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World War II and Fashion: The Birth of the New Look

Abstract

This article discusses the changes that took place in the style of women's fashions from the 1930s to the late 1940s, from the simpler wartime styles to the frilly, extravagant look popularized by Dior.

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Lauren Olds

By looking at the clothing styles worn by a group of people, one can infer a great deal about the prevailing social values of the time. Whereas at the turn of the twentieth century women encased themselves in constricting boned corsets in order to produce an exaggerated feminine silhouette beneath frilly and modest long gowns, only twenty years later, the flappers of the “Roaring Twenties,” wearing skirts that just skimmed the knee, wore special undergarments that gave them a lean, boyish look. In only a few years, the figure of the ideal, fashionable woman had undergone a complete metamorphosis, reflecting the loosening of conservative values and the birth of a new youth culture that would take the world by storm. Skirt lengths and silhouettes continued to fluctuate according to the whims of the designers until the outbreak of World War II, which brought the British and American governments into the world of fashion. Governmental regulations dictated clothing styles for men and women, and though many believe that the war was a period of stagnation in style, it was actually an impetus leading to a post-war fashion revolution in America and Europe instigated by Christian Dior and his New Look in 1947.

The purpose of this paper is twofold, however; I also set out to illustrate the difficulty of discovering truth about the past. It seems that in the case of recent fashion history, little dispute should exist about what people were wearing, because fashion magazines and catalogs are available as visual evidence. Yet I found that at times contemporary writers have exaggerated the war’s simplification of fashion, making it seem as if there was little variety in the styles available to the average consumer. I noticed that contrary to popular belief, there were various styles, especially in America, where restrictions were looser than in Britain. Designers remained creative while following the restrictions set by the British and American war boards.

During the ten years prior to World War II, women’s fashion in America and Britain underwent gradual changes as the decade progressed. This evolution can be seen in *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties: As Pictured in Sears Catalogs*, edited by Stella Blum. In 1930, the gowns were knee-length and drop-waisted, giving women a lean, boyish silhouette. (See Figure 1) There was no distinction between the width of the waist and hips, and the breasts appeared flattened. Women wore strappy, high-heeled shoes up to four inches tall. Over chin-length bobbed hairstyles they wore small, shallow-crowned hats with upturned brims in the front; these were a modification of the hat known as a cloche from the previous decade. In 1931, dress styles reverted to the natural waistline, and belted styles appeared. By 1932, skirts

were calf-length, belts were in, breasts became visible again thanks to the development of a boned brassiere from the Kestos Company,¹ and dresses took on a more natural feminine silhouette. (See Figure 2) In 1933-34, hemlines fell to the ankle and padded shoulders and ruffled sleeves emphasized the chest and torso area. (See Figure 3) Wider-brimmed hats became popular. By 1936, dresses and skirts were calf-length again and by 1939, they had inched back up to the knee, closing the decade just as it started off, though the silhouette was decidedly more feminine and mature, with gathered fabric on bodices emphasizing the bosom and shoulder pads creating a more statuesque shape. Blouses, skirts, sweaters, boleros, and man-tailored suits worn with frilly blouses were also common attire. The Sears Roebuck catalog also sold pants for women, but these were worn exclusively for sports or perhaps working in the yard.

Men's fashion changed only slightly in the thirties. Suits with wide, padded shoulders and pleated, cuffed trousers were a staple. In the mid-thirties, trousers became high-waisted and very full, especially among the younger men, with advertisements in the Sears Roebuck catalog of 1933 boasting 22-inch bottoms.² (See Figure 4) Trousers remained full through the thirties but widths were pared down from the 22-inch peak. Wool sweaters in pullover, cardigan, and vest styles were also popular for weekend leisure activities, and as campus attire for the college-aged set.

Throughout the thirties, popular fashion styles were dictated by designers and influenced by film stars, as shown in one advertisement for "the hollywood [*sic*] halo hat" with "Worn in Hollywood by Loretta Young" stitched right on the label.³ Women's clothing was described using adjectives such as "glamorous," "striking," and "dramatic." The average American emulated the styles sported by their favorite movie stars on the "Silver Screen." (See Figures 3 and 5) As shown by the items available in the Sears Roebuck catalog, the new ready-made industry made fashionable dressing affordable for the middle class, allowing them to copy the expensive couture fashions of the stars that were the American version of an aristocracy.

With the outbreak of World War II, function superseded form in fashion. In order to save materials such as wool and silk, used for making uniforms and parachutes, first the British and later the American governments passed bills limiting fabric usage and rationing clothing items. In 1941, each British adult received 66 clothing coupons, but this number quickly dropped to 48. In 1945, each person received only 36 coupons. A woman's tweed suit alone cost 18 coupons, half of the yearly ration. Shoes cost 7 coupons, unless one chose a pair with wooden soles, which cost 5. If these were not carefully dried out after a rain, however, the wood might split. With the government setting such tight limits on how many items of clothing each person could buy, everyday apparel, coats, and shoes had to be functional and hard-wearing.⁴

The Utility Scheme, introduced by the British Board of Trade in 1941, regulated cost and quality of manufactured cloth in England. The British government hoped to halt changes in fashion, so that clothes did not quickly go out of style, thus saving fabric needed for making uniforms and other aspects of the war effort. The leading British couturiers joined to form the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, headed by designer Edward Molyneux. Their goal entailed designing elegant, quality clothing meeting the new government standards. Later, the American War Production Board would serve the same role in the United States.⁵

The regulations in men's clothing, dictated by the British Utility Scheme of 1941, with similar restrictions later set by the U. S., set men's trouser openings at a maximum circumference of 19-inches, and pleats or cuffs were not permitted. Trousers were made of lesser-quality wool fabric combined with synthetics, and were usually available in only three colors: black, brown, or navy. Double-breasted coat styles were banned, and maximum collar-widths were specified. There were also limits as to how many buttons or pockets could be placed on certain garments.⁶

For British women, double-breasted jackets were also prohibited, and the number of pleats allowable in a skirt was regulated. Skirts could use no more than 2.5 yards of fabric. Hems could be no greater than two inches deep. Sleeve circumferences could be no greater than 14-inches at the wrist. In order to preserve leather in Britain and America, "wedgie" shoes with wooden soles were designed. Since there was also a shortage in silk, ladies' silk stockings were banned from the market in 1941. Nylon hosiery, a technological breakthrough of the 1930s, also disappeared from the shelves.⁷ New products for coloring the legs in order to imitate the appearance of stockings were introduced, such as Elizabeth Arden's "Velva Leg Film," appearing in an advertisement in a 1941 *Ladies Home Journal*. To complete the look, black eye pencil could be used to draw "seams" down the backs of the legs. The bobby sock also became a popular alternative to wearing stockings, especially among teenage girls. Alternative materials such as straw were used to make ladies' hats. Additionally, zippers in both men and women's clothing were prohibited to preserve metal.⁸

According to Anne Tyrrell, author of *Changing Trends in Fashion*, the styles available during the war were austere and simple. Gone were the ruffles and frills of the previous decade. Civilian clothing often mirrored the military uniform styles. (See Figure 6) Because rubber was necessary for the war effort, designers promoted styles that did not require girdles. Women's nipped-in waists were let out, lending dresses a matronly, rather shapeless character. (See Figure 7) Pants also became popular, in concurrence with the well-known image of "Rosie the Riveter," largely because of women joining the work force in factories to replace the men who were at war.⁹ One of the more

exciting effects the war had on fashion at the time was the introduction of the two-piece bathing suit for women, created as a result of the U.S. government's order, issued in 1943, that fabric used in women's swimwear needed to be reduced by ten percent.¹⁰

Upon examination of the *Ladies Home Journal* during the wartime years, I found that although some designs were utilitarian garments, many designers were creating styles that were unquestionably feminine and chic. Though there was a shortage of wool, the March 1943 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* shows how other materials such as fur were used to lend clothing a glamorous touch. (See Figure 8) The gowns have definite waists paired with broad shoulders. One design featured in *Ladies Home Journal* in June of 1941 shows a "short black dinner dress with bow shoulders" with a keyhole neckline and a wide, brimmed hat apparently made from some type of netting. This look is not shapeless or utilitarian-looking, and the keyhole neckline is something entirely new. The variety of ladies hats during the war is also evident from flipping through the pages of *Ladies Home Journal*. There are hats with wide brims, small caps that rest on the back of the head, and many other unique, fanciful designs. The designs on the pages of this American magazine were definitely *not* utilitarian.

Comparing the styles in American magazines with pictures of British styles, it seems that though they were similar in many ways, British fashions were more conservative and straight-lined than American counterparts. Tyrrell does not mention this distinction, although she admits that clothes rationing lasted longer in Britain than in America. By looking at some primary sources, it seems that the war affected British fashion more than it did American fashion. Britons had to endure more hardships than Americans did. This is most likely due to the fact that Britain was at war for a longer period of time than America.

Even after the war's end, clothes rationing continued in Britain. Americans had fewer constraints to follow, and as a result, a new American Look was born under the direction of the clever American designer Claire McCardell. Clean, relaxed lines characterized the American Look, reflecting a comfortable, yet active, lifestyle. According to Tyrrell, these fresh new styles with their full skirts, matching hats and gloves, and bright leather shoes, were envied by European women. It seemed as though Americans had taken the lead in the fashion world.¹¹

This changed in 1947 when the French designer Christian Dior launched his New Look, drastically altering the square-shouldered, straight female silhouette of the last ten years. This style had more in common with the Gibson girl look of the early 1900s than the fashions from just a few years before. The female figure once again became exaggerated and glorified, with dresses featuring soft shoulders, a slightly-padded bodice, a wasp waist, and a full skirt flaring out from the hips and grazing the calves. These gowns were

worn with sheer stockings and dainty high-heeled court shoes. The look was decidedly opulent and decadent. (See Figure 9) The skirts alone used as much fabric as 10 or even 15 wartime skirts, some using as much as 30 yards of fabric! The full skirt was balanced by a wide-brimmed hat.¹² For evening wear, the skirt was similarly long and full but the bodice was usually low cut or strapless, showing more bosom and cleavage than had been seen in public since the 1700s.¹³

In addition to the excessive amounts of material necessary for the skirts and coats, armor-like undergarments were reinvented after years of plain bras and slips. After several years of disuse, the corset was reborn. In order for the gowns to fit properly, a special “waspie” or “merry widow” corset, a padded, pointy bra, and special pads for the hips were necessary to create the voluptuous curves of the New Look. (See Figure 10) In addition, to create fullness under the skirt, a flounced, layered petticoat using several yards of fabric was a necessity.¹⁴

The American and British governments tried to persuade women not to wear the New Look. Many women criticized the New Look for being too extravagant, wasteful, expensive, and downright unpatriotic. In addition, these clothes were simply too expensive, not to mention impractical, for the average woman. Others complained that the heavy corset and padding necessary to achieve the New Look undermined the newly-found freedom of women. The New Look spurred much debate, and even public demonstrations in New York and Paris.¹⁵

Despite these criticisms, the majority of women embraced the New Look. For years, British women had endured shapeless, unfeminine-looking clothing. Before long, inexpensive ready-made versions of Dior’s creation were popping up in department stores everywhere, (See Figure 11) and any respectably fashionable woman was donning the New Look. Dior also created an alternative New Look, with an elegant straight, calf-length skirt and a short jacket. This style used considerably less fabric than the other design and also became popular. Despite the controversy and debate, Dior had emerged triumphant and Paris once again became the center of the fashion world.¹⁶

It is not surprising that despite its impracticality and artificial, exaggerated silhouette of womanhood, women were willing to give up their utilitarian, comfortable clothing for the New Look. Women were tired of wearing dull tweeds and masculine-looking jackets; they were ready to restore their femininity. Although the shape of the New Look was quite unnatural, it was undoubtedly alluring and glamorous. In addition, the New Look symbolized new hope and prosperity after years of scrimping and saving.

Men’s clothing, by contrast, did not change drastically after the war. A more relaxed line did replace the exaggerated, wide-shouldered styles of the Utility Suit. Men’s clothing, especially in the United States, took on a sportier

character. After years of difficult fighting and harsh conditions, American men seemed ready for a return to relaxation, leisure, and sport. British men's fashion lagged behind, but it would be several years before men's fashion as a whole underwent any major changes.¹⁷

A piece generally missing from the fashion books I read was teen fashion during the time. Since the designs in the *Ladies Home Journal* show the designer's idea of fashion at the time, I decided to consult the Illinois Wesleyan yearbooks from the war period in order to see what young people were wearing. Teenagers are normally at the cutting edge of fashion, often adopting new and different styles before, or in conflict with, the rest of the population. I found that the college-aged students generally lacked variety in their wardrobes. The female students are pictured most often wearing a wool sweater with a collared shirt underneath, a simple knee-length skirt, and loafer-type shoes worn with socks, while the male students wore sweaters and slacks or suits. At the same time, the magazines depict a more variable wardrobe, with dress styles ranging from very narrow "pencil" skirts to fuller, knee-length skirts, gloves, and a wide range of hat styles for ladies.

This discrepancy is in many ways due to the age difference between the students in the yearbooks and the intended audience of the *Ladies Home Journal*. But while the books claim that the era of cultural takeover by the youth did not begin until the 1950s, the pictures in the yearbook show that the teenagers of America, as early as the war years, had already established their own distinct, "preppy" style.

I found that while the war years did not produce any longstanding elements of modern-day fashion, the war itself had an incredible effect on fashion. For ten years preceding the war, many people faced dismal poverty as a result of the Great Depression. Then came World War II, one of the bloodiest wars of all time. America emerged from the war with its economy booming, and this economic prosperity led to feelings of national pride and a sense of hope for the future. Britain was not far behind. These feelings were reflected in the extravagant, luxurious clothing styles that Dior made popular after the war.

While I have discovered that fashion during the war years varied in America and Britain due to tighter restrictions in Britain, the clothing after the war became nearly identical once the restrictions were finally lifted in Britain in 1949. Although there was a more pronounced change from the utilitarian British styles to the New Look, the style reflected a similar attitude in Britain and America.

Women who had rolled up their sleeves in the factories doing "man's work" returned to their homes to greet their husbands with open arms. Leaving their assumed masculine jobs behind meant abandoning the simple work clothes for the direct antithesis: dresses with full, sweeping skirts worn with

delicate high heels. It was a way to reclaim their femininity and step aside to allow their husbands, brothers, and fathers to reassume their pre-war roles.

On a greater level, it was a way for America, Britain, and France to relish their victory and return to a state of normalcy, or actually, to show themselves and the rest of the world that they were more prosperous and more successful than ever before. The New Look was an aristocratic look. A woman wearing a corset, petticoat, full skirt, and heels looked like a genteel and elegant lady. She didn't have to work in a factory. Her successful husband took care of her and she did not have a care in the world, other than taking care of their beautiful children and shopping for the products being placed on the shelves by her country's booming industry.

Fashion reflects values and lifestyle. The fashions developed after the war reflected a hopeful and optimistic, if naïve, view of the world. The democracy-eating monsters were all dead, and the sun was shining, at least for the time being.

Endnotes

¹Schnumberger, Lynn. *Let There Be Clothes*. (New York: Workman Publishing, 1986), 345.

²Blum, Stella, ed. *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties: As Pictured in Sears Catalogs*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986), 56.

³*Ibid.*, 65.

⁴Tyrell, Lynn V. *Changing Trends in Fashion: Patterns of the Twentieth Century*. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1986), 96.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*, 98.

⁷Presley, Ann Beth. "Fifty Years of Change: Societal Attitudes and Women's Fashions, 1900-1950," *The Historian* 60 (Winter 1998): 323.

⁸Tyrell, *Changing Trends*, 98.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Baker, Patricia. *Fashions of a Decade: the 1940s*. (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1992), 19.

¹¹Tyrell. *Changing Trends*, 96.

¹²*Ibid.*, 11.

¹³*Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵Baker, *Fashions of a Decade*, 56-57.

¹⁶Tyrell, *Changing Trends*, 96-97.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

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- Tyrrell, Anne V. *Changing Trends in Fashion: Patterns of the Twentieth Century*. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1986.
- Ladies Home Journal*: June 1941, March 1943, July 1950.
- Illinois Wesleyan University *Wesleyana*, 1941, 1942, 1945, 1950



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

—Very Nifty, All Wool Tweed Effect
 Fancy Waist Cassimere. 22-in.
 bottoms.
 —Side straps and buckles.
 —Lay out in dark shades.
 Navy, white, orange. Packed with
 pieces of paper for the front like "Kings
 all the others." 1941. 1942. 1943.
 and into a pile of these marks and get
 yourself into circulation. "Here below
 the measurement. 1941 (spread) 34-36
 in. 1 1/2-1 3/4 in.
 48 D 2217
 Brown. \$2.95
 48 D 2216
 Gray.

*It's new!
and dramatic!
the hollywood halo hat!*



Figure 5

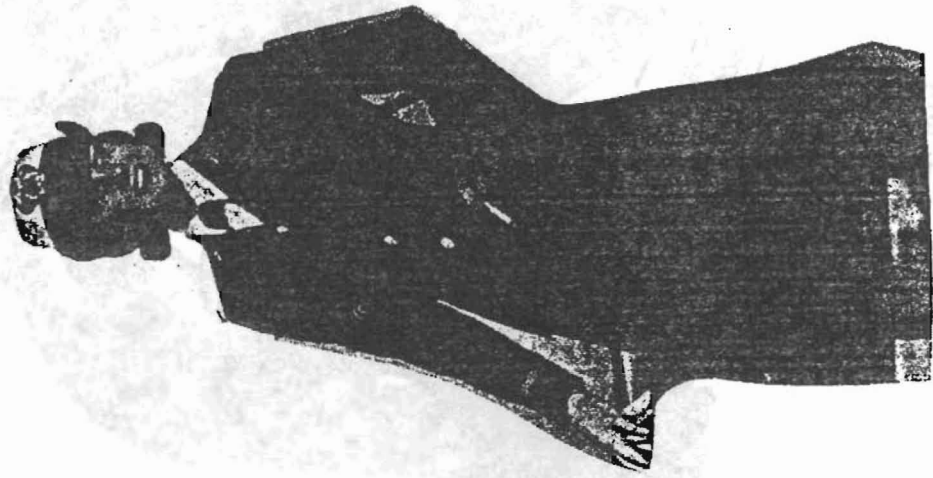


Figure 6

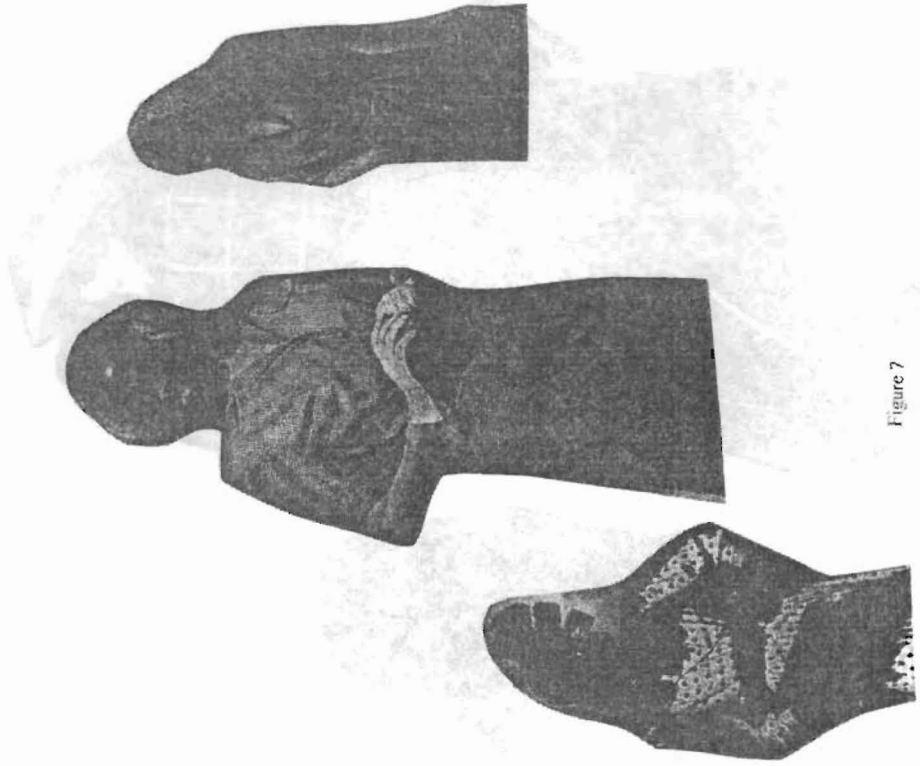


Figure 7

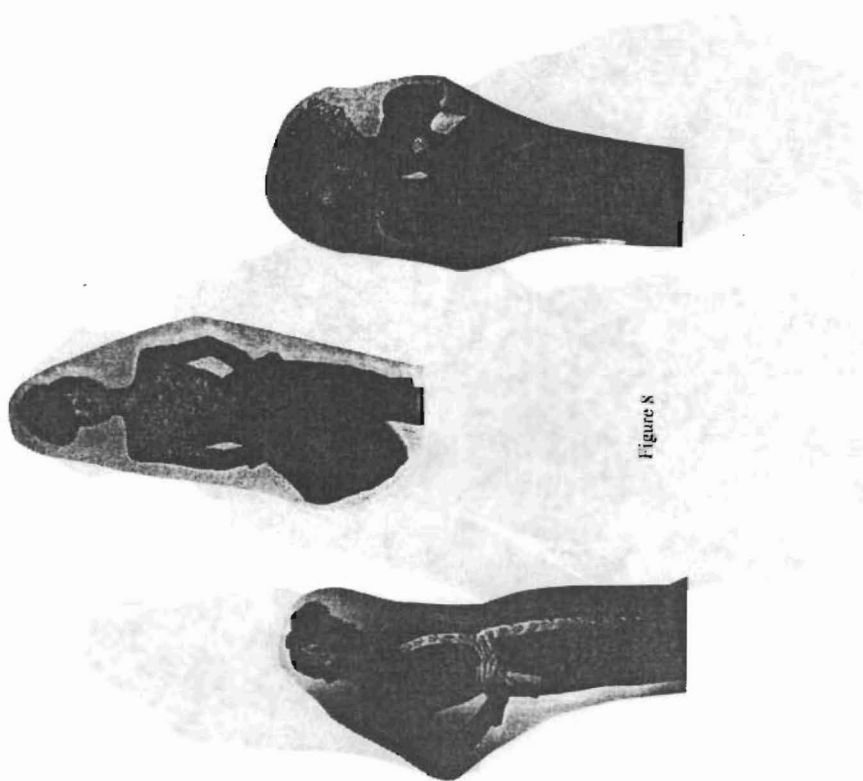


Figure 8

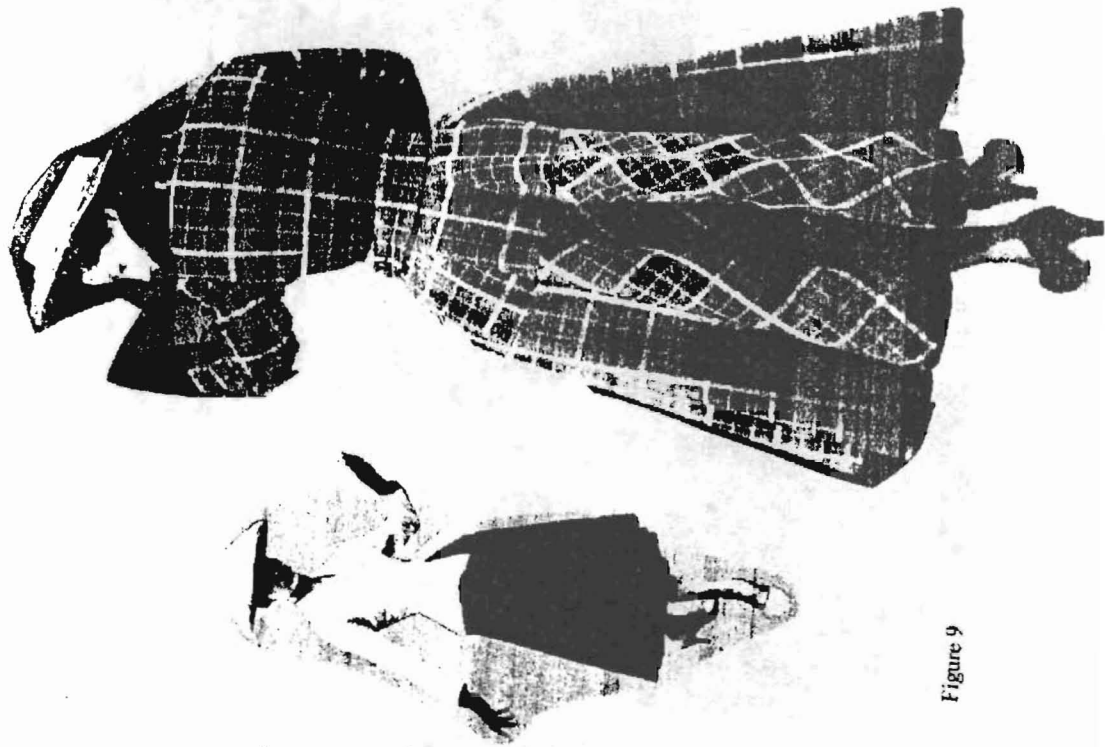


Figure 9



Figure 10

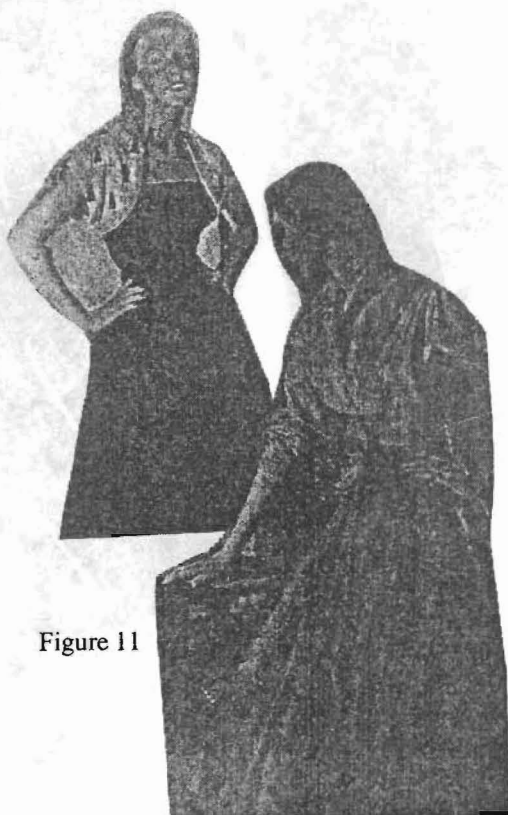


Figure 11