

WRITING ABOUT FASHIONS

Sandra Stansbery Buckland

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Abstract

The twentieth century brought many innovations in the fashion world, and those innovations prompted many people to report on new fashions, to analyze them, and even to criticize them. Fashion was, and is, news. Fashion is both an artistic expression and a vital industry that makes significant contributions to a nation's economy. And fashion is a sartorial mirror that reflects a culture's values, beliefs, politics, and technologies. Fashion, then, can also be controversial. With so many facets to its nature, fashion provided an almost endless variety of topics for twentieth-century writers. Some writers loved it and some writers hated it, but fashion was the topic of many written conversations. At the beginning of the century, there were several women's general interest magazines and a few fledgling fashion magazines, but by the end of the century, fashion found its way into a wide array of newspapers, magazines, academic journals, monographs, and history books. Through these media, writers left us a rich legacy of published works about fashion.

Fin de Siècle

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The twentieth century inherited from its predecessor a rapidly evolving world of fashion. Paris dominated the scene, and most consumers viewed that city as the source of all true fashion inspirations. There, couturiers presented their seasonal creations to an elite clientele. Ladies of means traveled to France and spent weeks or even months selecting their wardrobes and enduring numerous fittings. Finally, with their precious cargo carefully packed, they sailed home for another social season. Paris dictated the direction of fashion, but in the United States and Canada, very few women had the financial means to afford Paris couture. Yet at the end of the nineteenth century, many women knew about the latest Paris trends. They owed their fashion education to the diligent reporting of the ladies' fashion magazines, to the fashion editorials in their newspapers, and to the copywriters who wrote for fashion advertisers.

Paris loved all the publicity about its fashions, and it courted the fashion press. The organizing body for the couture industry was the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture Parisienne*. This organization coordinated all the Paris couture shows so that retailers, manufacturers, and the press could see all the openings. The *Chambre Syndicale* also provided press releases about the various couture houses. These press releases afforded the women's magazines, and even some smaller hometown newspapers, official, firsthand reports of the glamorous world of Paris haute couture. Women who could not afford to travel to Paris could still read about the latest fashions and adapt them for their own wardrobes.

During the nineteenth century, many fashion consumers still made their own dresses, or they employed the services of a local dressmaker. There was, however, a new fashion option: *ready-to-wear*, which referred to apparel made to standard sizes by a manufacturer and sold in retail stores or catalogs. This new technology saw its birth in the Civil War when the United States needed to provide uniforms rapidly for the Union army. The manufacturers that developed these technologies during the war continued their efforts afterward by producing ready-to-wear clothing for men. Soon, these manufacturers turned their attentions to the women's market.

Democratization of Fashion

The ready-to-wear industry first produced basic, staple items for women rather than more high-fashion garments. They began with simple capes, skirts, and petticoats. With new technologies and an influx of skilled immigrant workers from Europe, the ready-to-wear industry became a growing force in the fashion world by the end of the nineteenth century. This new industry fueled another major change in the fashion world—the democratization of fashion.

Democratization simply meant that at the beginning of the twentieth century, fashion became available to a wider array of consumers. It was no longer just the purview of the wealthy. Manufactured fashions and a cheap source of labor meant that fashion was now affordable to nearly everyone who wanted it. And as women began more and more to work outside of the home, they now had their own incomes to spend on fashion. A new breed of retail emporiums eagerly enticed women with the splendor of their architecture and the promise of a pampered shopping experience, but some entrepreneurs thought that these new consumers needed guidance. As the fashion industry grew, the publishing industry saw new opportunities in the fashion world, and it quickly developed beautifully artistic magazines with the primary goal of reporting on fashion.

From Women's Magazines to Fashion Magazines

Women's general interest magazines were not new, but they originally offered a variety of topics, not just fashion. By the 1880s, women in both the United States and Canada could choose from a variety of consumer magazines including *Godey's Lady's Book*, *The Cosmopolitan* (later abbreviated to *Cosmopolitan*), *The Queen* (renamed *McCall's Magazine*), *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping*. There was tremendous pressure on the women of the era to create an artistic home in order to guarantee the success of their families, and these general interest magazines guided readers in this cause. The magazines offered some fashion information, but they also provided tips on cooking, gardening, and raising children.

Demorest's Family Magazine, December 1889, p. 124. Demorest's Magazine (previously called Mme. Demorest's Mirror of Fashions) brought the latest Paris fashion news to U.S. readers. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-115741.

Beyond the practical advice, these publications also provided a literary source. Each month readers could choose from poetry, short stories, and fictional serials, all with a moral undertone that reflected the culture's view of a proper lady. That proper lady, though, was also expected to dress according to the etiquette standards of the time. The correct Victorian lady followed strict guidelines that dictated the proper dress for day, for evening, for calling on friends, and for mourning. With so many rules, combined with the new opportunities in ready-to-wear, the market was ready for a new kind of publication.

In 1892, *Vogue* launched its first edition. *Vogue* targeted both women and men with the latest information on the New York social scene, including news of socialites, theater openings, and book reviews. By 1899, the magazine also offered its readers the opportunity to order paper patterns of the latest fashions. *Vogue* readers could either use the paper patterns to sew their own versions of the newest styles, or they could take the patterns to their favorite dressmaker for her interpretation. However the women used the patterns, this fashion medium allowed its readers to own their own paper copies of the latest fashions. *Vogue* eventually added a sister

publication devoted solely to patterns and personal sewing. *Vogue* was initially a weekly publication that used both pictures and prose to guide its readers to the new fashion trends. Fashion was becoming big business. A new, synergistic relationship between fashion and magazine publication was growing as well.

Fashion Advertising

Apparel manufacturers needed a means of marketing their products to the consuming public, and the public was eager for news of the latest trends from Paris. Publishers were delighted to have a new opportunity for readership, but they needed revenue from more than just subscribers. For this reason, a third industry was also growing—fashion advertising. Magazine and newspaper readers culled information from feature stories and editorials, but advertisements offered less objective persuasion as to the correct mode of dress. By definition, an advertisement is funded by an identifiable sponsor. Those sponsors included the manufacturers who produced the fashions and the retailers who carried those fashions in their stores. One might not ordinarily think of advertisements as a source of fashion writing. Fashion ads are often full of beautiful illustrations created by some of the world's top artists, but ads also carry very carefully crafted prose. Skilled advertisers know that the illustrations attract the reader's attention but the words do the persuading. Sometimes those words describe the product, and sometimes the text is aimed at the reader's attitudes, beliefs, and values. The advertising industry grew in size and developed new techniques throughout the twentieth century, and it also came under scrutiny.

In 1892, the *Daily Trade Record* was published for the first time; it was distributed at the Chicago World's Fair (also known as the Columbian Exposition) in 1893. This medium was unique for two reasons. First, it focused on men's fashions, and second, it was a trade publication. A trade publication targets subscribers who work in a particular industry. The *Daily Trade Record* was later renamed the *Daily News Record (DNR)*. *DNR* was originally published daily in a newspaper format, but by the end of the twentieth century, it moved to a glossy paper format with only weekly publications.

DNR's success spawned a sister publication, *Women's Wear Daily (WWD)*, which first appeared in 1910 with a focus on the women's apparel market. It, too, took the form of a daily newspaper with insider information for those working in the trade. *WWD* became known as the bible of the fashion industry and in the early twenty-first century, it is still in print. Each day the paper highlights a different segment of the industry, including subjects such as textiles, cosmetics, sportswear, trade, retailing, employment opportunities, and couture. The paper also covers important issues that impact the fashion industry, including trade regulations, legislation, and business activities. *WWD* is an insider's must-read, but it is seldom available on the newsstand, and subscription rates effectively price the average consumer out of its readership.

At the fin de siècle, or end of the nineteenth century, the fashion world was ready to move into a new era of influence and business. The consuming public was interested in this growing enterprise, and publishers and advertisers were eager to report on every nuance of its activities. From the wonders of Paris haute couture to the ready-to-wear offerings at the local retailer, writers had a rich subject to explore and a reading public hungry for news.

Cover from the U.S.-based McCall's Magazine, 1910. Courtesy of Sandra Buckland.

The First Rumbblings of Unrest

The differences between the two branches of the fashion industry became more pronounced during the twentieth century, and the fashion press grew in both size and influence. As the fashion press expanded its voice, it also flexed its editorial muscles. Editors of major fashion publications, such as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and the *New York Times*, became celebrities and *gatekeepers*, that is, people who edit news of the fashion world for the consuming public. A gatekeeper decides which collections will get the most coverage, which manufacturers or designers will get editorial approval, which designers will be criticized, and which collections will

be ignored. Therefore, the fashion press, and particularly the powerful editors, helped to shape the direction of fashion. Consumers viewed the fashion press as an authority on all the nuances of fashionable dress. Initially, twentieth-century consumers followed the directives of the fashion press, but by the end of the century, they had discovered their own power. They became much more discriminating in the advice that they accepted and the advice that they rejected.

The fashion press and the Paris haute couture industry enjoyed a mutual love affair; the press loved Paris couture, and the Chambre Syndicale courted the U.S. press. Until midcentury, Canada lacked its own fashion magazines, so its consumers read U.S. publications or their local newspapers. Paris loved the publicity, but it also carefully controlled the press.

Paris presented its new designs at private shows held in individual couture houses. The designers welcomed stories about their collections, so they provided prewritten press releases. No one, however, was allowed to sketch during a show. U.S. designers Claire McCardell and [Elizabeth Hawes](#) began their careers as undercover sketchers. They would attend couture openings and then return to their hotel rooms, quickly sketching everything that they could remember. When the press began using photography, the Chambre Syndicale stipulated that no photographs could be printed for thirty days after an opening. This time lag gave Paris exclusivity before ready-to-wear manufacturers could produce copies called *knockoffs*. A publication that failed to comply with the thirty-day waiting period would be banned from future openings.

[Elizabeth Hawes](#), in her book *Fashion Is Spinach*, later wrote that the news from Paris was so important to the U.S. press that in 1926 there were “over a hundred American fashion reporters in Paris.” She continued, saying that there were “many” offices that wrote stories about Paris and sent them home for publication there. In [Hawes](#)’s opinion, *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* were the largest and were “recognized as the most important publicity agents the French [could] use.”

There were two reasons why Paris fashions dominated the U.S. press. The first reason is what [Hawes](#) called “the French legend.” She wrote, “all really beautiful clothes are designed in the houses of the French couturiers and all women want those clothes.” The second reason was owing to the differences between the couture and ready-to-wear industries. The Paris couture industry enjoyed design protection, but U.S. ready-to-wear manufacturers had no such safety net. Therefore, ready-to-wear manufacturers did not hold fashion openings for fear of copying. Retailers held fashion shows after the new designs had been shipped, but these lacked the glamour or the excitement of a Paris opening. Furthermore, many U.S. designs were adaptations of Paris couture designs because many manufacturers believed that U.S. consumers wanted to follow French fashion dictates. Paris fashions were exciting and glamorous, and U.S. newspapers and magazines were delighted to feed the French legend.

U.S. newspapers and magazines like to carry stories about famous people and celebrities, and the public loves to read about them. Readers devour all the intimate details of the lives of the rich and famous, and Paris couturiers were celebrities. Designers from the United States, on the other hand, were seldom, if ever, known to the average consumer. Prior to the 1930s, most garments bore the name of the retailer who sold them. Retailers saw themselves as fashion authorities. They believed that it was much more prestigious for a consumer to wear a garment with a label from Marshall Field’s or Sak’s Fifth Avenue or Bonwit Teller than to wear one from a manufacturer or from a domestic designer. Therefore, manufacturers struggled for name recognition. If they put their own labels in their garments, the stores simply removed the labels and replaced them with store labels. U.S. designers were even farther behind in name recognition.

The majority of U.S. designers worked anonymously for manufacturers. They were seldom allowed to produce original work; instead, they interpreted the latest Paris fashions for the U.S. and Canadian markets. These talented men and women received no recognition; their names were unknown to the public. They were not celebrities, so they were not newsworthy. Besides, they worked in the ready-to-wear industry. Most readers wore ready-to-wear clothes but dreamed of Paris couture. By the end of the century, however, world events would shift the focus of the media coverage.

World War I, the Depression, and World War II

World War I brought great hardship to France and, thus, to the Parisian fashion world. The nation suffered from shortages of labor and materials, and their exports to the United States were heavily taxed. North American women were also growing dissatisfied with the ornate nature of couture designs. Instead, even women who could afford couture began patronizing the more Americanized ready-to-wear fashions. *Vogue* continued to report on Paris openings, but fewer buyers attended.

In 1914, *Harper's Bazaar* sponsored a fashion show called "American Clothes for the American Woman." The event was held at the New York Roof Garden on Times Square, and it proved to be a success. In December 1914, *Vogue* reported on a subsequent show of U.S. designs. *Vogue* acknowledged some resemblance to Paris fashions but asked the question, "Is not Paris the master and New York the pupil who, now that the master is otherwise occupied, seeks to prove that by constant study and appreciation it, too, has learned something of the art of making clothes?" The two most influential fashion magazines on the continent were now endorsing U.S. design. They were not just reporting on the events; they were sponsoring and praising them. Their opinions mattered to North American readers, and one can assume that these readers surmised approval for their growing tastes for domestic designs.

Advertisement for McCallum silk hosiery, 1913. Beautiful illustrations were used in advertisements to attract the reader's attention. Courtesy New York Public Library.

The United States was also growing a new source of fashion leadership: the movies. Hollywood fed consumers' need for glamour and celebrities and beautiful garments with larger-than-life productions. U.S. designers such as Gilbert Adrian, Irene, Edith Head, and Howard Greer dressed their stars in all the glamour of a Paris opening. The newspapers and magazines contained stories of all the floodlit openings and celebrity gatherings. The movie studios soon realized that women went to the movies to see the new designs as much as to see the movie itself. The studios capitalized on this phenomenon by releasing ready-to-wear copies of celebrities' wardrobes simultaneously with the release of their movies. Women could wear copies of the same dress designed by Adrian for Joan Crawford. The women knew where to find the dresses because retailers were quick to advertise the garments in the local newspapers, and the women knew the names of the designers. Once again, the media reported the news and influenced, although perhaps inadvertently, the opinions of the consumers.

The 1930s found the world immersed in the Great Depression. Retailers struggled along with consumers, and Paris exports to North America dwindled. Lord & Taylor's vice president at the time, Dorothy Shaver, initiated a new campaign to stimulate lagging sales. She chose a group of designers, including [Elizabeth Hawes](#), and promoted them, by name, with their own labels in the garments. Shaver launched a major advertising campaign in the New York newspapers and magazines, a major and innovative step away from the tradition of promoting French designers. [Hawes](#) later wrote that Shaver's move prompted a "flood of articles on American Designers ... in newspapers and magazines all over the U.S.A." Shaver acknowledged Paris's leadership, but she also recognized that U.S. designers had something unique to offer to North American consumers. With Shaver's influence as a fashion industry leader and with the authority of major fashion publications, the public moved one step closer to a love affair with domestically designed ready-to-wear.

In the spring of 1940, Paris held its last couture opening until after World War II. [Carmel Snow](#), famous editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, embraced Paris as the heart of all fashion to such a degree that she literally risked her life to attend the shows. She later reported in her magazine that the city showed great courage, and that "Paris was still, and [would] always be, the center of fashion." [Snow](#) loved Paris and used her magazine to promote the couture that she adored. But when the Nazis occupied Paris in June 1940, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and every other publication in the free world found themselves without a story line.

The U.S. fashion industry quickly restructured its operations and used the fashion magazines and major newspapers as a means of telling the world that New York was now the fashion capital of the world. For the duration of the war, the United Kingdom, Canada, and South America looked to New York for fashion leadership. The New York industry, however, suffered some growing pains along the way. In 1940, New York's Mayor LaGuardia called a reverse

press conference of all the major fashion writers in the city. He wanted to know what was happening in this most important industry. LaGuardia recognized the power of the press to discover, report, and influence its readers.

The fashion magazines and major newspapers were quick to support New York. However, this support required some operational changes. For example, the *New York Times* carried the names of Paris designers in its editorials, but it would not carry the names of domestic designers or retailers. Under the leadership of its famous fashion editor Virginia Pope, the paper quickly changed its editorial policies and soon featured numerous stories about U.S. designers. Throughout the war years, New York, and the nation, worked to turn U.S. designers into celebrities and household names around the world. *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* ran numerous articles about the new American style, but one must also recognize that this coverage was partly out of necessity. After all, there was little news from Paris.

The liberation of France had all the fashion magazines scrambling to be the first to report on Paris couture. Virginia Pope steadfastly reported her allegiance to U.S. design, but other fashion editors were quick to renew their love of Paris. At war's end, the fashion press, the U.S. fashion industry, and the French fashion industry reached an understanding. New York served the ready-to-wear market, and Paris served those few who could afford couture. U.S. designers had gained some recognition, but they were not yet seen as equal with French designers. U.S. designer [Bill Blass](#) recalled that upon his discharge from the army after the war, he went to the home of a manufacturer to interview for a design position. He wrote that he did not expect respect for himself, but he thought that at least his army uniform would garner a degree of respect. He was asked to wait in the butler's pantry. Clearly, ready-to-wear designers were not yet celebrities.

Ready-to-Wear Captures the Spotlight

[Bill Blass](#) wrote about going to Paris openings in the 1950s and 1960s, when *Vogue's* editor, Diana Vreeland, and *Harper's Bazaar's* Carmel Snow sat down front at the shows in hats and gloves along with the rest of the fashion press. [Blass](#) reminisced that it was not until 1968 and Balenciaga's closing that they all realized that they "were witnessing the end of the world." Gradually, over the course of the twentieth century, Paris had been losing its grip on the reins of the fashion world. Paris still offered glamour and luxury, but the culture had changed. Women who could afford couture either did not have the time or lacked the desire to participate in the couture process. In response, Paris made a radical shift and began offering its own ready-to-wear. Middle-class consumers also grew very independent. The youth rebelled against any authority, including fashion. Instead, radical British youth developed their own styles, and North American consumers followed.

Instead of dictating style, Paris reflected the British invasion from Carnaby Street. Street fashion took a leading role through designer Mary Quant's miniskirts and high-fashion model Twiggy's boyish looks. Ready-to-wear dominated fashion, and its designers finally reached celebrity status. [Bill Blass](#) called the 1960s "the great American decade," but he did not think this would have happened without the leadership of three people who published fashion news: John Fairchild, editor of *Women's Wear Daily*; Diana Vreeland; and Eugenia Sheppard, writer for the *Herald Tribune*. Fairchild took the ready-to-wear designers from their places of anonymity and instead treated them "like stars." [Grace Mirabella](#), who became *Vogue's* editor after Vreeland, took a different view of the 1960s and 1970s.

Vogue magazine editor-in-chief Edna Woolman Chase (center) talking with her editors about the Paris fashion shows, New York, 1937. Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

[Mirabella](#) watched the designers get rich and too important to talk to fashion editors. From her perspective, the fashion industry became more about gossip and intrigue than good design, and she regretted the lost working relationship between designers and the press. She saw fashion openings as spectacles that forebode the end of true fashion.

The prosperity of the time spread to Canada, which in 1979 published its first fashion magazine, called *Flare*. Canada began to nurture its own fashion designers, such as Alfred Sung, Hilary Radley, and Parachute, and to export their creations to the United States. The glitz of the fashion world also spawned a new venue for writers: fashion television. Fashion had truly come into the venue of the average consumer.

By the end of the twentieth century, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *WWD* still held leadership positions in fashion publishing. They were joined, though, by a host of newcomers, including *Elle*, *In Style*, *W*, and offspring geared to a specific market, such as *Teen Vogue*. The democratization of fashion was complete. Fashion magazines included photographs of celebrities in combinations of couture, ready-to-wear, and vintage garments, and ready-to-wear designers worked at both the high-fashion and budget levels. The rules of fashion were gone. Some believed that fashion, itself, was gone. Just as it was at the beginning of the century, fashion had its devotees and its critics, but it would always have the fashion press ready to report and influence fashion consumers.

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