

# Parade of Wooden Women

by **RUTH BROWN REED**

**A**LMOST ANY woman would wax wrathful if you accused her personally of being a mere rubber-stamp creature. If she is the average innocent consumer, she is probably not aware of the degree to which standardized styles have molded her into a like kind. She does not know what goes on behind the scenes of the shops she frequents. She does not realize what a nice little mouse she is, or how she scurries with thousands of her little sister mice to the tune of a new Pied Piper that has sprung into being within the last five years. *She*, of course, is individual.

But the question is — can any woman be individual under the present system of forced standardization of “styling”? Can she be anything but commonplace? Take the largest metropolis in the world for your hunting ground, and see what the New York shops have to offer. Ask to see anything that is not a standardized fashion, that a certain group of “stylists” or manufacturers have not agreed is the smart or the correct thing. You will have a nice, long, discouraging shopping jaunt ahead of you. You will go home weary and empty-handed — unless you change your mind and buy what a great, coördinated, retail and wholesale group has decided to let you wear.

“Stylists?” you say. Yes, stylists and “fashion clinics.” No one ever heard of them until recently, but now they are the common language of wholesale and retail circles. The last five years have witnessed a great machinery

set up to standardize style and clothes, and these new words have sprung up to define the process.

But we are getting way ahead of our story. Let us first walk into the shops from the outside. Let us save the dénouement until the end. And then, let us try to be individual — not highly so, but just enough to express ourselves and not look like everybody else.

## THE BLACK-GREEN-BROWN-WINE BLUES

**T**O BE PERSONAL for a moment. Last spring I bought a dark blue coat. I bought it early. It was an expensive copy of a Bruyère model, simple and military in line. Thousands of women who read this article will recognize the coat by this description. It was the first of its kind I had seen. It is neither here nor there that everywhere I went I ran into cheaper editions of the coat. I have walked down Fifth Avenue and on the same day counted anywhere from six to a dozen women with adaptations of the same coat. It became a sort of hilarious game with me — the peak of which was reached when the coat appeared in a Thirty-fourth Street window gayly flaunting a \$14.50 price mark.

I am digressing. The point is that last fall I still wanted to wear the coat. In spite of the cheap copies, mine was still a good-looking coat. I could not afford just to throw it away, so I decided to buy a new blue dress for it and make an all-blue ensemble for daytime wear.

I won't drag you through all the shops hunting for a blue dress. Suffice it to say that I entered every large store in New York, and was told that "Blue is not a smart color this fall." Therefore they could not show me a blue dress. I protested that after all blue was a staple color, my blue coat only a few months old. The saleswomen all spoke like a chorus: "Blue is not a smart color this fall. We are showing black, green, brown, and wine." I combed Fifth Avenue — to be met by black, green, brown, and wine. I became so sick and tired of these colors that I could not imagine who would want to appear in them.

In one of Fifth Avenue's most famous department stores I said to the saleswoman: "Isn't it absurd that I can't find a blue dress in the city of New York, just because it has been decided that blue is not a smart color this fall? Yet in your French room a few minutes ago I was told that *blue for coats* is very smart — what you call a 'high' fashion. (That is, an exclusive fashion that has not yet become popularized or commonized.) It seems dreadfully inconsistent." The saleswoman answered me: "I spoke to our stylist about it and she said that blue is not a smart color this fall, that the smart colors are *black, green, brown, and wine*." I fled — with the inevitable black, green, brown, and wine echoing dismally in my ears.

One other instance before we push back the wall of the holy of holies and see how the stylists and fashion clinics operate.

Some weeks after my blue-dress episode, variations of the black, green, brown, and wine theme began to creep into the picture. I bought a dark red dress — *not* wine. I began an endless search for a hat to go with the dress. The inevitable wine met me on all sides. Saleswomen brought out their "color charts" — one of the new innovations of the stylists and fashion clinics. My red was not on their color charts, so I couldn't find a red hat to match.

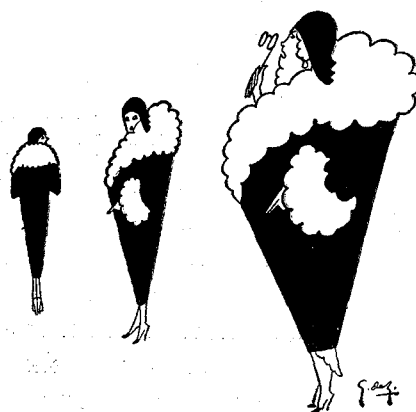
You see, they all get together and decide that such and such a shade is the smart thing; and then the dress manufacturers and the milliners and everybody in the trade begin making thousands and thousands of things this same color. And women have to buy them, poor lambs! Standardization? It's obliteration! Throw an inkpot at ten thousand women — will one of them stand apart as an individual?

## BUT IT'S NOT ON THE SMART-CHART

**N**OW FOR the final straw that broke my feminine back this fall. For this selfsame back I craved a soft suit with a luxurious fluffy fox collar. Not an unreasonable desire, by any matter of means. Woe is me! — the stylists had sent out word that flat, short-haired furs were the smart thing to wear. We were to wear — willy-nilly — hard, shining galyac or tight-curved Persian lamb (a fur that adds ten years to any woman's age, yet has broken out on the Avenue like the measles because it is smart). Again I spent weeks trying to find a suit with a fluffy fox collar. Everywhere the beautifully trained saleswomen sang their parrot song: "Flat furs are smart this year — we have only suits with flat furs."

Oddly enough, the exception to the rule was suits trimmed with raccoon, one of the most unbecoming furs ever worn by women — and a fur that no woman past eighteen would dare to wear unless she was a complete egoist or blind to her personal appearance. Just why raccoon should have been the only long-haired fur shown on suits, I don't know. The flat-fur style information came out of the fashion clinics. I don't know who was responsible for the fearful inspiration of the raccoon epidemic. Anyway, I am still suitless — and there are still hanging on the racks of the New York shops hundreds of suits trimmed with flat furs. . . . "Flat furs are smart this year — we have only suits with flat furs."

If you aren't convinced by now that a well-devised, functioning agency is at work which allows women little chance for individuality, watch the trend of articles that appear in well-known magazines. In *The New Yorker* last October there was an article written by a



woman who had just returned to New York and who was appalled by the "nude" expanse of forehead that greeted her up and down the Avenue. To quote: "I noticed a woman coming toward me with an entirely bare face. Bare, naked, and egg-shaped, it gleamed. My eye rested again on another woman. Her poor, naked, unsheltered brow, closely confined within its unalleviated black felt, towered majestically. And then I saw that behind her there was another, and yet another dome. . . . These expanses of face progressed like fleets of enormous eggs along the Avenue." This same nudity, it happens, is to be met by the thousands in every millinery salon. Try to find a hat that does not expose a naked forehead! Brims may be feminine and flattering — you may pine for brims — *but it is smart to show your forehead*. So show your wrinkles and your forehead you do, or you go without a hat.

In the New York *Daily News Record* of November 8, a man writes: "We formerly pivoted to admire the lovely ladies — but not any more. They look too much alike with their funny little black hats and their black dresses. The majority of them might have been put through a machine for all the originality they reveal in dress."

On my desk before me is a fashion letter that a national women's magazine — one of the largest — sent out to its readers a few weeks ago. The letter reported fashions seen at a musicale. To quote: "As you might have expected, the majority of women in the audience were dressed in black . . . in each case these women had chosen white gloves and a white satin blouse or white trimming on a black dress." In each case!

Good heavens, what if some woman had appeared in bright red? The thought appalls one — imagine the shock to the sensitive nerves of the stylists. For the stylists would have been there. They turn out in droves at every society affair. They stand with little clicking machines in their hands and count the number of women, the number of times each color is shown, the times each kind of collar or cuff appears . . .

and so on *ad infinitum*. Standardization? It's smotherization — with individuality gasping for breath!

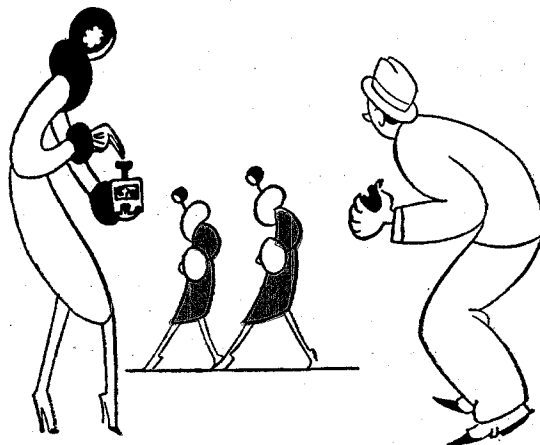
### THIS THING CALLED "STYLE"

**W**HAT IS THIS strange creature called a stylist? Where did she come from? Where does she get her authorization to speak? What makes her a stylist?

The stylists came into being some five years ago. This is no brief, by the way, against the stylists. Personally, they are likable, nice girls. When I say that no sign appeared in the sky to herald their coming and that this is strange in retrospect, I am poking fun at the system, not at the stylists themselves. Some of these girls came from Peoria, Illinois, or Paducah, Kentucky, or the prairies of Kansas. Their pass-key was good looks, good taste, with their native wits and enthusiasm sharpened by two or three years of New York contacts.

Peculiarly, styling does something to all of them. Once they become stylists, physical metamorphosis seems to set in. They acquire a certain mechanical smartness that is as identifying as a uniform. Clothes, of course, are their stock in trade. It is probably the system that makes them all look alike. They all wear black, winter or summer: black dresses, tight black hats, black coats (this year the coats were black broadcloth trimmed with Persian lamb). They are always well-groomed and fearfully serious about their work. Three tucks on a blouse instead of the usual two are quite cause enough for agitation.

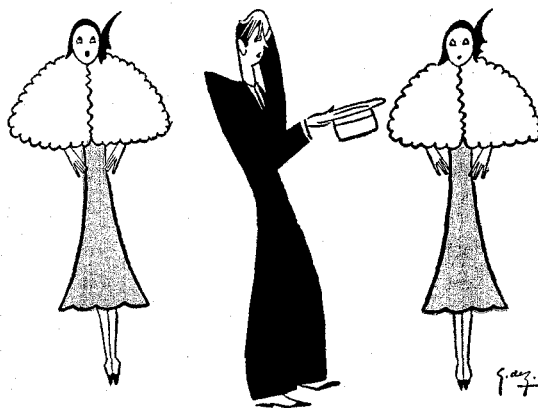
Originally the idea was that the stylists were to work with the buyers of the retail stores and advise them as to what the élite were wearing. Some of the stylists, by the way, were recruited from the débutante ranks, on the theory that they would know what smart society wanted. The theory was grand, if the human equation could have been left out. But the lady-buyers certainly did not take to the stylists. A grand squabble resulted, and some none-too-ladylike words were exchanged. The lady-buyers pulled down their corsets and lifted up their voices.



They had been buying clothes for years and years and they guessed they didn't need no woman to come in and tell *them* what to do. And if Mr. Smith, the merchandise man, thought he could put this stylist business over on them, he had another think coming. The copy writers who wrote the advertising liked the stylists little better. The stylists were prone to criticize — and the copy writers felt that they had had a lot more experience than the stylists.

The fashion clinic was the direct outgrowth of the dissatisfaction vented on the stylists. An individual stylist was just one woman's opinion. But back her up with authentic style information, and perhaps something might come of it. So the stylists were sent to school, a new kind of school — the fashion clinics. There are two such clinics, each headed by a personality which needs must be a wise composite of Barnum-Bailey showmanship and shrewd business sense. It's a grand racket, so to speak, said to net the heads a fabulous fortune each year. They hold these clinics four times a year, at the beginning of each season. To these clinics are sent stylists and buyers and advertising people from all over the United States. The clinics last from four to six days, to the tune of some hundreds of dollars per student. The stores pay for this, of course.

The students come back filled with swatches and sketches and colors and types, and they parrot this information on to everybody else: "Blue is not a smart color this fall — make dresses only of black, green, brown, and wine. . . . Flat furs are smartest — show only suits trimmed with flat furs. . . . It's smart to show your forehead — make hats only that show the forehead." And so on and so on. The manufacturers' machines begin to hum; by the tens of thousands dresses of black, green, brown, and wine are turned out; by the tens of thousands collars of flat furs go on suits; by the hundreds of thousands bald-headed hats are strewn over the country — all alike, all awfully smart this fall, all to be worn like a great American uniform.



To go back a minute. In addition to the quarterly fashion clinics, the schools issue fashion bulletins regularly to the clients all through the year, telling them what to buy, what color to show, what materials to use in suits and dresses and hats. They get a pretty penny for this service. Individuality, originality — strange unknown habitants of Mars — go by

the board. It's a standardized system. On last Easter morning, one school was reported to have thirty of its "counters" on Fifth Avenue within the smart church radius. The counters count everything. They hold little machines concealed in their hands. Click-click — three silk hats (the men come in for

standardization, too); click — four, five silk hats; click-click — there goes a wine dress; click-click — four wine dresses."

The information is pooled, tabulated, checked against elaborate files of fashion clippings from everywhere. Duplicate forms of the results are sent out wholesale to all the school's clientele. The stores take these forms and pass them out to their training departments, on to their buyers and stylists: "Stock black, green, brown, and wine. . . . Stock bald-forehead hats. . . . Stock suits with flat furs. . . . These are smart; these are good."

It's a beautiful system, really. The fashion clinics are put on with great cachet, generally at one of the smart hotels. Living models are paraded wearing the dresses that are said will be the best-sellers. Sketches of these dresses and swatches of the material are given to the students to take home to the bigger papas and mamas of the department stores. Tea is served in the middle of the afternoon. It is really gorgeous fun. You sit there and wonder how real these people are, how they can take themselves so seriously, what goes on in the back of the stylists' sleek black heads, just to what extent the wise clinic heads and the students keep their tongues in their cheeks.

Hush — one of the clinics is about to begin! The director raises his hand, like the conductor of a great orchestra. The parade of the wooden women is on — black, green, brown, and wine.





***Santiago and Conquistadores***

## **MEXICO THE MARVELOUS**

**A**MONG THE RELIGIOUS dances of Mexican fiestas, those of the Christians and Moors, in varying form, are perhaps the most often presented. Episodes of dialogue alternate with formal sets of sham warfare, accompanied by flute and drum, and attaining, with clash of machete upon machete, with leaping and retreating, swaying and interweaving steps, a deep momentum of exultation. Kings of Spain, in wooden masks and cardboard crowns, fight against Roman centurions in colored paper plumes, in tawdry robes of made-over ladies' garments, spotted with bits of mirror and spangles. Santiago, patron saint of the Conquista-

dores, belting half a rocking horse to his waist, battles against Moors in headgears crescent-shaped and gilded, magenta shirts and wrinkled stockings. Christian martyrs struggle against African blacks, Indian devils against Castillian noblemen: a grotesque medley of medieval, Biblical, and Aztec characters, slashing, cutting, thrusting, thudding heavy rhythms with mute, expressionless faces.

Not for the diversion of casual audiences nor for the delectation of the saints do they dance, but rather to steep themselves in their opiate impersonations, as victors over the pagan forces of the earth.