

CLOTHING AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION: A FASHION TREND ANALYSIS

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Fashion is an ever-changing expression of values, culture, beauty preferences and technological advances. This paper delves into how the economic disparity of the Great Depression had an intense and lasting effect on fashion trends. It highlights how human creativity is apparent and adaptable through clothing and how fashion is a priority for many people despite their socio-economic status. This paper also highlights how history may be told through clothing and trends. Little has been documented when it comes to sack-flour dresses nor has much been said of well-known 30s style dresses and how they came to be. This paper analyzes these and more historic art expressions and shows how unexpected business partnerships blazed a trail for future fashionistas.

An era's history is told through a myriad of expressions such as architecture, music, literature and paintings yet historians continue to discover cultural details that provide further insights into the past. Fashion and trends are an additional looking glass into an era providing a unique detailed perspective of a slice in time. Fashion reflects social events, be it in times of tragedy or success, war and peace even during severe economic depression. A costume historian for example, views clothing as an honest reflection of culture and an expression of the social environment revealing cultural patterns of the time.¹ When analyzing society during the economic crash of 1929 and the Great Depression in its wake people adapted and changed, perhaps as dramatically as the nosedive of the economy. Investments and purchases of stocks and shares from borrowed money during the 1920s with a hope to pay it off later were mostly lost along with people's life savings. Despite the economy, fashion continued to flourish and evolve while still reflecting the cultural patterns of its time. Clothing trends developed and conquered the economic hurdles of the thirties while employing some of the most unique sustainable fashion

¹ Kendra Brandes, "Feed Sack Fashion in Rural America: A Reflection of Culture," *Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy* 4 no. 1 (2009): 59.

solutions of the 20th century. The challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and hunger of the Great Depression revolutionized the fashion industry and paved the way for new materials in clothing design. It inspired and brought about individual creativity, unique make-shift clothing solutions and fashion business deals that we continue to practice today. Depression brought on conservative themes in trends which was an intense contrast from the recent decade of the 1920s. With the economy in such a state clothing mirrored a world that was turned upside down. It was a world that was surviving not thriving, but with survival unique methods to stay afloat prevailed with fashion being a huge part of the story. Style and clothing truly reflected the depressing and unique struggles of an era which was surrounded by disasters.

Any and all products that could be salvaged were— making way for fashion that demanded creativity and in some respects a team-up of agricultural manufacturers and textile designers. It didn't start with the Great Depression, but it certainly trended into popularity and became widely acceptable in rural American society. In this era the result of this team-up became known as feed sack fashion. Having experienced extreme monetary loss and hardship families were desperate as most could only afford what was necessary— clothing was rarely viewed as a luxury good. With the creativity of feed sack fashion women and children continued to update their wardrobes to keep up with the fashions of the day. The unstitching of one or more feed sacks to be sewn into anything from adult dresses to kids' overalls began as early as 1890² but it wasn't until the disparity of the depression that the trend really took hold. Unique patterns such as gingham with a variety of colours were printed on flour and feed sacks by the merchants. This made it possible to have variety in the wardrobe without feeling outdated or poor.³ In 1936 the Staley Milling Company of Kansas City, Missouri teamed up with the Percy Kent Bag Company and created what was called "tint-Sax." These flour bags and sacks were sold in 11 varieties of pastel shades and were created with higher thread count material. They were primarily made out of cotton percale— a higher end cotton fabric— and print cloth.⁴ This was more than just a unique way to recycle and the pre-depression uninteresting farm wife became a fashion influencer. The textile industry began to take notice of her. These textile industries began offering farm women the very best in cotton fabrics and disguised it not so subtly as flour sacks.⁵ Another clothing item that came in vogue was an apron house-frock hybrid robe. The dress was nicknamed a "Hooverette" after President J. Edgar Hoover whom

² Margaret Powell, "From Feed Sack to Clothes Rack: The Use of Commodity Textile Bags in American Households from 1890 – 1960" *Textile Society of America 13th Biennial Symposium Proceedings, Washington, DC, September 18- September 22, 2012*. (University of Nebraska, 2012), 3.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ Brandes, 5.

⁵ Ibid.

Americans largely blamed for the Depression.⁶ It was created with any fabric that could be found around the house and was designed so that if one part of the garment got dirty it would simply need to be re-tied so that the dirty part faced inward looking good as new. These apron-like dresses became popular in part because of their easy maintenance and conservation of laundry soap. Fabric along with water consumption was also minimized as washing them didn't require the same frequency as a standard dress. The *Gettysburg Times* in Pennsylvania wrote February 9, 1937 that these wrap-around style dresses could even be worn for "after-dusk glamour."⁷ These frocks which pre-Depression were seen as home-only dresses evolved dramatically becoming even glamorous. For an economically struggling American and Canadian woman of the day this evolution would have provided ample ways to stay on trend and look up to date for a night out. The Depression also made it appropriate for fashionistas to re-use a garment in different ways. Previously in high societies the re-wearing of garments wasn't a popular trend, but Greta Garbo in the film *Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise* popularized the idea and made it acceptable. Garbo, as directed, wore the same sweater in varying ways throughout the movie which glamourized the "make-do" approach with fashion.⁸ Certainly on Garbo anything would be acceptable and glamorous, but the movie-watching public related with her poor character and took the idea and ran with it. As such, in an attempt to bring already owned garments up to date inexpensive fabrics such as cottons were purchased at department stores and sewed onto older clothing.⁹ As a result, hems lowered as the flapper style and provocative garments of the roaring 20's became more conservative and modest.

The Great Depression suppressed the progress of the forward-looking light-hearted attitude in the 1920s and made way for a more conservative-looking approach to fashion designs. The earlier decade's traditions of flapper dresses and exposed legs for women were abandoned and knee length skirts crept in vogue. The 1929 runways of the coveted Paris couture foresaw these lower hemlines and flowy cuts, but many women could not afford them. Being inventive American women updated their shorter-length skirts by adding lengthening bands across the bottom hemline and to their sleeves— often fur or contrasting fabrics. These small inexpensive additions to preowned clothing gave the impression their outfits had been purposely designed this way and was not a desperate means to be up to date.¹⁰ Colours also reflected what was going on in the era. They were conservative and darker than

⁶ Catherine Bradley, *Servants, housewives, vixens, and the ever-changing apron. Cuizine: The Journal of Canadian Food Cultures/Cuizine: revue des cultures culinaires au Canada* 3, no. 2. 2012, paragraph 11.

⁷ Marian Martin Jiffy, "YOU CAN SEW THIS YOURSELF." *Gettysburg Times*. February 9, 1937.

⁸ Linda Welters and Patricia Cunningham eds, *Twentieth-century American Fashion* 6. (Berg Publishers, 2005), 87.

⁹ Maria Costantino et al., *Fashions of a decade: 1930*. (New York: Facts on File, 2007), 7.

¹⁰ Ibid, 7-10.

what had been previously seen and conveyed a subdued mood, as if personifying the economic disaster itself. Navy blues and blacks accompanied city wear; browns and greens for fall; afternoon and evening wear took on black and pastel shades of peach, pink, green and blue.¹¹ Colours that were all muted, downplayed and conservative. Another incident that resulted in a more conservative style for women was a business decision by the McMullen Company of Glens Falls in New York. This well-known manufacturer and designer of men's tailored poplin shirts was one of the first to popularize what became known as the shirt-frock, later to be called the shirtwaist dress.¹² McMullen during economic hardship was in search of more clientele and turned to a new demographic; women. The company hired designer Dorothy Cox who translated the traditional men's collared shirts into a one- or two-part dress.¹³ Because they were made from inexpensive fabrics such as cotton broadcloth, chambray and wool flannel wholesale prices were affordable and as such were widely purchased throughout America.¹⁴ These dresses were available to the average American consumer at a price of \$4.75 to \$12.75 (\$58.99 to \$158 today) and quickly became the newest must-haves.¹⁵ The company soon became known as a "Shirtmaker to Women."¹⁶ The nature of a men's tailored style shirt on a woman took on a very conservative approach, adding to the conservative-like trends of the decade.

Expensive designer Art Deco era fashions were trending in the 30s. Despite these trends, inexpensive ready-to-wear clothing prevailed, with price dives giving more people access to a designer-like wardrobe. U.S. department stores canceled orders of their overseas luxury garments and introduced affordable ready-to-wear lines. Luxury goods like designer clothing seen in Paris became attainable because the industry made it accessible for all by using fabrics that anyone could afford. The industry knew that during these harsh conditions consumers would trend away from purchasing high-end goods so they turned the luxury good into a normal one.¹⁷ It was something local designers could create themselves minimizing production costs and gaining higher profits. The patterns were simple and the fabrics inexpensive.¹⁸ The popular belief that only expensive things could be designer-like quality was beginning to fade, and affordable fashionable looks began to emerge. Though this concept first appeared with Art Deco in the 20s, it was popularized during the Depression and was experimented with by designer Coco Chanel. She was one of the first to capture the spirit of inexpensive fashion and made it available

¹¹ Ibid, 10.

¹² Welters et al, 93-94.

¹³ Ibid, 94.

¹⁴ Ibid, 93.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kim Eundeok, Ann Marie Fiore, Hyejeong Kim *Fashion Trends: Analysis and Forecasting*, (Bloomsbury Publishing: 2021), 6.

¹⁸ Costantino et al, 38.

to the market. Using cheap fabrics such as cotton she designed simple looking clothing such that the average housewife who knew how to sew would be able to recreate.¹⁹ Magazines inserted patterns of the designer's couture looks for women all over the world to mimic. Chanel also brought about the use of inexpensive plastics in jewelry creation making it possible for women to wear and own these things. Women could be seen walking the streets with plastic made jewelry and clothing. It became not only chic because of the novelty of the idea but also was widely used for its relatively cheap value. It was capable of mimicking materials such as ivory, ebony, jade or coral giving the moderate-income woman a chance to be designer-chic.²⁰ Ideas throughout the Art Deco era though conceived during an economic disaster were by no means suffocated by the strain of it. One of the most profound initiatives that came out of the Art Deco era during the Depression was streamlining.²¹ By employing faster simpler and cheaper working methods, streamlined fashion became a marvel of the modern age. Through the efforts of designer Norman Bel Geddes streamlining or Streamline Moderne became an acceptable style.²² It was a reflection of the austere economic hardships of the time and reflected shapes and lines inspired by the aerodynamics of art deco.²³ Streamlining was also interpreted as a symbol for a better future beyond the Depression. It was also another way to embrace the newly discovered machine age.²⁴ Heavy tariffs were also a huge factor that contributed to inexpensive designer-like looks and culture. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930 had a huge impact on America. The tariff raised import duties to protect American business and farmers by an average of 20 percent, and as such gave American designers fast track access to their own market.²⁵ They also turned Parisian-luxury-chic clothing to mass produced accessible clothing for any average American.²⁶ Certainly, those who were rich enough to afford a 20 percent tariff on original Parisian garments would continue to purchase it, but it wasn't widely popular. With the French couture market in America drying up, the void in the market created by the once Parisian designed clothing companies gave way to American designers. This brought popularity to women's designer sportswear. These garments were made out of inexpensive non-European imported goods. They were mass-manufactured and much more versatile, an aspect Americans loved during the time of depression.²⁷ Thus, sportswear was starting to be popularized as an answer to high

¹⁹ Ibid, 38.

²⁰ Costantino et al, 38.

²¹ Ibid, 36.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sheryl Ann Farnan, " 'It is a Profession that is New, Unlimited and Rich!': The Promotion of the American Fashion Designer in the 1930s." (PhD dissertation, Iowa State University, 2005). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations.

²⁶ Ibid, 2.

²⁷ Welters et al.

tariffs afflicting importations. Another consequence of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff was the cooperation of film directors and clothing retailers. To counteract loss of income with poor sales in retail stores, fashion designers and movie producers worked together to advertise clothing.²⁸ Because of tariffs halting international products, Americans began looking at New York and California instead of Paris for fashion advice, which presented a perfect way to advertise new “American” styles. With this novel team-up, anyone could buy the designs their favourite celebrity icons wore. Patrons would go to a movie, marvel at the outfits of Joan Crawford for example and seamlessly, replicas of these outfits would appear in retail stores right after the screening.²⁹ People had direct access to designer-looking clothing without bottoming out their bank accounts. We still see this culture going on today.

Social culture influenced by the economic crash of 1929 did have a profound and lasting impact on the world of fashion and the story of an era was told. It was a story that presented to us a narrative of poverty in a 20th century crisis, yet it wasn’t just about the lack of funds in society it was about creativity and innovation. It taught us the desire of people despite their circumstances to be fashionable and how important the outward expression of clothing truly is for humanity in the western world. Menswear exclusive clothing companies turned their tailoring specialties to women and created the shirtwaist dress. Farm-folk became a spotlight for style with the inventive conversion of flour sacks to clothing. Designers’ use of inexpensive materials revealed in greater depth the poverty and desperation of the time. The social climate of the Great Depression not only paved a way for novel materials to be used in fashion but ensured these changes would continue in the decades that followed. Fashion innovations and new ideas survived during an extreme period of suffering and poverty. People became creative, companies intuitive to their consumers and fashion trends were ground-breaking and new as a result while people still found joy in fashion. Most were able to update their wardrobes despite the devastating circumstances that surrounded them. They perhaps without knowing it, were creating a whole new way of doing things that forever curved the fashion world and told us a story we’ll always remember.

²⁸ Ibid, 95.

²⁹ Welters et al, 95.

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