

Fashion and Periodic Conditions before and after World War I:

- 1910s to the Beginning of 1930s -

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Abstract

Fashion has been affected by the change of periodic conditions. A good example is found in the relationship between fashion and periodic conditions before and after World War I in the U.S. During the pre-wartime, the artificial silhouette achieved through using devices like the corset was popular and then women's dresses were very decorative and gorgeous using a wide variety of details. S-curved silhouettes and Paul Poiret's style will be reviewed as distinctive shapes of pre-war fashion in the beginning of the 20th Century. Through the war, women's rights improved enormously, the use of the automobile increased tremendously, and various kind of sports, the movie industry and ready-to-wear market developed very much. Women's clothes also changed to be much more practical and functional in post-war fashion. It seems that fashion is affected by the change of periodic conditions.

Key words: artificial, periodic, post-war, practical, pre-war

I. Introduction

Everything changes radically in modern society. Especially according to many previous studies, fashion which changes so quickly has been sensitively affected by the change of periodic conditions such as political, economic, social, and cultural ones. A good example is found in the relationship between fashion and periodic conditions before and after World War I (WW I). WW I was one of the biggest events in the world's history and made fashion change gigantically. So it is important to know how periodic conditions affect fashion to forecast how fashion change in the future. That's why there are

many preceding studies related to this issue but there are few studies focusing on the U.S. although the U.S. is a good example and it has many data showing this relationship very clearly. This study will examine the relationship between war, periodic conditions, and fashion focusing on the U.S. from the 1910s to the beginning of the 1930s and provide another help for predicting the future fashion by understanding their relationship.

To find this relationship, first, the specific periodic situations such as the background of growth of women's rights through WW I, increase in the use of the automobile, and the development of various sports, the movie industry and jazz music will be investigated. In the second

section, the characteristics of pre-war fashion will be compared with those of post-war fashion. S-curved silhouettes and Paul Poiret's style will be reviewed as distinctive shapes of pre-war fashion in the beginning of the 20th Century. Two characteristics will be discussed. One is that the artificial silhouette achieved through using a wide variety of devices like the corset was popular. The other is that women's dresses were very decorative and gorgeous during pre-wartime. It will be shown that the most important change in post-war fashion was that women's clothes became much more practical and simpler by omitting some of the decorative details of pre-war time. And the developments of comfortable clothing to wear for traveling by car, various designs for sports, and the ready-to-wear market will be discussed. Finally, all of these contents will be summarized and some suggestions for future research based on my findings will be provided.

II. Review of Literature: Periodic conditions before and after World War I

World War I which began in 1914 was a huge tragic struggle in history and had great effect on all fields of each nation in the world. So it was natural that a wide variety of radical changes came out before and after WW I. Some people considered it as a men's war.¹⁾ But it also influenced women's life very much. One of the most important changes for women was the growth of their rights through the experience of WW I.

At the beginning of WW I, there were some movements that awakened women to their status in society. "Ring out, wild bells! Those of you who are already awake, bestir yourselves and carry

the message to the rest of slumbering womankind."²⁾ This was a kind of scorn, criticism or encouragement to urge women to awake out of their complacency. Women started to make an effort to answer the call. Anna Garlin Spencer, a public speaker on educational and reform subjects since 1870, argued that women had been preparing themselves during the last 100 years to help solve the current world problems. "This is the first great war in which the voice of women has had power to make itself heard. During the last one hundred years a radical change in the educational, legal, economic and social condition of women has given them a new sense of sex solidarity and of responsibility in public affairs. This change in women's position has given men a new respect for the moral and intellectual initiative of women, and is preparing them to welcome women's aid in the solution of world problems."³⁾

World War I was certainly a world problem that women had to fill vacancies in the labor-force at work place while men were participating in the war. As a result of women's participation in the work-force, they were able to earn the money for their living and this economic ability improved their status and also allowed them to become independent. They were interested not only in joining the work-force but also in taking an active part in various social and cultural activities. For example, they organized the Woman's Peace Party in 1915. In a declaration of principles, they exclaimed, "... as human beings and the mother of half of humanity, we demand that our right to be considered in the settlement of questions concerning not alone the life of individuals but of nations be recognized and respected."⁴⁾ They were not passive and obedient women any more as they had been previously. They were able to

demand their rights and made an effort to get them. They also wanted to be free in their own individual life. The clear example was flappers in the 1920s. Flappers were young and well-to-do women who boldly did whatever they wanted to do and enjoyed it. They painted make up heavily on their faces to create artificial look and got their hair cut short.⁵⁾ Their dresses dared to expose their body and their way of life was also very progressive. They enjoyed dating freely and having a private life regardless of traditional expected women's role. Even though these flappers were not the majority of women in that time period, they had great effects on many women's way of life and thinking as well as fashionable styles.

There were also several elements that affected women's lives. The automobile was an important thing in the lives of most women regardless of class after Henry Ford had succeeded in producing low-priced Model T⁶⁾ as a result of mass production. Many advertisements related to the automobile were found at magazines such as Life and the Sears & Roebuck Company Catalogue. One of motor car companies gave an example of a traffic jam to explain its automobile's importance and this showed how many people used cars. "Thirty-nine Motor Cars in one City block. Traffic delays on every main street and high road are largely due to the wide difference in performance ability among the cars that crowd it."⁷⁾ Sports was another important element. Although women did some sports before the war, popularity was not so high. But more women than ever before participated in a wide variety of sports such as golf, tennis, cycling, and horseback riding after the war because people wanted to pursue something active and enjoyable after suffering through the war. This

trend contributed to the development of sportswear. The development of the movie industry and jazz music also let loose a powerful forces after the wartime. The movie created movie stars who became popular idols. Many women wanted to be like them and followed their fashion. Young people who were looking for novelty liked to dance to jazz music. Its dynamic rhythm attracted them and influenced fashion.

III. Findings and Discussion

1. Characteristics of pre-war fashion

The distinctive characteristics of pre-war fashion at the beginning of the 20th Century can be found in two artificial silhouettes. One was S-shaped silhouette, which was the dominant style between 1890 and 1905 and the other was Paul Poiret's style, which was popular at the beginning of the 1910s. The first characteristic was the artificial shape of the dresses, necessitating the need for corsets. The artificial silhouette was achieved through the use of a wide variety of corset designs. The clear S shape prevailed until 1905 and then Poiret's oriental styles such as the hobble skirt, harem style, minaret style, kimono style, and tunic and turban were introduced at the beginning of the 1910s and became popular. These shapes represented the beauty of that time period. To be respected as a beautiful lady, a women had to wear a corset. "She drew a long breath, - her last till bedtime, - and then took her daily dozen pulls on the long strings that did her up for the day."⁸⁾ Following these fashion trends were very important for women who lived in man-centered society. Figures 1 and 2 taken from a Sears & Roebuck Company Catalog show the

tremendous variety of corsets used for achieving S-shaped silhouette and Paul Poiret's style. The company offered corsets in a range of sizes which were matched to the customers' own measurements. These corsets made a beautiful silhouette by covering defects of women's body shape. Many corset advertisements and the development of a variety of designs demonstrated that almost all women wore them.

As fashion changed, so did the shape of corsets from S shape to linear one. It is quite true that women changed their corsets to make a different silhouette in the 1910s Sears & Roebuck Company Catalog. Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2, we can distinguish clear differences between the two shapes. The now style changed the body from the voluptuous S-curve to the less voluptuous straight and tubular body shape. Figures 3 and 4 show the artificial silhouette that each corset made. In Figure 3, one model wears a dotted swiss blouse waist and a black

broadcloth skirt and the other wears a stylish frock. Both of them show the obvious S silhouette, which consists of exaggerated shoulder and bust, confined thin band neck and waist line, a one or two piece circular skirt with medium sweep, and puffed sleeves with ornamentation. Figure 4 shows the other style by Paul Poiret. All women are wearing frocks or jackets and skirts. Though the artificial shape is much simpler than the S-curved silhouette, the models still wear corsets to achieve this silhouette. Their dresses have characteristics such as an open neck line, natural shoulder, linear body shape (bust and hip were not exaggerated), and a natural waist-line and sleeve.

The second characteristic of pre-war dresses was the luxurious nature of the decorations. Figure 5 shows that many decorative details such as spangles made from a wide variety of materials, delicate laces, various types of ribbons, beautiful flowers, embroidery, decorative



<Fig. 1> Corset advertisement for S silhouette (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, S/S 1909, p. 1072).



<Fig. 2> Corset advertisement for Paul Poiret's silhouette (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, Fall 1914, p. 102).



<Fig. 3> Artificial S silhouette that corset made (Delineator, Aug. 1905, p. 199).



<Fig. 4> Artificial Paul Poiret's silhouette that corset made (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, Fall 1914, p. 225)



<Fig. 5> Decorative dress using many details(Delineator, Aug. 1905, p. 175).



<Fig. 6> Various ladies' neckwear designs (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, S/S 1909, p. 1101).

frills, and ruffles were used for women's dresses. Edouard la Fontaine, who was one of the best-known dress critics in Paris, described this style for a recent model. "It is an exquisite evening dress by Paquin. It is made of white chiffon, which falls in broad folds. The lower edge of the skirt is embroidered with spangles of silver and mother of pearl, and a similar trimming appears on the front of the corsage. This is hemmed on both sides by two narrow silver gallons, attached to the décolleté line by two bunches of roses, which are also repeated on the bracelets that gather the sleeves above the lace ruffle."⁹⁾ He wrote that the dress showed the tendencies of that present season and the elegant effects which could be obtained by comparatively simple materials and shapes at the Delineator, the U.S. magazine, introducing Paris trend to U.S. people. But these materials and shapes were never as simple as they appeared. For only one dress, they used spangles of silver, mother of

pearl, a corsage, two narrow silver gallons, two bunches of roses, and a lace ruffle. We can guess how decorative normal dresses were if this was characterized as a simple dress and conclude how essential these details were for women. This was a comment about the style of Paris but it also explained that of U.S. which was directly affected by Paris trend.

There was another good example to explain the high level of decoration. Apparel company's catalogues advertised each category of clothes separately in that time period. For example, see Figure 6 taken from Sears & Roebuck Company Catalogue which advertised various ladies' neckwear designs for customers who wanted to embellish according to their own taste. From bows to collars, the companies designed different shapes and colors and some of them were collar and cuff sets. Besides these neck wears, there were other specialized sections advertising notions such as dress braids, belting,

veils, embroidery work, and waist, dress and trimming nets. From these examples, we can understand that women's dresses were highly decorative during the pre-wartime.

2. Characteristics of post-war fashion

World War I was a very shocking event in the world and soon influenced all fields of society. Fashion was not an exception. Many of the new clothing characteristics that appeared at this time remained popular after the war.

First of all, the most important distinctive change in fashion was that women's clothes became much more practical and simpler omitting some decorative details because practical clothes were required for women to work. Skirt lengths became shorter than in the pre-wartime. The representative style of the 1920s was a boyish style shown in Figure 7 that had a tubular linear silhouette, a low waist line,

and a hem length a little bit below the knee. A narrow shoulder, small breasts, small hips, and long legs became the ideal female physique in this time period. In other words, this style didn't emphasize feminine characteristics. Rather it focused on making the shape of a woman like a boy. This boyish style basically pursued a natural body line. So women had been quite a bit emancipated from corset that had been worn for hundreds of years. Previously Richard Barry said, "Physical freedom is the basis of all other freedom - moral, intellectual, political."¹⁰ Nevertheless the corset didn't disappear completely; Figure 8 shows a corset advertisement in 1925. This corset, however, was different from that of the beginning of the 1910s. First, its length was much shorter. It covered only from upper waist to the hip. This means that the body was less confined. Secondly, in appearance it was designed not only for decoration but also for functional purposes. As a result of this, the design



<Fig. 7> Boyish style of the 1920s (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, S/S 1925, p. 35).



<Fig. 8> Corset advertisement focused on its function (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, S/S 1925, p. 125).



<Fig. 9> Various knickers and sportswear designs (Sears & Roebuck Catalogue, S/S 1928, p. 48).

became very simple and less decorative. Corsets of the 1910s had some decorative details such as ribbons, laces, and strings although the shape was simple (linear) as shown in Figure 2. But those of 1925 just showed some patterns in textile and a little decoration. Rather they focused on functional design which made the body comfortable. For example, some of the corset firms designed fancy elastic sections under the bust to make wearers feel free and made "a short clasp end at the waistline with a soft, comfort top preventing digging in at top and elastic fastener above the clasp with a hook and eye."¹¹⁾ Moreover, in the right upper part of Figure 8, the company showed how flexible its woven boning was and claimed "This favorite woven bone model is worn by thousands of pleased customers."¹²⁾ This woven boning was a special device which bent with the body. So all these designs gave wearers more freedom whenever they moved.

There was another good example to show this change clearly. It was Chanel's functional design works. Coco Chanel was a representative designer for functionalism and created beautiful styles for working women. She frequently used knit as material which also helped women feel free to move for work. She designed functional knitted jackets, knitted jumpers, quilted coats, and pleated skirts for the first time and also used jersey material for formal suits. They were very suitable designs for working women. She was a French designer but her designs were also popular in the U.S. Even now, the Chanel suit composed of a cardigan jacket and suit skirt remains popular as a high quality classic suit for woman.

Increasing use of the automobile by the general population was also a powerful force for

change in people's way of life and thus fashion style during the post-wartime period, as previously mentioned. The use of an automobile required new types of clothes. To get in and out of the car or to travel by car, people needed practical and active types of clothes. Sometimes they required clothes with a particular function. For example, when it rained, a raincoat was needed for both driver and passengers because many cars had no roofs or had roofs but open sides at that time.

As various kinds of sports became popular, people needed more designs of sportswear. Figure 9 shows a knickers and sportswear specialized section of Sears & Roebuck Company Catalogue. Generally sportswear consisted of a blouse or sweater and a skirt or knickers. Especially it introduced a variety of designs for knickers. Although both sportswear and pants were also worn in previous time periods, they achieved great popularity after the war.

The radical development of the ready-to-wear market was another distinctive characteristic after World War I. "The women of America spend seven billion dollars a year on ready-made clothes... Most of the time they just swear at, or praise, the "dressmaker"- and spend another seven billion."¹³⁾ From this article, we can notice that ready-to-wear had a great effect on people after wartime. They spent a lot of money for it and followed the style led by dressmakers.

As ready-to-wear market became bigger and bigger, designers continued to make new styles. Sometimes new styles were introduced by a popular movie star whose fashion was followed by many women. The other hand a popular trend such as jazz music also stimulated designers to make new styles. And these new styles made ready-to-wear market bigger. Paul Poiret who

<Table 1> Comparison of Characteristics before and after WW I.

Characteristics	Period	before WW I	after WW I
Periodic Conditions		- man-centered society - dependent women	- growth of women's rights - increase in use of automobile - development of various kind of sports, the movie industry and ready-to-wear market
Use of Corset		- focusing on making artificial shape	- less pressure on body than before - consideration of functional purpose
Silhouette		artificial silhouette - S-curved silhouette - Paul Poiret's style	natural silhouette - tubular silhouette
Design & Detail		- luxurious design - use of many decorative details	- simple & practical design - functional clothes design for car and sports - popularity of ready-to-wear - less details than before

considered the style itself as an important thing said, "When a woman chooses or orders a gown, she believes that she creates it herself; but she is mistaken. It is the spirit of style which inspires it, which sways her intelligence and dominates her judgment."¹⁴⁾

IV. Conclusion and Implications

It was clearly demonstrated from this study that women's fashion changed from impractical and artificial styles which confined women's bodies and thus their freedom to natural and practical styles which gave them more freedom when women's status was improved experiencing WW I, extremely emergent situation. In other words, women wore clothes for themselves, not for men as man-centered society changed and this was a result of radical change of periodic conditions through the war. The following is a summary of this study.

In the introduction I mentioned fashion had

been sensitively affected by the change of periodic conditions and selected distinctively different characteristics of fashion before and after WW I as a good example. I also indicated that it was important to know how periodic conditions affected fashion to forecast how fashion would change in the future. To find the relationship, first, I reviewed periodic conditions before and after WW I, from 1910s to the beginning of 1930s focusing on the growth of women's right. The war required women's labor-force and their participation in the work force improved their status tremendously and gave them independence in their lives. Several other elements that affected women's lives were mentioned. They were increase in the use of automobile, popularity of a wide variety of sports, and the development of the movie industry and jazz music. Secondly, I explained the characteristics of pre-war fashion and post-war fashion. S-curved silhouette and Paul Poiret's style were reviewed as the distinctive shapes of pre-war fashion in the beginning of the 20th

Century. They showed two characteristics. One was that artificial silhouettes using a wide variety of devices like corset were pursued and the other was that women's dresses were decorative. In post-war fashion, women's clothes became much more practical and simpler omitting many details. Functional wear for car and sports and the ready-to-wear became very popular.

For further research based on this study, I suggest studying the relationship between periodic conditions and fashion in various era. It would show different aspects in different era and these kind of researches filed up would help us to understand their relationships and predict how fashion change in the future by periodic conditions.

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