

"MRS. ROSENTHAL wore one of the most noticeable gowns on the lawn. It was composed of exquisite white silk chiffon, with a tracery of delicate pink rosebuds, elaborately shirred and trimmed with Paris tinted insertion. A knotted white chiffon sash and a dainty French sailor hat swathed with pink poppies and ribbon completed the costume, which was admittedly a triumph of the dressmaker's art." Ellerslie racecourse is not likely to see again a froufrou of such elegance as the *New Zealand Graphic* of 1904 describes in four columns of pin-tuck detail. Now consider this: "Their decorative instinct is strongly developed. They wear a straight loose garment, sleeveless and reaching to the knees, ornamented with beads and dyestuffs in formalised patterns of extraordinary vividness and ingenuity. This garment is loosely confined round the hips with a girdle, a relic no doubt of the hip ring found among still more primitive tribes. Their head-dresses are of brightly-dyed cloth bound low round the brows to protect the entire head from evil spirits. They hang quantities of beads round their necks, metal bracelets round their arms, wrists and ankles, and paint and tattoo their faces and backs with raised patterns."

That was a Congo traveller's description of African women in 1905. What would the traveller (and the fashionable race-goers of Ellerslie) have thought if they could have seen into the future twenty years? But the fascination of fashion is the way it shocks, surprises and pricks our conceit in this way. Seemingly dependent on the whim of individuals like Poirer, Schiaparelli and Dior, the fashions of an age, being an extension of the self, mirror the social climate unusually exactly. What the sociologists of twenty years' time will make of our present fashionable combination of pared-away dresses with platter hats swathed in tulle and roses that Mrs. Rosenthal would have appreciated, is anybody's guess.

The astonishing thing about fashion since the turn of the century has been the rapidity and relative ease with which women have changed their very shape. An advertisement in the *Graphic* runs: "Bovo-Ferrum will bring out your beauty, fill in the hollows and round out the curves. It is a flesh and tissue-builder that will make any woman plump and rosy as she was meant to be." To achieve the fashionable S-bend Madam breathed in to asphyxiation point and donned "W.B. corsets—specially recommended by our leading physicians. They reduce the abdomen without pressure and give a beautiful incurve to the back."

About 1910, amplitude suddenly went out of fashion. Indeed, there is a good case for saying that the twenties really began a decade earlier. The silhouette straightened and slimmed. Under the influence of a wave of orientalism, hobble skirts split up the front to show a segment of ankle in what the wearers hoped was a Scheherazade effect. But World War One put an end to such exoticism. A munition factory or a hospital was no place in which to hobble. Skirts crept up to seven or eight inches from the ground, and the blouse and skirt, with jacket, became almost a uniform. Delicate materials were superseded by stout, braid-trimmed alpaca and worsteds, fragile shoes by boots. Democracy, the demand for sex equality, and war are a formidable combination of opponents to fashion, which de-

pends for its chic on class consciousness and exclusiveness.

After that war there was a brief return to femininity, exactly as after the Second World War. Skirts dropped to just above the ankle until about 1922, but the hats foreshadowed the awful triumph of the cloche. Quite suddenly, then, women became flat and shapeless, with formalist two-dimensional patterns projected on them as on a screen. This rejection of traditional feminine allure has been explained as in part due to women's reluctance to bear children after the slaughter of war. Flesh-coloured rayon stockings appeared beneath skirts which climbed so high they almost met the waistline coming down. The petticoat was ousted by shiny cami-knickers. The typical pose of the "flapper," head thrown back, body forward, hand on hip, was pretty well imposed by her outfit. She could peer out from under her cloche only in that position and a hand at the waist spoilt the sack-like line of her dress. What astonishes us now, looking at dresses of the twenties, is their general air of tawdriness. Exquisite beading and embroidery was executed on limp, characterless materials.

The thirties were bound to be a period of reaction, confused though they were by a premonition of approaching war. Skirts dropped almost to ground level, with a snake-hips effect and natural waist. Everyone tended to look like the bride's mother in clinging materials and wide picture hats. On holiday, the daring wore the new bell-bottomed beach pyjamas which led ultimately to the vogue for shorts and slacks, which is still with us. The most striking innovation of the thirties was the ugly, black evening gown, unheard of in fashion previously.

If the war had not intervened, conjectures James Laver, the fashion historian, tight-lacing and a return to Victoriana would have ensued. Instead, women made do with their old clothes or wore new ones whose virtue was their skimpiness. Heavily-padded shoulders gave women a box-like outline which contrasted oddly with their flowing hair, almost the only gesture they could make towards femininity.

After the war came the New Look, a fashion flattering mainly to the young, as the "flapper" look had been. Parliament appealed to women not to support it. They might have saved their breath. It represented the return to normality, and was right for that reason. Eventually, of course, it died of its own excesses. Since then, H, A and Empire lines have trodden on each other's heels, all tending towards a string-bean look under bonnets resembling buckets and beehives. Spring is indeed the silly season and fashion its maddest manifestation. Perhaps we should be thankful that it is so, for fashion can only flower in peace.

The Shape of Spring



As seen in the glass of fashion since the turn of the century—S-bend, hobble skirt, "flapper," New Look, and now The Streak—woman has assumed more shapes in 50 years than the creator of the Venus de Milo ever dreamed of