

The New **REPUBLIC**

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Woman's Rebellion Against Fashions

HAVE you noticed how slightly women's clothing has changed in the past five years?

Costumers, corsetieres, and fabric manufacturers realize it with frantic concern. They are doing their best to turn women back into the former restless search for beauty amid wasp waists, balloon skirts, trains and draperies. So far their herculean efforts have brought forth only minor changes, like the epidemic of monkey-fur trimming and the leering tilt of scarlet hats over the left eye. These trifling victories are of small value to men whose fortunes depend upon women's conscientious following of fickle fashion.

Even a society lady can now wear her clothing till holes appear without being conspicuous. A raglan is ageless. A tweed outing suit needs only to have its skirt shortened from time to time. Accordion pleated skirts go again and again to the tailor for pressing. Dark blue and black serge dresses have become almost standardized in their simple cut, depending chiefly on the color of their embroidery for variety. The kimona has not altered since its introduction almost a quarter of a century ago!

Moreover, a woman can wear what she likes within the broadest range ever yet allowed her. Big sleeves, little sleeves, long sleeves, short sleeves and no sleeves at all, were all equally "in" during the vogue of the slit sleeve. Large hats can't drive out small hats; and vice versa. It is difficult, nowadays, to be actually out of style!

This is a serious condition for women's wear manufacturers.

My attention was first called to the divergence between what manufacturers want shoppers to buy and what shoppers persist in buying, in the pages of trade journals devoted to the manufacture and merchandising of women's garments. These periodicals reported last fall that costumers, corsetieres and fabric manufacturers had made common cause against the almost static condition of their industries. Notable delegates from England, France and America met for a conference in Europe. It seemed incredible that these impressive men, who thrust their own stout bodies into woollen cylinders and topped their serious faces with felt domes, could be the creators of fairy frocks and petal-dainty hats. You could not have told the gathering from any convention of bankers discussing European finances.

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A common grievance united the three industries. The disadvantage to costumers of unchanging styles is obvious. The corsetières declared themselves in an even worse predicament. A generation of girls was growing up who knew not stays; shameless creatures who wore their figure as God gave it.

There was danger, said the corsetières, that their excellent business might disappear as did the prosperous skirt-binding factories when skirts stopped sweeping the pavements. In these days when a hem is a hem and not a steel spring, covered with velveteen, no one sews on skirt bindings. Where are the manufacturers who used to make them? No one knows. And the corset manufacturers were afraid that they would soon be there too.

Fabric manufacturers joined the costumers' and corsetières' alliance because the amount of goods used in a dress today seems to them immorally scant. Formerly a woman who wanted a new dress hired a dressmaker and a seamstress and the females together cut fabric into small pieces and sewed it together again.

Do you know how a woman is very likely to make herself a frock today? She lays on the floor a length of cloth, doubled over. Shears in hand, she shapes it like a paperdoll's dress, gouging skilfully in under the arms, and cutting a circular opening in the neck. That is the foundation of a thousand varieties of dresses which later appear with low, broad sashes, jeweled girdles, beadwork, or gorgeous peasant embroidery. Two lengths of wide cloth is all such a dress requires. But if we women save by the present fashions, the factories lose.

The European women's-wear convention, called into being by the common peril, came to an important and unanimous decision. Complacent delegates returned to their homes with hope and new designs. Reporters for the trade journals met our returning delegates at the pier and sent their reports broadcast. The news was important enough to travel by wire and be announced in the daily papers.

Fashions were to change. So said the delegates. Skirts were to be long; very long. Skirts were to be full; very full. Skirts were to be draped. Waists were to be fitted, to contrast with the billowing below. The hour-glass figure was to return.

From the trade journals, which I was now devouring with frantic fear, I learned that the campaign was to be carried on, not only with increased advertising, but with the additional aid of the three vehicles of dress publicity—shop windows and dress shows, the theatrical stage, and the printed word. "Create a demand" is the technical term for giving people what they do not know they want. Women, by these three channels, were to be taught to ask prettily for tight bodices

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to impede their breathing, draperies that must not be crushed, skirts to dribble in the rain, and the weight of yards of fabric.

The campaign was on. Flaring, flaunting flower-beds of skirts, displayed in shop windows, were to tempt the shopper. Lovely wax figures smiled to prove that tight bodices were not uncomfortable. Charming manikins, at the fashion shows, went mincing down the platform in pointed layers of purple and scarlet chiffon, as quaint as fuschias.

But women shoppers, apparently unconscious that the mode had changed, kept right on buying or making loose, simple, comfortable frocks. They took the new colors, but did not even see the new styles.

The theatrical stage, costumed by the leading modistes, was the second influence brought to bear to change the fashions. It was well swept by trains and dragging sashes last winter. You knew an adventuress by her green and gold brocade, going up over the right shoulder and kicking out from the left heel. An ingénue wore as many crisp petticoats as a Dutch maiden.

Home magazines, devoted to women's interests, were the third force conjured to advance the new styles. Some of these periodicals began to break out in quaint advice which might have been copied from Godey's Ladies' Book, fifty years ago. The country, we were warned, needed the corset physically, fashionably and morally.

"Being a mother, you must also be a woman of the world," declared one earnest propagandist.

Do you want your daughter to go to a dance unprotected by a corset? If you do not understand, ask your son."

Rome fell, I felt convinced after reading such warnings, because her daughters did not sufficiently corset themselves.

With the retail shops, the stage and many home magazines lined up for tight waists and heavy skirts, we women-folks might have been forced to give in to discomfort, had not help appeared from an unexpected quarter. Do you remember the sudden outbreak of knickerbockers in the newspapers last winter? Knickers raged a whole week in news columns and appeared in the Sunday rotogravure sections.

Maybe you thought the knicker incident just happened? Not so. Nothing just happens where women's wear is concerned. A men's clothing firm had decided that this was the psychological moment for them to put out a line of women's knicker suits. From a men's clothing house came the relief expedition which saved us women—temporarily at least—from hoops and stays.

Pretty manikins in sober knickerbockers and longish jackets were hired to walk the principal streets of the largest cities and graciously allow themselves to be photographed for the papers. The garments caught the public approval in a sur-

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prising manner. A knicker club was formed in Chicago by girls who were pledged to wear 'em.

Knickers soon lost their news value and the sworn club members did not carry out their vow of wearing them to business, but they are now an accepted garment in a girl's wardrobe, and the advertising was a blow to the long, tight dress movement. The influence was greater because the garments were launched as a business enterprise and not as a reform.

A futile attempt was made when I was a child to introduce a dress very similar to those women are wearing today, but the sponsors made the mistake of admitting that it was a reform measure. Though much prettier than the prevalent boned waists and lined skirts, they were regarded as a sort of medicine good for weak backs and they were worn only by little groups of serious thinkers brave enough to "hang the weight from the shoulders."

When the modistes brought our present styles from Germany—not Paris, mark you—their introducers were too canny to tell us that the general style of the garments was originally a woman's reform, backed by a formal association, with branches in Switzerland, Holland and Scandinavia, holding congresses and making converts. When these same general styles were put on sale in America, women bought them by thousands and thousands. Fashions in this country are no longer ruled by a few leaders of society. They are determined by the purchases of several million working women, each of whom buys a pleasing dress, puts it on immediately, soon wears it shabby, and buys another. The girl with the pay envelope sets the style for the women who dressmake at home. These thousands of one-dress women are, apparently, insisting that the one dress shall be simple, smart, becoming, and comfortable to work in.

A haughty and experienced saleslady in one of the "exclusive" shops on Fifth Avenue, was called sharply to account for not "moving the stock" which the buyer had piled up.

"How can I sell these styles?" the saleslady defended herself. "The flappers won't buy them."

So long as the wage-earning flapper insists on pretty, practical and comfortable frocks, the rest of us are safe. We can let down the hems if we like.

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