

## Trouser Costumes, the Rational Alternative for Courageous Ladies

### *International Dress Reform Efforts – German Initiatives to Improve Women's Dress – "Rational Dresses": Propagated, Defamed, Accepted*



In the second half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, voices were raised, first in the United States, but soon also in Europe, calling for a correction of women's clothing that was harmful to health and inhibited movement. Advocates of dress reform began to form associations with the aim of publicising their efforts. They organised lectures, campaigns, exhibitions, and published newsletters promoting their ideas. At meetings and congresses, they internally discussed strategies for spreading the reform and drew up various catalogues of criteria, the basic ideas of which, however, were the same, on the basis of which healthy, appropriate clothing was to be judged. At national and international women's rights congresses, which had taken place regularly since the 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls, USA, questions of dress were often on the agenda - an indication that politically committed women also attached importance to this topic.

In order to keep the threshold to participate in the reform efforts for ladies of society as low as possible, the reformers concentrated on improvements that were not visible in the outer garments: Attention was now focused on women's underwear. The "Union Suit", became the favourite, also known as the "Emancipation Suit" - a loosely cut shirt trouser closed at the crotch. This discreet dress reform was universally welcomed, partly because it refrained from spectacularly challenging traditional patterns, and partly because an improvement in female dress was more urgent than ever due to changing lifestyles.

Although in the United States of the 1880s and early 1890s the moderate reformers were clearly in charge, there were repeated attempts to reintroduce the trouser costume. In a September 1892 report in *The Arena* magazine, under the heading "Symposium on Women's Dress", we learn that the American protagonists of dress reform had agreed on three prototypes: a "Syrian Dress", a "Gymnastic Suit" and a so-called

"American Costume". For the "Syrian costume", the Oriental women's costume was exemplary - a bouffant, waist-length trouser, held at the bottom, combined with loose outerwear and accentuated at the waist by a loosely looped sash. This proposal, launched by the *Rational Dress Movement*, London, was followed by Emily A. Bruce and Hattie Flower, among others, who allowed themselves to be admired dressed in this way at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. The "gymnastic suit" was intended as a house suit which, by means of a decoratively draped "Grecian" coverlet, was to enable the house lady to receive visitors without changing her clothes. Courageous radical reformers like Laura Lee, however, wore the "gymnastic suit" as a street dress and called it their "ideal costume". The "American costume" favoured by Annie J. Miller was a plain, much abbreviated street costume under which shirt trousers were worn.

European initiatives also initially focused on moderate reforms. As late as 1899, unbuttonable, footless skirts and leggings covered by dresses were the most courageous proposals of German dress reformers. In England, on the other hand, trousers for women were already an alternative for courageous ladies in 1887. At a meeting of the *Dress Reform Movement* in Westminster Town Hall in spring 1887, chaired by Mrs. Oscar Wilde, the latter emphasised the advantages of trousers. Trousers, she said, were "not only more agreeable, healthier and neater, but more decent, and do not get into disorder so easily." Showing leg was by no means more indecent than what fashion would usually offer. Then she sat down astride a chair in her trouser costume, "surrounded by rapturous applause." At another meeting, where she spoke in front of 3.000 people in the "Ladies Club", she concluded her speech with the courteous call: "Away with petticoats! The only rational costume is the trouser costume!"

The members of the international and national associations for the improvement of women's clothing consisted almost exclusively of educated bourgeoisie women, who were anxious to expand their sphere and saw "rational" clothing as a prerequisite for this. The focus was therefore on reformed formal and street clothes as well as clothes for leisure activities. Sportswear played a decisive role in the implementation of clothing reform improvements in women's clothing and was given appropriate attention by the reformers. In contrast to the discreet reform of underwear, sportswear took on the role of publicly demonstrated change. Since society tolerated changes in sportswear, which was used for certain physical, health-promoting activities, much less problematically than reform attempts against social clothing, the leisure sector offered itself as a suitable field for experimentation.

It was not until the war years 1914 - 1918 that women dress reformers increasingly developed professional and work clothes for women, often including trousers, which were even presented and recommended in fashion magazines. The example of trousers shows in a pointed way that it was not primarily the efforts of the dress reformers, but the changed everyday life of women that was decisive for the change in female dress tradition.

Text: © Gundula Wolter. For notes see Hosen, weiblich.

Picture credit: Hosen, weiblich, Fig. 42: "The trouser dress". The costume in the centre represents the trouser skirt model advocated by dress reformer Ada S. Ballin in 1885. In: Ada S. Ballin: *The Science of Dress in Theory and Practice*, London 1885. Fig. 15-17: *Ladies' dresses with divided skirts*. Private archive.