

A Dress of Freedom: How the Flapper Used Fashion to Take What She Needed and Do What She Wanted
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The 19th amendment was passed by Congress in 1919 and ratified in 1920, giving women the vote. During the war, women joined the work force to keep their country running, but now that the men were coming home, women had to find other ways to employ themselves and fill their time. Many women remained in the workforce, but others chose more entertaining ways to fill their time, going to jazz clubs and speakeasies which provided entertainment, social activity, and the thrill of breaking the constraints of prohibition (Presley 3). Fashion is the visual representation of social change, “particularly in regard to societal attitudes toward women (Presley 1). What a person wears and what parts of their body they accentuate helps us to understand what happened in a certain time period. Since women became more active in politics and work and developed a more varied social life, they needed fashion choices as kaleidoscopic as themselves. The 1920s flapper dress was versatile and appropriate for partying, having a night on the town, or going to work. They could be both feminine, fun, and professional simply by changing the type of fabric used or adding or removing accessories. Women’s fashion adapted to their new roles in the workplace and their social lives, giving rise to a New Woman, “The Flapper” The popularity of flapper dresses represented social change, women’s liberation, and professionalism. Seeing a flapper dress in a museum setting reminds viewers of the risks and new experiences women went through, opening the door to freedom for subsequent generations of women.

The 1920s dress in the Museum of Southern History at Houston Baptist University is made of purple chiffon with a gold embroidered and beaded center panel, collar, and sleeve cuffs. It has long sleeves and a purple and gold belt. The center panel, cuffs, and collar have gold

embroidered flowers with green, pink, and white beads that give the dress a pleasant pop of spring color to lighten the darker purple. It is tea length, and all of the edges are zigzagged, giving it a slightly unfinished look. The chiffon fabric has a slightly raised texture and the dress has a flowing bodice and a more weighted skirt. The simple design and textured fabric make for an elegant and classy dress that allows freedom of movement to walk around town, get in and out of cars, and dance.

The new fashions brought on a heightened sense of empowerment that came with a new freedom in behavior and self-expression that was seen in The Flapper. The Flapper came in two stages. In the first stage, the Flapper was an expression of identity in response to the repressive fashions and social expectations of the Victorian age and was exhibited and popularized by Zelda Fitzgerald. This version involved, “eschewing their Victorian parents’ staid marriages, imagining partnerships of passion, equality, shared dreams, mutual intellectual pursuit, and above all, fun” (Pike 131). The second stage of flapperdom brought on the “New Flappers” who endeavored “not to do what is pleasant and what they please, but simply to outdo the founders of the Honorable Order of Flappers: to outdo *everything*. Flapperdom has become a game; it is no longer a philosophy” (Fitzgerald 392).

One of the many contrasts between the Victorian and the Jazz Ages are the views towards working women. In the Victorian age, only women from poor or destitute families worked. A working woman was a sign of poverty and shame, especially if they worked in the factory. Thus, Victorian women were expected to be idle and marry well (Turning Points in World History 179). Victorian fashion was characterized by very full hoop skirts which were sometimes accompanied by a train (Ashelford 221-224). The Edwardian age was not much better as far as comfort goes when “ladies’ dresses attained new heights of sheer femininity.” Edwardian fashion

forced women's bodies into an "S" shape which was "achieved by means of an extra-long flat-fronted corset, boned so that it threw the hips back and the bust forward" (Ashelford 246).

Looking at the attitudes towards working women and styles from the Victorian and Edwardian ages, it is no wonder that women in the Jazz Age chose to exhibit their independence by working and liberating their bodies from the constricting and distorting fashion. Flapper dresses were shorter and less shapely and were often accompanied by a bobbed haircut. "Corsets, except for women who needed strict control, became progressively lighter and prettier, and as elastic materials improved they were made mostly of elastic and without the menacing bones of the past" (Presley 3). Flapper dresses were deemed less feminine and "dominated the decade in terms of redefining the possibilities for female identity and expression through dress" (Wilson 322). Women did what they wanted to do because they could, and they no longer had a reason not to. Zelda Fitzgerald says in "Eulogy on the Flapper,"

the Flapper awoke from her lethargy of sub-deb-ism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge, and went into the battle. She flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure; she covered her face with powder and paint because she didn't need it and she refused to be bored chiefly because she wasn't boring. She was conscious that the things she did were the things she had always wanted to do (391).

Fitzgerald's Flapper was about independence, fun, and personal choice. Fitzgerald distinguished "between her own ideal of the authentic flapper as an exemplar of moral courage and pioneer of social change – flapperdom as a philosophy – and later glamour-obsessed, image-driven imitators of the flapper lifestyle" (Pike 131). The Flapper broke away from the constraints that

society and fashion had kept her in for so long and chose to behave in a way that expressed who she was, rather than what she was expected to be.

As a museum piece, the dress exemplifies freedom, change, elegance, and liberation without over-indulgence. In my mind, I am visiting the roaring 20s and am walking the streets of London or New York while wearing this dress with a sense of freedom from which I gain my value as a woman. This dress is a reminder of the 1920s women and their new-found freedom who fought for social equality so we can choose what to do with our lives and enjoy the vast number of choices that are now open to us regarding our careers, dress, and lifestyle.

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