

Fashion in the Fifties

‘It was around VE DAY that the old itch came back to me again. As the last guns rumbled and the last all-clear sounded, all the squalor and discomfort and roughness that had seemed fitting for so long began to feel old-fashioned. Instead of consenting willingly to bear them I wanted to fight them. I wanted to throw the dried eggs out of the window, burn my shabby curtains and wear a Paris hat again.’

Anne Scott-James, *In the Mink*

I don't want to get too hung up on fashion; the ethos of 'make do and mend' didn't die in 1945. In the years after the war, some people were so hard up for clothes they turned their blackout curtains into coats. But still, many of the women in this book were, thanks entirely to their own efforts, increasingly well off as the Fifties wore on. They could afford to shop, and they were interested in fashion: then, as now, clothes were an effective way of making a statement about their place in the world. And even had they been broke – as Patience Gray often was – they would still have rushed out to buy nylons and lipstick once they became available again, as women did all over Britain. Or they might have made things, as Alison Smithson liked to do (a built-in sewing machine was the sole retro reference point in the House of the Future she designed for the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1956). Sylvia Syms told me a wonderful story about how, in the early Fifties, she went to a party in a copy of a Dior dress she'd made herself – only to find Ava Gardner sitting there in the real thing. 'I told you

it would look better on a blonde,' Gardner said to Frank Sinatra on catching sight of her.

In any case, last time I looked, dreams were free. *Vogue*, then as now, wasn't a catalogue; it was a repository of fantasies and yearning, a hook on which to hang one's aspiration. High fashion filtered down, just as it does today, women adopting its latest dictates when and where and how they could: a peplum here, a new bag there. A lot was going on. There was Christian Dior, whose New Look made its debut on 12 February 1947 (nipped-in waists, padded hips, sloping shoulders, skirts crammed full-to-bursting with petticoats); there was Jacques Fath (his flying saucer buttons were everywhere); and there was Cristóbal Balenciaga (women loved his balloon jackets, which enveloped the upper body in a way that lengthened one's legs and emphasised one's face). In 1954 Coco Chanel, who regarded Dior's designs as an affront to liberated women, created her first Chanel suit (collarless tweed jacket with patch pockets, and a chain sewn into the hem of the skirt the better to perfect its line). As the decade wore on tunics and chemise-style dresses became more fashionable, popularised first by Balenciaga – he was always fiddling with waistlines – and then by Hubert de Givenchy, who launched his 'sack' silhouette in 1957. Corsets were on their way out. In London Hardy Amies, who had dressed Princess Elizabeth for her tour to Canada in 1950, had installed himself in Savile Row, where he was attending to the more practical needs of a certain kind of British female. 'A woman's day clothes must look equally good at Salisbury station as the Ritz bar,' he said. Tailoring was the thing. Hemlines were getting higher and so were heels. In 1958 Roger Vivier designed a heel reinforced with steel, and thus the stiletto was revived. Trousers, which so many women had worn during the war, were also becoming more popular. Their champions were Katharine Hepburn, who was reputed not to have a single skirt or dress of her own, and Lauren Bacall.

Technical innovations made life easier all round. Before the war nylons had all been 'fully fashioned', which is to say designed and manufactured individually for legs of all shapes and sizes; stockings did not stretch. In the years following the war, however, it was discovered that stretch could be added by crimping nylon under heat, an innovation that also led to the disappearance of the rear seam. By 1959 DuPont was ready to launch Lycra. Easy-care fabrics made life for housewives a good deal easier. Acrylic, a drip-dry substitute for wool, arrived in 1950. Polyester came on to the market in 1953. It meant, among other things, that pleats no longer had to be ironed in.

Actresses and models, as ever, were hugely influential. Women loved Audrey Hepburn's appropriation of Parisian-cum-Beatnik style in Stanley Donen's 1957 musical *Funny Face* (skinny black pants, turtleneck, cute headscarf); it trumped even the little black dress she had worn in Billy Wilder's *Sabrina* three years before. Grace Kelly's *peau de soie* and lace wedding dress, created for her by Helen Rose, an MGM Studios costume designer, was widely admired and much copied. In Britain the most well-known models were Barbara Goalen (so famous that when she married a Lloyds underwriter at Caxton Hall in 1954 she was mobbed by crowds of fans) and Fiona Campbell-Walter, a favourite of Cecil Beaton who could earn up to two thousand pounds a day.

Younger women, however, had different ideas about what they wanted to wear: this was, after all, the dawn of the teenager. Some took their cue from music (Teddy girls wore hobble skirts, flat shoes, cameo brooches and jackets with velvet collars, and styled their hair in ponytails), and others from the movies (Marlon Brando, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor all did their bit to make jeans popular). Rebellion was in the air. Another role model was Françoise Sagan, whose best-selling novel about a pleasure-seeking seventeen-year-old called Cécile, *Bonjour Tristesse*, came out in 1954, when she was still a teenager (it was made into

a film in 1958). Sagan – ‘a charming little monster’, as the novelist François Mauriac put it – had pixie hair and was photographed for the press in gingham shirts, Breton stripes and a polka-dot bathing suit.



Françoise Sagan: ‘A charming little monster’

Which brings me, finally, to the bikini. It was Louis Reard, a French automobile engineer, who invented the bikini in 1946 (he was running his mother’s shoe shop at the time). He had the idea when he saw women rolling up (or down) their swimming costumes the better to get a tan. He called his invention the bikini after Bikini Atoll, where the first nuclear bomb had just been tested. But it wasn’t until the Fifties that his design really took off: Brigitte Bardot posed in one during the Cannes Films Festival of 1953 and the world went mad for the idea. ‘A swoonsuit that exposed everything about a girl except her mother’s maiden

name,' as Diana Vreeland, the fashion editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, put it. Vreeland thought the bikini was well named. It was, she said, 'the most important thing since the atom bomb'.

For a colourful account of some aspects of the British fashion industry and of daily life on a glossy magazine in the late Forties and early Fifties, I recommend *In the Mink* (1952) by Anne Scott-James, who was the editor of the British edition of *Harper's Bazaar*. The book caused a mild stir on its publication, the critic Harold Hobson describing its references to sexual behaviour in the fashion world as 'shocking and disgraceful'. It seems tame now but, on the other hand, some things never change. Her account of the Paris collections – 'just when you felt you *must* faint, the show would start' – will seem uncannily familiar to anyone who has ever read a twenty-first-century newspaper report on the same subject. It's all here: the clichés, the tantrums, even the difficulty of writing a properly interesting beauty feature when 'this year's Pink Blush is really just last year's Old-fashioned Rose rechristened'.