

Fashion: A Cultural Context by Lauren Clarke

'Fashion' is multi-faceted- a multiple choice- depending on your budget and attitude you can dress 'in fashion' and yet be totally individual thanks to the available choice, and the liberal dress codes that exists. Only 40 years ago things were very different- discuss the social and cultural changes that have taken place since the 60's that has allowed this phenomenal change to happen, using quotes from authors and academics to underpin your ideas.

Introduction

As we approach the year 2003, we find a vastly different fashion industry from that which existed only 40 years ago. Although the fashion sector is known for its rapid change, we see an industry today that has been dramatically transformed by such new things as new technology, globalisation, and changing consumer values. Every segment of the industry has been required to change to meet new competitive challenges. As a result, we find a fashion industry that has restructured its self to respond to global competition.

The industry is faster, is geographically more wide spread and can focus on understanding and serving the consumer more effectively than ever before.

Though transportation and communication advances, the industry has become a worldwide production and distribution network. At the same time, new technologies allow close examination of consumer needs and have reduced the time it takes to respond to those needs.

One of the most enduring images of the 1960's is undoubtedly the mini skirt. Not merely a new fashion trend but a true icon of the sixties, the mini skirt epitomised the attitudes of the era. The name synonymous with the fame of the mini skirt is of course Mary Quant. Not only was she responsible for creating the infamous mini, but she also led the way for the radical changes in the fashion industry that made London such a celebrated centre through out the decade. Like most new fashion trends, the mini skirt was an innovative idea sparked off by a series of unique social and cultural changes.

Hemlines had been dramatically shortened at other times before the sixties, also in times of great social change, after and during World War 1 and World War 2. This fashion revolution happened at the same time as another big cultural change of the century- pop music. Music has and always will be a major influence on fashion and sub-culture.

Another huge cultural change of the decade was 'the pill'. The younger generation was becoming less inhibited, and more sexually promiscuous because of the invention of the contraceptive pill, and clothes became more overtly sexual and revealing.

Along the street of Haight Ashbury, hippies could be seen wandering along, wearing their multi-coloured kaftans or afghan coats over fringed tasseled dresses, flat leather sandals, a headband copied straight from the American Indians or a pair of scruffy flared jeans. What had started off for many as an ethical movement by a few die-hard individuals in America soon became a world wide phenomenon influencing lifestyles and creating the main stream fashion of the late sixties.

This was a form of anti-fashion as revolt. It was untidy and spontaneous and radically different from the chirpy neatness of the earlier years of the decade and the futuristic fashions of the previous few years. Boutiques such as 'I was Lord Kitchener's Valet' or 'Granny Takes a Trip' in London, both reflected the sartorial anarchy of the times with their bright riotous designs.

Hippie women reacted against the dolly bird image of the early sixties that with the arrival of the mini skirt had been designed to free the young woman from sexual stereotyping. With its thigh revealing length it confined her in a look, which aimed directly at the male's libido. Although the late sixties have been criticised for its naïve belief that free love and marijuana would solve the worlds problems, there was a lot of creative activity which led to permanent social change. People felt free to break down taboos. The woman's, civil and gay rights movements all started in this decade. Sexual stereotypes were being broken down and 'free love' was on the agenda.

Men and woman began to look alike with unisex jeans and long hair, the older generation felt increasingly alienated from the young. Experimenting with gender was part of the revolution. As woman took up the banner for sexual equality, men began to reject the fifties ideal of muscular machismo. The old mores of what constituted male dress were broken down and men experimented with less obviously masculine looks.

Much of the late sixties was, for many spent in a haze of drug induced euphoria. The use of LSD was a powerful influence on ideas and dress. People experimented with their lifestyles in the belief that they were somehow on the road to a greater awareness and understanding, fuelled by the sensory experience of acid and its ability to distort the senses, creates hallucinations and vivid colours.

Fashion has always had it's social conscience and can be the perfect vehicle for powerful political messages, from the iconisation of Che Guevara's portrait to the anti-war slogans of Katherine Hamnett's T-shirts. But the truly unexpected that flies in the face of fashion its self can carry as powerful a signal as the blatantly written message. Anti-fashion by definition is the opposite of fashion, so if it exists, it should be different every time fashion changes. But its rules stay the same because what it all represents is all negative- anarchy, destruction of order and instigation of chaos.

By the mid 1970's woman had discovered that trousers gave them a sexual neutrality that allowed them to compete in the work place. The 1980's career girl was now an executive who had business lunches and held boardroom meetings. She was confident, independent and more liberated than ever. Designers created outfits especially for these woman. Denim jeans were re-designed to fit woman, and the designer's name on a visible label became all-important. This period launched 'power dressing'.

Women's trousers have always reflected social change and women's growing confidence in their place in society. This was especially true during the seventies. Now every woman has a pair of trousers of some kind in her wardrobe, whether part of a suit or a pair of faded denim jeans. This continues to illustrate women's increasing sense of equality and freedom of choice in society, of which women's trousers have been a constant measure.

Alongside this licence to choose from a range of styles regardless of the context a more serious fashion aesthetic existed. The androgynous clothes many women choose to wear expressed the growing women's movement and their desire to be taken more seriously they entered the work force on a more equal footing. The seventies represented the twilight of an era of sexual liberation, over indulgence and decadence. The sexual revolution may have been discussed at length in the sixties, but it could be argued that it actually happened and exploded in the seventies, especially in increasingly jaded ways. The chic new

sexual conventions of the day denied that a person's sexuality could be neatly classified.

During the 1980's, fashion became integral to the newly emerging concept of the lifestyle. The new wealth and prosperity hyped in the media were ever more evident throughout the decade. In this decade there was a deregulation of the stock market and an explosion in property prices. This helped establish the culture of the yuppie.

There was enormous wealth around, but it was spent with a corporate mentality, so that even the most exotic trophy wife appeared to be dressing not only for her man, but for boardroom approval. Power dressing- dressing to show your importance and bank balance, dressing for success, was in. Even if you were a supermarket shelf stacker, you would still wear your impressive power suit in your spare time.

In the 1990's Princess Diana of Wales, was a major influence. She had the rare gift of combining aristocrat grace with the stature of a catwalk model. She championed the interests of British fashion at home and abroad and had her own unique international stage. Her style emerged over the years into a more sophisticated and confidently intuitive one. Having Diana wear your outfit was a priceless piece of publicity, but even for those who copied, she was a strong influence and a tonic to the industry. She gave hope to a whole new generation of couturiers and mainstream designers, and a new outlook to many girls who

could now wear such clothes without having to be debutante.

To understand the constant changes in fashion, it is important to understand that fashions are always in harmony with their era. As a famous designer expressed it “Fashion is a social phenomenon which reflects the same continuing change that rides through any given age.” Changes in fashion, he emphasised “Correspond with the subtle and often hidden networks of forces that operate on society...In this sense, fashion is a symbol”. Different views exist on how fashion changes are started. Sprole & Burns categorised these views into two groups as follows-

- Because the fashion industry thrives on change, this idea suggests that different segments of the industry force change on the consumer by dictating new trends. Traditionally, European fashion houses exerted a powerful influence; the trade media such as women’s wear daily, shaped the industries choices. Therefore, consumer’s choices and retailers dictated what would be worn by what they carried. Although all these forces are important, Sproles noted “Changing fashion is a far more complex phenomenon than those with the industry- centred views may wish to believe”. In recent years, many consumers have become increasingly resistant to having new fashions forced on them. Often consumers now exert a spirit of independence in their dress by wearing what they feel is right for them, regardless of what the industry promotes.
- Others who study fashion change, believe consumers are responsible for what becomes fashionable. Given an array of products from which to chose

certain trends develop because a group of consumers establish that these fashions are right. Four major theories suggest how consumers determine the course of new trends; some trends may begin with the upper socioeconomic consumers. Others may occur within all socioeconomic groups. Sometimes fashions rise from subculture groups such as urban African- Americans, youth, blue collar workers and ethnic minorities such as Native American. Nearly any creative or initiative individual can launch fashion trends if they are consistent with the social climate and lifestyles of the times (Sproles 1981).

Men and women are complex creatures whose actions are seldom governed by reason alone. Change comes about for psychological reasons. People grow bored of what they have, the eye wearies of the same colours, lines, and textures after a time. What is new and different appears refreshing, and what has been on the scene for a while appears dull and unattractive. Changes for such psychological reasons occur also in the fashions for products other than clothing. Auto manufacturers introduce new colours and shapes because potential buyers tire of the same colours and shape.

Changes in fashion are also caused by rational reasons, such as environmental factors that create new needs. A classic example of social change that brought about drastic change in fashions occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century, when women, first, gained and enjoyed new political and economic freedom. Their altered activities and concepts of themselves encouraged them to discard the constricting garments that had been in fashion for centuries and to

adopt shorter skirts like those of Mary Quant, relaxed waistlines, bobbed hair and other fashions more appropriate to their more active lives.

Generations later, as women moved into top executive positions in the business world, the tailored suit, soft blouses and attaché bags became the 'dressing for success' fashion of young career women in the late seventies and eighties.

The physical fitness movement in the 1970's and 1980's brought about the need for exercise clothing, and as the interest in jogging, hiking, tennis and aerobics grew, also did the need for new and different fashions appropriate to each of these active sports. Casual Fridays and a shift towards working at home have changed the way many people dressed for work in the 1990's. Even environmental concerns influenced fashion by avoiding the use of certain dyes and finishes harmful to nature.

Conclusion

Although fashions change constantly and new ones appear almost every season, a full-scale change over is never completed at any one time. In studying the pattern in change in fashions, scholars have observed that changes in fashion are evolutionary in nature, rather than revolutionary. It is only in retrospect that fashion changes seem marked or sudden. Actually they come about as a result of a series of gradual shifts from one season to the next. For example, when women's skirts became inching up from the mid calf in the 1960's this gradual shortening was not particularly noticeable at first. It was only when skirts moved thigh high, in the form of minis and micro minis, that people took notice of the approaching extreme.

Even today, when the rate of fashion change has accelerated sharply, the pace of change is really slower than it appears to the unskilled observer who has failed to notice the early evolutionary movements in a new direction. The evolutionary nature of fashion change is a fundamental principle that is recognised by fashion practitioners, it provides them with a solid, factual foundation for forecasting and identifying in-coming fashions. When planning and developing new styling ideas, they always keep the current fashions and evolving directions in mind. Therefore the expectance of a particular coat or dress fashion during a current season becomes a straw in the wind for experts to search for clues to next seasons trends.

The degree of its acceptance provides needed clues as to what will or will not be welcomed by the consumer in the next season. Knowing that people do not respond well to sudden changes, the fashion experts build gradually, not abruptly, towards new ideas. Even the slowest most gradual of evolutionary changes in fashion, do change eventually. Examples of this can be found in history and recent times. For example when the mini skirts of the 1960's moved up to the micro mini skirts of the 1970's, hems began inching downward. Whether it be skirt lengths, suit lapels, silhouettes or general fashion looks, all fashions tend to move steadily towards an extreme, at which point a new direction develops.

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