

Changing Ideals of American Beauty
In Perspective
1983

At the turn of the century the ideal American beauty was weighted down with as much as twenty-five pounds of clothing. Her waist was cinched with corsets that could pass for instruments of torture. She fainted frequently as a result. Her silhouette was distorted by an enormous bustle, and her movements were restricted lest she reveal a portion of her lower limbs. She was a safe object of men's attention, a fragile doll who required protection.

In the twenties it was fashionable to bare shocking amounts of skin, but the suggestiveness of women's dress was limited by the fact that women strove to look like adolescent boys with kewpie-doll faces. World War II occasioned a no-nonsense look--padded shoulders and severe suits--as well as a wholesome girl-next-door look. The fifties saw a return to extravagance in clothing as a reaction to wartime austerity. Marilyn Monroe's generous curves, over-padded by today's standards, were envied by many a flat-chested adolescent.

Notions of what was beautiful in the sixties and seventies were influenced by three major movements: the hippie movement with its emphasis on naturalness; the black movement, which reminded us that beauty comes in many colors; and the women's movement, which urged us to see beauty in many shapes, sizes, and ages.

While we seem to have gained some appreciation of differences in beauty, in typical American fashion we seem to have gone overboard once again. The new look seems to be a cross between Charles Atlas and Twiggy. Women are more weight-conscious than ever, and added to their desire to be thin is a desire to be strong. Both thinness and strength are, within reason, positive and healthful goals. In their need to be fashionable and healthy too many women are, in reality, sacrificing their health, both physical and emotional, by replacing practically all their body fat with muscle. Eating disorders and impaired reproductive function are too often the result. Our optimum weights are in part genetically determined just as our skin color and eye color are. We have learned to consider many different combinations of features beautiful. Why must we all be the same size and girth?