

Demure to Deviant: Ladylike Fashion in the Twentieth Century



By:
Beth Dincuff
Charleston

Demure to Deviant: Ladylike Fashion in the Twentieth Century

By: Beth Dincuff Charleston

There are many meanings and uses of the term “ladylike”. Ladylike as a concept can be defined through the language of fashion but it can also be used as a moral or religious standard. Ladylike is a contextual idea. Within the fields of fashion studies and the commercial industry of fashion “ladylike” has varied meanings depending on the context in which it is visually presented. Within the fashion industry itself, the concept of ladylike can be presented in a somewhat straightforward “modernized traditional way” as in the “new classic” available at the US based retailer Talbot’s or deconstructed as a concept and presented in a self referential way such as French couture house of Dior had shown on the runway and in print advertisements throughout the tenure of creative director John Galliano. Additionally, defining ladylike in terms of fashion can be problematic as its visual signifiers change rapidly over time. Rules of etiquette and appearance relax and bend and sometimes come full circle when they are concerned with sartorial acceptability within a given group or society. This is as true today as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, when the 1948 edition of *Vogue’s Book of Etiquette* stated:

A salient example of the change in standards is in the matter of clothes, women's clothes especially. It used to be said that no “lady” [their quotes] left the house without a hat on her head and gloves on her hands. Decorum demanded this... But the rules of decorum, as far as clothes are concerned, is, still exactly what it was: It is in extremely bad taste to wear in public clothes that depart widely from the accepted norm. Any clothes which make an obvious bid for public attention are offensive evidence of indiscriminate and exhibitionism. ⁱ

According to *Vogue’s Book of Etiquette*, even though decorum, which in the above quotation can be presumed to mean “rules of fashion”, may have relaxed from the early decades of the twentieth century, but at the time of publication, deviating from the norm when dressing was still considered offensive, indiscriminate and exhibitionistic. Fashion publication, in the form of magazines and etiquette or style guides, and films that portrayed demure sartorial choices was two resources that served as guides for woman who wished to dress in a ladylike manner. On screen, actresses such as Mary Astor, Loretta Young, Kay Kendall, Deborah Kerr Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn epitomized the discerning ladylike style. The American designer Mainbocher, who was active from the 1929 until 1971, was the most renowned purveyor of the ladylike look in fashion. The couturier was so adept at conveying the social nuances of understated dress, that fashion editor Sally Kirkland said of him, “He not only made a woman look like a lady, but as if her mother had been a lady too.” A favorite designer of debutantes Brenda Fraizer, Doris Duke, Gloria Vanderbilt and CZ Guest, Mainbocher is best remembered as the creator of the Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Simpson’s, effectively understated wedding gown. Sophie Gimbel, custom designer at Saks Fifth Avenue was another champion of ladylike fashion. From the mid1930s until the early 1970s her well heeled clientele could always rely on the quality and taste level of the ensembles she sold at the

Salon Moderne. Gimbel believed in balance and moderation when dressing stating, “that women should not wear dresses that expose their shoulders and knees at the same time,”ⁱⁱ in order to create an alluring but restrained countenance. At the luxury price point, fashion designer Carolina Herrera, who is known for her intelligent interpretation of classic ladylike fashion, carries the tradition forward today. In ready to-wear, labels such as the now defunct Peck and Peck, known for their shirtwaist dresses; Talbots Inc., whose merchandise is styled with “a nod to tradition infused with modern flair” and whose advertising campaign since July 2011 have featured actress Julianne Moore; and Ann Taylor a competitively priced brand that caters to “well-dressed career woman who favored classic fabrics in fashionable designs” and who in an advertising maneuver similar to Talbots, have engaged actress Demi Moore as spokesperson for the brand.

In the twentieth century, ladylike fashion has proven to be the standard of dress with popular fashion in the western world invariably following a ladylike trajectory. The only two prolonged time periods when ladylike fashion was not the norm were the 1920s and the 1960s very unique decades in which fashion was more heavily influenced by youth worship than at any other time. That is not to say that there have not been briefer but equally interesting breaks from the ladylike norm include the strong shouldered look of 1940 that coincided with the increased autonomy of women during World War II, and a similar looking silhouette during the height of the power dressing craze of the late 1970s and 1980s. The rise of Japanese fashion designers such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons whose influence began to be felt globally in the 1980s can also be cited as a breach from ladylike dressing. The influence of the non-western approach to garment construction these designers practiced, “a new relationship between body and clothes, a new attitude toward the beauty of imperfection”ⁱⁱⁱ was in direct opposition to the hourglass silhouette, as were the characteristic black tonality and the deconstructionist aesthetic of the garments. In each instance the hour glass or “paper-doll” silhouette a manifest of ladylike fashion with its full skirt, narrow waist, and fitted bodice was put aside in favor of a boxier, sometimes masculine, sometimes ambiguously unisex silhouette.

Furthermore, parameters can be constructed around the definition of ladylike fashion by explaining what it is not. It is not overtly masculine, though it can be tailored, somber and conservative; words often used to describe masculine clothing. (One cannot look like a man and still look like a lady) It is not childlike. Rompers, anklets or knee socks, school girl fashions and an abundance of frills are eschewed by designers and customers alike who wish to achieve a ladylike countenance. Overalls and baby doll dresses can never be ladylike, as the waist must be apparent in ladylike dressing and a characteristic absent from these fashions. (One cannot look like a girl, a female child who does not yet possess a distinctive waistline, hips or a developed chest and still look like a lady). Thirdly, it is not dress that is socially inappropriate. The opposite of ladylike fashion goes by many names, from the polite but ambiguous, such as improper, tacky, and inappropriate, to more inflammatory descriptions, such as cheap, racy, loose (in morals, not fit), Vampish, slutty, and whoreish. Utilizing these parameters as a guide, in their broadest definition, ladylike fashion is above all: feminine, mature, and appropriate.

The 1920's were the first decade where fashionable women are offered a sartorial model that was viable alternative to ladylike fashion: the flapper. The flapper was everything a lady was not, yet she was undeniably fashionable. The first two decades of the twentieth century hinted at the freedom that young women would soon experience when making stylistic choices, but the Gibson Girl was light years behind the new modern woman. Brash and physically bolder than women of previous generations, the flapper demanded a silhouette that was simple and allowed for freedom of movement whether she was on the dance floor or in the front seat of a sleek coupe.



Eschewing the hour glass silhouette that had been a salient characteristic of feminine fashion for over a century for a boxy, boyish silhouette and an abbreviated hemline, the flapper flaunted an androgynous, sexually provocative style. Here was a young woman who had no interest in dressing in a ladylike manner.

In the United States, the post World War II years brought about many social changes.



The number of people marrying and filing for divorce both rose. Social classes became more fluid as a more diverse selection of people entered college and became part of the moneyed class. The newly prosperous wanted to behave in a manner appropriate to their improved station in life. ^{iv} Consequently, during the first months of 1946 the demand for Emily Post's *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* surged, with sales climbing to a high of over 5,600 copies per week. ^v Along with entries on the proper format for invitations, and decorating and entertaining, dressing the part of someone born to privilege was of considerable importance for Emily Post's readers. In addition to the shift in social hierarchy, ladylike fashion became pervasive in America due also to a fashion-centric phenomenon: Christian Dior's New Look. Debuting in February 1947, the New Look was characterized by dresses and suits with "soft shoulders, waspy waists and full flowing skirts." ^{vi} The influence that this ultra feminine look had on fashion in the United States can be seen in a day dress (at left) from 1951, by

American ready-to-wear designer Anne Fogarty. This dress features Fogarty's "paper doll" silhouette, achieved through the wearing of a restrictive corset at the waist and multiple petticoats to support the skirt. Fogarty famously penned the 1959 book, *Wife Dressing: The Fine Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife* replete with rules to follow for looking your best at all times for your husband. Possessing an 18 inch waist into middle aged adult hood, Fogarty advocated an intensely feminine silhouette which remained popular from the advent of the New Look until the mid 1960s when an onslaught of A-line suits, trapeze dresses, pants and miniskirts overshadowed the style.

The fashion press, enthusiastic supporters of the ladylike New Look, wrote numerous articles on how to achieve the flower-woman look that the French couturier espoused. For an au courant ladylike countenance, the donning of "flaring ankle-length skirts for dancing, more coverage, slender waists, fabrics with weight, texture, gleam, color, high heels or baby Louis heels (depending on the height of her beau), moderate accessories, and controlled hair" ^{vii} were in order. An article in *Glamour* magazine, from 1947, entitled, "Fashion is, above all, a Lady" advised its readers that for the spring season, "we're wearing our skirts longer, our waists lower, our hats, as well as our hair, neater. These add up to a New Look...It is the look of a lady...quiet, graceful and soft-spoken... as opposed to the erstwhile high-spirited look of a girl going places." ^{viii} Are ladylike dressing and personal ambition mutually exclusive? If so, why does *Glamour* pit them against each other?

Given the docile behavior and adherence to rules of dressing and decorum that inevitably accompanies true ladylike dressing, it is not surprising that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries ladylike fashion has been relegated to trend status. No longer considered strong enough to exist as a constant in the fashion industry, ladylike dressing is relegated to the status of a marketing gimmick. The latest being the collaboration between retailer Banana Republic and Janie Bryant, the costume designer for *Mad Men*, a television show set in the world of New York City advertising in the 1960s. The collection features wasp waisted dresses, full and pencil skirts and sharply tailored suits that read "ladylike" in fashion today. ^{ix}

Ladylike fashion is too often confused with retro fashion and is often used as shorthand for a certain type of well groomed style that could have been popular any time from 1930 to 1970. *Ladies Home Journal* magazine makes this mistake in their article *The 6 Pieces You Need for a Ladylike Look this Fall*, "Amidst a sea of micro minis, stripper heels and skin-tight jeans, rises a crop of beautiful classics that will make you look nothing but sophisticated...a high-waisted pencil skirt, a silk blouse, something leopard, wide leg trousers, modified cat eye sunglasses". ^x Though ladylike in style when compared with "stripper heels" the fact that both trousers, leopard print were not considered ladylike when first introduced into women's wardrobes apparently means very little as long as it appropriately retro.

For those women willing to follow the rules of ladylike fashion today there is no clear voice. The lone paragraph covering the topic of "Women's Clothing" in the latest edition of *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette* has only this to say: "It can be fairly said that anything goes in women's dress today. Country clothes have become city

clothes; dresses skirts and pants have become interchangeable, and the very fashionable wear evening fabrics during the day.”^{xi} In the place of strict sartorial pronouncement, handed down by fashion and etiquette experts, women today are offered online advice on how to look ladylike that borders on the inane: “While women should not feel that they need to dress up every day, grooming is a sign to the outside world that a woman is ladylike. Instead of throwing on tattered sweats, choose a nicely fitted jogging suit to run errands.”^{xii} Without knowledge, the power and comfort that can be found within the appropriateness of ladylike dressing becomes unfathomable for the average woman. Women lost a position of power, and instant respect when they lost the reassuring presence of ladylike fashion. An area that is worth further thought is in where the power of the visual signifiers of ladylike fashion now lay. Objects, that in past decades, a woman dressed in ladylike fashion would feel uncomfortable without including gloves, a well made up face, a pair of good shoes, neat hair, an attractive handbag, a suit with dressmaker details, a cashmere twin set, and a strand of pearls, can all act as fetishes. Contextually, these fetishes, accessory and other instrument of fashion, can change in meaning from demurely ladylike to unsettlingly deviant.

Makeup is a particularly interesting area to look at in terms of its relationship to social acceptability and ladylike fashion. The twentieth century began with a resistance to coloring ones face with cosmetic products because of moral and medical reasons. Helena Rubenstein, the legendary beauty entrepreneur noted in her autobiography, *My Life for Beauty*, that when she first arrived in the United States in 1915, “Only women described as ‘loose’ used make-up; ‘nice girls’ sprinkled a little rice powder on their noses and beyond that trusted in God to make them beautiful”.^{xiii} During the 1910s young women were still under the sartorial influence of the ethereal beauty of the Gibson Girl, a fictional, ideal of modern American women-hood. A paradigm of propriety and beauty, she was modest and aloof, a dream girl who, as a figment of illustrator Charles Gibson’s imagination, was an unrealistic role model for many young women.

The desire for physical beauty existed amongst young women but the means to achieve it were not socially acceptable. To make cosmetics acceptable for ladylike women, exemplars of lady like deportment in the form of European nobility or well established society matrons were used throughout the preceding two decades to endorse cosmetics and various beauty products. After an extracted period when first creams and beauty lotions, and then finally, colored cosmetic became socially acceptable, the wearing of makeup was normalized in American culture. Rules governing the use of makeup such as the appropriateness of reapplying lipstick or powder in public, the age at which young woman should begin to wear makeup and for what occasions were established by beauty experts such as fashion magazines, etiquette books, local women’s committees and the PTA (Parent Teacher Association). With such illustrious guidance, makeup became socially palatable and therefore could be enjoyed by a lady. In her best selling tome, *Wife Dressing*, Anne Fogarty advises her readers to wear make-up even while cleaning house, “foundation and lipstick are important to keep your skin moist and you lips smooth and to catch dust particles that fly through the air.”^{xiv} As Madame Rubenstein famously said, “There are no ugly women only lazy women”. Instead of

being an indication of freshness and innocence, a bare face on a woman implied slovenliness.

Makeup falls out of the sphere of ladylike dressing and becomes disturbing when it is garish, either purposefully applied for effect or through ignorance of social norms, Drag queens, prostitutes and some entertainers like Lady Gaga can fall into this category. For makeup to be deviant, for it to shock and perhaps even sicken the viewer, the age of the wearer must be the unexpected factor as in the case of beauty pageant contestants as young as three years old in full adult makeup.

An accessory that is considered extremely ladylike, that has been used in various ways in recent years is gloves. Either short for day or long for night, gloves have served women well during most of the twentieth century. A favorite of debutantes and queens, gloves are governed by strict rules of wear that may have made donning them all the more fitting for a ladylike discipline. In late 1910s through the early 1920s, no lady left the house without them. “Now, modern usage holds that gloves should be worn on occasions such as these: going to a formal luncheon, dinner, reception, or dance; in the streets of large towns and cities; going to and from church; going to official receptions or entertainments.”^{xv}



Among the four separate entries on how to wear gloves, *Vogue's Book of Etiquette* counsels, “a woman should always take off her gloves before she starts smoking, playing cards, eating, drinking, or putting on make-up. “When one is wearing long, elbow length gloves one should take them

off as soon as one is seated at the dining table, before touching food or drink. At dances and receptions, gloves are left on for dancing and one may unbutton them at the wrist, tucking the finger end of the gloves into the wrist opening whenever one wants to smoke, drink, or powder one’s nose... Bracelets may be worn over long gloves, but rings should never be worn outside a glove.”^{xvi}

Long evening gloves show up to great effect on Rita Hayworth in the 1946 film *Gilda*. Acting as a sexualized prop, Hayworth’s black satin opera gloves are worn with a form fitting strapless evening dress when she performs a seductive striptease version of the song, “Put the Blame on Mame”. Extremely provocative, the gloves act as a compelling ladylike fetish, with their removal conveying a sense of Gilda’s wild abandonment and vulnerability. The choreography of seductive public glove removal was perfected by Gypsy Rose Lee, a mid-twentieth century burlesque star/stripper who never barred all on stage and reportedly took a full 15 minutes to take off a single glove in such an

enticing way that her audience was enthralled the entire time. Shown, at left, fitting a costume on one of the supporting dancers in her act, Lee was aware of the potency of such a traditionally ladylike prop used in the context of a striptease performance.

When the most recent edition of *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette*, contains one entry concerned with gloves that serves only to contextualizes their function in earlier times by stating "gloves were once de rigueur for white-tie affairs, with evening wear" ^{xvii} while making no mention of the role or usage of gloves in the present day, it can be said that gloves no longer possess the same power as they had in past decades when, as part of the requirement of ladylike dressing, a ritualistic following of rules prescribed their wearing. Discounted by the primary user, an object, in this instance gloves, becomes available for transformative meaning by a new fashion individual or group. When a ladylike object/signifier becomes popular with a non ladylike group, masculine men, or female children or women who dress in a socially unacceptable manner it becomes more than merely un-ladylike. Instead, it takes on a



meaning and power of a traditional gender identifier adopted by a new wearer. Some of the most startling and effective adoptions of ladylike fashion occur when they are co-opted by a non ladylike wearer, in this case a man. When evening gloves "jump" the gender barrier and land on a self identifying heterosexual man they transform into a startling and effective symbol of misappropriated appropriateness. When fashioned from an unexpected material such as black patent leather or rubber, and worn by the overtly sexualized, makeup wearing, Goth rock idol, Marilyn Manson, evening gloves take on a clinical, vivisectionist air. Re-contextualized, they are no longer appropriate and reassuring but have become eccentric and menacing. In contemporary fashion there are many symbols of ladylike dressing that have been ignored by fashion then adopted and adapted up by the fashion forward. Pop star Madonna has adapted jewelry originally meant to aid the wearer in times of prayer and contemplation to decorative trinkets. With the help of Jean Paul Gaultier she has also reinterpreted the role of underwear as outerwear in numerous times. More recently Lady Gaga, who some say is following Madonna's lead in reconfiguring potent cultural symbols, has re-appropriated a ladylike strand of pearls into a case of luminescent facial pox, an effect achieved through the use of heavy foundation and powdering and the affixing of individual pearls to her face. If the signifiers of ladylike fashion, briefly addressed here are no longer serving their original purpose of empowering women, and have instead devolved into metaphors for outdated modes of gender and sexuality, they should be used by persons who understand the power of fashion and know how to use it to express their

individuality. Ladylike fashion is not a trend; it is an institution. The only change is that today it has different members.

End Notes

- i. Fenwick, Millicent. *Vogue's Book of Etiquette: A Complete Guide to Traditional Forms and Modern Usage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948) 11.
- ii. Sophie Gimbel. "Ten Designers Predict." *The New York Times*. 21 March 1943. ProQuest. 20 August 2011.
- iii. Valerie Steele. "1980s." *Japan Fashion Now*. 17 September 2010. Museum at FIT. 29 August 2011. 3.fitnyc.edu
- iv. Perkins, Jeanne. "Up Close: Emily Post," *Life*, May 6, 1946, 59-60.
- v. Perkins, Jeanne. "Up Close: Emily Post," *Life*, May 6, 1946, 59-60.
- vi. Design Museum. "Design at the Design Museum." *Christian Dior*. undefined. Design Museum. 20 August 2011. designmuseum.org
- vii. *Vogue in August 15, 1947*.
- viii. "Signalling Spring: Fashion is, Above All, a Lady," *Glamour*, March 1947, 161.
- ix. Kate Carter. "Fashion Statement." *Banana Republic Launches Mad Men Clothing Range*. 25 August 2011. Guardian News and Media Limited. 27 August 2011. guardian.co.uk
- x. Sue Erneta. "Ladies Lounge." *Ladies' Home Journal*. 11 August 2010. Meredith Corporation. August 11, 2010.
- xi. Tuckerman, Nancy and Nancy Dunnan. *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette: Entirely Rewritten and Updated* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 75.
- xii. ehow.com Accessed August 27, 2011.
- xiii. Rubinstein, Helena. *My Life for Beauty* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966) 58.
- xiv. Fogarty, Anne. *Wife Dressing: The Fine Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife* (New York: Glitterati Inc., 2008) 144.
- xv. Fenwick 35.
- xvi. Fenwick 35.
- xvii. Tuckerman 75-76.

Image Sources

- Image 1 – Flapper c. 1920's. Photographer unknown. © Life archives.
- Image 2 -Daywear from American ready-to-wear designer Anne Fogarty, 1951. Photograph by Nina Leen. © Life archives.
- Image 3 -First US Debutante Ball held at Versailles Palace, debutantes in elegant ball gowns. July 1958. Photograph by Loomis Dean. © Life archives.
- Image 4 -Dancer Gypsy Rose Lee (R) designing costume for girls to wear during her performance. Taken in Memphis, TN, US, 1954 Photograph by George Skadding. © Life archives.

This article was originally published in "Fashion Colloquia – London, September, 2011".