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Fashion, Advertising, and Class Delineation:
A Study of Ready-made Fashion's Effects on Class Barriers

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Fashion, Advertising, and Class Delineation

The period around the turn of the 20th century in America was full of social and technological changes. The fashions of the period reflect some of the changes in lifestyle that occurred. Advertising for these fashions reflects how society reacts to some of these changes.

By the 1890's, America was no longer the rural, yeoman's country that Thomas Jefferson had envisioned. Industry had blossomed in the north. Large corporations were making it difficult to maintain small businesses. Factories mass-produced everything from soap to railroads, and employed thousands of people to do it. Long hours and poor wages stimulated labor movements to demand better pay and shorter hours. As these demands were realized, much of the American public found themselves with a little bit of spare time and some change in their pockets. During the early 20th century, leisure activities bloomed to help people spend their spare time and money. The bicycle, which had become popular in the late 19th century, was replaced with the automobile. Motion pictures produced images of lifestyle and fashion that people could only dream about, yet dreamed about nonetheless. Amusement parks like Coney Island became wildly popular holiday getaways. Middle classes who could now afford homes of their own began to move out of tenement dwellings in town into single-family houses outside of the busy cities. Life for the average American had expanded beyond the simple, but difficult, goals of putting food on the table and a roof over one's head.

The Civil War marked a pivotal period in the dissemination of information and advertisements through newsprint. It was during the Civil War that the New York Times began to print issues on Sundays. It was also during this time that a Sunday supplement with articles and advertising specifically targeted to interest women was added to the paper. Advertisers quickly realized the importance of making their appeals reach women directly, since women were the primary purchasers of consumer goods of all types, and editors were happy to oblige.¹

From the 1890's on, fashion pictures in drawings and photographs appeared in papers on a regular basis. Improvements in graphic technology led to a dramatic increase in the number of drawings used on a regular basis.² As techniques for printing improved, papers were printed and distributed more quickly and cheaply. By 1899, the circulation of the New York Times had risen to 75,000 paid subscribers.³ A significant number of these subscribers were outside of the New York area. Newspapers reached these subscribers daily, making knowledge of the current fashions immediately accessible to a large audience.

These daily images of fashion helped increase the speed with which new fashions were demanded, by allowing participants in fashion to come from more than one level of society.⁴ As successively lower levels of society began to mimic

¹ Marzolf, 1977. Bleyer, 1927. Thomas, 1987.

² Thomas, 1987. p. 16.

³ Thomas, 1987. p. 14.

⁴ Roach & Musa, 1980.

pictures they saw in the media, the upper levels of society adopted new styles to distinguish themselves from the working classes.

Magazines were a different type of media; they could be developed for a specific audience with specific concerns. After the Civil War, several ladies magazines were developed, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Home Companion*. Most of these focused on things specific to women's family lives: cooking, cleaning tips, home decorating, sewing tips, etc. However, a few of these focused specifically on ladies fashion, such as *The Delineator*, *McCall's*, and *Cosmopolitan*. However, these magazines do not always provide a chronologically continuous record. For example, *Peterson's* magazine ceased publication in 1898. An equally widespread fashion-focused magazine did not begin again until 1912, when *Harper's Bazar* began publication.⁵

Another factor to consider when using magazines as a source of fashion records is the audience that they reached. Magazine subscriptions were substantially more expensive than newspapers, and had a narrower focus. Thus, while the daily news would have something that would interest everyone in a family, a monthly issue of a ladies' journal would only appeal to the ladies of the house. Thus, these magazines appealed primarily to the middle class, who could afford the subscription and had the leisure time to read them. While magazines provide a more focused set of ads and fashion descriptions, they were not designed to reach the whole populace, as were newspapers.

⁵ Thomas, 1987. p. 9.

The Civil War was not only improved the printed media, but was also the catalyst which pushed the ready-made clothing industry into action. Before the Civil War, the term *ready-made clothing* referred either to clothing made by tailors and then stored until a busy season, or to cheap clothing of pathetic quality made primarily for mobile workers without the resources to make their own clothing, such as sailors. The shops that made these poor articles of clothing were often called slops, after the chests that sailors used to store their possessions in.

The Civil War created a need for large numbers of identical uniforms, which in turn supplied the economic drive for improvements in sewing machinery and in standardized measurements for ready-made clothing. After the war was over, men returned home with a need for civilian clothing. The production machinery that had supplied uniforms switched to fulfill this demand. While for the most part the working classes were the only supporters of this industry, over time, the industry made further improvements in quality, sizing and style, so that it became more convenient and less costly to purchase a ready-made suit of about equal quality to what a tailor could produce.⁶ By the turn of the century, it was not at all uncommon to see men strolling along the streets in suits of reasonable quality that had been mass-produced. The men's suit industry had improved dramatically from its roots in slops only 50 years before.

⁶ Kidwell & Christman, 1974. Ewen & Ewen, 1992.

While the style of men's clothing has remained pretty much the same for the last two hundred years, women's fashion has varied drastically. Fashionable clothing has almost always been more complex for women than for men, and the transition of women's clothing from custom-tailored to ready-made occurred at a much later date. This may have been due in part to the fact that there was less stimuli for the clothing industry to begin mass production of women's clothing. No war required mass production, and although the number of working women was increasing, a woman's role was still to provide for her family. The general expectation even as late as World War II was that women should "subordinate all activities to maternity," to be at home to provide for her family.⁷ Among this duty of provision was the making of her and her children's clothes.

Like men's clothing, a systematic method for setting clothing sizes was necessary to mass produce clothing that would fit a large group of people. In the 1860's, Ebenezer Butterick was among the first to actually produce such a system. He did not use his sizing to make ready-made clothing, but to create patterns so that women could make their own well-fitting and stylish clothing easily, or have a seamstress make it. The patterns were quickly bought and used by clothing factories, though, "establishing a link between public and private spheres of production"⁸ since both private homes and factories were producing the same articles of clothing. Eventually, it became easier and even cheaper to

⁷ Gwendolyn Hughes, 1925, as quoted in Ewen, 1976.

⁸ Ewen & Ewen, 1992. p. 149-50. See also Walsh, 1979.

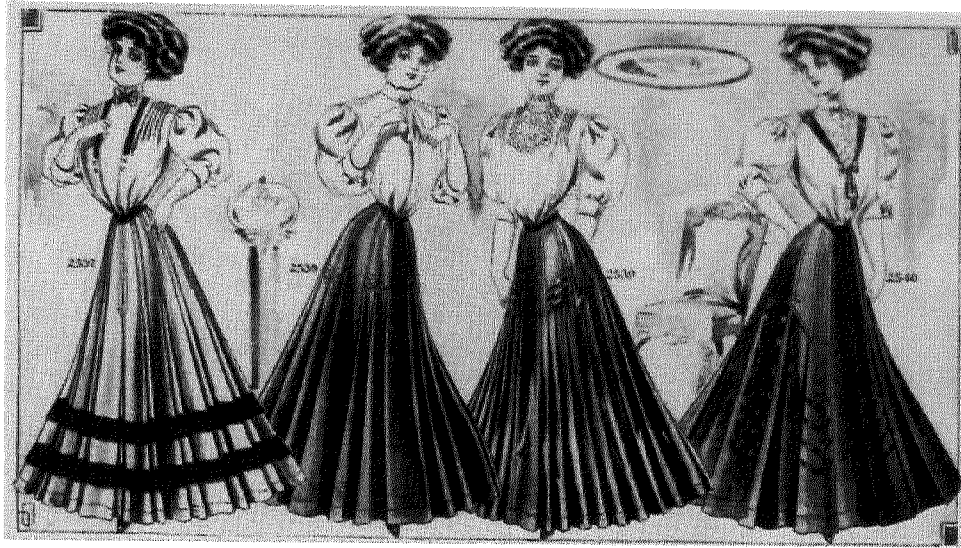
simply buy mass-produced clothing; the mass purchasing and production reduced costs so much that a shirt might sell for only a little more than the fabric, threads, and buttons might be purchased for. Buying clothing already made saved time for people to spend either in leisure activities or in other money-making ventures.

During the 1890's, shirtwaists worn with skirts became popular among ladies of all classes. These were fairly easy items to mass-produce. The shirtwaist was a garment similar to men's shirts, which had been mass-produced since the Civil War. They varied in style, from a simple, straight-cut blouse very similar to men's shirts, to frilly, lacy shirts that were unmistakably feminine. "There were tailored waists, semitailored waists, hand-embroidered waists, waists decorated with 'machine stitching cleverly done to resemble handwork,' nursing waists, fancy lawn waists, very dressy taffeta silk waists, china silk waists, handsome novelty waists, stunning white lingerie waists..." and the variations continue.⁹ Styles of shirtwaists were adapted for all occasions – from working in the kitchen to attending a formal dinner party.

The skirt often worn with a shirtwaist need only fit the hips and waist. They could be made at one length, and hemmed to fit the wearer. A heavier skirt could be worn in the winter, and a lighter weight skirt in the summer. Because the shirtwaist and skirt need not be the same size, the sizes necessary for an appropriate fit over the entire body could be mixed and matched. A person

⁹ Kidwell & Christman, 1974. p. 145.

whose proportions were not ideal or well matched would have needed a tailor to make a garment that fitted her entire body. Now, she could buy the correct size shirtwaist and the correct size skirt, hemming the skirt if needed, and be fully and stylishly dressed without ever stepping into a tailor's shop.



From M. Philipsborn's catalogue, spring and summer, 1908. (copied from Kidwell & Christman)

With the turn of the century came new styles, generally less fitted than the previous decades. This made the sale of ready-made clothing much easier to accomplish. Previously, most women buying ready-made clothing would still need to alter their purchases for the proper fit. As styles became looser, an imperfect fit became acceptable, even stylish.¹⁰

Another change in fashion also helped promote the sale of ready-made clothing. "Patterns of sumptuousness and conspicuous consumption of cloth were costly both in terms of the amount of cloth and the labor they required.

¹⁰ Kidwell & Christman, 1974. p. 109.

Textile yardage decreased as simple, less fulsome styles began to appear.” These less fulsome styles were more economical for businesses to produce. The amount of cloth used in a fashionable outfit decreased from 19 yards in 1913 to 7 yards in 1928.¹¹ Not only the decreased amount of cloth, but the decreased amount of labor needed to finish that cloth, made production less expensive.

This change in the amount of fabric used reflected the changing role of women in society. As the origins of ready-made clothing for men arose primarily from the clothing needs of a mobile work force, the expansion of the ready-made clothing industry into women’s clothing reflected a similar role for women. This change, to public activity and wage work, is more significant for women than men, since women had previously worked largely within the home. Even as more and more women entered the mobile, wage-earning workforce, the perception that women should work within the home, primarily at raising a family, continued to persist well after World War I.¹²

However, the rise of quality, style and sales within women’s ready-made clothing shows that, while the ideal may have been for women to be at home, in actuality women were becoming increasingly active in the public world. As their activities increased, their demands for quality garments at reasonable prices and current, useful styles increased. Bloomers, pants that were full enough to resemble skirts, were introduced to satisfy demands for garments suited for

¹¹ Ewen & Ewen, 1992. p. 150.

¹² Ewen, 1976. p. 159.

riding bicycles which were wildly popular in the first decade of the 20th century. Looser clothing allowed freedom of movement, which the fitted, formed suits and necessary undergarments of the late 19th century had prevented. The looser styles made working, traveling, dancing and sporting easier than before. Ironically, many of the women demanding these garments were the same women working to produce them.¹³

The movement from custom-tailored, hand-sewn clothes to ready-made garments effected several changes in clothing's reflection on social status. Before the development of the ready-made clothing industry, what one wore denoted one's place in society. Homemade garments that often did not fit particularly well denoted a position in the lower levels of society. Stylish, fitted garments that used excessive yards of fabric denoted a higher economic position. These stratifications would be clear to anyone walking along a busy street.

As fashionable patterns that mimicked the styles in vogue emerged, that stratification became less pronounced. Garments all looked stylishly similar, and the quality of the garment, a factor less easily noticed and always improving, was all that separated lower classes from upper classes. By the 1920's, one employer in Indiana complained, "I used to be able to tell something of the background of the girl applying for a job [by the clothes she wore.] Now I have to wait until she

¹³ Ewen & Ewen, 1992. p. 130-131.

speaks, shows a gold tooth, or otherwise gives me a second clue.”¹⁴ The fashion barriers that had delineated class for centuries were disintegrating.

What was primarily being sold was the *luxury* of the item, according to Ewen & Ewen. Fashion itself was a luxury item that had previously only been available to those who could afford to buy new tailored clothing every season. “With the rise of mass fashion, the language of elegance and luxury entered the common vernacular of perception and expressions. The garment industry, initially, a supplier of clothes designed explicitly for workers, and *for work*, now began to dress its public in wares that suggested the common accessibility of prosperity and leisure.”¹⁵

Again, this public desire for luxuries that once only belonged to the upper classes is reflected in the women’s undergarment industry. During the 1920’s, the use of silk stockings, as opposed to the more common and utilitarian cotton stockings, increased drastically among the general population. This was yet another example of the disintegration of class distinctions through dress.

Retail advertising for ready-made clothing occurred in the printed media as well as wall posters, fliers, and trinkets like fans and pencils, but these medium are much harder to record. While both magazines and newspapers advertised ready-made clothing, usually at a specific retailer’s establishment, their methods tend to differ.

¹⁴ Ewen & Ewen, 1992. p. 117.

¹⁵ p. 130.

Newspapers had a wide audience, and were read commonly throughout all classes. Daily papers, such as the New York Times, generally had sections relegated to fashion, social life, and other specific issues. On Sundays, from the Civil War onwards, there was an additional segment targeted specifically for women, which would discuss social issues, cooking tips and recipes, fashion highlights, etc. Advertising placed in papers such as the New York Times were designed to appeal to all classes, but especially lower and middling classes.

Common ready-made items advertised included shirtwaists of all varieties, skirts, suits, cloaks, hosiery, hats, and shoes. Stores frequently announced new styles or sale prices of these items by accompanying text with black and white illustrations of the styles. (See Appendix) The primary attraction of many of these ads is the reasonable price for fashionable merchandise.¹⁶

When a retailer advertised for his enterprise, as opposed to advertising for a specific item or selection of items, again his focus was on price and style, but also the luxury of the shopping experience. Early in the history of department stores, offerings such as string ensembles, lectures on social issues, concerts or theatrical presentation, and equal service to all regardless of station were used to attract consumers to the establishment. Entertainment became a common means to attract customers, and often these were forms of entertainment that had previously been primarily a source of entertainment for upper classes. Richard

¹⁶ Survey of random issues New York Times between 1895 and 1915.

Strauss conducted the world premier performance of his *Symphonia Domestica* in 1904, inside the rotunda of Wanamaker's New York,¹⁷ a luxurious form of entertainment that would normally only be available to those who could afford the symphony tickets and the appropriate clothing to wear to such an event. These performances and exhibits were not designed to enlighten the lower classes to cultural or art appreciation, or to meet the entertainment standards of the upper classes; they were designed to attract customers to the location.

Department stores used both free attractions, such as the premier performance of the *Symphonia Domestica*, and purchase-based attractions. Sections of stores such as Wanamaker and Bloomingdale's large pet stores, floral shops and roof gardens, museums and libraries were free for customers to browse through. Other attractions such as restaurants and beauty parlors offered services for a fee, but in a more convenient location than other shops of a similar nature. One now had the luxury of shopping for a morning, sitting down to lunch with friends, followed by an afternoon beauty treatment, all without ever leaving the store.

The use of luxury as the attracting, appealing factor in advertisements, not only of clothing but of all goods, reflected the diminishing demarcations between classes. Through the consumption of similar, luxurious products, all classes of society were beginning to share a common culture: the culture of consumerism. On a smaller scale, to focus on women's ready-made clothing, women shared the

¹⁷ Leach, 1984.

common culture of fashion. Ready-made clothing designed to mimic the newest couture fashions was readily available in various levels of quality and price, so that anyone could participate in the world of fashion, which had previously only belonged within the realm of the wealthy.

While the retailer and advertising within newsprint tried to spread this appeal of luxury to everyone, regardless of class, the ladies magazines of the middle class seem more anxious to preserve these distinctions. Journals such as *Harper's Bazaar* and the *Ladies Home Journal* have numerous clothing advertisements, but they are primarily for patterns, fabric and tailors. This continues through the first 15 years of the century. In fact, several advertisements for tailors during these years specifically advertise that they do not sell ready-made clothing. They often guarantee a perfect fit, in contrast to the sloppy or loose fit of ready-made clothing. Implicit in many of these ads is the sense of personal attention to one's self, body, and clothing needs that one will receive by visiting a tailor rather than a retailer of mass-produced clothing. Tailoring shops' negative view of ready-made clothing may have more to do with the loss of business resulting from cheaper and better ready-made clothing available to the public than from the actual differences in the products and services offered. Their use of snobbery towards ready-made clothing may be a desperate attempt to maintain business, or it may be a reflection of the middle and upper classes' desire to separate themselves from the working classes, since,

by the 1920's, the quality of ready-made clothing was very close to that of tailored clothing.

As late as 1915, the only ready-made articles that were regularly advertised in these ladies' magazines were for things that would not normally be seen by the public: corsets and other underwear, bathrobes, and maternity wear. Occasionally, cloaks and fur capes, items which had been mass produced for a longer period of time due to the physical strength needed to produce them,¹⁸ were advertised as well. These items were acceptable items to purchase ready-made, because they had not been visible symbols of social status.

From examining women's fashion between the 1890's and the 1920's, we can follow the movement of women out of the home and into the workforce, as well as into more active leisure activities. Styles change away from the carefully formed silhouettes that had been associated with femininity to looser styles that borrow elements from men's clothing, such as the shirtwaist and bloomers. These elements borrowed from men's clothing are parallel to changes in the accepted role of women, which began to incorporate elements from the role of men, such as wage-earning labor and sporting for leisure times.

The advertising of these styles in newspapers shows the availability of fashion to everyone. Advertising in magazines, which were targeted for middle class audiences, displays the social needs of the middle class to distinguish themselves through fashion from the lower classes, while still mimicking the

¹⁸ Ewen & Ewen, p. 131.

styles of the upper classes. Thus, from examining women's fashion ads in newspapers and magazines, we can see that fashion as a source of class delineation disintegrates, and instead becomes a luxury that unifies all classes of women.

Appendix



Bloomingdale Bros. use line art to illustrate their sale items. (from Early American Advertising)



These two ads show common styles of illustration as well as reflect the



as well as reflect the increasingly active role of women. Yachting, tennis, and swimming became popular for ladies and gentlemen in the early 20th century. The ad below shows ready-made evening dresses, priced from 7.50\$ to 12.50\$ (from Suiting Everyone)

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