

Bows, Bustles, and Bicycles

By Stephanie

During the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901), many lives of upper-class women living in England were transformed. Throughout her monarchy, the growth of industries exploded and products were more readily available. One area of life that changed greatly during this age was fashion. Throughout the Victorian era, the range of materials, the variety of decorations, and the assortment of colors on women's dresses increased exponentially due to developments in textile business that came from new machinery in the Industrial Revolution. Many dresses were made of silk, cotton, woolen, taffeta (a crisp, light fabric), satin (firm cotton), or muslin (Victorian Web). As Jennifer Ruby states, styles slowly became more and more intricate using materials such as "Macclesfield silk, lightweight wools such as cashmere, fine linen from Ireland and printed cottons" (5). Dressmakers began using specialist wool yarns and fine silks which were imported from France and the Far East. Sometimes originating in England, but oftentimes in France and Belgium, lace was a popular decoration. It was during the reign of this beloved queen that shops began springing up in cities, selling lace, ribbons, and satins. The new railroad lines brought goods to stores and more and more women could afford decorations now. (Ruby 5) Additionally, patterns began to be sold to homes and the Victorian Age saw an increase in magazines with new styles from Paris, Vienna, London, and New York (Victorian Web). Eighteen-forty brought the invention of the time-saving sewing machine. Consequently, dressmaking became more convenient and the ornamental decoration of dresses increased.

Interestingly, changes in society were often synonymous changes in fashion and this is especially true of the Victorian period. The driving influence in the changes in the Victorian

Age was desire. In 1837, a young girl inherited the throne and upper-class Victorian women began desiring to dress like her.. Introduced in 1840, the sewing machine made dressmaking much easier and wives and daughters yearned to use their clothing to flaunt their great wealth. However, a longing to participate in new-fangled sports soon took over the fashion world. The Victorian Age drew to a close with women craving for social emancipation and the clothing trends that reflected it.

Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837. Wanting to connect with the people, she became very popular and commoners began to copy her out of adoration. This petite queen dressed modestly and started the style of the white wedding dress.

Because their beloved queen was small, the women of England desired to also look petite. Consequently, dresses featured small waists and fitted sleeves, giving women a very dainty and feminine appearance. Petticoats and corsets, which are made of baleen from the upper jaws of a whale, made a woman's body smaller. Strangely, corsets were believed to be medically advantageous and a fitted corset depicted moral character. However, corsets were very uncomfortable and restricted movement. As Peter Chrisp states in his *Victorian Age*, "According to *The Handbook of the Toilet*, published in 184a, 'The gait of an English-woman is generally stiff and awkward, there being no bend or elasticity of the body.'" (Chrisp 8) Unfortunately, tight lacing of the corset often led to fainting fits and women kept bottles on a chain about their neck with smelling salts. In addition, women wore flat shoes or slippers (white to balls) to look small (Ruby 11). Many aspects of clothing in that time mirrored the diminutive monarch

Also, Queen Victoria dressed quite modestly, a trait which seems to be reflected in the fashions of the mid-century. During the daytime, the entire body was covered. Women's

fashion transformed from the loose, high-waisted, low-necked dresses of the Regency period to fitted, low-waisted, high-necked dresses of the Victorian period. Worn over long, white, detachable undersleeves, oversleeves were very open, (Victorian Web). When a woman walked outside, she wore a plain dress that covered her shoulders and arms, in order to not draw attention to herself. Only in the evening were the shoulders revealed, but sleeveless dresses usually included a large collar that covered the arms (Victorian Web). Wide hats shrank to narrow bonnets. Because jewelry was thought to be crude and ostentatious, only bracelets and a chain for smelling salts were worn. Overall, women were encouraged to dress quite conservatively.

Not only were they modest in dress, women of the 30s and 40s were also fairly conservative in cosmetics. As Bridges states in her online article, Queen Victoria “declared that wearing makeup was vulgar, and should be reserved only for actors” (Petticoats). Instead of lipstick, women bit their lips to add color (Mitchell 140). Lotions and lip balms were used, as well as face powders to keep from getting a shiny face. Strangely, the goal was a curious paleness of the face, as women were supposed to look weak and sickly (Chrisp 9). Vinegar was also used to encourage fair skin (Chrisp 9). Chemicals used were often hazardous (Mitchell 140). This is just one more reason why women were modest when it came to the use of cosmetics

Even the hairstyles were not very extravagant. In the 1830s-1850s, hair (Queen Victoria’s and everyone else’s) was kept long except for during times of disease-. Women used a center part with flat hair on top of the head, pinned up behind. In the 30s and 40s, women maintained a knot, high, on the back of their head. Popular in the 30’s, ringlets with loops behind the ears were worn. At the beginning of this decade, women wore caps during the

daytime and added flowers and ribbons to their caps in the evening. However, young women gradually stopped wearing caps and their mothers soon followed. Overall, there was nothing gaudy about the neck up on women of that time.

In February of 1840, the beloved queen was married in a modest, white, satin dress. She wore a veil decorated with orange blossoms (Chrisp 31). Immediately, her quickly became the fad for wedding attire. After Queen Victoria's wedding, every wedding dress was white with loads of trimmings and most brides wore orange blossoms. Worn over the typical crinoline, bustle, or pad, with petticoats underneath, wedding dresses were featured very full material at the back. It was also important that the bride brought a beautiful trousseau with her into her new husband's home. To sum up, the wedding outfit was just one more trend by which the Victorian women showed their adoration for their young queen.

The Victorians' beloved monarch was not the only thing dictating fashion. In the 50's and 60's especially, they were overcome by an intense desire to flaunt wealth. Fashion was important to the Victorian Era because it was the icon of a social status. Because it was so expensive to follow the many details and intricate rules of fashion, by doing so, a woman of status could display her family's prosperity. Stated by Roberts of Clothing and Fashion, "In becoming an expensive and accomplished decorative object, she functions as an advertisement for her husband's (or father's or lover's) economic potency and privileged position." (as qtd. in *Victorian England* 71) Everyone comprehended the language of fashion and what it told of a person (Chrisp 5).

The typical dress of this era consisted of a tight-fitting, jacket-like bodice, shaped to the waist. Revealing a need to have a servant help with dressing, tight clothes (in the bodice and sleeves) were especially popular (Mitchell 139). Fitted sleeves also showed that it was

impossible for the wearer to do any work (Swisher 71). Flaring out at the waist, the jacket featured two flaps lined in lace. Lined with lace, the bodice was open at the top. Lace and ruffles were also used to decorate the sleeves. Desiring to show their wealth, wealthy women maintained an image of waste (Swisher 71). As much fabric and trimmings as possible were used to flaunt wealth. A full skirt was popular with numbers of petticoats. Featuring an eighteen foot circumference, some skirts made it impossible for two ladies to enter a room or sit down on a sofa at the same time. Ball dresses were very elaborate. Typically, they featured three layers of different colors and were decorated with ribbons, ruffles, and flowers. (Ruby 27) Invented in England in 1856, new dyes made multi-colored dresses possible. These aniline dyes brought gaudy colors to previously plain dresses. Lavish and complex, outfits reflected a desire to flaunt wealth in that period.

In addition to dresses, undergarments were also very intricate. First, a chemise and drawers were worn underneath. Stays made of whalebone were worn over the chemise to make the waist tiny, while a camisole was worn over the stays to protect the dress from the whalebone. Typically, about six petticoats were worn over the drawers to help display the beauty of the skirt. (Ruby 11) However, the number of petticoats needed was done away with in the mid-1850s when the crinoline was invented. Forming a cage about the wearer's legs, it was made of steel hoops. The crinoline was another way to show off wealth, as it had to be covered with dozens of yards of fabric, which was very costly (Swisher 71). Instead of full coats, this new invention required that capes and shawls be worn, or coats fitted at the waist and allowed to flow loosely over the skirt (Ruby 25). Overall, the crinoline became extremely popular for a time because it did not require as many petticoats to keep the skirt full and a shorter corset could be worn with it than had previously been worn. The inflatable crinoline was also invented, consisting of

indiarubber tubes which could be inflated to any size, instead of hoops (Ruby 11). However, it was deemed as a failure because a few women experienced punctures (Ruby 11). Furthermore, the steel crinoline itself was not in fashion for very long, as it was unrealistic, awkward, and immodest (wind could cause the skirts to sway, revealing the ankle). With the 1860s came a skirt with a flattened front, widening at the back (Victorian Web). This form was maintained with a “crinolette”- a half crinoline (Chrisp, 15). Overall, women were more than happy to throw their money into the latest fad.

Not only were clothes very intricate, but accessories could also be complex and expensive. The crinoline called for stylish boots, as shoes could now be seen when the skirt tips slightly (Chrisp 15). Indoors, women continued to wear caps (Ruby 11). Lined with white satin and trimmed with small roses, bonnets with an open shape were worn outside. A shawl made out of cashmere wool was also stylish (Ruby 11). When outdoors, women carried parasols to protect their face from the sun, since a tan was unbecoming and unfortunate. However, the parasols had to be small and collapsible in order to be taken into a carriage. Obviously, one can only imagine the amount of money women spent on accessories in those days.

In 1861, a revolution in fashion came when Prince Albert passed away. The wealthy, royal family dressed in black clothes for mourning. Out of this came several “social” rules on what to wear while in mourning. Once again, money was poured into staying current with the dictates of fashion. The length of the period of mourning depended on the relationship with the deceased one. While widows wore mourning dress for two and a half years, mothers of children whose parents-in-law died only had to wear mourning clothes for six weeks. In the “first period” of mourning, widows wore black, silk dresses. Outside, they covered their faces with a black veil. After a year and a day, they entered into the second period, in which they could wear their

veil back. (Chrisp 32) Nine months later, they did not wear any crepe, but retained the black silk. The last period, or “half mourning” lasted six months in which the widow could add soft colors. At weddings, widows always wore half mourning, in order to not add gloom to the day. Abiding by mourning rules correctly was very expensive, as mourning fashions were constantly transforming. In addition, widows could not keep their mourning clothes because many thought it unlucky to keep crepe in the house. (Chrisp 33) Overall, staying current with the unspoken fashion rules was very time-consuming and expensive. However, women loved to indulge themselves in this since it showed their enormous wealth.

In the 70’s and 80’s, looking like Queen Victoria was no longer trendy and the desire to wear intricate and expensive costumes was taken over by a longing to participate in many activities. With the 70’s came sports. As women developed more of a mental independence, they began participating in these sports with the men. Dropping their crinolines, they donned the newly invented bustle- a cotton pad worn in the back, under the skirt. The bustle still retained a very full skirt in the back, but allowed more movement than the cage-like crinoline.

Upper-class women filled their summers with riding, yachting, tennis, archery, swimming, croquet, walking, and ice-skating in the winter. In addition, they spent many days at the seashore and in the country. Consequently, all of these activities required very different costumes. Croquet was the most decent sport of all, as it could still be played in a tight corset. However, women gradually traded their extremely modest outfits for more “indecent” ones as they participated in more and more sports. Women played tennis in blouses, short skirts (ending at their ankles), aprons, caps, ties, and gloves. As swimming became more popular, immodesty did as well. Consisting of basically a chemise and drawers, the sleeveless bathing suit became typical. Women also wore caps covered in frills and insets with embroidery. Bringing on a more

masculine look, bicycles caused women to trade their skirts for breeches, or knickerbockers. These were worn over very colorful, striped stockings. Lastly, a collared blouse, tie, and hat completed the unladylike outfit. As women desired more and more to take part in activities that were previously restricted to men, their clothing reflected their desire for freedom.

Not only did they want physical freedom, they also desired social emancipation. Women began craving the same freedom that men had- the freedom to work, support themselves- really, the freedom to do whatever they wanted. As women started to taste social emancipation, they gradually began to dress in more masculine fashions. First of all, bustles and corsets were done away with. Then, the “tailor-made” outfit was invented. Consisting of a blouse, tie, jacket, and skirt, this outfit could be purchased in a store and worn for a very business-like look. Requiring several yards of fabric, the leg-of-mutton sleeves gave women a more masculine look than the petite, feminine look of tight sleeves. Furthermore, bloomers (baggy knickerbockers) were more accepted now and many women wear these under a loose tunic that reached only to the knee. Overall, fashion began to lose its dainty, feminine appearance as more and more women accepted the masculine look of suits and bloomers.

As soon as Queen Victoria came to the throne, upper-class women of England began dressing like her. Next, a desire to flaunt wealth became very apparent as women used yards upon yards of fabric and trimming to display their prosperity. Lavish styles were forgotten, however, when sports became popular and ladies began to wear more practical clothing that allowed more freedom. In conclusion, the period ended with women wearing more masculine outfits than ever before, a reflection on their desire for social emancipation. Overall, it is easy to see how trends in society affect styles. From bows, to bustles, to bicycles, many things changed the definition of fashion in Victorian England.

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