



“There is magic in the principles of ‘optical illusion’”: An historical analysis of advice to women on dressing for their body shape

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This pilot study was undertaken to gain a better historical understanding of women’s advice literature on dressing for different body shapes. Previous researchers examined advice given to women on how to dress for the work place, for different times of the day, and for specific occasions (Klepp, 2011). There has also been contemporary research on dressing for specific body types and proportions (Connell, L. J., et al., 2006). This study examined advice literature for women from textbooks and advice books on dressing for various body types through periods of different fashion silhouettes. The focus was especially on how advice related to figure variations and to use of illusion in dress. The following research questions were considered: How were body shapes and types described and were there variations based on the dominant silhouette of the period? What advice was prescribed to women based on their body type? How was the design element of line discussed in relationship to dressing for body type?

The time period examined was 1914 to 1961, a period in which the home economics movement was growing and flourishing, and at the same time publishing books on dress from a variety of perspectives. As young women in both high school and college took home economics courses, they often studied textbooks directed toward making them better clothing consumers. This included advice on how to dress. For this study we examined books, both etiquette and textbooks, with at least one section listed in the table of contents that focused on dressing for body types and/or mentioned line and illusion in dress. A total of 15 books were examined with three books per decade: 1910-1919, 1920-1929, 1930-1939, 1940-1949, and 1950-1961). Content analysis was chosen as the method to collect the advice data. The set of rules established for the current study consisted of predetermining themes (ideals, body shape, design details, and illusion), systematic analysis of materials, and coding data for frequently found trends within the established themes. Both text and images were analyzed for emergent themes.

The following themes emerged: definitions of the ideal body, advice on how to dress for shape, and the use of line to create illusion in dress. The first theme, definitions of the ideal body, pertains to socially defined ideals of beauty and specific definitions of ideal body proportions. The second theme, advice on how to dress for shape, included advice to determine the types of garments best suited for a woman based on her body type and the classification of body shapes. The final theme, using line to create illusion, focused on the importance, use, and perception of the ability of line to alter perception of body shape.

The theme of the ideal is best summed up by Whitney (1916, p 57), that “many women [are] measured by an ideal standard of beauty.” Society’s concept of what was beautiful constantly changed and, as Cocks (1927) pointed out “it is the mode of life which fashions the prevailing mold for the feminine figure” (p. 110). In the 1920s, Cocks (1927, p. 112) defined the

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ideal figure as “one that is ideally useful” as women became more active in participating in leisure sports and activities. Ryan & Phillips (1947, p. 111) stated that a “beautiful figure is not based on any definite height and weight, but rather on the maintaining of good proportion.” Measurements considered ideal were often given. Picken (1940) for example stated that the ideal standard figure was 5’7 with a “34-inch bust and 37-inch hip” (p.21).

Advice addressed the dos and don’ts of choosing appropriate clothing for body shape. In general, body shapes fell into three groups, average, tall, and stout or large, although there were other subdivisions. Advice included how to maintain correct proportions through dress (Farnsworth, 1915; Picken, 1940; Ryan & Phillips, 1947), how to hide flaws (Rittenhouse, 1924), and why some dress styles look better on certain figure types (Whitney, 1916). As Whitney (1916) explained, “a tall woman may wear a dress skirt that is very wide at the bottom, but the plump stout woman will be a ridiculous figure in the same enormous sweep of skirt (p. 58).

The last theme addressed the garment detail of line and how it was used to enhanced or camouflaged various figure “problems.” As Picken (1924) explained, “There is magic in the principles of “optical illusion.” But, she suggested it required both skill and a knowledge of every rule and “trick.” Within the theme, line was described most commonly as both the design lines of the garment, and surface stripes and patterns. There was attention to what stripes can and cannot do to create illusion, including the ubiquitous importance of narrow stripes for “stout” women, and Cocks’ (1927) assertion that “horizontal lines and broken lines should be the choice of the tall thin women.” Picken (1924) offered more detail on the complexities of line, including when lines of the garment intersect decorative detail. Green (1948) suggested that women with large hips wear four to six gored skirts “to make them less prominent” (p. 111).

With limited formal research on historic advice related to defining body types, proportion, design and illusion, this research helps to close a gap in the literature. This pilot study also provided a foundation and context for further exploration as history advice literature might inform current research on perceptions of proportion. This study will be expanded to include more in-depth research on how body shapes have been classified, on use of optical illusion, and on how the ready-to-wear market affected perceptions.

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