



What They Expect When You're Expecting

by GABRIELLE BIRKNER

Tube tops silk-screened with the names of heavy metal bands and “Daisy Duke” jean shorts lined display tables of the Brooklyn maternity boutique where I had gone seeking modest cover for my growing baby bump.

“Do pregnant women actually wear these?” I asked the sales clerk, holding up a pair of the barely-there cut-offs. She explained that they were very popular with local mothers-to-be, and added, without the slightest hint of irony, that they come in even shorter varieties. I thought of my own restless, swollen legs in those denim short-shorts, and I grimaced.

Making my way toward the sale rack, with its slightly more practical offerings, I thought about how far maternity wear has come. Having options other than amorphous shifts and baggy overalls is welcomed by this expectant mother—and many others, too. But the popular culture that begot skin-tight pregnancy fashions, racy maternity lingerie, “hot mom” handbooks and magazine headlines such as “Maternity Fashion Faceoff: Kate Hudson vs. Jessica Alba,” has extended to the gestating set the pressure on women to look sexy at every stage of their lives.

As Elissa Strauss wrote recently on The Sisterhood, the Forward’s women’s issues blog, “Pregnancy and post-pregnancy

PHOTO: DAVID T. CRENSHUN

has, for the most part, remained elevated above the foxy ambitions that have bled into an ever-increasing range of a woman's life ... during which women are now subjected to the same hot-or-not standards that used to apply only to women in their 20s."

She cited newborn onesies with cheeky sayings, such as "My mom's a fox," and "If you think I'm cute, you should see my mommy!" as evidence that pregnancy and post-partum beauty standards are changing.

Even in Jewish communities where modesty is prized, where women are expected to wear long skirts and where celebrity imagery is less pervasive, there is nuanced evidence of the "hot mom" trend. Leah Ostreicher, the owner of Generations Maternity, which caters to the ultra-Orthodox community in Borough Park, Brooklyn, said that in recent years even the modest pregnancy fashions she specializes in have become more fitted.

When she first began selling maternity wear in the community 20 years ago, she said, the guiding principle was "the bigger the better," with Orthodox women favoring tent-like trapeze dresses; today, she said, more often they opt for pencil skirts and tank tops worn over long-sleeve shells. Not exactly tube tops and short-shorts, but an evolution nonetheless.

"Over the past five or 10 years, the ultra-Orthodox community has embraced pregnancy as a time to be sexy and feminine," said Chaya Tamir, a 28-year-old Lubavitch mother of three, in Miami. "So you're seeing more belly-hugging pieces and tighter clothes—pieces that celebrate what your body is doing."

As a result, Tamir said, like their less religious counterparts, more Orthodox women are carefully watching the scale throughout their pregnancies.

Until recently, pregnancy provided "an exemption from looking like a supermodel," Jordana Horn told Lilith.

She is a New Jersey mother, expecting her third child this summer, who has been chronicling her pregnancy on various parenting blogs. "Now, it's very different."

Horn blames the past decade's celebrity baby boom, which continues to be a major source of fodder for tabloid titles and gossip websites. "It tires me out just to flip through the magazines," she said, "let alone to go to the gym for enough hours to look that good." She said that, for the duration of her pregnancy, she has sworn off the magazines that insist on fetishizing celebrities' perfectly rounded, out-in-front bumps.

Watching celebrities put on baby weight and shedding it has become a "media sweet spot," said Rosie Pope, host of the Bravo series "Pregnant in Heels." Onscreen and off, Pope, who is also a high-end maternity wear designer, assists expectant parents with all of their pre-baby "needs"—as in, one client *needs* to be photographed nude on her horse; another *needs* a panel assembled to come up with the perfect brand name for her third child.

Pope said she encounters a lot of women who obsess about their weight (and their fitness routines) during pregnancy. "I keep reminding them that all of the changes are happening because they are becoming a parent—and there's a healthy amount of weight they need to gain for the sake of the child," she said. "It's nature's way of telling parents, 'You don't come first anymore.' If you can't handle that, you may want to rethink becoming a parent."

She also said sees many women set unrealistic timelines for losing their baby weight. And they find themselves, almost inevitably, disappointed—or embracing unhealthy weight loss techniques. The New York Post recently dubbed this trend "mommyrexia." Pope tells her post-partum clients that the celebrities they see walking the red carpet, or

"PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN LADY," ATTRIBUTED TO MARCUS CHEEBAERTS II, VIA WIKIPEDIA.ORG; MATERNITY CORSET, 1908, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; LANE BRYANT MATERNITY CORSET (1917), VIA PERIODPAPER.COM; SHERMANS MATERNITY SHOP TK, AUGUST 1991 COVER OF VANITY FAIR, VIA WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Those Baroque Years

The Baroque era's waist-less design allowed the dress to be worn throughout the pregnancy.



The Victorian Era

Pregnancy corsets, worn both during and after pregnancy, were used to support, and hide, the bump. Doctors sought to ban the pregnancy corset, but corsets were worn into the 20th century.



even the catwalk, weeks after giving birth likely have teams of people—trainers, nutritionists, chefs—helping them get their pre-baby bodies back. Of course, most women cannot expect to lose within a matter of weeks all of the 25–35 pounds that the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists now recommends that healthy women (carrying a singleton) gain during the course of their pregnancy.

Rabbi Alison Adler suggests another approach. A spiritual leader at Congregation Mishkan Israel in Hamden, Connecticut, and a trained psychotherapist who teaches about Jewish under-

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standings of food and body image, she recommends prayer as a way to bring the focus back to “how miraculous it is that our bodies are doing this, and that includes getting rounder. I always come back to the blessing of *Asher Yatzar*, which thanks God for opening the body when it is supposed to open and closing it when it is supposed to close.” *Asher Yatzar* is the prayer that many observant Jews recite each time they go to the bathroom, but Adler thinks it’s particularly well-suited for pregnancy and childbirth.

For some, health concerns are behind some of the emphasis on pre- and post-natal aesthetics, said Jessica Denay, the author of the 2010 book *The Hot Mom to Be Handbook*. Denay contends that the sexy-while-pregnant phenomenon may actually be pro-

moting healthier lifestyles. “Years ago people used pregnancy as an excuse to binge on ice cream, to eat whatever they wanted,” she said. “If they now say, ‘I want to fit into that cute outfit, so I’m going to put down the Devil Dog, and pick up an apple or a pear’, guess who benefits from that? The baby.”

For her part, Deborah Kolben, the editor of the Jewish parenting website Kveller and the mother of a toddler daughter, questions the backlash against “hot moms.” “There’s no reason women shouldn’t feel beautiful and sexy when they’re pregnant; there’s no reason they should have to hide themselves behind ugly, shapeless frocks,” she said. “Does it sometimes go too far? Sure. Does that make it all bad? No.”

The trend can, of course, reach destructive and narcissistic extremes—when women are eternally conscious of the gaze of some “other” every day of their lives. And yet, despite the extremes, and even despite some of the recent articles indicating that pregnant women fear losing their husbands—or at least their husbands’ attention—if they don’t drop back to their pre-pregnancy shape immediately, the phenomenon of “hotness” during pregnancy holds an empowering message of liberation. Liberation from the pregnancy-hiding politics of the maternity muumuu, and liberation from the illogical idea that a woman’s identity as an expectant mother means a total subversion of her identity as a sexual being.

But that doesn’t mean I’ll be buying those Daisy Dukes any time soon. ■

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Mid-20th Century

in 1952, Lucille Ball was the first woman to show her pregnancy on TV. Rather than “pregnant,” she was referred to as “with child.”

The first maternity clothes were marketed as such in 1904. In this Sears Catalog, maternity wear is modeled by non-pregnant women, a trend that continued until the 1980s.



And Now...

The August 1991 cover of Vanity Fair reformed how we saw pregnancy in society—especially among celebrities. ‘More Demi Moore’, photographed by Annie Leibovitz, has become iconic.



Timeline compiled by Hanna Sender.