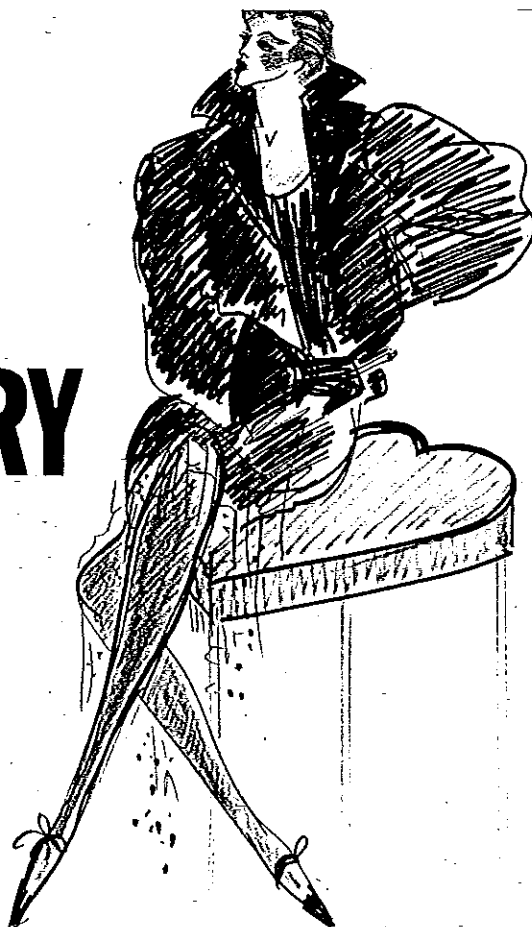


# THE 20TH-CENTURY SHAPE

Everything about women's clothes changed when their hemlines finally got off the ground.



Left: Designer Yves Saint Laurent's 1978 short skirt with blouson jacket. Above: Dress styles from a pre-20th-century catalogue, when hemlines swept the ground. Below: The short skirts of the 1920's, worn with hats and gloves.

**W**hen skirts rose off the ground at the start of this century, the clothed bodies of women took on wholly new visual proportions. All the old assumptions about what women's clothes were like had to be scrapped and the changing relation between hemline and waist level became a crucial index of fashionable change. Legs and feet suddenly had to be incorporated into any total visual scheme, and the total volume of clothes was sharply reduced.

For a thousand years, the skirt had reached the feet no matter what shape it took, and some kind of firm girdle had to grip the torso to support the mass below. A balancing mass

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appeared above — a sleeved bodice and a headdress. In all those centuries, fashion expressed itself on the surface and at the extremities of this basic formula, in the ebb and flow of sleeves and skirts ballooning and collapsing by turns, or in the rise and fall of hair and hat. A waist anchored everything at the center, sometimes varying in level. Variations of accessory and ornamentation were far more important to the quick flow of fashion than shifts in basic form. Serious designers did not exist — only gifted devisers of surface effect, backed up by skilled craftsmen.

Following the modern impulse toward abstraction, early 20th-century fashion made haste to abolish the waist, minimize bodily curves and reduce the skirt to a suggestion. The ancient theme of a firm bodice stabilizing a long, full skirt lost all its established continuity and became simply one of many future options. The shape of the clothed female body became like "the cone, the cylinder and the sphere" — the elements of

Cézanne's program for abstracting all natural form. And female dress became as abstract as other forms of modern design. At the same time, women's clothing became a prestigious area for the work of imaginative designers; it became a new field for the serious exercise of modern esthetic views.

The 20th-century respect for functional construction and delight in its appearance were extended to the female body. Attention came to focus on a woman's actual structure, with its full human complement of noticeable bones and working joints, including two complete, movable legs with articulated and supportive feet. Bone, tendon and muscle asserted their visual authority after a millennium of obfuscation and idealization. Women's clothes were no longer used to hide or remodel the body's structural truth. They began to work with it, to create a felicitous interchange between the form of a garment and the moving forms of a female body. Fashion came to consist of shifts in the rules of this in-





A black velvet tunic accented with white pique designed by Robert Rigueur in a graphic silhouette of the 1950's

terplay, and, as a result, sexual allure had to change its tactics.

Up to this point, female sexuality expressed through clothing had relied on variations of décolletage, combined with stricture and padding to emphasize the female torso in different ways. Even more, it had depended on the symbolic mystery of mobile and complex surface arrangements. Billowing frills, sweeping trains and swinging hoops, fluttering ribbons and straying ringlets were all designed to make distracting suggestions of their own. They created a kind of public ceremony to guard and celebrate the hidden shrine. In its new, reduced mode, female clothing, like modern architecture, demanded new methods for old purposes: calling attention to plain facts and suggesting unattainable treasures.

**L**egs did a great deal of this work. Having kept out of sight for so long, they now offered stunning new aspects of female attractiveness. The way in which skirts covered or failed to cover sections of the leg made a new kind of difference in the look of the dressed woman — especially in emphasizing the

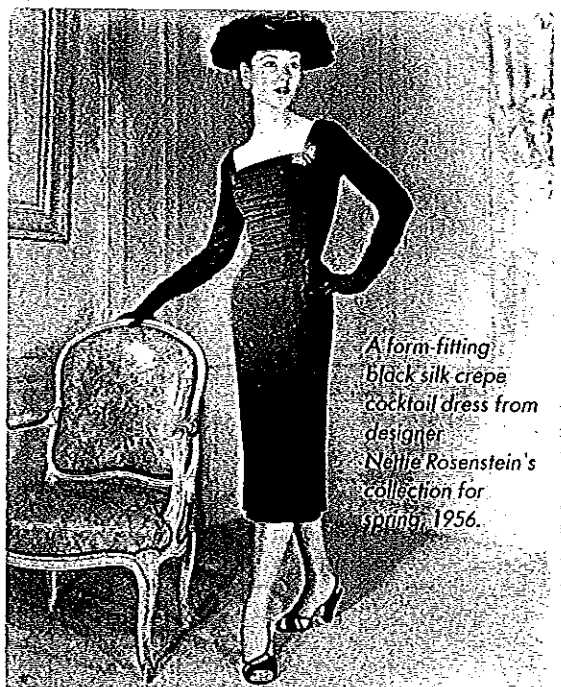
erotic gulf between youth and age. Up until the 19th century, all little girls as well as all mature women had worn floor-length skirts. Only after about 1810 were little girls dressed in short skirts, and so for the next century short skirts meant childhood and long skirts meant sexual maturity. When the 20th-century woman re-

quired a new symbol of freedom, the short skirt was ready-made for the task. It had come to suggest the insouciant and audacious school-girl, a being full of sexual possibility without sexual responsibility, innocently seductive and often silly but fundamentally honest.

Another meaning already adhered to short skirts — the suggestion of erotic theatrical exhibition. Well before 1800, while sober women and good girls were wearing long skirts, female acrobats and dancers in short ones were kicking up their heels before the public. Such women were certainly not respectable, and the line was blurred between serious stage art and straight erotic display. The feminine freedom gained by shortening the skirt brought with it some shady, stagey connotations, some spice in the mixture of youth and zest. But the necessary overtones of unattainability were preserved by the high heel and the tough, elastic girdle. These kept the free-looking legs from actually striding and the clearly outlined pelvis from moving at all.

In the first half of our century, all female fashion kept a traditional feminine cast despite its modern gestures. No desire to be an astronaut or a pirate or a lumberjack was expressed by the elements of female clothing. Trousers were utilitarian, worn only for sport

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A form-fitting black silk crepe cocktail dress from designer Neffie Rosenstein's collection for spring, 1956.

Photographs from The Bettmann Archive, Inc.

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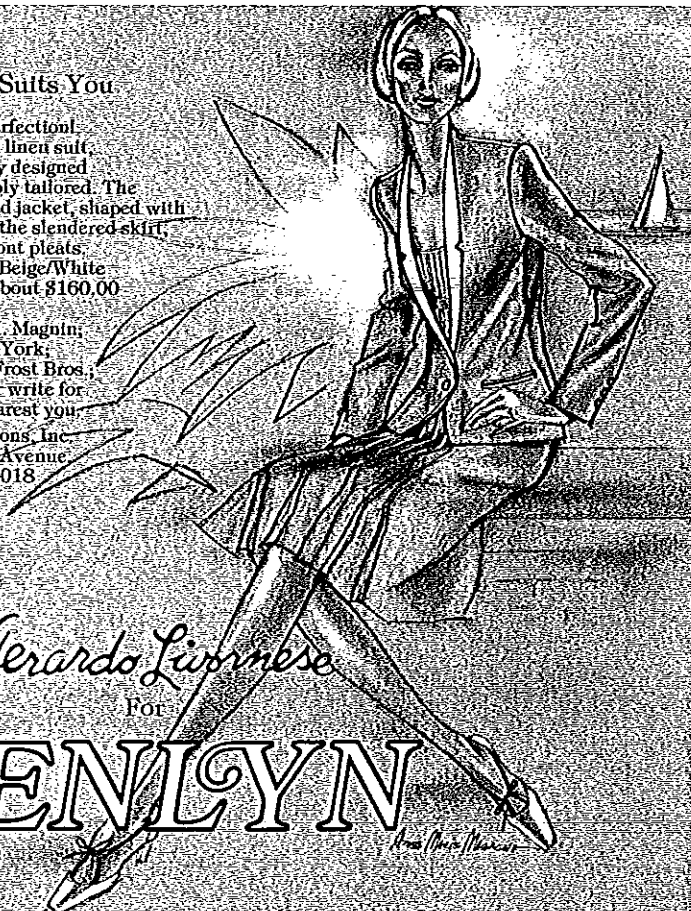
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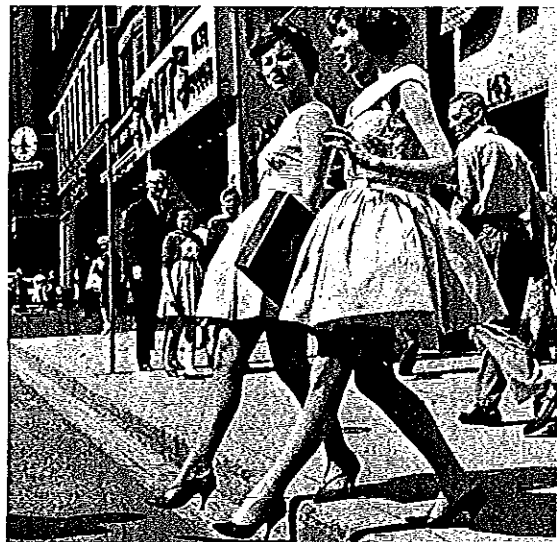
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Photograph from Culver Pictures.

Miniskirts worn in 1960. This spring, some designers are showing this length, although not in these full shapes.

or labor. Sexual freedom in dress did not extend to experiments in sexual ambiguity, nor did the real grasp of female power extend much beyond the power of sex itself. But the suggestion of the stage had come to stay, to lie in wait for full realization in the liberated future.

**W**e are now coming to the end of this momentous century in women's dress. It has taken the better part of it for us to get so used to short skirts that we no longer care how short they are, so long as the proportions please and their shape fits our momentary mood. The issue of skirt length, once a matter of public controversy, has retreated to the realm of private taste. The waistline used to shift or vanish while the watching faithful held their breath; now we look in the mirror and decide each case on its merits. It has taken most of the century for trousers to become a natural element of female costume, and they are finally free of all connections with unseemliness, mannishness or horsiness. They are being offered by imaginative designers in hundreds of diverse shapes, for women to wear in any setting. The point is clear: We no longer need to make joint

statements about modernity; the personal theater of dress has become a dominant force in fashion.

Women may now actually do anything or be anything, without ceasing to be themselves or women, and so they are also at liberty to dress up as anything without damage to their honor. If a woman wears sequins and feathers to a party, no one there will refuse to believe she is a corporation lawyer. Clothes are potent signals, but they readily lend their power to the pleasures of private entertainment and the deeper reaches of fantasy.

Designers are deftly exploring the possibilities. In clothes, all basic forms still carry their old meanings and so all new ideas can freely play on them. Overtones of cowboy and grease monkey may combine with the flavor of hoodlum or duchess; schoolmistress and prizefighter with pageboy and milkmaid. Skirts and sleeves may suggest old movies or ancient bas-reliefs. One great aid to the show business of clothes has been the rise of instant nostalgia, which allows even the recent past to keep its charm. The images in today's fashion drama never wholly leave the stage. All they need is clever new music and a spotlight to bring them front and center. Thigh-high skirts, heavy gypsy flounces and strictly tailored trousers all hang together on the rack, ready for the right scene, the right material, the right cue. The 21st century will find it all a hard act to follow. ■