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### Finding Freedom in Fashion

The 1910s were a transformational time in America, especially for women. For the first time in centuries, women's dress underwent dramatic change. They were freed from their corsets and heavy skirts. They were liberated from sewing clothes for themselves and their families. The Industrial Revolution eased women's responsibilities in the home, and women were less confined to their houses. They entered schools and the workforce in never-before-seen numbers. Lois Palken Rudnick explains the exact number of women in *American Women Modernists*, "In fact, there were more women college students, and more women professors and professionals, as a percentage of the population, in the 1920s than in the 1960s. By 1910 women were 40 percent of college students and 48 percent of artists" (7). Women could now fill their free time at the movies when they were not at work or school. The invention of cinema expanded women's worlds by introducing them to new identities, perspectives, and experiences. During this time of extreme transformation, women's fashion evolution paralleled their place in society; however, freedom remained elusive.

Although women no longer wore stifling corsets in the 1910s, gender roles were still so strict that they were prohibited from wearing pants. However, these social codes did not apply on screen. Women and girls often played boys and young men in the early days of cinema. Filmmakers believed that they portrayed emotion better than boys. Additionally, boyhood was

not as gendered as it is today. According to Laura Horak in her book, *Girls Will Be Boys*, boyhood was an almost genderless time of a child's life in stark contrast to adulthood. Therefore, it did not distract from the narrative for women or girls to play boys; on the contrary, it added to it. This changed with the marketing of film actresses as young and gorgeous (Horak 45). Ironically, as film allowed women to imagine new possibilities for their lives, it also made gender roles stricter in some ways.

Women could not wear pants in public, but from the beginning of cinema, women could be almost naked on screen. Theda Bara was the first sex symbol in cinema. Bara played a vampire in the film *A Fool There Was*. This originated the concept of vamping, which the flappers took up in the next decade. It also inspired a slew of films with the femme fatale character of the vamp. However, no vamp was more popular than Theda Bara. In "Born Fully Clothed: The Significance of Costume for the Silent Cinema Vamp," Inga Fraser explains the characteristics of the vamp. She often used animal, spider, and snake imagery; she wore flowing, usually revealing garments suggestive of oriental style and had wild hair (197-8). Though the vamp's body was liberated from the rules of society, she did not challenge the structure of society. The vamp reinforced fears and negative stereotypes from her behavior to her costumes. Fraser explains, "The female vampire is... visually aligned with contemporaneous depictions of the prostitute, the morphine taker and the absinthe drinker, all of whom display an unnatural and destructive thirst for bodily pleasures" (186). The vamp combines sexiness and death. Her utilization of oriental style reflected negative stereotypes made by Western culture. On the one hand, it represented modernity and exoticism, but it also suggested immorality to Western audiences. This connected sexiness with sin and reinforced a racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, the vamp brought sexuality to cultural consciousness as nothing ever had before, and knowledge is a

tool of freedom. Increased awareness of desire eventually would lead to a cultural reckoning with sexuality. While the male creators of vamp films told stories of terribly sexy women who were undead, dying, and dangerous, her revealing clothing conveyed honest insights into the nature of desire, which was as restricted as gender.

On and off screen, the 1910s was the decade when ready-to-wear clothing replaced women sewing clothes for their families and themselves. However, as the space that women were allowed to take up in society grew larger, ironically, size restrictions for women's bodies shrank smaller. The rise of mass-produced clothing was possible because of standardized sizing. Unfortunately, the proliferation of standardized sizing meant fewer clothing options for bodies that varied from the majority. This led to fat people having less access to fashionable clothing than straight-sized people. Without access to stylish clothes, one has less access to partners, job opportunities, and kind treatment by society. This created a stigma towards fat people, especially women. One brand, Lane Bryant, noticed that the fashion industry neglected fat women and seized the opportunity. For decades, they were one of the few brands not to ignore fat women. However, they still approached fatness as though it were a problem. They designed clothes to be slenderizing, which reinforced the harmful idea that bodies that differed from the norm were bad. Freedom from corsets did not mean freedom for women's bodies.

Paul Poiret, a French designer, is credited with freeing women from their corsets. "Yes, I freed the bust, but I shackled the legs" (Rabinovitch-Fox 23), he said. He invented the hobble skirt. The hobble skirt was round at the hips and cut in tight around their ankles so that women were forced to take tiny steps or hobble. The ready-to-wear industry copied his garments and those of other famous designers. Women of all classes wore his hobble skirts and were both newly freed and shackled.

Suffragists, too, wore Poiret's hobble skirts. However, some feminists disliked them because they saw the connection between clothes and society. One such person was prolific writer and feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who wrote extensively about fashion and sociology in the 1910s. Rabinovitch-Fox records that Gilman "interpreted the hobble skirt as an expression of male designers' intention to keep women in bondage or as women's unconscious resistance to their own emancipation" (24). Gilman notes that forces opposing women's freedom come from without and even within.

While the hobble skirt was only partially an advancement for women, suffragists successfully harnessed fashion for freedom in other areas. Fashion was, in fact, instrumental to women gaining the right to vote. Essentially, suffragists were able to launch a very successful PR campaign. They filled newspapers, magazines, and even theaters with images of them looking beautiful while exhibiting behavior that signified they were moral and proper. They wore white when photographed to stand out in black and white print and drew influence from female heroic figures like Joan of Arc. In suffragist films like *Mothers of Men*, suffragists wear Victorian dresses instead of more modern hobble skirts or kimono styles. They emphasize that they are and will remain ideal mothers. The argument over who was a better mother played a prominent role in the battle between suffragists and anti-suffragists. By wearing Victorian dresses, they emphasize that they are traditional women despite seeking the vote. This contrasts heavily with how antis portrayed suffragettes. In the anti film, *A Lively Affair*, suffragettes are portrayed as masculine. They are gambling, and their clothes echo menswear. Their hair and their behavior are disordered. The battle over suffrage became a battle of appearance. Suffragists and antis battled for the most attractive because along with attractiveness came the implication of virtue. This demonstrates the power of fashion to communicate, as well as the significance of design.

Clothes are consequential; therefore, ready-to-wear democratized society by making it difficult to distinguish between classes. For women in the early twentieth century, wearing the right clothes to be perceived as a lady of impeccable morals granted women more freedom. Fashionable clothes were cultural capital. Women need the proper clothing to get and keep a job. This is exemplified by the Great Shirtwaist Strike of 1909. One of the demands of the striking women was a place to keep their hats while they worked because hats symbolized ladyhood. They lost access to respect, suitors, and the potential to advance their social status without them.

The deep meaning of fashion is invoked in advertisements, yet it is denied in the treatment of garment workers. This is the case today and was certainly the case in the 1910s. *The Song of the Shirt* was a 1908 film based on a poem by the same name. The fashion of the characters helps to tell their story. The protagonist wears loose and humble clothes. Her shirt is dark and shapeless, while her white skirt resembles an apron. She fears the death of her sick mother and tries to get work so that she can provide for her. Clips of rich people celebrating contrast her story. The women are dressed in white, comparatively complicated dresses. The men wear black, sleek suits. The rich women wear large hats with bows and feathers. The protagonist begged men in suits for work. Perhaps they would not have thrown her from their offices if she were dressed like the rich women. Dress leads to opportunity.

Many black women used Victorian dress to signal their respectability, as Jane Rhodes notes in “Pedagogies of Respectability.” They donned this style strategically to “uplift the race” and, therefore, gain greater freedom. The difference between what white women and black women were wearing was symbolic of the segregation in America. The suffrage movement, which was successful in large part because of how it united women over a common cause, was as segregated as the rest of the country. Black women responded to these obstacles by gaining

education, entering the workforce, making art, and much more. *Within Our Gates* is a film from 1920. It was created by Oscar Micheaux and starred Evelyn Preer. It was made in direct response to *The Birth of a Nation*. It told the story of a black woman who faced and overcame difficulties. However, she did not let them stop or define her. Despite what she went through, she led a good life. She raised money for a local school in need and found love. Rhodes explains that films like this conveyed messages to their audiences. This film acknowledged some of the hardships that black women faced and offered encouragement. Marriage and family are portrayed as the pathway to freedom. Preer's dress is proper, though not strictly Victorian. Her skirt is a hobble. The constricting role of perfect respectability echoes the skirt.

The least restrictive style of the 1910s was the kimonos. Many women began wearing kimonos inside their homes, but a few dared to wear them outside. In Greenwich Village, a hub for radicals, feminists, bohemians, socialists, and artists, feminists began wearing their kimonos publicly. According to Rabinovitch-Fox, while most of the women in America did not join in this trend, it was favorably viewed by many women as glamorous. The feminists of Greenwich Village freed themselves further. They began designing their own dresses and wearing them outside. One of the first women to do this was Nina Wilcox Putnam. Putnam's dress is long and flowing. It does not restrict the body in any way. Her dresses, which she began designing in the early 1910s, look like the flowy clothes hippies would wear over half a century later.

Rabinovitch-Fox summarizes Putnam and explains, "Putnam stressed the importance of designing and sewing one's own clothes, as it enabled a woman to gain control over how she looked, free from commercial and economic interests of the fashion industry" (25). Women designed the most freeing design for women. Putnam and other Greenwich dress-designing women urged all women to follow suit. However, this was impractical for many women in

America. For working women, many of whom spent their days sewing clothes in factories, sewing additional garments upon returning home was a lot to ask. Furthermore, most of the country's social norms prohibited women from wearing anything like this publicly. Therefore, the ready-to-wear clothing industry continued to expand, and women sought freedom in society and fashion.

American women of the 1910s showed that greater freedom could be gained through collective fashion efforts; however, with the new freedoms gained came new forms of oppression. Reflecting on the clothing and the freedom of the 1910s, one sees that the roots of problems in society today are not as distant as we may think. Progress has not been linear. As we imagine and create a freer future, we must be vigilant for the new oppressions that may emerge.

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