⁷ Johnston, 22; Byrde, 163.

⁹⁸ Walkley and Foster, 27.

⁹⁹ Ley, 39.

1889 they comprised an important part of a woman's daytime wardrobe, and were constructed of finer, smoother fabrics than the traveling suits. They were heavily influenced by menswear, which is apparent in the name – for most of these suits were made by men's tailors rather than dressmakers.

Indeed, masculine fashion exerted quite a pull upon feminine clothing in the 1880s. The collars and lapels on women's dresses,¹⁰⁰ the appearance of bodice plastrons, and the habit of wearing dress bodices open to reveal an underbodice or waistcoat demonstrate this influence. “The masculine features of some of these [clothes] represented their serious attempts to be functional,”¹⁰¹ even though many aspects of style prevented these same clothes from achieving that functionality. In multiple ways, this is symptomatic of the changing role of women in society. As access to education increased, women became less interested in domestic affairs and more interested in the world outside of their homes. In addition, as the Gilded Age progressed, “marriage [was] no longer the simple solution of every girl's life.”¹⁰²

Especially beginning in the 1880s, women began to work outside of their homes for reasons other than destitution. They took part in social causes – notably the settlement house movement and the temperance movement – which had heretofore been regarded as the province of men, and which most men still regarded as their exclusive sphere. Thus, it can be argued that



Fig. 8: Tailor-made wool and silk bodice and skirt, 1885. Note the waistcoat-like underbodice.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹⁰⁰ Johnston, 26.

¹⁰¹ Byrde, 70-71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 71.

the appropriation of masculine articles of clothing into feminine wardrobes represents the beginnings of success of women's rights activism. In the words of women's and social historian Arthur Meier Schlesinger, Sr.:

"The leadership assumed by women in the temperance cause, the social-settlement movement and certain other reform enterprises attested their changing role in society. The impact of events had jarred them loose from the traditional seclusion of the home, obliging them whether they would or not to take an increasing part in the world beyond their doorsteps."¹⁰³

This dramatic shift in women's roles was to have a greater impact on women's fashion in decades to come.

Comparison between the early bustle, natural form, and late bustle silhouettes.

Fig. 9: Two-piece silk taffeta day dress, 1868-72. Fig. 10: Silk taffeta natural-form dress, c. 1880. Fig. 11: Silk taffeta bustle dress, 1885. All photographs courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org)



Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

¹⁰³ Schlesinger, 173.

La Belle Epoque (1890-1900)

The fashion trends that emerged toward the turn of the century underscored, once again, the influence upon Victorian society held by the ideals of “conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption.”¹⁰⁴ As the inequality of wealth distribution between upper and working-class Americans steadily increased, so did the extravagance of the upper-class wardrobes. At the same time, women's fashion began to exhibit more and more characteristics influenced by practicality rather than appearance, mirroring the growing role women demanded in society.

The 1890s saw the end of Charles Frederick Worth's dominance of the fashion industry, due to his death in 1895. While his couturier business was carried on by his sons,¹⁰⁵ the loss of Worth's creative genius meant the end of the House of Worth's monopoly on setting fashion trends. The work of artist Charles Dana Gibson, who created possibly the first standard American ideal of beauty with his glamorous “Gibson Girl” illustrations,¹⁰⁶ became arguably the most significant influence on women's fashion of the decade. The Gibson Girl, “tall and commanding, slender and athletic,”¹⁰⁷ replaced the prevailing ideal of a woman who was “voluptuous and plump, with a full, almost



Fig. 12: Charles Dana Gibson, *Stepped On (detail)*, 1901. Print from pen and ink sketch.

¹⁰⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) Project Gutenberg, August 2008, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/833/833-h/833-h.htm> (accessed April 1, 2014), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Ley, 23.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Schlereth, 166.

round face,"¹⁰⁸ and remained the standard for the next two decades. Gibson's illustrations particularly influenced the growth of the shirtwaist, a type of blouse, as a fashionable article of clothing. It became particularly popular among working women "because it was fashionable and practical."¹⁰⁹

Beginning in the late 1880s, skirt draperies and puffs began "disappearing in favour of straight falling lines,"¹¹⁰ and by 1890 the layered skirts popular for so long had completely vanished from high fashion. They were replaced with bell-shaped skirts,¹¹¹ "plain, undraped, gored in front, and gathered in back,"¹¹² that sometimes measured up to five and a half yards in circumference.¹¹³ Often triangular-shaped inserts called godets were added along the hemline to make the skirt even fuller.¹¹⁴ Skirt lengths varied from walking dresses, which cleared the ground by up to two inches, to evening dresses with a train of ten inches or more.¹¹⁵ The majority of skirts, however, touched the floor all the way around and had some sort of slight train.¹¹⁶ During the middle years of the decade, skirts were stiffened with lining and interfacing¹¹⁷ in order to make them hold the trumpet-like shape fashionable at the time. While they were sometimes padded at the hips in order to emphasize the tightly-corseted waist, the disappearance of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁰ Walkley and Foster, 27.

¹¹¹ Ley, 46.

¹¹² Barton, 509.

¹¹³ Walkley and Foster, 28.

¹¹⁴ Barton, 509-10.

¹¹⁵ Harris, iv.

¹¹⁶ Ley, 46.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

bustle by 1889¹¹⁸ meant that skirts no longer required any support structure other than one or two petticoats.

Petticoats in the 1890s were often constructed of silk, as “the sound of rustling silk was considered quite seductive.”¹¹⁹ They exhibited rows of ruffles around the hem, both to add fullness and shape to the dresses worn over them, and as an embellishment in case the petticoat became visible. Indeed, underclothing in general became more decorative during these years, possibly as another exhibition of the “conspicuous consumption” mindset seen so frequently in upper-class Victorian life. This mindset is also visible in the sheer size of many women's underclothing collections, which, for a middle-class woman in 1890, consisted of

at least half a dozen chemises, a dozen pairs of drawers, nine petticoats, one to five flannel petticoats, nine camisoles, a dozen pairs of cotton stockings, three pairs silk stockings, two dozen handkerchiefs, a bustle pad, nightcaps, garters, lace collars, and gloves for day and evening wear. In addition, one magazine advised, “you cannot do [with] less than three or four pairs of corsets.”¹²⁰

Corsets remained popular during the 1890s, as, without bustles to make their waists look smaller by comparison, women now had to cinch their waists more tightly to achieve the fashionable “hourglass figure.”¹²¹ They differed little from those of the 1880s, though special “ventilated” corsets occasionally appeared under sporting clothes for health reasons.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Walkley and Foster, 28.

¹¹⁹ Tom Tierney, *Late Victorian and Edwardian Fashions* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 27.

¹²⁰ Harris, iv.

¹²¹ Blum, 227.

¹²² Johnston, 144.

The disappearance of the bustle moved the emphasis of the fashionable silhouette away from the hips and, instead, toward the shoulders.¹²³ Instead of the vertical line so visible throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the new silhouette was "more horizontal,"¹²⁴ especially in the middle years of the decade. "Everything was calculated to increase the width of the shoulder line,"¹²⁵ and the bodice instead of the skirt became the primary focus of a woman's wardrobe. Bodices were heavily boned, featuring very high, stiff collars,¹²⁶ except on evening gowns, which often had heart-shaped necklines that were still higher than those popular in preceding periods of fashion.¹²⁷ Often, daytime bodices were built to give an effect of "blousiness,"¹²⁸ similar to that of a shirtwaist. Toward the end of the decade, as focus of the silhouette shifted from the shoulders to the bust, this blousiness became more pronounced.¹²⁹ While they may have appeared looser and more comfortable than preceding Victorian fashions, both these bodices and bloused shirtwaists featured a tightly-fit, boned lining.

The greatest amount of change during the 1890s occurred in the shape of women's sleeves. The decade began with "a narrow, pointed look to the head of the sleeve,"¹³⁰ similar to that popular throughout the preceding decades. Between 1892 and 1896, sleeves moved away from this tighter fit and puffed up to enormous proportions, calling to mind the fashions of the

¹²³ Byrde, 84.

¹²⁴ Walkley and Foster, 28.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Blum, 227.

¹²⁷ Barton, 505.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 506.

¹²⁹ Blum, 227.

¹³⁰ Byrde, 84.



Fig. 13: Silk dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves, 1897. Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).

1830s.¹³¹ Sleeves reached “their maximum immensity of three yards around”¹³² in 1896. They were usually constructed of a crunchy material, mounted on an undersleeve, and sometimes stuffed or boned to support their prodigious dimensions. Giant puffed sleeves became so popular that some evening dresses even featured elbow-length sleeves so the puffs could be larger¹³³ – a departure from the prevailing norm of extremely short sleeves on evening wear. The ridiculous dimensions of these sleeves, termed “leg of mutton” sleeves because their large tops and narrow forearms resembled a full leg of mutton, contributed greatly to drama professor and costumer Lucy

Barton's opinion that “the fashions of the nineties take their place among the most absurdly unhygienic of any age.”¹³⁴ Sleeves deflated rather suddenly in 1897 and, while they retained some fullness at the shoulder, remained tight to the wrist until the end of the century.

Tailored suits remained fashionable throughout this period, increasing in popularity as more and more women ventured outside the traditional domestic sphere. The combination of jacket, shirtwaist, and skirt emerged as the standard for fashionable women, replacing the bodice and skirt combination occasionally seen in the 1880s. Through the influence of the Gibson Girl, blouses and skirts became acceptable to wear alone, though the blouse had previously been

¹³¹ Johnston, 90.

¹³² Barton, 508.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 498.

regarded as something of a lingerie garment.¹³⁵

Women's sporting clothing throughout the 1890s was heavily influenced by the rise of a new health fad: bicycling. "It was recommended by physicians and it also helped bring about more rational fashions for women."¹³⁶ Cyclists quickly discovered that floor-length skirts were not practical for their new hobby and adopted a variation of the "bloomer suit" first introduced in the 1850s. This suit consisted of "baggy knickers...worn with a tailored jacket,"¹³⁷ and "exposed the leg as far up as the calf! Fortunately....bicycle boots saved the day for modesty."¹³⁸ While bloomers had been ridiculed upon their original appearance in the world of fashion, they quickly became accepted as bicycling wear.¹³⁹ Those women who did not care to wear bloomers on their bicycles wore, instead, a shorter version of their everyday skirts.¹⁴⁰ Other sports required special costumes as well, including tennis and ice skating, which allowed women to sport daring ankle-length skirts.

Fabrics used in women's clothing changed as the decade progressed. In the early 1890s most clothing was constructed out of heavier materials. Brocade, heavy satin, tweed, and corduroy were all popular,¹⁴¹ with heavier fabrics used for skirts than for bodices. These years were characterized by bright shades paired in higher contrast combinations, and stripes were a popular decorative motif. The later 1890s brought softer, more clingy fabrics into fashion,

¹³⁵ Walkley and Foster, 28.

¹³⁶ Schlesinger, 217-18.

¹³⁷ Ley, 38.

¹³⁸ Barton, 498.

¹³⁹ Blum, 227.

¹⁴⁰ Mark Sullivan, *The Turn of the Century*, vol. 1 of *Our Times: 1900-1925* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 386.

¹⁴¹ Walkley and Foster, 27-28.

including cashmere, mohair, crepe de chine, and chiffon. These fabrics generally appeared in softer shades, including pastels and cream, and often featured either printed or embroidered floral patterns.¹⁴² Thin fabrics were often used as overdresses for slips in bright shades such as peacock blue, red, or orange.¹⁴³ Tailored suits generally appeared in more neutral colors, such as gray, brown, green, or blue, usually with white shirtwaists.

Dress embellishment in the 1890s decreased significantly from that seen in the 1870s and 1880s. Upper class women, who had utilized excessive dress trimming to differentiate themselves from the middle and working classes, now chose instead to use expensive and fragile fabrics that would have been impractical for those without a great deal of disposable income.¹⁴⁴ This new trend must partially be attributed to the popularity of the Gibson Girl, who eschewed elaborate embellishment in favor of the perfect silhouette.¹⁴⁵ Toward the end of the decade, trimmings such as ruffles and ruching decreased on evening gowns in favor of embroidery and beading,¹⁴⁶ while braiding and silk piping remained fashionable on tailored suits. Lace remained popular both as a fabric and as a trimming throughout the entire decade, and machine-made lace finally became socially acceptable as an equivalent to “real” handmade lace.¹⁴⁷ Fur also became popular as a dress trimming, with sealskin, mink, chinchilla and ermine furs among the most fashionable.¹⁴⁸

Women's wardrobes still required a myriad of accessories as the United States marched

¹⁴² Ibid., 28.

¹⁴³ Barton, 516.

¹⁴⁴ Arnold, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Kathryn Moore Greenwood, *Fashion Innovation and Marketing* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 11.

¹⁴⁶ Johnston, 100.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴⁸ Barton, 516.

toward the twentieth century. Hats, important during outdoor activities to keep away unfashionable freckles, began the 1890s as small affairs perched on top of the head. By the end of the decade, they grew considerably in size and became heavily embellished, "usually with decoration that added to the height."¹⁴⁹ Fashionable hat trimmings included flowers, ribbons, lace, and feathers, with ostrich plumes and birds-of-paradise the two most popular varieties. Because of their size and weight, hats were held on by elaborate hatpins, often bejeweled. These, along with hairpins, lockets, brooches, and bracelets, emerged as fashionable articles of jewelry, while earrings and ear piercing fell out of fashion. Pearls became a necessary item in a fashionable wardrobe. Gloves remained a must for ladies of society, though suede gloves appeared as an alternative to kid. Shoulder capes protected the huge sleeves of the mid-1890s during inclement weather, while three-quarter-length capes and princess-line coats became popular in the late years of the decade.

Increased practicality in daytime clothing was arguably the most significant fashion development of the 1890s. This new need for practicality in women's clothing can be traced to two specific sources – artistic influences and social developments. Louis Sullivan, a member of the group of architects known as the Chicago School, coined the phrase "form follows function"¹⁵⁰ to describe his artistic philosophy. Sullivan emphasized that the shape of a building should be conducive to its purpose, and hints of this philosophy can be seen in the fashion industry with the design of the tailored suit. Increased practicality in clothing also stemmed from the central role women took in the humanitarian movements prevalent in American society. Whether grounded in religious beliefs, socialist thinking, or the influence of utopian novels, these movements demonstrated a concern for bettering the lives of minority populations – a

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 504.

¹⁵⁰ Schlesinger, 212.

concern that fueled the growing rise of the women's suffrage movement.¹⁵¹ By the end of the decade, women had gained the right to vote in four western states – Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho – and the suffragists' influence was only to increase over the coming years.

The S-Bend (1900-1908)

The death of Queen Victoria in 1901 brought King Edward VII to the throne of England, and he and his wife Alexandra quickly established their court as the most fashionable in Europe. Even the British court, however, was unable to shift the center of fashionable clothing design away from the couturiers of Paris. The House of Worth had been joined in the realm of high fashion by other designers, notably Jacques Doucet, Jeanne Paquin, and the establishment of Callot Soeurs. This group of dressmakers shared influence over the fashion world throughout the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁵²

Queen Alexandra, while certainly influential, was by no means the only woman sparking trends throughout American women's fashion in the early 1900s. Stage actresses, particularly Italian diva Eleanora Duse,¹⁵³ continued to exert a pull on the fashion industry that foreshadowed the immense influence Hollywood stars would demonstrate in later decades. (Duse's fashion influence was not in the least harmed by her decision to have all her clothing – both stage and everyday – crafted by the House of Worth.)¹⁵⁴

Women's high fashion of the 1900s continued to be flamboyant – excess was the order of the day – but “opulence was getting to be a bit dull. President Taft, weighing in at 300-odd

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 161-62.

¹⁵² *Ley*, 52-53.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

pounds, was something of a culmination of that style, and it was time for new direction.”¹⁵⁵ Toward the end of the decade, society ladies and couturiers began a move toward simplicity in design,¹⁵⁶ though they still spared no expense in garment construction.



Fig. 14: Portrait of three sisters dressed in skirts and shirtwaists, c. 1902.

The suffragist movement continued to affect fashion as well, with the shirtwaist and tailored suit remaining staples of every woman's wardrobe. While upper-class women rarely purchased ready-made clothing, the fashionable shirtwaist spread to the wardrobes of middle and working-class women and fueled the exponential growth of the ready-made clothing industry. This, in turn, fueled labor unrest in the garment industry as many workers struck for better wages and working conditions. As many garment

workers were young women, society ladies such as Alva Smith Vanderbilt Belmont and Anne Morgan supported them in their demands, seeing the struggle for workers' rights as a parallel to their own struggle for women's rights.¹⁵⁷ In this instance, women's fashion both fed and was fed by the suffragist movement.

Another important influence on fashion in the first decade of the 1900s was the rise of the automobile as a popular method of transportation, with 78,000 on American roads by 1905.¹⁵⁸ Cars allowed faster and easier travel between city and country, breaking down the barrier

¹⁵⁵ Greenwood, 14.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ David von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 66-71.

¹⁵⁸ Schlesinger, 365.

between urban and rural areas and helping along the standardization of American fashion. They also symbolized a move toward a more mechanical society, which began to reduce the need for servants and, in turn, began to simplify women's wardrobes, as fewer servants meant fewer hands to help a lady into her clothes. A more directly obvious fashion development stemming from the popularity of automobiles was the introduction of motoring suits, which protected their wearers from the elements experienced in an open vehicle while remaining stylish. These suits included long coats, sometimes waterproofed, and hats with veils or goggles to protect the face from airborne dust or insects.¹⁵⁹

One of the most noticeable features of Edwardian fashion was the distinct “S-bend” or “kangaroo bend”¹⁶⁰ silhouette created by the new straight-front corset. “Lower-busted and longer below the waist,”¹⁶¹ this new corset was originally intended to relieve pressure on the internal organs by constricting the hips rather than the ribs, but the prevailing fashion for an unnaturally narrow, waspish waistline prevented it from having any real health benefits.¹⁶² Instead, it thrust out the bust and shoulders, flattened the stomach, and pushed the hips backward, creating a curved, “pouter pigeon” silhouette. Much of the S-bend's popularity stemmed from the



Fig. 15: Illustration from Ladies' Home Journal, October 1900, contrasting the 1890s silhouette with the silhouette created by the new "S-bend" corset.

¹⁵⁹ Tierney, 29.

¹⁶⁰ Barton, 531.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 544.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 544-46.

personal preferences of King Edward, who “preferred well-rounded, buxom women.”¹⁶³ Some corsets were padded in bust and hips to create a more decided curve.¹⁶⁴ Other than the corset, women's underclothing remained similar to that of previous decades. Silk taffeta petticoats continued to be popular among upper-class women, especially elaborately trimmed, as it was fashionable to show a “froth of white”¹⁶⁵ beneath one's skirts if said garments happened to be lifted.

Bodices throughout the Edwardian period were often heavily bloused to add to the “pouter pigeon” look created by the corset.¹⁶⁶ Calculated to reduce the apparent size of the waist, this often gave the appearance of an extremely low bustline.¹⁶⁷ Two-piece outfits, such as the ever-popular tailored suit, held sway over daytime wear. Rather than fitting over the waistband of the skirt as bodices had in previous decades, many daytime blouses tucked into the skirts, with the waistband sometimes concealed by a belt.¹⁶⁸ Blouses “were very often very elaborate and expensive,”¹⁶⁹ and generally fastened down the back with either multiple concealed fasteners or a row of many tiny buttons. This trend reduced the practicality of the shirtwaist and skirt combination by requiring a maid or some other second person to assist a lady in fastening her clothing.¹⁷⁰ Even though the Gibson Girl ideal appeared in princess-cut gowns, evening bodices were often bloused because the form-fitting fashion ideal proved “too exacting for the average

¹⁶³ Tierney, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Barton, 546.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 548.

¹⁶⁷ Ley, 56.

¹⁶⁸ Barton, 547.

¹⁶⁹ Ley, 56.

¹⁷⁰ Barton, 548.

figure.”¹⁷¹



*Fig. 16: Wool twill dress, 1900.
Photograph courtesy of the Los Angeles
County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org).*

High, stiff, ornamented collars remained in fashion for daywear, often accompanied by ties or bows. Evening dresses throughout this period featured heart-shaped, round, or square necklines, or off-the-shoulder necklines augmented by shoulder straps. Sleeves varied greatly depending on the article of clothing and the time of day. Long, tight sleeves on day dresses evolved into small leg-of-mutton sleeves by 1903. Bishop-style sleeves predominated by 1904, and then changed back into long, tight sleeves after 1907. Shirtwaists tended to have looser sleeves than day dresses, though they did sport tight,

starched cuffs at the wrists. Dresses and shirtwaists worn later in the day were more likely to feature shorter sleeves, with half or three-quarter sleeves often trimmed with lace ruffles. Evening dress sleeves varied from shoulder straps to elbow-length, depending on the taste of the wearer.¹⁷²

Jackets proved a popular item of women's clothing during the Edwardian period. Eton jackets and boleros appeared intermittently over several years.¹⁷³ Tailored suits, of course, continued to sport jackets, which “when worn with flared skirts....were short and fitted. As the skirt became straighter, the jacket was longer and semi-fitted.”¹⁷⁴ Jackets featured masculine

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., 549-50.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 549.

¹⁷⁴ Ley, 56.

elements such as lapels and cuffs, were generally trimmed with velvet or braiding, and their sleeves resembled modern coat sleeves.¹⁷⁵

Skirts changed very little throughout the Edwardian period. They remained long and gored, full at the bottom, and fitted or pleated about the waist. Most skirts touched the ground all the way around and many trailed on the floor,¹⁷⁶ with the exception of “rainy-day”¹⁷⁷ outfits and sporting wear, which often revealed the foot up to the ankle. The long skirt required constant attention from its wearer, who often “had to bunch it in great folds and devote one hand to nothing else but the carrying of it.”¹⁷⁸ Practicality seems, at least in this aspect of Edwardian clothing, to have been entirely discarded in favor of appearance.

Linen, silk, wool, and cotton dominated the clothing industry throughout these years. Raw silk and wool broadcloth were the two most fashionable fabrics for tailored suits, with wool flannel, mohair, heavy linen, and serge popular in the summertime. Summer gowns generally appeared in lightweight fabrics like organdy, voile, and dimity, and full gowns were often constructed out of Irish crocheted lace. The trend for layering these thin fabrics over colored underdresses continued throughout the Edwardian period. Shirtwaists were constructed out of fabrics that were more easily laundered, such as handkerchief linen, dotted Swiss, and batiste, though some more expensive waists were made of silk. Silk velvet, taffeta, satin, crepe, and brocade all remained popular for evening gowns, supplanting the wools popular during the 1890s. Lucy Barton theorizes that “the intensely hot, dry winter temperatures of city buildings

¹⁷⁵ Barton, 549.

¹⁷⁶ Ley, 56.

¹⁷⁷ Barton, 550.

¹⁷⁸ Sullivan, 390.

may be held partly responsible for¹⁷⁹ this change.

Colors during the years from 1900 to 1908 tended toward soft, muted shades. Neutral colors such as brown, navy, and gray were popular for walking costumes, while pastels, especially a shade of lavender known as “wisteria,”¹⁸⁰ dominated evening wear along with white. Shirtwaists could be white, or, when meant to accompany a specific suit, “dark silk to match the cloth.... [or] a lighter color to harmonize with it.”¹⁸¹ Pinstripes, checks, and plaids all became somewhat popular during these years, especially Scottish tartans and especially for outdoor or sporting wear.¹⁸² The Edwardian Age “was emphatically the age of lingerie, lace, and white embroidery,”¹⁸³ and many garments exhibited as much handmade lace as possible. Decorative buttons also appeared as popular trimmings, along with pin-tucks, braiding, and both white and colored embroidery.

Brooches disappeared from high fashion at the turn of the century, simply because there was no room for them on the elaborately-bloused bodices of the Edwardian woman. They were replaced by “baby pins,”¹⁸⁴ which were utilized in a manner similar to cufflinks. Locketts and bracelets remained in fashion and were joined in the jewel box by luxuriant hair combs and jeweled rings. Parasols still appeared as part of a woman's wardrobe, but began to fall out of fashion. Handbags became wildly popular in the years after 1906, with beaded purses and leather bags two of the most fashionable varieties¹⁸⁵. Gloves ranged in length from a single button at the

¹⁷⁹ Barton, 559.

¹⁸⁰ Greenwood, 14.

¹⁸¹ Barton, 547.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 559.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 558.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 561.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 562-63.

wrist for daytime wear in winter to elbow-length on formal occasions. They could be made of kid or of silk, and appeared in white, black, and various lighter shades “as might be needed to carry out the ensemble.”¹⁸⁶ Stockings, which had long been composed of white material, were now either matched to the shoe or dress or, during the day, made of black fabric. They were often embroidered or trimmed with lace.¹⁸⁷

“In 1900, the standards of style in appearance and dress ran to ‘smallness,’ and called for high, tight-laced corsets, tight kid gloves, and shoes usually a size or more too small.”¹⁸⁸ While this statement may adequately describe most of Edwardian women's accessories, it certainly fails



Fig. 17: Two Edwardian women in leisure wear and large hats, c. 1903-07. Photograph by Adolph de Meyer.

to describe the elaborate hats that dominated most of the early 1900s. Designed to perch atop the pompadour hairstyles fashionable during these years, hats continued to grow in size as the decade wore on. They were constructed with “crowns so shallow and small that they could not have fitted upon any head,”¹⁸⁹ and were often perched at impossible angles, therefore continuing to require hatpins in order to prevent them from tumbling off. Edwardian hatpins grew to much larger dimensions than their Victorian counterparts, and became much more

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 564.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 553.

¹⁸⁸ Sullivan, 388.

¹⁸⁹ Barton, 539.

elaborate.¹⁹⁰

Sailor hats enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the first half of the decade, but faded away after 1905. Most of these hats were constructed of expensive fabrics, such as velvet, chenille, or lace, “made upon foundations of wire and buckram.”¹⁹¹ Ostrich feathers continued as a popular embellishment, appearing in such quantities that their use evoked criticism from ecologists.¹⁹² Toques, a type of brimless hat, appeared frequently as well. Commonly constructed of fur, they could also be made of cloth, and featured embellishments ranging from feathers to fruit.¹⁹³ Nearly all hats, whether wide-brimmed or toques, sported veils of varying lengths, crafted from various forms of mesh and fashionable for the dramatic effect they added to a toilette.

In addition to hats, women's outerwear included short, lightweight coats with velvet collars, long semi-fitted coats “made of heavier, darker, and more luxurious material,”¹⁹⁴ loose coats for traveling, and woolen “dusters”¹⁹⁵ for automobile use. Wraps and fur jackets enjoyed popularity over evening wear. French designer Jacques Doucet introduced the first fur coat with the fur on the exterior in 1907,¹⁹⁶ and fur accessories such as muffs and boas were a necessity for every stylish woman.¹⁹⁷ While fur fell out of fashion in some areas of the United States in the later Edwardian years, it remained popular in the northern cities where the majority of society

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 542.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 540.

¹⁹² Ley, 57.

¹⁹³ Barton, 540.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 553.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ley, 39.

¹⁹⁷ Barton, 563.

women resided.

While upper-class women attempted to simplify much of their wardrobes as the rational antithesis to the excessive embellishment of previous decades, the continuing industrialization of the American economy allowed clothing manufacturers to, in like manner, simplify garment construction. The result of this dual consolidation was a preponderance of factory-made clothing that “drastically reduced prices to bring simplifications of the latest fashions within the reach of most Americans.”¹⁹⁸ While wealthy women continued to purchase their wardrobes from custom dressmakers, middle- and working-class women gained increasing access to clothing that resembled whatever was fashionable at the time. The result was a decrease in, though not a disappearance of, the obvious class divide visible in women's clothing.

The *Titanic* Era (1908-1914)

Women's fashion changed drastically after 1908, due primarily to the influence of another French couturier – Paul Poiret. Trained under both Jacques Doucet and Gaston and Jean-Phillipe Worth, Poiret opened his own couture house in 1904. He combined influences from such diverse elements as the Russian Ballet, the styles of the Empire period, and the Far East to create fashion “for the ‘new woman,’ who, although still wealthy and often titled, began to demand simpler clothes.”¹⁹⁹ Women fitting this description included Bertha Palmer of Chicago, who single-handedly managed the Palmer House Hotel “while using the time left over to double the \$100 million real-estate fortune left her by her husband,”²⁰⁰ and Alva Belmont, “queen of New York society”²⁰¹ and an ardent suffragist.

¹⁹⁸ Greenwood, 16.

¹⁹⁹ Ley, 53.

²⁰⁰ Greenwood, 12.

²⁰¹ von Drehle, 66.

Poirot's period of influence over high fashion was characterized by a “masculinization of the female appearance,”²⁰² emphasizing narrow, straight lines and greatly simplifying the figure. While the appropriation of masculine elements into female clothing, continuing from the late 1800s, somewhat mirrored the suffragist demand for equal rights, this demand did not yet result in practical, comfortable, high-fashion clothing. “This was the era of the great feminists,”²⁰³ but “despite their growing influence on the thinking of the day, they had no immediate effect on the emancipation of women's fashion.”²⁰⁴ Indeed, in some ways high fashion became more restrictive between 1908 and 1914 – commonly known as the *Titanic* Era due to the popularity of that film, set in 1912.

One of Poirot's first innovations was a drastic change in the shape of the corset. He introduced a sheath corset,²⁰⁵ which sat lower and hung longer than the S-bend corset, effectively removing all manner of curves from the female figure. This removed emphasis from both bust and hips, creating a boyish figure that stood in stark contrast to the curvaceous ideal of the Gibson Girl. The narrow silhouette created by the sheath corset resulted in a consolidation of the undergarments worn with it. By 1910, women wore combination garments replacing their drawers and chemises, and princess-cut slips replacing their corset covers and petticoats. Starched fabrics were replaced with more lightweight ones, including silk.

The new silhouette spelled the downfall of the shirtwaist. By 1911, “keeping the shirtwaist fresh and popular had become a constant battle,”²⁰⁶ even for manufacturers of ready-

²⁰² Greenwood, 20.

²⁰³ Ley, 65.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Barton, 546.

²⁰⁶ von Drehle, 106.



Fig. 18: Tunic-style silk evening dress with metallic embroidery, 1910-15. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

made garments, and by 1912 it began to fade from view. The blousiness of the shirtwaist was replaced by a narrow, high-waisted bodice reminiscent of the early 1800s. High collars disappeared as well, supplanted by square, V-shaped, round, or bateau necklines. Poiret introduced a V-neckline that cut low in the back as well as the front, but it did not catch on. As Lucy Barton states, “It must be remembered that in all the years during which women had uncovered their bosoms....until the twentieth century they had kept their spines

concealed.”²⁰⁷ Sailor, Peter Pan, and rolling collars all appeared frequently on garments of this era. Tailored jackets remained fashionable, generally in a three-quarter length until the end of the period, when a short, cut-away jacket appeared. Kimono-style jackets became popular after 1912.²⁰⁸

Sleeves on daywear continued to be long and straight throughout this period. In 1910 a looser, kimono-style sleeve became popular, which “changed the waist into a simple, unfitted garment, unknown to fashion for a century,”²⁰⁹ as the bodice and the sleeve of a kimono-style garment were cut in one piece. Kimono sleeves were sometimes fitted with lace ruffles. Evening dresses generally featured either short puffed sleeves similar to those found on Regency dresses,

²⁰⁷ Barton, 544.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 549.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 550.

or “straight sleeves cut in one with the tunic.”²¹⁰



Fig. 19: Postcard, c. 1911, depicting a woman in a hobble skirt.

With the introduction of the sheath corset, “hips went out of style, and with them long full skirts.”²¹¹ Street skirts shortened to ankle-length by 1909,²¹² and all but the most formal of evening dresses lost their trains.²¹³ Dance dresses, cut to ankle length, appeared in 1912.²¹⁴ In addition, skirts began to lose their fullness and creep inward, emphasizing the narrow line now fashionable. By 1911 a new Poirot style, the “hobble skirt”²¹⁵ was introduced. The hobble skirt was essentially an illogically narrow sheath skirt, “as straight as a bolster case and....not over a yard wide.”²¹⁶ The utter impracticality of this

garment resulted in a brief trend toward slit skirts in 1912. While slit skirts “revealed the female foot and ankle for the first time in years,”²¹⁷ they also proved impractical due to the impossibility of wearing petticoats beneath them. A second alternative to the hobble skirt proved more enduring – the “peg-top”²¹⁸ silhouette, which, though narrow at the hem, widened further up to

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 551.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ley, 57.

²¹⁴ Barton, 552.

²¹⁵ Greenwood, 17.

²¹⁶ Barton, 551.

²¹⁷ Greenwood, 20.

²¹⁸ Barton, 551.

allow movement.²¹⁹ The peg-top look was emphasized by the use of panniers or overskirts, and began the migration of the waistline back down to its natural location. At the same time, straight-line dresses continued to be popular, often in the form of a “tunic costume,”²²⁰ which consisted of either a transparent tunic-style overdress worn over a longer satin slip, or a opaque tunic over a satin skirt.²²¹

Fabrics throughout the *Titanic* period remained similar to those of the early Edwardian period. Well-draping fabrics like charmeuse, crepe de chine, and chiffon became the most popular for straight-line dresses, while taffeta, due to its crisp nature, was used for peg-top dresses. Suits of this period were generally constructed of either serge or velveteen. Opossum, moleskin, and squirrel furs all enjoyed popularity during this period as outerwear materials, along with every color of fox fur.²²²

Unlike fabrics, fashionable colors changed drastically from the early Edwardian to the *Titanic* years. Gone were the whites and pastels popular for the first few years of the twentieth century, and in their place appeared bright shades of pink, orange, blue, green and purple. This is likely due to the influence of the popular Russian Ballet, which utilized these colors during its 1909 performances in Paris.²²³ Vivid patterns came into vogue as well, including Asian-inspired “peasanty patterns.”²²⁴ These colors were carried into embroidery and beading, both of which emerged as wildly popular methods of embellishment during this period.

Wristwatches appeared on the fashion scene in 1912, replacing pocket watches and

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., 552.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 557-59.

²²³ Ibid., 559; Ley, 54.

²²⁴ Barton, 559.

brooch watches as necessary items in a toilette. Locketts went out of fashion in favor of a gold necklace called a *lavallière*, adorned with either enamel or gems.²²⁵ Larger handbags became fashionable, especially those made of brightly-colored, ornate fabrics. Fur scarves and large muffs made up a portion of a fashionable woman's winter wear, while parasols still held on to their status as summer necessities. Long white gloves remained popular for evening wear. White kid gloves were briefly stylish for daywear, but they stained easily and their inability to be washed made this trend impractical.²²⁶ Beaded, embroidered, or painted chiffon scarves and fascinators appeared frequently with evening gowns, and flowers – especially violets – were worn at all times of the day.²²⁷ Cloaks and capes came back into fashion as outer garments, and cardigans and other sweaters began to make appearances in women's fashion as well.²²⁸

Hats continued to grow in size until 1909, when they stopped expanding outward and began growing taller. (They reached such dimensions that multiple laws were passed prohibiting hats in theatres, for they blocked the views of other spectators!)²²⁹ Hat trimming in general simplified beginning in 1910,²³⁰ but a plethora of ostrich plumes remained a popular decoration until use of feathers was restricted by law to preserve the bird population.²³¹ Smaller, plainer hats became popular around this time, both tricorne or sailor-style. These were generally decorated only with ribbon and flowers. From 1910 until 1912, high-crowned “extinguisher” hats, so called

²²⁵ Ibid., 561.

²²⁶ Ibid., 563-64.

²²⁷ Ibid., 564.

²²⁸ Ibid., 553.

²²⁹ Ibid., 540.

²³⁰ Greenwood, 20.

²³¹ Ley, 71.

because they resembled candle snuffers, came into fashion,²³² replaced in 1913 by lower, narrow-brimmed hats with very minimal trimmings.²³³

The fashion developments of the late Edwardian period continued the trend toward simplification. Although many of the innovations could not be termed practical, they paved the way for women's fashion to evolve into something that could be considered both attractive and pragmatic. As suffragists continued their quest for the vote, gaining voting rights in California, Washington, Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon by 1912, women's clothing slowly moved away from "ornamental exuberance"²³⁴ and became steadily more streamlined. In dress as well as in politics and society, "women were asserting their equality with men."²³⁵

World War I and Aftermath

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 did not at first have much noticeable effect on the American population. The United States, declaring neutrality, continued to trade with both Germany and England. As Germany sought to prevent supplies from reaching England, destroying American property as a consequence, sympathies moved increasingly toward assisting the British and French in their fight against the Germans. The resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, which had been suspended after the outcry surrounding the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915, helped sway the United States to finally join the war effort. While American men joined the armed forces and many landed in Europe to fight on the war front, American women stepped up to fill in voids created in this new wartime economy.

"Most men in government, insofar as they had thought about women at all, seem to have

²³² Greenwood, 20.

²³³ Barton, 540.

²³⁴ Greenwood, 17.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

assigned to them the duty of 'giving their sons' and putting flags up for them in their windows,'²³⁶ but women chose to contribute much more than passive support to the American war effort. Upper-class women participated in volunteer efforts that ran the gamut from preparing Red Cross supplies to selling war bonds to organizing food conservation efforts, while many working-class and middle-class women joined the labor force as factory workers, replacing men who had been drafted into the military.²³⁷ These new jobs paid higher wages than those previous open to female workers, which resulted in many household servants leaving their domestic jobs for industrial work.²³⁸

Between 1870 and 1920, the number of female workers employed in domestic service dropped from one in two to one in six. This created what has been called "the servant problem"²³⁹ among upper-class families. In short, upper-class women could no longer employ as many servants as they once had because there were not as many servants to be had, and this resulted in a streamlining of clothing, as many women no longer had maids to help them dress.

The efforts of American women in the war effort brought the matter of women's suffrage to the forefront of political concerns at the war's end. "For almost every woman, it meant a strengthening of her concept of herself as a citizen with responsibilities to her country,"²⁴⁰ and these responsibilities necessarily came with rights. Although many women were driven out of the labor force by men returning from the front and reclaiming their jobs, the hard work they had

²³⁶ Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 213.

²³⁷ Schlesinger, 419.

²³⁸ Schneider, 224.

²³⁹ Schlereth, 71.

²⁴⁰ Schneider, 235.

done during the war destroyed “the gracious fiction that women are essentially ornamental,”²⁴¹ and played a strong role in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919, which extended the right to vote to all citizens, regardless of sex.

The most important development of the late 1910s in the fashion world is arguably the marked increase in the practicality of women's clothing. Simply put, “women's clothes began to make sense for the first time,”²⁴² as women simplified their clothing in order to make it more functional. In some ways, this simplification served as “a visual assertion that females are quite as useful as males,”²⁴³ as streamlined, practical, business-like clothing had heretofore been the province of men. Clothing became far more democratized throughout the United States, as upper-class women during the war spent their time and energy on volunteer work rather than keeping up with fashion trends. They even began to wear some ready-made clothing, as opposed to having all their clothes custom-made. The democratization of fashion mirrored the decline of high society in general. By the end of the decade, “high society had gone out of fashion,”²⁴⁴ and motion picture stars rather than wealthy socialites emerged as the greatest influence on the fashion realm.

Hemlines steadily rose during the war years, continuing to rise in the years following, and dresses became less restrictive and less elaborate. By the war's end, dresses had gone from requiring ten yards of fabric to utilizing three, and some hemlines dared to reach only to the knee.²⁴⁵ Some conservative members of society were shocked by the new fashions, for never

²⁴¹ Greenwood, 20.

²⁴² Ley, 66.

²⁴³ Greenwood, 20.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Sullivan, 392.



Fig. 20: Mrs. Irene Castle in a summer costume. 1916-17. Photograph by Emily Burbank.

before in Western civilization had women's calves been visible beneath the hem of a dress.²⁴⁶ Most women ignored the critics, “for, however far politicians were to put the clocks back in other steeples in the years after the war, no one ever put the lost inches back on the hems of women's skirts.”²⁴⁷

As hemlines rose, waistlines dropped. They reached the natural waist and kept falling, creating a silhouette with a lengthened torso that deemphazied bust, waist, and hips, furthering the

masculinization of women's appearance. While the straight, curve-free outline that came into fashion necessitated restrictive undergarments for some more curvaceous women, the majority of women replaced their corsets with less-confining girdles and brassieres. Petticoats were largely discarded during the war years because of their impracticality, and did not return after 1918 because the new silhouette did not require them.

The tailored suit began to fall out of fashion in the later 1910s, replaced in popularity by the dressmaker suit. Dressmaker suits, sewn from jersey and less harshly tailored than their predecessors, were first introduced by French couturière Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel. They were comprised of “a simple, straight skirt, blouse, and jacket,”²⁴⁸ and proved extremely popular going forward. Sweaters began increasing in popularity after the war, especially with the advent of

²⁴⁶ Ley, 67.

²⁴⁷ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1991), 151.

²⁴⁸ Ley, 70.

synthetic fibers such as rayon. Another new garment that became popular during and after World War I was the chemise dress, “a simple, straight dress...with a low, round neck, and usually sleeveless.”²⁴⁹ The chemise dress, invented for its practicality, proved one of the strongest fashion influences during the 1920s. Madeleine Vionnet, a contemporary of Chanel's, introduced a version of the chemise dress cut loosely enough that it could be donned over the head rather than being stepped into and fastened. Vionnet also experimented with fashioning dresses of material cut on



Fig. 21: Fashionable lady from Texas, 1919. Photograph courtesy of Jeanne Boleyn.

the bias,²⁵⁰ which allowed the fabric to drape in new ways and would become quite popular in later years.

Colors during the later 1910s became darker and fabrics heavier, due partially to the serious mindset introduced by the war and partially to the increased masculinity of feminine dress. Blacks, browns, grays, blues, and dark purple preponderated, with more vivid colors slowly beginning to reappear in 1919. Silk and wool remained the two most popular fabrics for any sort of clothing in a wealthy woman's wardrobe. Chanel incorporated rayon into her designs by 1915, but the inferior nature of the early synthetics prevented them from becoming popular for several years.²⁵¹ Chanel also capitalized on the simplification brought on by World War I by introducing “costume” jewelry. This jewelry, made of glass or other materials rather than

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

precious gems, was designed to compliment a specific costume rather than become a prized showpiece in a woman's wardrobe. It assisted in the democratization of fashion, as it was far more readily available and less expensive than fine jewelry.

Hats shrank greatly in size during this period for two main reasons. The first was the continuing increase in the popularity of the automobile, which precluded the wearing of extremely large hats because they would blow off. The second reason was the growing popularity of bobbed hair, sparked by nurses during World War I who found it impossible to keep themselves sanitary with extremely long hair. They found their new hairstyle both comfortable and easy to care for,²⁵² and thus kept their hair bobbed instead of letting it grow back out. Once the war ended, the new hairstyle was propagated by movie actresses and remained popular well into the 1920s. Bobbed hair affected the size of hats because the enormous hats of the late Edwardian period no longer had large, pompadour hairstyles to sit upon, which meant that women had nothing into which they could stick their hatpins. Instead, hats became smaller and fit closer to the head, foreshadowing the cloche hats of the flapper era. Indeed, many of the fashions of the World War I era foreshadowed those of the 1920s. In many ways, the years between the Edwardian period and 1920 can be seen as a transitional period between the Victorian Era and the fashions of the modern era.

Conclusion

Fashion, as an institution, illustrates both explicit and implicit values of the civilization in which it appears. The drastic changes in American women's fashion between the Civil War and the end of World War I occurred because of similar changes in the roles American women played in their political, social, and economic surroundings. Even without knowledge of the historical context of the Victorian and Edwardian Eras, an insightful individual could examine the clothing

²⁵² Sullivan, 394.

of the women in these periods and draw concrete conclusions about their positions in society. The increasing practicality, masculinization, and democratization of feminine fashion during this period demonstrate both the change in the actual sphere women occupied in society, and the change in the roles which women were perceived as able and permitted to play in that society. Fashion serves as a mirror to the society which it represents, and American women's fashion between 1865 and 1920 is no different. It provides a visual representation of the changing perceptions of women apparent in a time and place where they rose from mere ornaments in the domestic sphere to catalysts for change in the political realm.

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