

War and Fashion

By JAMES LAVER

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THE study of female fashion is very far from being the trivial pursuit it is sometimes considered. The common view is that the cut of a dress, the shape of a hat, a waistline high or low, an angle of a feather or the color of a trimming, are things quite arbitrary, decided upon by a small group of designers sitting in Paris, London or New York, and imposed willy-nilly on an unsuspecting and herd-like public. The history of costume confutes this view completely. There is a rhythm in dress, there is a meaning in fashion, as anyone can be convinced who will take the trouble to stand far enough away from the problem to get it into perspective.

It is a curious fact that no one can see the fashions of today or those of the last few years. The eye is confused by the multiplicity of detail, the essential line escapes. Yet the clothes of any given epoch are a unity, and no detail of them could be changed without falsifying the picture. The fan of the Pompadour, the folding parasol of Queen Victoria—from such trifles it is possible to reconstruct not only the dresses worn by those who handled these objects but the whole background of their lives and even the political opinions and social conditions of their period. If this is so—as it undoubtedly is—then fashion, far from being a frivolity, is always the epitome of an epoch and in it can be

seen reflected, as it were, in miniature, the whole of an age.

It would be strange, therefore, if war did not have a profound effect upon fashion. It has, and what is even more to the purpose, its effect is always the same. In considering this, minor wars must, of course, be ruled out. The British Empire has been engaged in a war of some kind for about a third of its history. War is only of importance when it provokes, or is accompanied by, some profound social upheaval, and for the purpose of comparison it will be sufficient to consider two such wars—that which followed the French Revolution and that which is now called World War I.

The first of these—the French Revolution—marked a sharp reaction against the costume of the preceding period. Marie Antoinette had worn towering headdresses and billowy skirts, kept in position by hoops. Materials had been very rich: brocaded silks with many trimmings. It is true that she had from time to time played at being a milkmaid, but the little china shepherdesses with their bows and ribbons and their garlanded crooks, still to be seen in collections of eighteenth-century porcelain, show exactly the kind of milkmaid she was. Her “country” costume was just another kind of fancy dress.

During the “Terror” people dressed simply and shabbily in order to escape notice, but with the fall of

Robespierre there was a new outburst of fashion. Only the fashion in question was very different from what had gone before. Vanished were the rich materials, vanished the hoops and the high-heeled shoes. It was the mode to admire things Greek and Roman (were not the Greeks and Romans republicans, at least for part of their history?) and, so, women clad themselves in what they fondly imagined was the dress of the Ancients. This pseudo-classical dress can best be imagined by describing it as a white nightgown made of muslin or other flimsy material, the flimsier the better. Some *Merveilleuses*, as the fashionable ladies of the *Directoire* were called, went so far as to wear semi-transparent dresses with pink skin tights underneath, or to damp the material slightly in order to make it cling and reveal the shape of the body beneath.

This tendency to wear less is one of the most striking and inevitable results of social upheaval, and the same result can be seen in the years following the war of 1914-18. In both periods, underclothes were almost entirely abolished or reduced to a single diaphanous garment in place of the multiplicity of skirts which had been worn before. In both, women began to reveal so much of their persons that if they had appeared thus only a few years before—say, in 1910 or 1780—they would undoubtedly have been arrested for indecent exposure.

In both periods they flung away their corsets, although in the eighteenth century the corset was not, for the most part, a separate garment, but was embodied in the dress itself. A characteristic of the dress of the *Ancien Régime* was its visible lacing

up the front of the bodice. But the effect was the same: to emphasize the hips and to pinch in the waist, and this tight waist, for some profound reason of feminine psychology, is incompatible with violent social change. In other words, the flinging away of the corset is always a symbolical gesture. It means female emancipation and always accompanies it.

NOW, once tight-lacing has gone, there is no reason why the waist should remain in its normal position. Indeed, there is every reason why it should not, for if the waist is in its normal place, then small waists will be admired, and tight-lacing comes back again. So one can lay it down as an axiom that war results in women's waists either rising to immediately below the bosom—as in 1800—or sinking to the hips—as in the early 1920's.

Such fashions are entirely to the benefit of the young, and they mean, always, a revolt of youth against the elder woman. The mature woman of generous curves is at her best in an elaborate toilette, and in ages when this is fashionable the *jeune fille* sinks into the background. But in periods of emancipation (which is not a steady progress as some feminists would like to think, but merely a recurring phenomenon) the *jeune fille* is no longer a *jeune fille*, but an independent young woman, and older women awake with horror to the fact that the emancipated flapper is dictating fashion. The "little girl" dresses of the 1920's are a striking example of this, with their flat bosoms and their short skirts exposing a startling amount of leg. The dresses of 1800 were not short, but they were

even more revealing, and although they rather emphasized the bosom, it was only the very young woman who could wear them to advantage.

The other thing which women always do when they feel themselves emancipated—the result of the breaking-up of the social framework—is to cut off their hair. If you study the head only of a woman of 1800 and a woman of the 1920's, you will find the two images interchangeable. It is only the dress, with its very high or very low waist, which reveals the difference of period. The hair is either cut close like a boy's (yes, the "Eton crop" was known in 1800—Mary Anne Clarke, the mistress of the Duke of Clarence, had a very charming one) or else dressed so close to the head that the effect is almost the same. The present war is almost certain to bring about the same result.

Hats are even more easily altered than clothes, and therefore provide a yet more sensitive weather-cock to show the way the social wind is blowing. It is sometimes thought that war, or social upheaval of any kind, causes hats to assume ever more fantastic shapes, to become enormous with bunches of plumes, to cover themselves with trimmings, lace or stuffed birds, to perch on the head at odd angles, to imitate market gardens, or ships in full sail. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As in clothes, so in hats, the effect of war is always a drastic simplification. After the French Revolution hats either became extremely small or disappeared altogether to give place to turbans or wreaths. After the Great War came the so-called *cloche*.

Every woman wore the *cloche*, and those who had long hair were almost compelled to cut it off, or they found themselves unable to get the hat on their heads. Its form was of the simplest, a mere close-fitting helmet framing the face and bearing a regrettable likeness to the steel helmet of the German infantry. It became a uniform on which there was no place for trimming of any kind and very little for even small variety in cut.

It may be said that the *cloche* did not impose itself until after the Great War, and this is true enough. The same time-lag can be noticed in the hats of today. They are fantastic and cheeky, but they are not the hats influenced by the war, but the hats created by the preceding period of uneasy peace. After this war it is certain that hats, whatever their shape may be, will have one shape only and keep to it with monotonous persistence. The flying helmet may possibly provide a model. He would be a bold man who would prophesy, but certainly the odd shapes we see today will have disappeared and all women's heads, from behind, will once more look strangely alike.

ANOTHER striking result of the period of upheaval caused by a great war is the tendency of women's clothes—and interior decoration too, but that is another story—to assume a uniform color. Bright, variegated tints vanish, heavily patterned materials disappear, women get into uniform, not the formal uniform of a war job, but a civil uniform which they impose upon themselves. After the French Revolution, white became universal for women's dresses, as can

easily be seen by a glance at the fashion plates of the period.

After the Great War, when so many women joined the auxiliary services, it might have been supposed that a reaction against drab was inevitable. Many women, returning to civil life, declared that they never wanted to see khaki again. Yet beige is nothing but the ghost of khaki, and they wore it for ten years. Perhaps after this war we shall see imposed on feminine fashion the phantom of Air Force blue.

At this point some indignant woman is sure to protest that there is nothing inevitable in all this, that other women may do what they like but that she, for her part, intends to follow her own taste, and express her own personality. Let it be so, by all means. A woman is never more convinced that she is expressing her own personality than when she is following the latest fashion. Women do not wear what they like—they like what they wear, and what they wear is decided for them by what the French would call the "climate" of their epoch, by the whole consensus of political events and social forces. To prophesy the future would be foolish, but it is permissible to draw conclusions from the past, and these con-

clusions all point the same way. This is the importance of fashion and its profound significance; and the only difference between the fashionable woman and the others is that the former is more sensitive to the prevailing influences and adapts herself to them first, not on the plane of the conscious intelligence, but in a much more occult and mysterious manner.

SO FAR as war and its effect on fashion is concerned, we may sum up our conclusions in a couple of formulae, each of which is capable of extension into a treatise. They might run as follows:

PEACE	{ <i>social stability — tight-lacing — normal waists — elaborate hair-dressing and the prestige of the Grande Cocotte.</i>
WAR	{ <i>social upheaval—no corsets—abnormal waists — short hair and General Promiscuity.</i>

Unless there is a universal collapse, the second of these two formulae is certain to operate at the conclusion of the present conflict.



Horace Cole made a career of
puncturing noted stuffed shirts

The Serious Art of Hoaxing

By JOSEPH HONE

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IN A picture paper of thirty years ago—February 16, 1910—which I have by me, is a photograph of four Abyssinian princes. Profoundly impressive they look. Behind them is their German interpreter, and beside them, debonair in morning clothes, completely unembarrassed, a gentleman described as Mr. Herbert Cholmondeley of the Foreign Office. Mr. Herbert Cholmondeley had just conducted the princes to Weymouth, where, amid the pomp of a large part of the British Navy, the visitors had been shown over the mightiest battleship of those days—H.M.S. *Dreadnought*. Beneath the vast bushy moustaches of this Mr. Herbert Cholmondeley not even the smallest smile is to be seen, and it was typical of Horace Cole, otherwise Mr. Herbert Cholmondeley of the Foreign Office, that he should have been unruffled even by laughter at a moment when he had set all England laughing, set Europe laughing, and nearly set the House of Commons, the Admiralty

and the Government by the ears. For that photograph is a picture of an enormous hoax which had driven a coach-and-four through all the formality which Horace Cole in his actions mocked at—at heart perhaps respected.

Horace Cole's jokes were probably the most serious things in a life which, it is right to say, found time for the cultivation of the things of the mind—art and poetry in particular. One side of the family was Irish, which may account for contradictions; Cole's greatuncle was the gentle poet Aubrey de Vere. There were many soldiers in his family; he would have been a soldier but for his deafness—he escaped from Eton to fight in the Boer War and it was a grief to him to be out of the World War.

London, Dublin and Paris were the scenes of his amazing hoaxes. There was the London prank Cole played on a Member of Parliament, so young, so handsome, so complacently respectable. This young politician had