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The Outskirts of Fashion

"IT'S a funny thing," says Miss Blossom in Walter Brookes's article on page 4, "but I always like what's in fashion. I should hate to be one of those people who don't like what's in fashion, wouldn't you?" It is perhaps an occupational necessity for Miss Blossom to approve the gowns that are passing through her hands. If she had a mind of her own in these matters her situation would be difficult. The handmaidens of fashion must be true believers, accepting without question the decisions of the oracle. They are thus able to enjoy a flowing novelty, a perpetual rustle of spring, with no more than a faint suggestion of moth balls to disturb the perfume within their sanctuaries. Not for them are the agonies of creation, the strain and the doubt which must afflict such men of genius as Christian Dior and Norman Hartnell. If the great Dior, after long meditation, announces that the waistline must move down to the hips, the rightness of the decision bursts upon the gown shops like a revelation. It is possible that by some malevolence of heredity the young ladies in the shops are not themselves able to resemble the models who parade in photographs: their own hips, alas, may defeat the intention of M. Dior to convert their bodies into the stems of tulips. But they may still be fashionable in spirit; to handle the gowns is a pleasure on its own, and an unselfish joy may attend the simple rites of packing and despatch.

This is a world in which all men except designers must move and work under sufferance. There are some who say that fashionable women are only faintly concerned with male opinion: their happiness comes from the envy and silent fury of other women who feel themselves to be out-dressed. These may be exaggerated notions, put abroad with subversive intention. Yet it is a fact that much goes on, where clothes are concerned, which is quite beyond the understanding of men. Garments designed for women do not always reveal their attractions quickly; some of them have to be

seen frequently before they can be believed, and by the time men are beginning to see dimly that there may after all be some virtue in the latest "line" (simply because they are getting used to it), a new phenomenon swims before their startled eyes. There is apparently some faculty in women which allows them to see at a glance the possibilities of a new fashion. They are not dismayed (or seem not to be) by any conflict between design and nature. It may be supposed, for instance, that the "flattened long-bosom look" and the sinking waist announced a week or two ago from Paris would not always be feasible. Many nice women would be unable to follow the dictum that "the bosom first states its existence in afternoon clothes, when the 18th century look comes in." All this would be well enough if women retained slender figures, or had them to begin with. As things are, there is something almost insulting in the way that fashions are tied to notions of perpetual youth and slimmness.

Most women, however, remain calm among such distractions: they simply take what they think fit from the newest vogue, and leave the rest of it to people with different measurements. Much adaptation occurs while the ideas of designers are brought closer to practical needs. The "spindle" line which is now agitating the salons of Paris may be scarcely discernible when at last it reaches the streets of Wellington; and by then, no doubt, M. Dior will be at least two seasons away, wrestling with new creations. There is perhaps a little of Miss Blossom in most women, a sort of dream which does not interfere with the practical business of dressing within the limitations of figures, physical and monetary. And yet sometimes it is hard for dull-minded males to understand why, within those limitations, so much flitting among styles is needed before the inner tranquillity of the well-dressed woman can be reached. As Lady Astor once remarked, with admirable succinctness: "What would we say if men changed the length of their trousers every year?"

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 23, 1957.