

## 'Esthetic of poverty' -- From Speakeasies to Fashion, the Dirty Thirties are Back

by Joanne Sasvari, Financial Post, Published: Saturday, May 09, 2009

A recession, yes. A global credit crunch, certainly. But a depression? Not by most expert accounts. Take a look in our closets, though, and our style choices are starting to tell a different story. For the past few seasons, fashion has been taking its cues from the 1930s, whether in last fall's Depression-inspired pieces at Gap, the ongoing craze for costume jewellery, the focus on a higher waistline, the passion for patterns, the return of the goddess gown to Hollywood red carpets --or, indeed, the sudden renaissance of Hollywood itself.

"In North America, Hollywood was one of the biggest influences in the '30s and there's quite a parallel in the boom in cinema going on now," says Alison Matthews David, instructor and historian in the fashion program at Toronto's Ryerson University. If this sounds as gloomy as your recent investment statements, it shouldn't. Contrary to popular belief, when it came to style, the Depression era was anything but depressing.

The 1930s were as much about rule-breaking designers -- avantgardiste Elsa Schiaparelli, Madeleine Vionnet of the bias-cut glamour gown, the legendary Coco Chanel--as they were about hand-me-downs and making do. "There were all these lovely things being made," says Katherine Cleaver, a semi-retired fashion professor and historian, also from Ryerson University, "but not very many people could afford it."

The most enduring of the lot was Chanel, known for her trim suits, little black dresses and clever knits, which could easily translate from the haute monde to everyone else. As Ms. David notes, "She took the esthetic of poverty and made it fashionable." It was "Mademoiselle" who transformed the jersey, which was basically used for fisherman's underwear, into a fashion fabric worn by the Parisiennes. And it was she who made costume jewelry chic, not scandalous, when she wore heaps of faux pieces mixed with genuine gems.

"Traditionally, fashion and status and wealth were totally linked. But in the '20s and '30s, it wasn't quite as clear cut because you could wear costume jewelry and get away with it," Ms. David says. Most importantly, a crystal brooch or fake pearl necklace could renew an outfit at a tiny cost -- just as sparkly accessories from vintage shops to H&M to designer labels like Fendi do today. It was the same with other accessories, too: Belts and berets, ornamental buttons, scarves, gloves, bags and silk corsages all added an instant and affordable update. "I think traditionally, historically, when clothing was more expensive, women did stay more in style by changing their accessories," Ms. David says.

The design esthetic of the 1930s didn't appear out of nowhere. Just as today's return to tailoring and serious colors follows the frivolity of the late 1990s and early 2000s, fashion then was a reaction to the decade before. The 1920s had seen every traditional fashion rule thrown out the window. Corsets were abandoned. Hemlines were raised. Arms were bared. Waistlines disappeared entirely.

Following the Crash of 1929, however, fashion made another significant shift. First, there was a return to a more modest and womanly form, which is echoed today by the return of the dress to fashion's centre stage. "In terms of silhouette, things like skirt lengths went down," Ms. Cleaver says. "Within a year or two of the Depression starting, skirts had gone from two inches below the knee to six inches above the floor. It's a completely different length."

There was also a return to tailoring, a huge change from the silk fringes and floating panels of the '20s. "It's almost like people create an armor against recession by buying tailored pieces," Ms. David says, noting that hard times typically see an increase in investment pieces like the well-made, architectural suits and jackets we've seen the past few seasons at Balenciaga.

Notably, the 1930s saw a practicality in day clothes across all classes of women for the first time ever. As Ms. Cleaver notes: "There were business-like suits which everyone needed because everyone had to go out to work." For those who didn't actually have to work, the new suiting was a sort of chic camouflage, because it was poor taste to flaunt one's wealth. In a similar vein, today's well-to-do are turning to what Barbara Atkin, Holt Renfrew's vice-president of fashion, calls "stealth wealth" labels like Akris, which are luxurious, but not obviously so.

Men, too, saw a loosening of class restrictions in clothing, thanks to the styles set by the dashing Prince of Wales, who became the Duke of Windsor when he abdicated the British throne in 1936 to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson. It was he who brought tweeds, knitwear and leisure jackets from the country to the city, and made getting dressed a matter of casual elegance for all future generations of men.

Adding to the ease of dressing were the new technologies, techniques and materials that allowed manufacturers to create clothing and accessories that only looked expensive. Fabrics like nylon and rayon -- the "artificial silk" that cost half the price of the real stuff -- allowed relatively poor women to add richness to their dress, especially in terms of color. It was an era of riotous patterns, of florals and geometrics in luscious colors, much like today's vibrant patterns at every price level, from Old Navy to Prada.

And where were the people of the 1930s wearing these practical suits and brave colors? When they weren't working or entertaining at home, they were going to the cinema. Today, movie ticket sales are up 14%, and films haven't been so popular since, well, the 1930s. Or, for more intoxicating fun, they might have gone to a speakeasy and enjoyed a new cocktail like the Sidecar. Coincidentally, trendy bartenders are bringing back the 1930s underground bars and the classic drinks they served at modern speakeasies like The Diamond in Vancouver, Dick's Place in London and Barchef in Toronto.

"Vancouver was home to some of the most famous speakeasies ever," says Mark Brand, one of the co-owners of The Diamond, expected to open this month. "It's just a real attempt to bring us back to a social pace. It's what a speakeasy does." But there is one huge difference between our recessionary era style now and the Great Depression: how we actually obtain our clothing.

Ms. Cleaver says people back then didn't have nearly as many clothes as we do today. "You'd be surprised by how little people had," she says. "I'd say most women would have three to five dresses, and then they might have, if they were a bit avant-garde, a pair of pants. They might have two pairs of shoes. By modern standards it's laughable. It's bizarre."

And women didn't head down to the mall to pick up a new frock. Instead, a woman either had her clothes made by a dressmaker or she would make her -- and her entire family's -- clothes herself. "Women all sewed," Ms. Cleaver says. "It would have been a real lifesaver in the '30s because you could make your own clothes."

By the 1960s and the rise of ready-to-wear, sewing was out of fashion and few women bothered to learn the skill. Although we've seen a renewed interest in knitting, sewing and quilting, it's unlikely that women will pick up needle and thread again en masse. Then again, who knows? Who could have predicted the return of trousers that reach the rib cage, the granny brooch, brandy cocktails or cinema-going? As Dior designer John Galliano said at the Paris couture shows earlier this year, "There's a credit crunch, not a creative crunch."