

The designers' shows may be wonderfully outrageous, but what do the clothes have to do with what we actually wear? As London Fashion Week opens, **Anne Hollander** explains how style swings from the past to the present, and from the catwalk to the High Street

The art of the possible

to distract from whatever plausible harmony iful. It's clear that for the catwalk, a mad designer has achieved for the clad bo general effect is of an expert team of i more than 50 British designers: ondon Fashion Week opened yesterday, and already dozens of peculiarly attired models will have strutted down the capital's catwalks, parading the work vely costumed temale cl m of tall DEC DE

or suit, an invitation to observe the clever details of the cut and trim. Then you know that the designer is referring to the days of elegance, before deliberate absurdity took over the world of by a sleek coffure and face above a smooth sheath rtimes deliberate classicism is signa

Since that time – say, 30 years ago – the world of high fashion has become both a huge public entertainment and a closed, optional, ellist universe. The fanatics and the grouples are timurementle, but nobody has to pay attention if they in the control of the co don't feel like it; none of it sels an actual stan-dan't for anyone's ordinary life. High fashion and, its media image may have seet the absurd ione, but Real Fashion is what keeps the business in usiness – what is sold in the shops for people

And what about Real Clothes? Everyone has to get drassed every day, everyone feels the need to look right in public and looking right is emphatically a matter of fashion—and money, and the mirror, and the intraclability of the flesh. How railing at fate for not giving me just four more notes in height, two below the knee and two could enjoy! But some things cannot ltered, even by fasting, prayer and good nostor nany times have I stood in front of the glass, area, even by fasting, prayer and good posture... yough high heels can help. With those, what prodigious triumphs

You see distinct types and groups of people, each styling themselves in different ways that show what a hotchpotch most wardrobes are; old and If you look at crowds on city streets you can see how real, living fashion works itself out - the fashion nourished by the unglamorous mass-market garment industry, which nevetheless they are the series a wary eye on those fabilions downs, when seems a wary eye on those fabilions downs. new clothes together, new ways to wear old thi that are sometimes captivating,

cometimes lamentable. To find inspiration for all this variety, you look

at the countless media images of current stars of from the things that lie in your cupboard, just lich-ing to show their unexpected side by combining with something new. television and film, or any good-looking public figures. The public thinks: Can I tale any of this personally? Whose looks, and which parts of fortunately, from the constantly shifting opu out there that lie in wait to trap the ungifted, lete fool. True

deles over a long, full coat. Who can say why, exactly? At that time, shawk were available, now sourves are - neither has ever appeared on a cutwall, in the mode current of the sheet. Popular some years ago you would have ple, you may feel like wrapping a thick, fringed monochromatic scarf round your neck and tying the process of dissemination is lationward than that. These days, for ex-

busy or simple. The designers and manufacturers of mass-market garments have an uneasy life, ways of soark-weering must start somewhere, but preadsely where it is impossible to say.

The real trouble comes with something like the new right length of hem the new right cut of trouser, or in the right degree of tight or loose, floating transparent tops and navel-baring flared and loose, cross-over ruffled blouses, or shor

garrent marketed to hilf the longings of teenage girls) bears in its very single and texture the seeds of its own extinction. The idea is nothing new, and was conthingly expressed by Oscar Wilde in a locture entitled. Dress, which he gave in 1882, "Bashon is a form of lugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it eternal, like that of a breathtaking performance - registered in heaven, even if unrepeatable. At mass-market level, nothing acutely modish can look even moderately lasting. Every cheeky new garment marketed to hilfi the longings of teenage mate mastery and priced in the five digit region, is the idea that their aesthetic claim is somehow At conture level, one appeal of the breathtak-ing shreds and puffs of hand-embroidered silk gauze, arranged around the torso with consum-

every six months".

Now, an alternative convention in dress has become a boon to millions of women and girls—become a boon to millions of women and the second se that is, the masculine convention, always accept-able, becoming to all at every age. This doesn't just

and buttons and pockets, or neat and smooth in and a vast array of quasi-athletic shoes, Many styles of such clothing are now marketed to women as fashion, bristling with flaps and straps utiliterian design—jeans and khakis, T-shirts and tank-tops, duffle coats and anoralts, moving on to active sportswear—sweat pants and swexishirts mean tailored trouser suits, long since elegant for two generations of women. The more widespread masculine convention is based on the informal menswear of traditional design, beginning with flannel trousers, open-collered shirts and blaz-

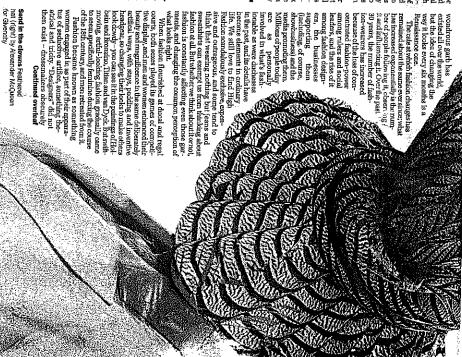
of distancing themselves allows for variation within a conventional visual vocabulary. Besides looking great on gorgeous youths and maidens, it looks great on little chilternal, but enduring ren and old duffers too. Notably ons of the scheme – black trousers and a bla The look of all this is neither ephemeral nor eneck, say – are frequently worn by people cing behind the scenes in the High Fashion ing designers, perhaps as a way

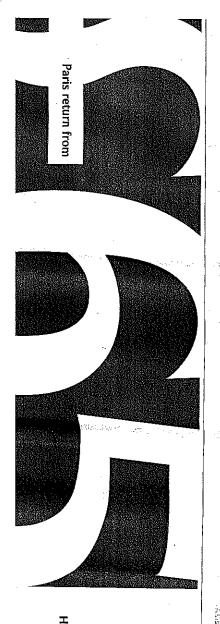
Some things cannot be

The people on a modern city street now show consideable homogeneity in clothes, with some variation in colorur and detail, rather like a medieval populace all wearing similar hoods and tunics, who from time to them might also get to gavik at a few persons parading by in fire-lined gavik at a few persons parading by in fire-lined gavk at a few persons parading by in tur-lined gold brocade with trailing sleeves and amezing

pulling it another way, to shift that distinction— has been followed (and objected to) since its inception, somewhere in early 14th-century Europe. For many centuries before and since, another Reshion—meaning a public sertorial cus-tom that keeps changing its visual ground, sway-ing taste in one direction for a while, so as to distinguish the wise from the chieless, and soon Condemned to envy the perfect distined beauty of the partitier and the gazelle, human beings invented fashion apparently to signal their dissistantion, both with themselves and with one

prayer and good altered, even by fasting, posture ... although high heels can help





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helped create the elegance of clients, who got all the credit or blame for it.

The masculine soul, by con-trast, began to need visual expression. A man no longer wished to look attractively noble, rich and powerful because of his complex, tightfitting and ornamented clothes, but rather wished to be unassumingly clad so as to seem attractively straightforward, and interesting for his mind and heart.

Simple and flexible modern tailoring — unadorned wool trousers, waistcoat and coat over a plain shirt and cravat was gradually developed to give male sexual allure those natural qualities. It empha-sised the individual face, and the easy pose and movement of the male body. A keen eye might distinguish a gentle-man from a non-gentleman only by the suave fit of his omy by the stave in of his garments. Fashion — now a low-profile force among men — might loosen or tighten them slightly, but the basic design was not tampered with for more than two centuries.

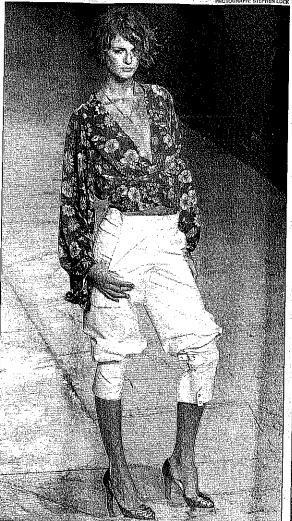
It became part of their nature, like the panther's coat. The more understated the design of male dress during

Men's couture shows a freshly aggressive character

those two centuries, the more complicated and suggestive variably alluring female dress, ranging from the long, transparent muslin shifts girded high under the breasts in 1800 to the utterly ungirded, knee-length chiffen shifts cov-

ered with spangles in 1926. Between those years it went through several extreme forms of smoothly uphol-stered torso, variously expos-ing the shoulders and bosom and arms, exploding below into hoopskirts both long and calf-length, bustles both high and low, trains heavy and slithery, and ankle-length hobbleskirts, everything laden with beading, ruching, soutache and passementerie.

One notable innovation around the beginning of the Second World War was the absolutely strapless bodice for evening dresses. This was





Women, cannily, haven't given anything up

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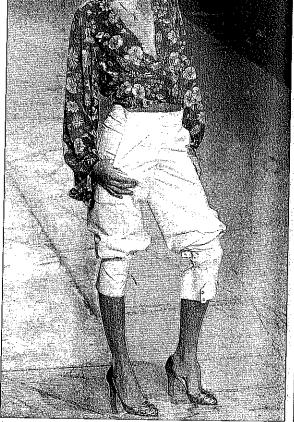
those two centuries, the more complicated and suggestive and variably alluring became female dress, renging from the long, transparent muslin shifts girded high under the breasts in 1800 to the utterly ungirded, lace-length chiffon shifts covered with spangles in 1926.

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around the beginning of the becond World War was the besolutely strapless bodies or evening dresses. This was a striking new exposure, never before suggested even in the daring evening fashions of the First World War.

During the past 30 years of elf-conscious absurdity, eminine high fashion has ended to use the past as a ind of joke; the same shapes ave recurred, even in a nocking spirit. Vivienne lestwood, for example, used 880s furstles with short skirts in 1994, in her "On Liberty" ollection, to startling effect, a 2006, for Givenchy haute outure, Alexander McQueen seed 1850s skirt-width and 550s straplessness together a dress apparently made of cicles, sugar and tinfoil rought into a cage-like net-ork around the model's fig-





Once more unto the breech 'Knee-breeches, which refer back not only to the 1970s but to the 18th century, are very much in evidence today

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ure. From this we can see that the huge skirt — so fine a feature of history and the dread 1950s — is not dead but sleeping, getting ready to awaken among us all.

Of course, many designs which include historical references, as fashion, has long done, make it to the High Street. Knee-breeches, for example, which refer back not only to the 1970s but to the 18th century, are very much in evidence today.

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Twentieth-century female fashion was marked by two historic changes. In the first half, it was the permanent shortening of female hair and skirts, after millennia of length for both; and, in the second half, the permanent adoption of male dress by women. Feminine sexuality, expressed for six centuries as a mystery cre-

ated by selective exposure and surface ornament supported by constriction and extension, came to find expression in the same natural, straightforward covering invented for the masculine version."

After 1970, under the influence of Yyes, Saint Laurent, women at last permitted themselves to be elegant and seductive in simple trousers, shirts and jackets. In the decade before, it had all been revolution and liferation, and women wore old-style farm clothes or gypsy trappings, or the tiny dresses and luge shoes à la Mary Quant. In addition they modelled childhood hairstyles, or rebellious outfits involving

threadbare army uniforms and varieties of abused blue jeans. We now find that both sexes across a broad social spectrum are sharing companionably in modified, wellmade versions of formerly male sportswear or labouring gear in denim, khaki and synthetics, or in wool, silk and leather, now and then leavened by unusual effects born of current events, personal, guirk or inspired invention.

omen, very cannily, haven't given anything up, and old-fashion is still a mighty resource for them. They have reserved their ancient right to eye-catching skin exposure, to hair and skirts of any length, to babbles and tassels, to frills, fringe and ornamental on transparent lace, and to alarmingly fragile shoes. Men, not to be outdone, have

reclaimed their own ancient rights, and many have gone back to various styles of long hair, remarkable hats, scarves and belts, earrings, necklaces, bracelets and cotours not seen since Cavalier times.

Skirts have occasionally.

Skirts have occasionally, appeared on high-level masculine catwalks, but they have instantly disappeared. Their time is clearly not yet. Men's couture in fact shows a freshly aggressive character, perhaps in reaction to the overwhelming female takeover of male trappings. Ferocious suits share the runway with the criminal look, the "gangsta" effect. Suggestions of fanciful ancient armour appear, together with menacing modern warriors in terrorist, soldier or even inter-galactic mode, with sculptural boots and breastplates, many with

belts and holsters for deathdealing weapons.

These fantasies are being proposed in the same spirit as the extreme fashions proposed for women, and both prove that treely invented visions of violence, crotteine, and excessive luxury make a great spectacle for the voy—ems we know omselves to be. On the other hand, what we normally wear shows the true common fantasy of the 21st century — that what we most desire is durable equality accessorised with unpredictable touches of wit and pleasure for everyone.

■ Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress by Arac Hollandes (Claridge Press) is available for £15-50 plus £1-99 µ&p from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222).