

FASHION

By
J. WENDELL CLARK



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Fashion, that strange emulative quality of the human family, that game of follow-the-leader, forming and transforming ideas and morals, molding even the senses, affecting the appetites, the adornment of people, the shape of cities and the relations of nations.

We are inclined to assume that our appreciation of what is right and wrong, what is good or bad, what is beautiful or ugly comes from some inherent sense of the measure of these things; rather it would seem that from somewhat mysterious sources forces arise which in themselves may be as wisps of straw, as vague as shadows, but which, joined to other forces, become as the blending of the strains of music into harmony, thus to form opinion.

Fashion might be defined as the urge of novelty or change expressing itself with an exaltation of excellence in the performance of a created mode in the arts or the actions of people. A mode existing without an urge is a habit or a convention. A fashion must have the flare of fire with an ever-increasing circle of dominion.

It might be the thought of some that Hegelian change, a world reaching out for greater harmonies through the compromise of clashing opposites, is the stimulus of fashion. But the struggle for perfection as Hegel saw it found no end. To reach a higher plane was to find a higher and more complex opposite awaiting further strife and repeated compromise, the Absolute alone furnishing the perfect unity. But who, other

than the Evangelists, claim to know the Absolute? Who knows the higher plane? The government of the United States, a fashion in the way of governments, has been accepted as a compromise between the best and the worst of governments since its inception, but already it is complained that it has become a centralized tyranny and worse than the worst of them. However, as between the short and the long skirt there has been an elevating compromise which would have so gratified the philosopher along with the rest of us that it is distressing that he could not have lived to view this fashion.

It might be said of fashion that it is custom in the making; that, it seems in part, to be the reaching out of the individual to attain perfection and which, attained to his satisfaction, becomes a custom. Likewise fashion is the classic in the making and among the arts styles become the fashion to survive as classics when it becomes the common acceptance that perfection has been attained.

Nor is fashion a war between opposites as Hegel saw it; on the whole there is an easy capitulation for the sake merely of variety. The individual grows weary of any long-continued stimulus to any of his senses. A perfume, however delightful when first applied to the olfactory terminals, sooner or later ceases to give any pleasure and at last becomes offensive; a food, however delectable in the first eating, if too long continued will become repugnant to the terminals of taste. If an individual be confined to the limits of Taormina to view unendingly the magic serenity of that glorious paradise he will yearn for other lands to cast his gaze upon. Deep in the core of every individual is a weariness of sameness and a desire for novelty. And more, it is well known that change, change of scene, change of diet, change of work is salutary; that the secretions of the body are stimulated by novel excitements.

Let us then assume that fashion is based first upon the individual's actual need of change to keep active the vital

secretions of his body and secondly on an inherent impulse to excel.

It may perhaps be stated as a truism that fashions enduring longest are those least complex in their structure or composition, or stated differently, the durability of a fashion is in direct proportion to its simplicity.

There might be the thought that a war of opposites lies between the simple and the complex, between, for instance, a simple and an ornate treatment of a building, or between simple and flowery wording in writing, or between a blue serge or a checkerboard pattern in a suit of clothes, but there is no mid-ground of a higher elevation than at least one of the opposites. Simplicity seems always to be the victor in these struggles.

Now it would seem to be a fact that in recent years there has been a growing tendency of modern artists, be they architects, painters, or musical composers, to create something different rather than something excellent. We find competent critics applauding such crazily queer productions as *Dr. Category's Cabinet* and finding something to praise even in the scenery of irregular, topsy-turvy houses and zig-zag streets. We find competent critics, too, applauding the work of Marie Laurencin, who paints a woman's face without a nose, with eyes whose irises take up the entire palpebral fissure, with hair that has the appearance of fur, and all of which suggests a musing cat. There seems more humor than art in such a composition and yet it is not for humor that praise is given it.

Again in the field of music, who could have believed a generation ago that actual dissonance, a veritable bedlam of sound, could have found an audience that would lift a voice in its defence.

And yet, such is the substance of man that because he finds a change, even though the change be of questionable excellence, he lends an ear, solicits other ears, and thus by simple multiplication creates a fashion.

But there is something in the individual aside from his inherent receptivity to change—it is his urge to proselyte. The drama of something novel in his experience stimulates him to interest or amaze the crowd in the same field. He will extol a novelty even when he himself is not convinced of its excellence. A man has only to visit a new and untried doctor to sing his praises even before he has tasted his medicine. There is a veritable passion among people to pass their doctor on to their friends be they sick or well. Likewise a man who sees a new play at the theater or visits a new resort for pleasure is without rest until he has prevailed upon all of his associates to do as he has done.

Men are inclined to assume that their ideas of aesthetic values are fixed, that their ability to distinguish between the lovely and the ugly is something stable, and that given two opposing modes their decision twenty years from now would be as today; that, for instance, they were always able to distinguish between a man of culture and a brown derby. But such is hardly the case. Let us take, for example, the matter of polish. Here is a word that for centuries has applied equally well to men and to dining-room tables to signify culture.

It will be remembered that in the days of some of us, and all of our fathers, a reflecting luster was as necessary to a shirt front as to the diamond in the studhole, or the prisms dangling from the chandelier. Nothing shineable was left without a gleaming surface that caught the eye from as far as it could see. Polish became an actual symbol for refinement in the individual.

And then, from some undiscoverable source and for no good reason, something came to cover shine with shame. Chinamen could launder only for the unenlightened and thousands of them were thrown out of business or into the chop-suey business; varnish became a drug on the market; the makers of brass polish, silver polish, and patent leather shoes all suffered enormous losses.

And most of us living through this period believed that we were conforming to an evolution of taste, conforming to a sort of Hegelian change to lift us higher in our aesthetic appreciations.

But what has happened? Two or three years ago someone devised a process of plating with chromium. It was first viewed from its utilitarian possibilities, since unlike other cheap metals it possessed a quality of keeping its luster without the use of chemical polishes. At once it was discovered to be a valuable substitute for brass and nickel despite the fact that there was a rather unpleasing leaden tone beneath the luster.

Chromium plating has become a fashion—the streets are streaming with an almost dazzling glare of it from automobiles; shop fronts are here and there embellished with it; the shop of Grünfeld in Berlin has it not only as a shining façade but to outline its shining showcases and to reflect a gleam of spiraling glitter from a staircase that twists about a gleaming elevator shaft.

The day seems close at hand when we will send out the dining-room table to have its surface once more rubbed into mirrored smoothness and for another age or two contend that polish is the true companion of culture.

No, it must be granted that taste is not a constant—that whereas certain individuals are more than others sensitive to the harmonies of life, rearrangement of the factors of those harmonies will create a change, even a reversal of opinion.

So let us presume that life is made up of so many syntheses, that as a river flows, ever changing its character, its depth, its breadth, its reflection of sky or hills, torrential through the wild, resisting boulders and peacefully flowing over the meadows, so does man glide through life from youth to old age. And as every bend of the river brings a changed synthesis so does every year in the life of the individual bring a change of synthesis.

Should a boy put on his grandfather's hat he is out of synthesis, in spite of the fact that the hat is a new hat and his head large enough to hold it above his ears. Should a grandmother use tweezers on her eyebrows, mascaro on her lashes, and a lipstick on her lips she is out of synthesis even though her looks are greatly improved by the action.

And just as there is a synthesis for each of the changing years so there is a synthesis for every class of society. A structural steel worker who wears brown overalls would be out of synthesis if he should put on the white overalls of a painter or plasterer. A farmer working in the fields wearing dancing slippers would be ridiculously out of synthesis.

And just as a class has an urge to conform to the associations of manners and customs of the class, so is there a resentment against any intrusions by any other class.

The rich, and therefore powerful, over a period of many centuries in establishing the art of living for their class, assumed for themselves those articles for the adornment of their lives that were rare or costly to produce. Among these are diamonds, pearls, fabrics of difficult design or weaving, and highly polished metal and wood surfaces.

And the poor took for their symbol those articles easily produced and sustained. Now, the symbol of the one class is guarded just as jealously as the symbol of the other. Let those who might think that jealousy is confined to the affluent group endeavor to induce a bricklayer to stroll about his neighborhood of a Sunday morning wearing a silk hat and the other habiliments of the gentle class.

But what has come during the last fifty years to spread confusion among syntheses, and to disrupt symbols that had remained more or less stable through the centuries? It is machinery and mass production; it is a knowledge of chemistry and the ability to produce cheaply and artificially the rarer articles of adornment that have heretofore been accepted as the symbols of affluence.

Now, whereas every class resents the intrusions of any of its individuals into any other class, they do not object to such intrusions as a body. The moving picture came to show the one half of the world how the other half lived, and the poor in the world's goods acquired a taste for pearl necklaces and carved furniture. And, since fish scales could be turned into very exquisite pearls for a few dollars a string, and carved furniture could be produced in a moment of time by pressing out a design on steam-softened wood, such luxuries of life came within the reach of practically all of us.

Around twenty years ago there came into vogue a dance called the one-step. To be gracefully accomplished the stride had to be a long one and tall, slender people were best adapted for it. It will be remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Castle, both of them bonily thin, exhibiting on the stage, traveled from coast to coast and brought to themselves a wave of enthusiasm such as had rarely been accorded to artists.

Thus began the fashion of thinness. The young girl who was tall, and thin, and shy because of it, came forward to meet the tall, thin man on the center of the dance floor. And plumpness gave way to length and angularity; the short, round figure that turned so gracefully to the mincing, one-two-three step of the waltz could not well accomplish the swift, gliding movement of the new dance. Quite a change came over the size and shape of the flowers that arrayed themselves along the wall.

But one thing could result from such a metamorphosis in physical popularity; a considerable increase in the marriages between the tall and lean with a consequent breeding away from fat.

I have previously indicated that through the cheap manufacture of articles that symbolized the well-to-do there has come a need to set up other standards of superiority for the affluent class. Now, since for a generation the successful in

life, who have everything in their favor when it comes to the selection of a mate, have been breeding to thinness with a consequent forcing of the poor in the opposite direction, what is rapidly coming about is a differentiation between the select and the vulgar based upon fat.

Who is it that has not, of late years, in visiting the districts where the poor abide, noted that well-fed fatness is the characteristic of the people on the streets, or in visiting the neighborhood of the well-to-do that thinness marks the dweller there?

Of a night in August when the temperature is ninety-five take a stroll along the esplanade of the lake front of Chicago where the street lies tangent. Witness what has been brought there from the squalid, fetid hinterland. Great hulks of gasping fat recline in cheaper automobiles or sit upon the terrace of the walk.

Fat, since it carries with it none of the grace demanded in this age and is, therefore, something to be avoided, has come to express weak indulgence; and immorality is the companion of weak indulgence. Thinness cannot be attained or maintained in most instances without labor and intelligence. The result of labor with intelligence is the acquisition of capital or that which gives its possessor a superior position. Thinness symbolizes a superior position and the urge of it is the part of fashion.

Around seventy years ago Pasteur in searching the air for evidence to prove or disprove the theory of spontaneous life discovered that germs were abounding. They fell upon his Petrie plates unless he held them high above his head while standing on a mountain peak. Sometime later he related a germ which has come to be known as the streptococcus to certain infections of the human system. From Lister and others it came to be known that germs of sepsis were normally living on almost every article. They learned, too, that these germs could be washed away with soap and water and that they

could be destroyed by chemicals. This knowledge came to a world that was driving away rheumatism by wearing a polished horse-chestnut in the pocket, a world that was defending itself against contagion by the use of amulets.

Now since the days of Moses there had existed written commandments for the hygienic living of people. These laws were based chiefly upon the use of running water to keep the garments and bodies of individuals clean. There were laws for the isolation of lepers, there were laws concerning the length of time food could be kept and the care of utensils which were calculated to prevent the eating of putrified food in a day when ice chests were unknown. Moses had an extraordinary wisdom, he knew the value of cleanliness, he related disease and pestilence to the contamination of filth.

"And every soul that eateth that which dieth by itself or that which is torn of beasts whether he be home born or a stranger, he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening, then shall he be clean.

"And whomsoever he that hath the issue toucheth, without having rinsed his hands in water, he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And the earthen vessel which he that hath the issue toucheth, shall be broken and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water. And when he that hath an issue is cleansed of his issue then he shall number to himself seven days for his cleansing and wash his clothes and he shall bathe his flesh in running water and shall be clean."

Surgeons, today, wash their hands in running water because their hands have been in contact with things that were not surgically clean. How remarkable was the wisdom of Moses but how futile were his injunctions. Christ and his disciples sat by the wayside and they were eating their noon-day meal without having washed their hands.

"Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem. And when they

saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashed, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brazen vessels, and of tables. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands?' And he saith unto them, 'Are ye so without understanding also: Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him: Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?'"

I know the answer of the faithful Christian. It is that Christ spoke in the terms of the spirit. One might ask, What of whiskey? Whiskey is supposed to defile the spirit. But the fact remains that the disciples ate with dirty hands and Christ defended their action, which might indicate to some that cleanliness as a virtue was not in the thinking of the Jews of that day; it was just one of those silly laws.

The salutary injunctions of Moses became mere conventions; the Jewish world went through the motions; they dipped their hands in water (the orthodox among them still doing so), but as a ritual and not for an avoidance of contamination. John Wesley told his flock that cleanliness was next to Godliness but the Methodists have not lifted themselves entirely from the class of the great unwashed.

Until the time of Pasteur the civilized people of the earth were a rather dirty aggregation. Why? Because they had no conception of cleanliness. The mandates of Moses were written in the book, pages upon pages upon pages, but the idea behind the mandates seemed to die with that great leader. The synthesis of cleanliness came with the discoveries of

Pasteur. Men became conscious that living enemies were about them; the microscope had made them visible. They could be taken from the surface of the body and on nutritious media colonized and increased in numbers. Laudable pus was the phrase of the pre-Lister period, but suddenly the world came to the conception of the swarming things, the avoidance of which Moses had given warning three thousand years before.

Operations on the internal body revealed the action of bacteria on living tissue and destructive processes became related to the microscopic organism. They began to recognize that just as maggots were the swarming things that devoured dead flesh (live flesh, too, in instances of great filth) so were bacteria the swarming things that cause ulcers and inflammations in the tissue of the living body.

Let us now build up a fashion from its roots; we will take the fashion of sun bathing. It is common knowledge that over a good part of the world there has come what might be called an obsession for this practice. In a recent journey to several countries of Europe I found it as true there as here; and reports from Russia indicate that the proletarian upper class is lying half-naked on the sands wherever they can be found. I learned the other day that our distinguished townsman Carl Sandburg has built himself a roofless veranda of the same dimensions as the house, where, in a bathing suit, he moves about, following the sun as it slants between the hillocks of the dunes. Rich man, poor man, beggar man and even Al Capone have avowed a passion for this sort of entertainment and invigoration. Such is its urge that it is coming to be a common expectation for the workers to have furnished them a winter vacation so that they can be restored in the Sunny South and return with swarthened visage and peeling backs.

Now it must be admitted that Victorian modesty would have formed a firm barrier to the advance of this fashion. A

modest seclusion and exposure of the body to the rays of the sun do not go hand in hand. But modesty when applied to the exposure of the body has never been inherent in the human race. Man has sought to cover only what he was ashamed to show. Witness a golf-club locker-room—those conscious of some physical superiority carry their towel jauntily in the hand while those not so gracefully endowed have it bound about the torso. And with women, too, where skirts are shortest eyes are most happily directed.

The truth is that when woman came into her voting own, when "obey" became an archaic absurdity in the marriage ritual and man was no longer privileged to guard his possession jealously, she at once and quite rightly became a capitalist.

With one base of this fashion established let us turn to the next. Thirty years ago someone in operating upon a person for tuberculous peritonitis discovered that merely to open the abdomen to let in the light of day would cure this disease. This fact was registered in the public mind by the daily press. Scientists began to study the effects of sunlight and occasional leakage into public channels established the concept that there was something mysteriously salutary in sunlight for the cure of disease.

And then, one day, there appeared in the newspapers the announcement that codliver oil, a tonic used for rickets, a disease retarding the development of bone, could have its efficacy enhanced some 25 per cent by exposure of the oil to the sun's rays. This was magic, the sort of magic for which man had ever been searching; in a way it was bringing to life an inanimate object; a pumpkin turned into a chariot to carry Cinderella to the ball.

Other announcements crept into the public thought; certain elements of the blood were increased when an animal was exposed to sun's rays; guinea pigs and chickens grown under intensive sun's rays were found to attain a much larger size

than when grown under normal conditions, and they were actually dwarfed when developed without sunlight.

Now there are other factors that enter into the great and almost universal urge of sunbathing: one, the fact that industrial centers, so relatively enlarged and crowded in the last twenty-five years, are so smoke-laden that the sun's rays are practically valueless when they reach the residents; another that with an almost universal distribution of the automobile, especially in America, there is an escape.

I have endeavored to show that fashion is a contagious thing developing from small and often unrelated beginnings, that it is the great urge of life. We are reaching about among the mysteries and, finding something, it may please us for a moment and that we call a fad; it may please us for a considerable period and that we call a fashion; it may unendingly give us joy or profit and that we call a classic or it becomes a custom.

During the late war, for the first time, the urge of fashion was considered scientifically; it was learned that great bodies of people could be so manipulated that they would be swept collectively one way or the other. Publicity, or the use of avenues of communication to form opinion, became a power whose force had not as yet been dreamed in the pre-radio and moving picture days.

And yet there are those so benighted among us, and some of these in high places, that they still believe in the commandment, the strong arm of authority as the best means of producing a better life; there are indications that more and more we are putting ourselves in the hands of the Pharisees. I have indicated that the commandments of Moses, wise and salutary as they most of them were, had no real or lasting significance among his own people even in his own times.

Now, there are certain qualities of citizenship upon which there can be no disagreement: these are happiness, health, industry, and temperance. Some of these are dependent, one

upon the other—none can be authorized and all can be prompted by well-directed fashions.

Perhaps we may look to a day when our Congress will limit its concern to ways and means of providing revenue, and to standing behind the administration in the business of the nation; and when a new Congress, a Congress whose studies have been of the behavior of men, will be given the task of molding us not into submissive obedience to particular laws, but into happy, healthy, industrious, temperate citizens.

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