

Establishing Standards of Beauty for The American Miss and Matron -



Strange Quirk of Psychology Plays Leading Part in Placing on Firm Foundation New Styles in Both Dress and Physical Contours

The flapper—a product of the World War—passed out of the picture several years ago.

Now another feminine type faces the same ruthless extinction. The string-bean figure is doomed.

And Miss and Mrs. America, Model of 1929, need no longer starve themselves to be in the mode.

Lucy Park, of the Fashion Coordination Bureau, who discusses underlying factors that influence the feminine choice of costumes.



A mannequin's dressing room backstage, just before the opening of one of the spring fashion shows in New York City.

HOW are standards of feminine beauty established in this country?

Just now we are hearing that the boyish figure is passé, that curves are coming back. The report comes as the decree of those final arbiters of women's styles, the great couturiers of New York and Paris. There is little doubt that the decree will be obeyed, but how is it that a small group of dress designers are able to alter with a word not only styles in dress but styles in physical contours?

For years, medical and dietetic authorities have been warning girls and women that self-starvation for the sake of a boyish figure was impairing their stamina and rendering them susceptible to a host of diseases, including the dreaded tuberculosis. The necessity of normal amounts of energizing foods such as the starches and sugar was repeatedly stressed. The feminine half of the population listened respectfully, perhaps sometimes resolved to reform, but in thousands and tens of thousands of cases that was all the effect the warnings had.

A Sharp Reversal

The majority went right on cutting down on potatoes, on sweets, on cereals, and on just the other foods they needed most to support the active life the modern woman leads. Now, at the behest of a small group whose members are more concerned with aesthetics than with health, these same girls and women are abandoning their pursuit of extreme slenderness, and the unwholesome dietary regimen that, in many instances erroneously, was supposed to contribute to the attainment of their objective.

From this it would be easy to conclude that the standards of feminine beauty are established by the couturiers, but this is by no means a complete answer to our question. They formulate the standards, but they do not establish them. That is left to another group. The names of those who compose it are not so well known. In most instances, their names are not known at all outside of their own profession, but upon them largely depends the acceptance of the standards, and that acceptance involves a queer quirk of psychology on the part of those for whom the standards are evolved.

The Big Parade

The scene is a Fashion Show in any large or medium-size city. From behind the drawn curtains the stage comes the sound of notes strung—

Girls and women who have been standing about in expectant groups, talking to each other or examining their programs, hurry to their seats, each eager to get as close as possible to the stage or the runway. The curtains part. A hush falls upon the assembly. The fashion parade, the great event of the show is about to begin.

As the mannequins appear, turning this way and that to exhibit the finery in which they are attired, the spectators crane forward. Each woman in the audience is imagining herself in the place of one or another of the mannequins who most closely resembles her own type. There are murmured "Oh's" and "Ah's" of admiration. There are whispers of criticism. All through the audience, women are making mental notes of the costumes in which they fancy they would appear to best advantage.

They may not know it, but the tenor of their mental notes is influenced as much by the mannequin herself as by the costume she wears. Lucy Park, style expert of the Fashion Coordination Bureau, New York City, is the authority for this statement, and Miss Park has a comprehensive background of knowledge and experience from which to speak. Her duties involve the selection and training of mannequins, the management of fashion shows in all parts of the country, and style consultations with manufacturers, retailers and buyers.

Psychology Enters In

"The effectiveness of the most lovely dress or wrap can either be heightened or marred by the mannequin," Miss Park says. "Her personality, her poise, her expression, her figure, and the way she carries herself must blend with the costume to form one harmonious whole. It is here that psychology enters in, to play a decisive part; to cooperate with the mannequin in establishing new modes of dress and even new modes in physical outlines."

"Because the spectator subconsciously puts herself in the mannequin's place, she sees herself creating the impression which the

mannequin makes upon her. If the total impression is a favorable one, she is practically certain to feel that, clad in the same costume, she would be equally attractive. So she decides that upon her next shopping excursion she will purchase that costume, or one as much like it as she can find, within reach of her purse.

"But the mannequin has been selected with due regard for the fact that she must be of the type which will set off to best advantage the costume she wears. Her curves or lack of them, the way her hair is done, her complexion or her make-up, have all been given careful consideration. She is fitted to the costume as much as the costume is fitted to her. If the purchaser is to look really well in the dress or wrap, she also must be fitted to them. With the styles now demanding curves, the mannequin will surely have them, and the purchaser must either possess them or acquire them.

"In other words, the purchaser must make herself look as much like the mannequin as possible, and the pressure in this direction is a tremendously powerful one. The mannequins who appear in the fashion shows, or others of their profession, serve as living models in the exclusive shops along Fifth Avenue and in the great department stores. They pose for magazine covers, for fashion illustrations, and for advertisements. They pose also, for the wax and papier mache figures upon which costumes are displayed in shop windows. In a score of different directions, through millions upon millions of media, they exert their subtle influence, establishing the standard of feminine beauty which the couturiers have decided upon as the current vogue."

Social Register Recruits

The part played by the mannequin, together with the increasing attention which women are giving to dress as an accompaniment to the growth of culture and sophistication in American life, have both raised the prestige of her profession and placed a heavy responsibility upon those charged with her selection and training. Girls whose names appear in the Social Register and on the membership lists of the Junior League are taking up the work with enthusiasm and finding it highly remunerative.

There are, according to Miss Park, three types of mannequins in more or less constant demand—the American, the Svelte, and the Ultra-sophisticated. The American type has a fresh, out-door look. Neither fat nor thin, nor exaggeratedly athletic in appearance, she must be able to wear both American and English sports clothes. Helen Willis is a good example. The Svelte type has the distinctly feminine curves and swaying lines demanded by the more formal day-time clothes. The Ultra-sophisticated type is tall, and also possesses the feminine curves which are required for the costumes she usually wears—formal afternoon attire, evening dresses and negligees.

Difficulties of Selection

A fairly constant supply of smart looking mannequins is usually available in New York and the other larger American cities, but during the busiest seasons of the year those charged with their selection for the various shows and exhibits are sometimes hard put to it to find a sufficient number of girls who exactly fit their exacting requirements. Within recent years, the Parisian couturiers have been asking for American girls to display the sports clothes designed to attract American visitors in France.

Not long ago Miss Park was given the task of organizing a group of girls to be taken to France for this purpose. The girls must be typically American. That was the chief requirement. In the largest American city, and one noted for its beautiful women, such a requirement would

not seem to present many difficulties. Miss Park went over her list of available mannequins and finally cut it down to one hundred and twenty-five. Out of that one hundred and twenty-five she had a hard time obtaining the ten she required. Part of her difficulty was due to the fact that some of the



Madeleine Vionnet, the famous French dress designer who creates all of her costumes on a doll-like model.

Photograph by Bonney Paul Polret, dean of Parisian couturiers, at the opening of a Paris fashion show.

girls were unwilling or unable to leave the country, but the greater part of it was due to the scarcity of typical examples of American girlhood who also possessed the other necessary qualifications.

Some of the Qualifications

The qualifications differ with the kind of show that is being arranged, the size of the room in which it is to be staged, and with the costumes or parts of costumes that are to be displayed. Large girls are required for the big shows, for the small, petite type would be lost in the huge ball rooms in which they are customarily held. Bobbed hair is still smart for the younger and less sophisticated types, but girls of practically all ages and types appear to better advantage with long hair when in evening gowns. The ideal mannequin, therefore, should have bobbed hair that can be arranged to look as though it were long. Red-headed girls usually make attractive mannequins but they can only wear certain colors. Ash-blondes are in great demand for evening gowns in ivory shades and other shades that are just off white.

The girl who decides to be a mannequin usually does so in response to a "Help Wanted" advertisement inserted in the newspaper by one of the smaller shops. There she acquires the experience and training which are essential for success in her profession. Her later career, if she is a success, will probably take her into the larger exclusive shops, into the department stores and out

on the road to visit one after another the big shows both in this country and abroad.

"A few girls are natural, born mannequins," Miss Park says, "but these are extremely rare. The girl who would reach the top of her profession must possess some dramatic instinct and she must have a genuine feeling for clothes. These traits are probably inborn in the majority of instances, but the other essentials—a graceful walk, poise and an expression that is neither too stiff nor an artificial smirk—must usually be cultivated. The mannequin must be something that belongs neither to the stage nor everyday life, but that is peculiar to her own profession."

Changing Conditions

"In the past the period of the mannequin's greatest popularity has been comparatively short, for from six to eight years, but that period is steadily lengthening. Youthfulness and the boyish figure are ceasing to be of predominant importance. In Paris it is an axiom that a woman cannot be well dressed until she reaches the age of thirty-five or forty, for it is not until then that her figure and personality reach maturity. Besides, the older woman usually has more money to spend on her attire, and American women in their late thirties and early forties are paying increasing attention to the selection of their clothes."

"All of this is leading to a growing demand for mannequins with the larger and more mature figure. The dying craze for extreme slenderness, both among girls and older women, will have another fortunate effect, alike upon the mannequin and the countless girls and women who consciously or unconsciously mold themselves upon her. No longer forced to count every calory, with the constant fear that an increase of a few pounds in weight may mean a decrease in her earning power, she will be able to satisfy her normal appetite with the foods she needs to supply her with the energy and stamina demanded by her work. The same freedom to permit the development of normal curves will inevitably be indulged in by that half of the population for whom she sets the current standard of beauty."

While the mannequin's career is by no means a sinecure, it is, according to Miss Park, one in which a girl can look forward to financial independence and even to modest wealth. During the first few years she will probably receive from eighteen to thirty-five dollars a week. As she gradually acquires training and experience her remuneration grows. Incomes of between five and six thousand dollars a year are common. One well-known mannequin averages well over ten thousand a year, and she is in such demand that her services must be engaged far ahead of time through her secretary.