



Covering our naked bodies has been around since Eden. But walking out the door each day to face the 21st century, we're doing more than mere modesty requires. For many women privileged to have such choices, how we choose to present ourselves is, sweepingly, about identity.

So... what do smart women say about fashion now? Four writers share the soundtrack running through their heads when they put themselves together in the morning.

GETTING DRESSED

by Sonia Isard

Fashion is a completely delightful obsession for my cohort of 20-something women. It's an in-your-face reclamation of the joy of clothes, putting the *femme* in feminism, so to speak. We do our research online, scrolling through endless pages of red carpets and runways—it's easy and satisfying to be an armchair expert.

Part of me loves this—the rising trend of trendiness as a totally legit preoccupation, an art form, in fact. No more hiding the fact that you tweeze, wax, shave, and covet the perfect little black dress that you noticed in the window of that adorable boutique down the street from your non-profit. We all care what we look like, right? So why not run with it? I already hem and haw in front of my closet every sleepy-eyed morning, and it's only fun when I like what I see on the hanger, and then in the mirror. (My personal mantra is entitled: "Boots and Tights" and it goes something like this: "Boots and tights, boots and tights, boots and tiiiiights!" It works every time.)

We don't have to look at self-fashioning as an oppressive, retrograde chore that makes us look like we have bad politics. Instead, why not think of the precarious art of self-maintenance as an indulgence and a privilege?

After all, there are so many options for women's self-presentation (at least for a privileged segment of female society). When we dress up, or dress schlumpy, or dress as if we were still at Habonim camp, we already know we're making a statement, performing some kind of female identity. And it seems to me

that the by-now-*dub* notion that gender is constructed, performed, cultural, etc., is so Anthro 101 (no longer just Women's Studies 101) that the doors are open for women to actually enjoy the process of feminine self-presentation. More like, "I *get* to put on this sparkly gold sweater/bright red lipstick/soft wool minidress/what have you."

On the other hand (why should we be free to be unambivalent, after all?), this fun with femmey fashion has a darker side. Author Stephanie Coontz has been making the TV rounds exposing what she calls the "hottie mystique," the idea that "young women have to not only achieve in ways you were never expected to achieve before, but to compensate for that achievement they must show that they are completely hot, sexual and desirable." Marjorie Ingall, over at the online magazine *Tablet*, is also a skeptic: "We may tell our girls to be strong, faithful, brave, and smart, but the overarching message they get is that beauty trumps all else." Sure, I genuinely love my mani-pedi—it makes me feel sharp, together, and yes, empowered. But that's \$40 I could spend on a subscription to *The Economist*, an hour I could spend getting ahead on ever-mounting deadlines or fomenting the revolution. Is that a choice most men ever even think about? I often deeply resent the time and energy it takes to maintain some arbitrary threshold I made up called "It's OK to go grocery shopping in this outfit." What's the hidden cost of prioritizing prettiness?

Still, I know I feel much braver and more adventurous, more willing to step out of my comfort zone throughout the day, when I feel put-together pretty (enough). More vaudeville than *Vogue*, more burlesque than bourgeois, acknowledging this frees me up to embrace some traditionally feminine aesthetic practices. And for me, at least for now, thinking about the presentation of femininity as "play" on a grand scale—that's what makes fashion feel like an art, rather than a burden. ■

Sonia Isard is Lilith's assistant editor

NO THANKS FOR THE LIBERATION

by Rokhl Kafrissen

This year we're celebrating the 20th anniversary of the publication of Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. I can't pinpoint the exact moment I read it, but it had to be close to its publication in 1991. My mom had purchased it in hardcover, so I was, let's say, 16 when I read it. If 12 is the golden age of science fiction, then 16 is the age at which revolutionaries are made, should the right books fall into the right hands.

I already had my junior feminist's card by the time I picked up *The Beauty Myth*. Some memories:

Age 8: My synagogue holds an all-ages, all-sexes, pre-High Holidays shofar blowing workshop. It must have been a slow news day, because the local cable news channel came out to cover our tentative *tikiabs*. And somewhere there exists a VHS tape of me, a super-gawky little me, in white unicorn sweatshirt and corduroy pinstripe pants (my stylingest outfit), giving my thoughts about learning to blow the shofar. Except, instead of talking about the shofar, I decided that it was my moment to tell the world it needed more women rabbis! Which is strange, because I hated going to "temple" with a passion and found it beyond boring, even with a lady rabbi, as I discovered years later. (Sorry, lady rabbis. It's not you, it's me)

Age 12: Being most generous with my opinions about various injustices, I was asked to lecture my fellow students in honor of Womens' History Month; my first foray into consciousness raising. For my material I turned to what I knew best—after school cartoons. I asked my classmates to ponder why the Smurfs were defined by their traits, but Smurfette was defined by her femininity. Smurfette, not Freud, taught me that anatomy was destiny.

Age 16: When *The Beauty Myth* fell into my hands, I finally had access to a sustained analysis of the construction (and enforcement) of modern femaleness, one that went far beyond the enchanted mushroom colony of the Smurfs. *The Beauty Myth* wasn't so much a theoretical framework, as an exposé. Naomi Wolf showed how economic, legal and social advances made by women had been met by a retrenchment of social controls on women. She proposed that womens' self-image, the way they presented themselves, was perhaps the final battleground in the fight to maintain women as a subservient class.

The "beauty myth," she argued, was a brilliant way to make women themselves complicit in their own disenfranchisement by making the feminine ideal so unattainable, so expensive, so dangerous and—most importantly—so time consuming, that women as a political category would not be able to move forward as they had in

the 70s to promote abortion rights and end legal discrimination.

The book is heavy. One of its central images is the Iron Maiden—a coffin painted with the image of a lovely young woman, where prisoners would be entombed to die a slow death (or painful and quick, if the Maiden had spikes). For Wolf, beauty was a burden, and a dangerous one at that. After reading *The Beauty Myth* I looked around and saw

that every step I took into womanhood was impossibly heavy with the demands that I examine, alter and perhaps even mutilate myself in ways that were never demanded of my male peers. At 16, the mother of one of my best friends suggested I get electrolysis to curb the unladylike dark fuzz that trailed down the sides of my face. Coincidentally, she was also the mother of the only one of my friends who had plastic surgery, a nose job, the summer between 11th and 12th grade. I needed no clearer demonstration that the distance between hair removal and surgical mutilation was dangerously short. At 16, *every* concession to the beauty myth became, to me, a skirmish in a life or death battle.

What to do with the realization that you live in a culture that won't be satisfied until self-mutilation is not only normal, but necessary? Being 16 is bad enough, but now I was trying to figure out how to be 16 and also stay out of the clutches of the beauty-industrial complex that surely wanted to rape, mutilate and lobotomize me. As for many revolutionaries, there could be no compromise.

One answer is to take it to the people. One of my very close friends was the editor of the high school newspaper, and I got a column in the paper with a title only a Bolshevik could love: "The Cockroach of Sexism." Though I thank God that this was way before the days of Google, I'm still proud that I got people thinking about issues of sexism and homophobia. "The Cockroach of Sexism" was a positive channel for my feminist rage, and it was also the first step I took as a journalist.

There was a lot of rage, and a lot of hopelessness. Looking back on that time, I think it was tragic that rather than engage with the beauty myth, as all my friends did, finding some kind of place they felt comfortable, I pretty much rejected all of it. That didn't mean I liked the way I looked. It didn't mean I had the male attention I most definitely wanted. It just meant I was miserable and had sideburns and hairy legs and only my ideals to keep me warm at night.

Reflecting on the weakness of *The Beauty Myth* today, as a more mature feminist and as a much happier, more confident woman, I see that there was no place in Wolf's world for female agency. In her view, women were helpless before the ravenous maw of the "cultural conspiracies" that continually shifted the war on women's self-esteem from their skin to their leg hair to their pubic hair to their un-pornified labia. Aside from her rather naive calls for a new female culture of solidarity, Wolf offered no strategies for survival in the hostile world she described. If you still cared about the way you looked, her message seemed to be, then you simply didn't get it.

The other thing that Wolf didn't address in *The Beauty Myth* was beauty privilege. I can still remember my moment of scandalized shock, and relief, when I asked a friend if she had been revolutionized by the book. She shook her head and said that it was hard to be told by a woman as beautiful as Wolf that beauty shouldn't matter. With her striking features, big eyes, thick, luxurious hair, Wolf is as gorgeous today as she was at 28, when she published *The Beauty Myth*.

Her book had another big blind spot when it came to the intersection of race, class and gender. As a white, American-born, middle-class woman, I had the luxury of rejecting beauty ideals without suffering an economic impact (just its disastrous effects on my love life).

The real turning point in my approach to self-presentation came when I was 25, a first-year law student. I met the woman who would become one of my closest friends in the world. Olga was blond, covered in tattoos, wore leopard print and pink without apologies, and was unashamed of her love for Hello Kitty (something I never revealed to anyone before I met Olga).

Olga was also a radical feminist. We organized the women students' association at our school. We dreamed about ditching law school and starting a Jewish pagan coven. We promised to perform each other's abortions should the day come when abortion was once again forced into back alleys.

Olga cared immensely about the way she looked. As she put it, when you're a poor, fat, immigrant and your name is Olga, yeah, people are going to judge you on the way you look, and you better look good. But instead of setting out to fit in, which as she intuited early on was fairly pointless, Olga set out to express herself in the most beautiful and most authentic way possible. Everywhere we went, people were in awe of her.

Our law school being only a few blocks from the enormous Anthropologie on Fifth Avenue, Olga and I spent many after-

noons there drooling over expensive frilly sweaters and adorable sailor pants. Olga's husband was a painter, and their house was always full of his art, the art of their many artist friends and the beautiful things they had acquired over the years.

What I saw in Olga was an integrated kind of beauty and self-expression. Her sense of style was expressed in her tattoos, her precise taste in sneakers (no white soles) and her impeccable home. Rather than letting the Iron Maiden's lid close on her, Olga kicked the lid right off. No matter what she did, she always had a deeply informed political analysis of her actions. Beauty is

not much different than other aspects of our lives—beauty is political, but so is what we eat (can we eat beef if it contributes to deforestation?) what we buy (can we avoid all unethically produced goods?) how we give birth (C-section or vaginal?) and pretty much every facet of being alive today.

And each of those choices is inflected by the economic and social privilege held by the chooser. For me, an important part of being a progressive is recognizing my own privilege as well as not judging others against my own. I wouldn't dare judge a poor family for buying cheap beef. So why should I beat myself up for wanting to have the smooth cheeks prized by our culture and naturally possessed by many, but not all, women?

I learned to stop judging myself against a ridiculous standard of imagined feminist purity. I discovered that I could have fun with makeup in a way that didn't feel burdensome or fake. I didn't have to wear it everyday if I didn't want to (itself an important privilege of the clearskinned). I could wear cute clothes and shave, or not, depending on what I wanted. I got electrolysis in my late twenties and wept, not because I was selling out, but because I'd wasted so much time letting the hair make me miserable, but refusing to do anything about it. ■

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STANDING OUT

by Letty Cottin Pogrebin

In the early years of second-wave feminism, some activists thumbed their noses at Vogue, Seventh Avenue, and their mother's closets. Liberated women wore their disdain for fashion as a badge of honor on their slogan T-shirts. No more dressing to please men. Or to arouse other women's envy. No more color-coordinated outfits. According to

these women, if you looked good you couldn't be smart and if you were smart or wanted to be taken seriously you couldn't look good.

Though I deplore the culture's obsessive focus on women's appearance, that bifurcated view never made sense to me. I see dressing ourselves as just another means of expressing our uniqueness and individuality. I think clothes are fun and I pay no attention to the fashion fascists.

What's more, I see the issue Jewishly: In the same way that Judaism expects us to embellish sacred objects, I believe the human body deserves to be embellished. What matters about the Torah are its words, yet we dress the scrolls in velvet, silver bells, and gold trim, to signify the preciousness within. We set a beautiful table for Shabbat and Pesach; we don't make do with paper plates and plastic cups unless we have to.



YEMIMA TAMIR



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Likewise, humanity, the ultimate fruition of God's creation, is worthy of respectful embellishment. Beautification of the body need not signify idolatry of the self but rather a manifestation of the uniqueness of each life, and a measure of how much we value individual creativity and human variety. We dress nicely for services and buy new clothes for Rosh Hashanah. Why go out in *shmattes* the rest of the year?

It's all of a piece with the theology of *perfecting creation*. If you believe, as I do, that it's the job of human beings to improve upon and complete what God couldn't finish, then you will conclude, as I have, that dressing the body is just another opportunity for us to elaborate upon what we have been given.

As for *how* to elaborate and embellish, I'm not interested in this year's "trends." The quickest way to stop me from buying something is to tell me everybody is wearing it. I want what *nobody's* wearing. This, I suppose, is consistent with my resistance to all forms of convention. As an article of faith, I won't conform to anything or anyone who tells a woman what she "should" do—and that includes the arbiters of fashion.

Dena Pinsky is probably to blame for my attraction to counter-conventional clothing. While the rest of us were wearing little white dickies and circle pins, Dena came to school in a shell pink angora sweater and a swirly crushed velvet skirt. I don't



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MIRIT WEINSTOCK FASHION DESIGNER

Israeli clothing designer Mirit Weinstock (miritweinstock.com) bucks the trend for fashion that looks better on the hanger than on humans. And instead of turning the camera on professional models, she asks her fans to submit self-portraits. The result? High-art photos of real women wearing Weinstock's real clothes. The artists photographing themselves here all see self-fashioning as a canvas for creativity. In the photos we've selected, Israeli women draw on their own substantial talents to express both drama and playfulness in fashion. Efrat Hassan and Ira Shraberman are photographers whose work has been widely exhibited and published. And the woman on this issue's cover is photographer Alicia Shahaf, also known for her project "Heroines," portraits of women who have suffered sexual assault.



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remember anyone else in my fourth grade class, but I remember Dena. She wore what nobody else was wearing.

Right now I am totally thrilled with my new Ugg boots. Unlike any Uggs I've ever seen, these black sheepskin boots are banded up the leg with shaggy black fur that looks like it was sheared off a long-haired mountain goat. Fabulous! I bought them three weeks ago and I've already worn them 10 times.

Unusual boots are my weakness. Since I'm generally a serious person, I like to wear something quirky for contrast. For instance, the zebra boots I got at Housing Works, the thrift shop whose proceeds benefit people with AIDS. I love that store.

People donate all sorts of great shoes and boots, most of them hardly worn. You never know what you'll find there. I haven't been to Macy's or Bloomingdale's in years.

This may be harsh, but I have to say that these days, when I go to a Jewish women's event, nearly everyone looks the same. One year they were all wearing flowing pants and gold jewelry. Now it's black tights and short dresses, blow-dried hair and super-high heels. A herd mentality seems to have taken hold in the Jewish community; it's as if everyone subscribes to the same fashion bulletin and they're trying to out-impress each other with how slavishly they've followed its decrees.

I wonder about the cost for women of subverting their own personal style to conform to this year's look. I wonder if, after constantly crushing their individuality in the fashion arena, they also pay a price—emotional, spiritual, or even political—in terms of how they operate in other contexts and how they feel about themselves in the world. If a woman has sacrificed her authenticity and integrity to fit in with what “everyone is wearing,” if she can't go against the grain and wear white after Labor Day and before Memorial Day, if she won't express her creativity and personal style in dress, I worry that she won't have the backbone to go against the grain and demand her rights, or stir the pot of social change, or advocate for the underdog.

I'm certainly no fashion plate. My daughters are always begging me to let them edit my closet and get rid of my fringed vest from the 1970s or the pleated skirts I love to wear with boots. I give in sometimes, just to keep peace in the family, but sometimes I retrieve an item from the giveaway pile after they've gone.

When hemlines went down, mine stayed above the knee, because I'm only five foot three, and long skirts make me look like I'm barely 60 inches tall, and make me feel short, which I don't feel otherwise. For the same reason, you will never see me in a round-toe shoe. I think they look stubby. If I had to wear a round-toe shoe just because they're “in,” I would have an out-of-body experience; I wouldn't feel like me.

I learned that shoes can be hazardous to your mental and physical health when I was 14, and my boyfriend took me to Times Square on New Year's Eve. After more than a decade of only being allowed to wear brown oxfords or Mary Janes, on this

night I wore high-heeled shoes—silk pumps died apple green to match my dress—because my mother said I could, and because I wanted to look older and taller and sexier (not easy when you're still flat-chested), and because the models in *Seventeen* magazine wore high-heeled pumps when they went out on dates.

Walking to the subway station in Queens, I was already pretty hobbled, and by the time my boyfriend and I got off the F train at 42nd Street, the balls of my feet were like hot coals, the blisters on the back of my heels

were bleeding, and the backs of my “sexy” shoes were rubbing bone. I was in agony, and the night had barely begun. I slid a folded up tissue between my heel and the shoe but still couldn't bear the pain, so I finally took off the pumps and in stockinged feet, on December 31st, stood for three hours on a copy of the *Daily News* that I'd rescued from a trash basket. What a bummer. Needless to say, I had a completely different evening than my comfortably-dressed boyfriend. I felt like a fool.

The point is, fashion isn't trivial; it can be crippling, both literally and metaphorically; it can distort and disfigure who we are, and put a scrim, a false front, between us and other people. I'm talking about core identity, here—how we feel about ourselves as we move through our lives, stand in a public place, enter a party, sit in a meeting. Anything that takes away from our sense of being real and comfortable can't be good for us. So what's with those towering high heeled boots? ■

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MY COACH BAG

by Yona Zeldis McDonough

Mick Jagger famously sang, “you can't always get what you want,” and then consoled us by adding that, sometimes, “you get what you need.” But in a long-distant summer of my life, I found, with some surprise, that I was able to do both. It was 1973, and I was 16. My parent's 24-year marriage was lurching

and stumbling toward its bitter end, although I did not know that then. What I did know was that when I phoned my father's office—he had been the PR Director at Women's American ORT for many years—one Friday morning in late July, I was told he had gone on vacation. His secretary did not know when he would be back and no, she did not have a number where he could be reached.

I was stunned. True, he had mentioned that he would be going on a trip, though he had been evasive about where and when. Yet nothing quite prepared me for the shame—it was shame, and I can feel it still—of hearing this information from a woman who had only recently started working for him and whom I barely knew. How was it that a virtual stranger was privy to something so vital that I was not? Quietly, I hung up the phone.

My mother's reaction to his departure was to flee herself. She must have been reeling from the shock of it, and the cruelty too; she sought the solace of old and dear friends who lived on the Jersey shore. She left me alone with my 21-year-old brother. Unlike my father, she let me know where and how to reach her,

as well as when she would be coming back. And she also left me cash—several hundred dollars. I remember that they were crisp, new, fresh-from-the-mint bills. She must have gone to the bank to withdraw them.

Once both parents had decamped, my brother's admittedly idiosyncratic coping mechanism was to rearrange our Brooklyn apartment completely, moving furniture and embarking on a vast campaign of de-cluttering and winnowing. Furniture was yanked away from walls and given a new home in another room or ruthlessly tossed; pictures were re-hung or taken down. He was gleeful, even manic in his task. He had been struggling for some time now; dropping out of the School of Visual Arts after a single semester and spending his time on the couch reading, listening to music and trying—with a deceptively low-key kind of urgency—to conjure up a plan about what on earth to do next. I was torn: I was relieved to see his by-now-customary torpor replaced by activity, and I welcomed the chance to connect with him in any way at all. But I also suspected that when our mother returned, she might not be so keen on his little home improvement project.

So I put into action an escape plan of my own. With my parents gone and my brother utterly absorbed by the question of whether or not to paint the apartment, I hurried off to Bloomingdale's on 59th Street in Manhattan. There, on the ground floor, was a handbag I had been lusting after. It was slouchy, bucket shape, in a buttery shade of leather and made by Coach, well before the company had begun to churn out the logo-driven, frou-frou *chazerai* it currently peddles. No, this was the real Coach, the essential Coach—simple yet clever, austere yet elegant—designed by Bonnie Cashin and sporting a thick zipper and the kind of utilitarian but classy brass hardware for which she had become known.

The bag cost \$52, a price that was light years beyond anything I had ever paid for a handbag before. But I wanted it so badly, and had dreamed of it, coveted it, and schemed to buy it—babysitting money, allowance—all summer long. Now, amazingly, both the means and the opportunity were mine. I had with me one of the fresh green bills my mother had given me, and I used it to pay for the bag. I had a strong hunch that she was not going to object to any purchase I made in her absence.

The bag came home with me on the subway. I did not feel quite worthy of it, so I left it shrouded in its nest of tissue for several days, allowing myself only occasional, reverent peeks. My mother came home and was predictably horrified by what my brother had done. I felt guilty that I had not tried to stop him, and he and I both meekly accompanied her to the incinerator room to see what we could salvage. This episode was followed by several mournful, tense weeks in which we all kind of spun off our orbits, away from one another; there was little communication or even contact between us.

Basking in the endorphin effect of a beloved object

Then my father returned as suddenly and mysteriously as he had left. "Is that all?" I railed. "Aren't you going to tell us where you were? What you were doing? You owe us an explanation." But he refused to explain, justify or apologize. We did not speak of it again, and by February of the following year he and my mother had decided to separate. By April, he was gone for good, and by August he had remarried. My relationship to him had changed course, and never found its former footing—of love, of trust—again. But that is another story.

And the bag? I finally took it out of its paper and began to use it. Every single day. Immediately, I noticed how comfortable it was to carry. Cashin had revolutionized the handbag industry by doing away with the fussy, structured bags of yore, those tiny, fit-for-a-Barbie-doll accessories with their stiff handles and rigid, unyielding openings. Instead, she worked to create fluid, streamlined shapes that women could carry to work or to school, day or night. She made sure the bag was easy to open, and could be carried on a shoulder, not just gripped with the hand. My own Coach had all these features, plus an ineffable, this-old-thing kind of chic that never ceased to thrill me.

Slung over my shoulder, the bucket bag accompanied me all over the city. It had ample room for my wallet, keys, hairbrush, as well as a paperback book (no Nook, no iPad, no cell phone in those days), an apple or box of raisins, and my Clinique lip gloss in Berry. The bag came with me to college, and then graduate school too, and when it was lifted—silently, stealthily—from the back of my chair at a restaurant, I mourned its loss far more than the scant few bills in my wallet. But the Fates were kind, and the bag—*sans* money, of course—was returned. I was so happy to have it back that I kissed it.

Over the years my bag had changed and evolved. The strap had stretched with use, and the pale, buttery color I loved had darkened to something closer to chestnut. It had acquired a certain sheen by then; it glowed with its own special patina. I still wore it, though not as exclusively any longer. But although I owned many other bags by then, none had been so tied up in my past and so integral to my identity.

I don't remember exactly when the bag and I parted company; maybe I was in my late twenties, maybe I had even hit 30. When I finally let it go, it was nearly mahogany in color and the strap almost black. It was time. I packed it off to Goodwill and replaced it with another Coach, this one black, with a less slouchy and more structured silhouette as befitting (or so I thought) my age and my young-woman-in-the-working-world status. But however stylish and sleek this new Coach was, it never achieved that talismanic power of that other, the first, and in some ways, the only. All those years later, Mick's plaintive words still thrummed true: *if you try sometime, you just might find you get what you need*. And I did. I did. ■

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