

## Women's Trousers: A Public Nuisance Becomes Fashionable

### *Fashion Ladies of the Pre-War Era – The "New Woman" Shows Leg – Fashion Experiment and its Uptake*



By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the line of women's fashion had shrunk to such a tightness that its culmination point in this direction had been reached. Floor-length skirts that narrowed below the knee and fitted the shape of the body like a second skin not only traced the contours of the legs in all clarity, but also made it impossible for fashion-conscious ladies to stride out naturally. Tripping about, tucking in their skirts and unable to board railway carriages, carriages or automobiles without assistance, fashion models countered the trend of the time towards more independence and mobility. Voluntary self-mortification through the wearing of so-called "hobble skirts", which culminated in the application of ankle cuffs made of lace to protect the skirt lining, represented the high point and at the same time the turning point of a fashion form driven to absurdity. If the slender line was to be maintained, the only option was to go down unorthodox paths, i. e. either to show leg by slashing or radically shortening the skirt or to split the skirts in two at the crotch. A "wave of orientalism", triggered by performances of the Russian Ballet, which was fascinating not least because of its exotic, splendidly decorated costumes, may have contributed to the fact that fashion designers initially favoured so-called "harem trousers".

The models of trousers and culottes illustrated in German-language, French and American periodicals document that two-piece costumes were not fashion ephemera, even if the focus of their presentation was concentrated on the first half of 1911. Rather, they express the strenuous search for new forms and possibilities that is characteristic of the years before and, to a limited extent, during the First World War. This is also confirmed by the variety of manifestations. The proposals taken from contemporary publications make it clear that although so-called "trouser dresses" (divided skirts) were not a major fashion trend in the years 1910 to

1918, the idea of a two-piece was not completely abandoned either. It also seems that in the eyes of contemporary fashion correspondents, Paul Poiret did not play the leading role in the launch of trouser fashion that is attributed to him today. The novelty was rather a consistent further development of the "slim line", with which various fashion houses had already been experimenting in varying intensity and duration since 1908.

The fashion of divided skirts and harem trousers around 1911 was a consistent further development of the tight line, but a scandal because of the leg dress. In the meantime, trousers had become widely accepted as a special-purpose costume for women, but as an everyday and formal dress they were a provocation. Eugen Isolani, a German contemporary and cultural historian, noted in 1911 that never before had a new dress fashion caused such a sensation: "Even if we go back to the times of the much ridiculed crinoline, which was attacked in pictures and words [...] we will not encounter such a profound excitement as that caused by the culotte wherever women, however shyly, pay homage to this new fashion. Women who dare to let their skirts flow out very low above their feet into two parts, each of which closes around one of their legs, so that this novelty can hardly be noticed and called trousers, are pursued in the streets with mocking jeers, so that the unfortunate culotte wearers have to take refuge in houses. And this happened in cosmopolitan cities whose inhabitants are accustomed to being shown many a fashion extravagance, some that should have seemed decidedly more outrageous than the very women's trousers whose approach should have long been expected by all those who understand the psychology of fashion."

After 1918, the world was a different place. Economically, in terms of power and socio-politically, the war and its consequences represented a drastic turning point for all the countries involved, as a result of which three once powerful monarchies were overthrown, societies as a whole were democratised, and women were granted the right to vote and stand for election almost everywhere. Now the game of fashion was no longer played in small, elite circles, but in the large circle of employees, secretaries, civil servants, shop assistants - the working woman with a certain income of her own. The fundamental change in women's living conditions was responsible for the high percentage of women in paid employment.

The women's fashion of the 1920s painted a picture of the time, its moral and ethical attitudes, but in particular it marked the blatant change in the role of women and the ideal of women. Inaction and weakness were replaced by vigour and fitness, artificial emphasis and provocative accentuation of the female secondary sexual characteristics by an emphasis on natural forms or their complete negation. In the mirror of fashion, types of women appeared that had not existed in this permissiveness since the phenomenon of the *merveilleuses*, the fashion ladies of the *Directoire*. Just like the "nudity fashion" of the revolutionary period, the women's fashion of the post-war period was extremely light, frugal clothing with a high erotic signal effect.

However, for the first time in the history of our culture, this was based on the accentuation of the lower female extremities, while previous points of emphasis such as the bosom, waist and hips were completely ignored. Women's legs, tabooed for centuries, shaped the image of the New Woman, the generation of women who radically broke with the traditional image of

women of the pre-war generation and created new patterns that are still valid today. Short, hanging dresses taken from children's fashion made naked women's legs visible, which until then had only been known publicly as ankles or calves. Trouser suits referred to the two-leggedness of women, which people had long tried to conceal, and made everyone aware that female bodies were by no means as strikingly different from male bodies as fashion traditionally signalled. Boyish haircuts - bob, Eton crop with shaved neck - and masculine accessories - glasses, ties, cigarette holders - underlined the fashion statement. "The woman à la mode is a gamine," noted the fashion magazine *Styl* in 1922, "not a full-blooded woman, but a boyishly slender intermediate. Fashion does everything in its power to underline this statement."

Although trouser fashion for women had not yet become established as a street costume in the 1920s, it was the first time that trousers were widely accepted as part of female work, leisure and social clothing. At this time, trousers lost their character as an exclusively male garment. Since then, people no longer argued about whether women should be allowed to wear trousers, but only on what occasion.

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