

Style changes: cyclical, inexorable, and foreseeable

Product planners take note: investigations indicate that fashion follows a century-long cycle, regardless of economic trends, functional considerations, or technological innovations

Dwight E. Robinson

Picture an anthropologist sitting at a desk, thumbing through back issues of magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* until he comes to a model wearing the latest style in evening dress. He picks up his calipers, places one end on the model's mouth and the other at the tip of her toe, measures this distance, and records the model's height. His next step is to measure and record six dimensions of the model's dress. He then figures the ratio of each of the six measurements to the model's height and puts the data in graphic form. The results show when skirts were longest and shortest, widest and narrowest, when waists were lowest and highest, most pinched and most expansive, and when necklines plunged lowest and rose highest, and bustlines were most ample and most constrained. Now, why on earth would a social scientist take on such a tedious and seemingly trivial task? The author suspects that the eminent anthropologist who did just that recognized fashion change as

a subject worthy of serious study. In fact, the author himself has gone on to study changes in men's facial hair and dimensions of automobiles over the years. Taken together, the results may have a message for the astute product planner: to plan products most effectively, managers should try to discern the cycle that the design of their products goes through.

Dwight E. Robinson is professor of business, government, and society at the Graduate School of Business Administration and School of Business Administration, University of Washington. This is the third article on fashion theory and product design that he has written for HBR. The beard data have been compiled for an upcoming article, "Fashions in Shaving and Trimming of the Beard: 1842-1972," which will appear in the *American Journal of Sociology* in March 1976.

Illustrations courtesy of The Warner Brothers Company.

Coping with fashion change has been a perennial problem for product planners. No matter how useful or durable a product may be, it cannot be successfully marketed unless its appearance (shape, color, texture) fits the potential buyer's present notion of what is stylish. That notion, because it is constantly changing, is a hard one to keep up with, especially for planners who rely on traditional forecasting methods. It is often a matter of guessing what the public will consider stylish when the public itself does not know what forms will catch its fancy only a year or two in the future.

To the businessman who is baffled or frustrated by this problem of rapidly shifting tastes, I would say that product planning does not have to be a guessing game. All of the fashion cycles that have been measured are surprisingly regular and very long. Anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, who took time off from studying California Indian cultures to measure women's dress proportions over three centuries, very appropriately referred to the "stateliness of their march."¹

The question the product planner will ask is: What are the internal mechanisms that create what seem to be the most regular fluctuations in all of socioeconomic statistics? My reply is, in part, that where there is regularity of recurrence there are likely grounds for prediction. Not perfect prediction, of course. No emerging social era has ever slavishly copied an earlier one. Yet Victorian froufrou, bric-a-brac, and gingerbread had much in common with eighteenth-century rococo. What the fashion measurer can offer the product planner is an eye-open-

1. Kroeber's study was published in *Anthropological Records* 5, no. 2 (1940), pp. 111-153.

ing body of information about recurring patterns, removing the blindfold imposed by too much attention to economy, utility, function, and the like.

Evidence is at hand on which to base two principles about the way in which fashion works: (1) fashions follow an inexorable cycle, and (2) because they are inexorable, fashion cycles must be as independent as any force to be found in social change. If, as is so often argued, style change were simply the result of external causes—events such as technological inventions, social upheavals, and historical accidents, or the advent of a design genius—it is clear that the graphs I will present shortly would *not* display the regularity of movement that they do. To suppose that such a variety of events would conveniently sort themselves into these smooth undulations is a strain on belief.

What the dubious reader should consider at the outset is that fashion change is sufficiently intelligible and predictable that its study and application to product planning can enormously reduce the risk of costly errors in judgment and may even contribute positively to successful new designs. After all, design must change if fashion so dictates. Admittedly, progress in discovering the scientific laws governing fashion has been slow. That seems to me unfortunate because I believe that patient effort can lead to valid conclusions about the way in which the process works. But at the least, I am confident that nobody who grasps the extent of the autonomy of the fashion process can ever look at the world of design in quite the same way again. Ephemeral as the subject of fashion may now seem to be, I feel that the potentialities for using it to improve product planning could easily amount to many billions of dollars annually.

Dialectics of fashion

In their shortsighted obsession with their own era, people forget that *fashion change is and has been incessant*, at least since civilization emerged from the dark ages. To prove this point for yourself, all you need to do is review the history of any art, fine or applied. Has any period of painting, architecture, or literature repeated the style of its predecessor? Did the Jacobean wear the same cut of clothes or

sit in the same sort of chairs as the Elizabethans? Of course not.

Once stated, the law is obvious. Yet over and over again, people think and act as though it didn't exist. At every moment we tend to think that the ultimate in design has somehow been reached. I've had automotive stylists tell me that they were not sure people would buy fewer cars if they shut up shop. And market researchers have told me that at long last today's generation has become so individualistic that it has lost all interest in following fashion. Perhaps such confusion, if not self-deception, serves a purpose. If a young couple buying a new house were to allow themselves to think about how old-fashioned it would look in 10 or 20 years, it would probably spoil some of their fun in setting up house-keeping.

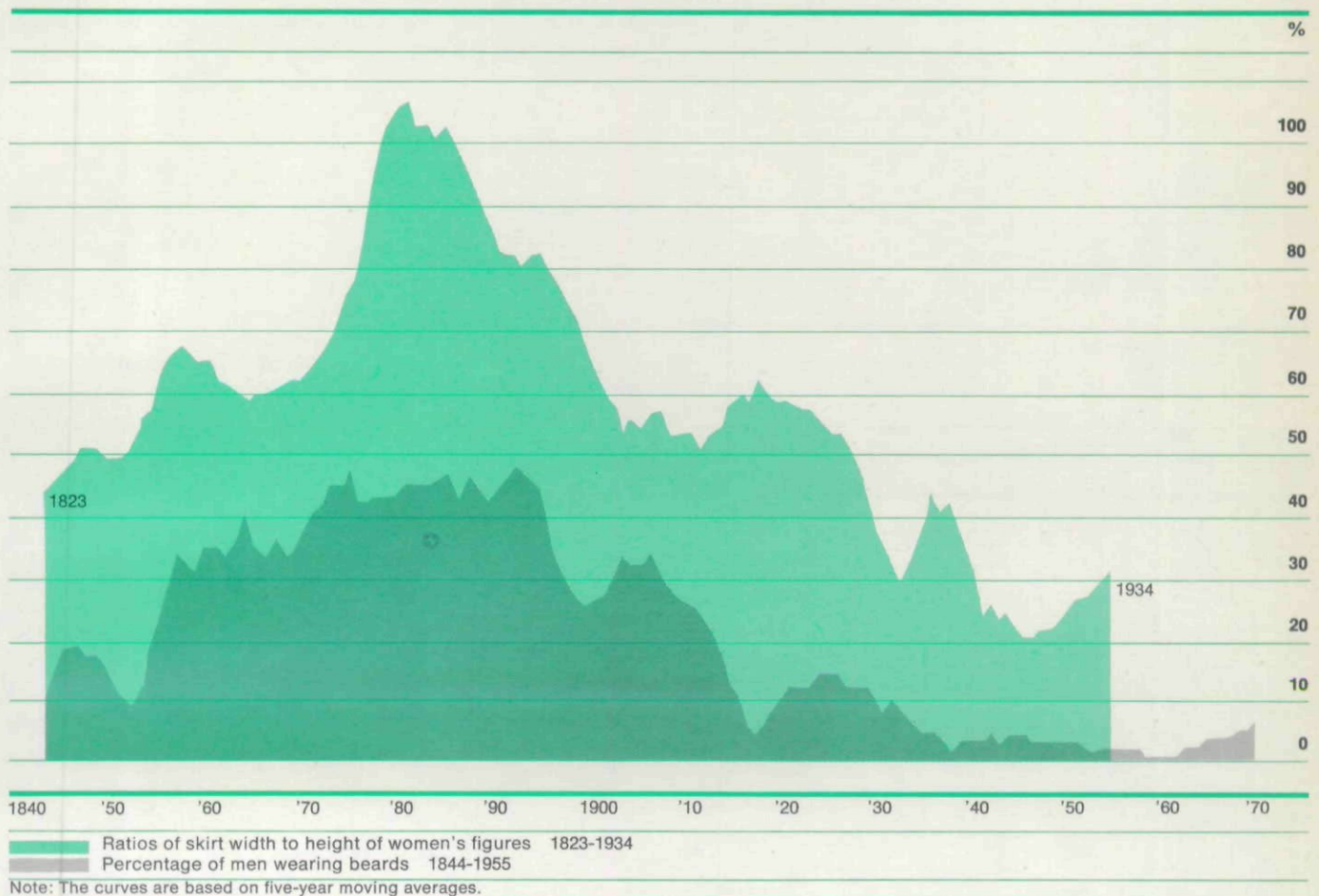
Yet fluctuations in taste affecting all sorts of consumer goods are so regular that we now appear to be on the track of reliably forecasting them. Kroeber, for example, found that the ratio of women's heights to the width of their skirts followed a remarkably predictable cycle from 1823 through 1934.

The possibility of predicting fashion movements became even more real to me when I saw the results of my research on men's whiskers. My motivation for doing such a study was, at first, sheer curiosity: I wanted to find out whether men are any less influenced by fashion than women. As a student of economic cycles, however, I had developed the economist's weakness for trying to find cyclical patterns in such familiar things as the national income, freight car loadings, and, of course, stock prices. After plotting how men changed their minds about wearing beards and moustaches over a period of 130 years, I was amazed to discover that the results were startlingly similar, indeed almost parallel, to Kroeber's figures on dress dimensions.

Exhibit I shows the similarity between the two time series. The time scales of the two curves have been positioned to allow for an assumed 21-year lead time in skirt fluctuations, possibly related to the comparative youthfulness of subjects in Kroeber's samples for dress. It is interesting to note that the coefficient of correlation for the two series is notably high, equaling 0.867. *Exhibit II* charts the occurrence since 1842 of men with some form of facial hair. I obtained the data for these charts by counting the pictures of men shown in issues of *The Illustrated London News* from 1842, its first year of publication, through 1972. The procedure was simply to

Exhibit I

Fluctuations in skirt width (1823-1934) and beard frequency (1844-1955)



determine for any year the comparative frequencies of five major features of facial barbering: sideburns, sideburns and moustache, moustache alone, beard, and no facial hair. Each comparative frequency was then expressed as a simple percentage, taken year by year.

The hundred-year march: out and back

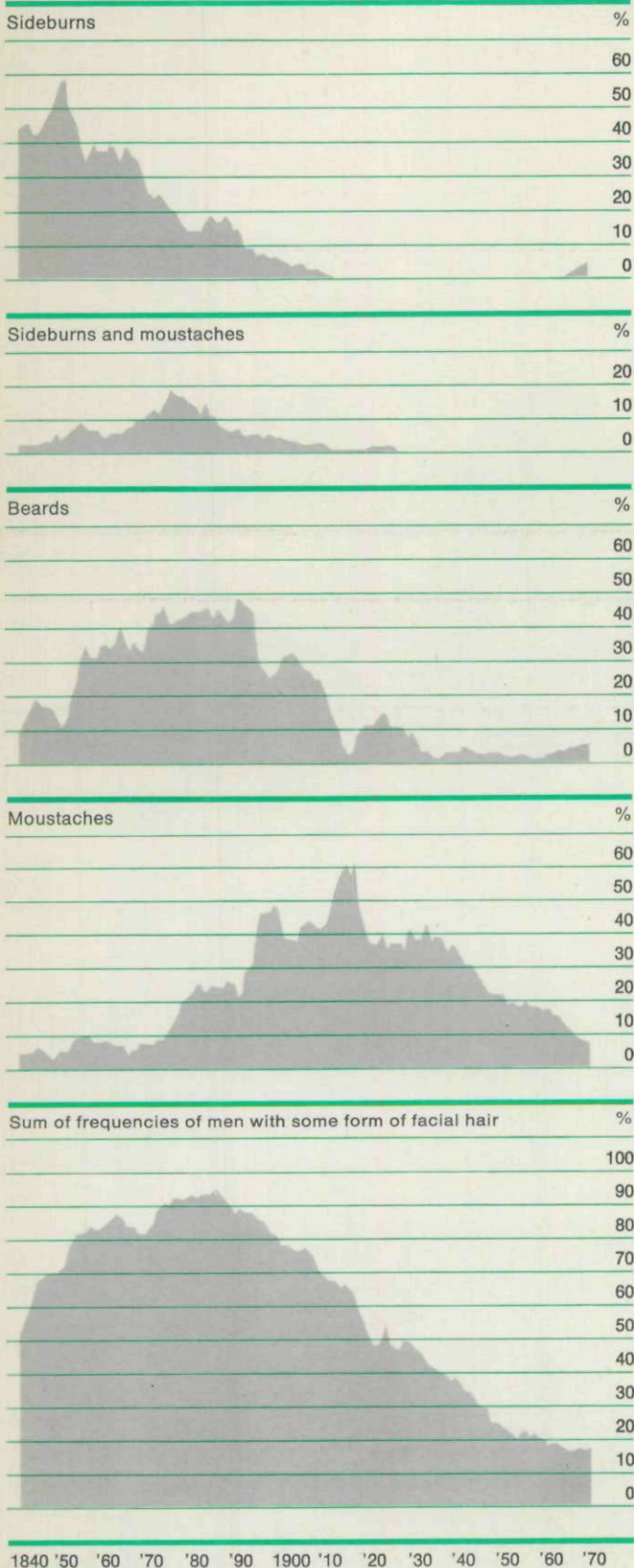
As were Kroeber's, my efforts at measurements are in the pioneering stage. My as well as Kroeber's choices of categories for measurement may not have been the most appropriate ones in every case. For instance, as *Exhibit II* shows, my classification of "sideburns and moustaches" was never a form of significant proportions. As can be observed, less than 20% of men ever chose to wear such a combination. In the classification "sideburns alone," only a downswing took place during the period I plotted.

Nevertheless, the time series for beards, moustaches, and all forms of facial hair turned out to be impressive. The beard wave started almost coincidentally with the first year of publication of *The Illustrated London News* and bottomed out around 1940. The popularity of the moustache began a sharp rise about 1870 and came close to rock bottom in 1970. These two waves, then, are both about as close to a century as one can imagine. But then we come to the most impressively regular wave. The wave of the number of men wearing some form of whiskers shows half of its rise between 1842 and 1885 and all of its decline from 1885 to 1970. If we allow 40 years for the first half of its rise, then we start about 1800, for a full wave of 170 years. The average of these four cycles (excluding the sideburns and moustaches in combination) is 122.5 years.

Kroeber, too, may have chosen one or two measurements that failed to yield impressive measurements. His figures on skirt *length*, for example, are of lim-

Exhibit II

Frequencies of facial hair (1842-1972)



Note: The curves are based on five-year moving averages.

ited interest because before 1920 the hem seldom rose more than two or three inches from the floor. But when Kroeber averaged the cycles of his six dress dimensions, he got a mean wave length of 98 years.

The long, low look

Encouraged by the results of the facial hair study, I decided to measure fashion swings in another article of daily life—the automobile.

For this study, I expanded a study done in 1958 by L.H. Nagler, a consulting automotive engineer. Nagler had compiled statistics on the length and height of Detroit-made automobiles from 1927 through 1958. To obtain an industry average for each of those years, he used the specifications of the standard size Plymouth, Ford, and Chevrolet, since production of these three cars accounted for more than half of the market. To extend his study from 1959 through 1974, I had to modify his procedures somewhat. In 1960, the standard-size Plymouth, Ford, and Chevrolet no longer claimed half of the market. To get an average figure that did reflect at least half of all Detroit production, I had to look at all the models in the three lines for which more than 100,000 were produced. I then weighed the figures according to the number produced for each model before coming up with an overall average for each year.²

Exhibit III indicates that the ratio of the height to the length of the average automobile is going through a cycle. True, the exhibit shows a progression in only one direction, but this could be because the mass-produced car has not been around long enough to have gone through a full style cycle. The figures do give some indication, however, that after approximately 50 years this particular fashion trend toward the long, low look is reversing itself as well.

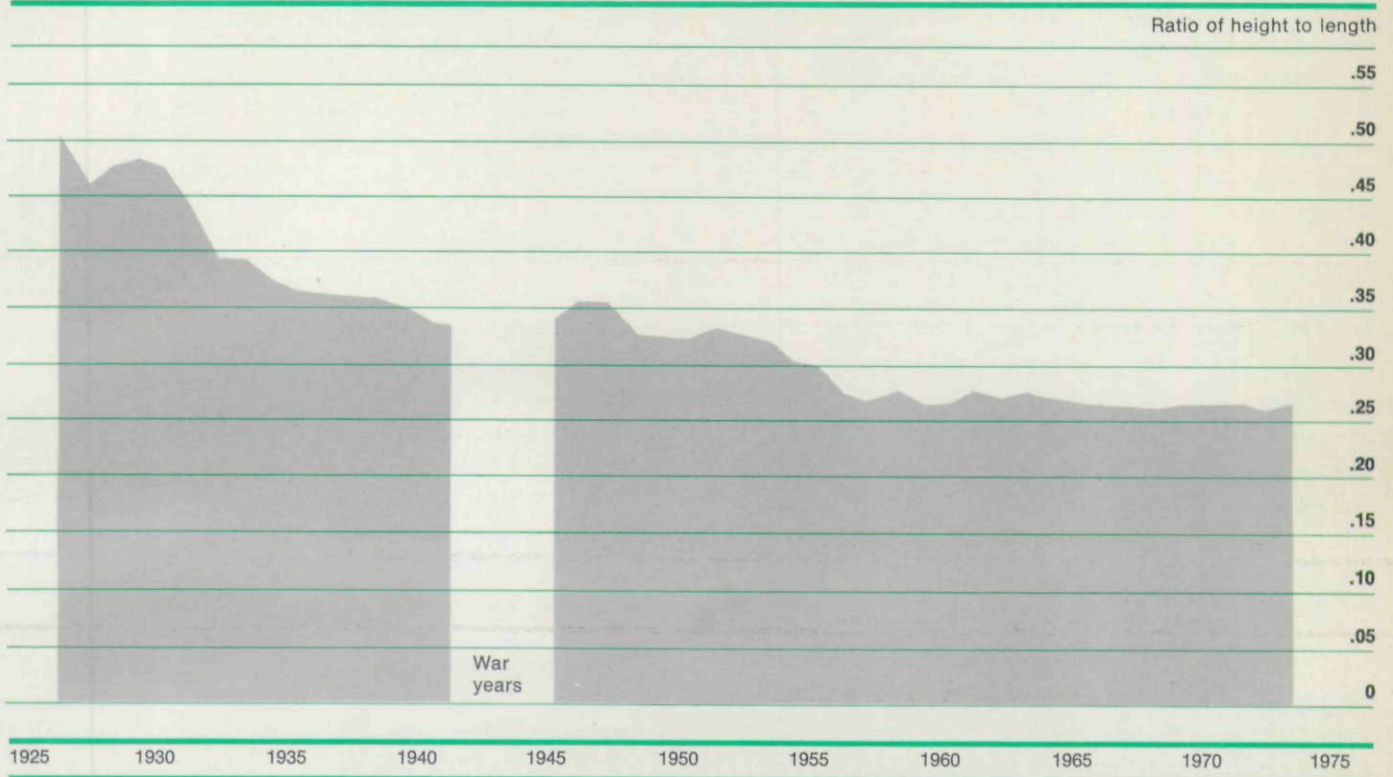
Inch by inch

The car roof has steadily come down from a maximum height of approximately 75 inches to about 50 inches above the ground, or from nearly 6½ feet to a little over 4 feet. Down, down, down came the car top, by half an inch in the typical year. It is tempting to speculate how many billions of dollars every single inch of this mighty downward compression has cost. And no conceivable statistical yardstick will ever tell us.

But do we really need to do more than recognize the fantastically costly and intricate procedures that had to be undertaken year in and year out to com-

Exhibit III

The American automobile and the longer, lower look



press the mass-styled car? Not only did the car have to be redesigned by means of drawings, clay models, and blueprints, but tools and dies of very hard, cold steel had to be wrought to fine tolerances to stamp out the parts of the new bodies. Currently, Detroit's annual bill for these "special tools" is running upwards of two billion dollars. And finally, every consideration had to be given to accommodating the occupant—his frame, his vision, his position, his comfort. (Am I not right in putting comfort last? If the auto designers also treat it as least important, they would have no apologies to make to designers of lots of things in other fields of fashion—from corsets to platform shoes, boiled shirts to neckties.)

It is as though fashion were a heavy hammer, pounding the car body ever flatter. Perhaps in the beginning all the designer needed to do was lower the roof a few inches, sacrificing a little headroom. But it soon became all too evident that, in order to wage the campaign for the ever longer, lower look, car designers could not leave the mechanics of the automobile to the engineers.

The back seat had to be moved forward from its position above the rear axle. The frame had to be curved downward like a cradle. It was not just a matter of scanting ground clearance, flattening the design of springs, and shifting the position of the differential. Soon the body of the car had to come down around the drive shaft itself; so in the mid-1930s the floor well was introduced. Only an automotive engineer with a flair for history can fully grasp the extent of the interrelated adjustments that were necessary to reposition the steering rod, the universal joint, the clutch case, and the gear case. Surely, all of these adjustments exerted effects on the performance of the car, ranging from steering characteristics to power delivery. Altered angles in the drive mechanism meant realigning the motor; lowering the hood meant redesigning the motor. So stepping up horsepower was not just a road to greater speed. It was necessary to propel the heavier cars.

Style of life

These findings point to a master force that, for want of a better name, we can call the style of life. This force, like Adam Smith's "invisible hand," guides us to take up or abandon different ways of seeing our-

2. For the years 1927-1958, L.H. Nagler, "Passenger Car Dimensions as Related to Parking Requirements," a paper presented to the Highway Research Board, Washington, D.C., on January 8, 1958; for the years 1959-1970, sources of statistics were March 15 issues of *Automotive Industries*; for the years 1971-1974, sources were April 1 statistical issues of *Automotive News*.

selves. It moves remorselessly, in measured steps, from one polarity to another. A shift in one direction absorbs all the energies we lavish on a "new look" for a period of approximately 50 years. This means, of course, a round trip of twice that time—usually a century or more.

Thus, in cases like the automobile, we have just barely had time enough to see the trend go more than one way. Although the internal combustion engine was invented by 1886, the gasoline buggy remained a toy of the rich until after World War I. If my hypothesis about a century-long fashion cycle is correct, the long, low look has run its course (quite aside from the consideration that going any farther in that direction is very close to being anatomically impractical). The profile of the family car from now on will have a more vertical look to it, whatever may be the fate of sports cars. In fact, reports coming out of Detroit tell us that the cars on the drawing boards are at least two feet shorter and somewhat higher, and some of these are already on the road. Moreover, if we look strictly at small cars, which are taking an increasing share of the U.S. market, we see that the ratio of their length to height has already moved toward a more vertical emphasis.

What all of these trends refute is the notion that fashion behavior is random and whimsical. True, the evidence is based on only three forms subject to fashion shifts, but they are things that confront most of us most of the time. When my data on beards are observed in conjunction with Kroeber's on skirt widths, the similarities of periodicity and amplitude seem little short of astounding. And *Exhibit III* on diminishing car height shows a remarkable similarity to the downswing on the moustache curve in *Exhibit II*: both moved downward at the rate of 2% per year (if the one-directional movement is given the value of 100%). By all means let us have more measurements, but for now the few that we have are precious.

Style scarcity or oil shortage?

At this point the reader may be getting a little impatient with all this talk about fashion's influence when it's obvious that the gasoline shortage has caused Detroit to rethink its design policies. The

very long car has become a kind of dinosaur, faced with extinction because of problems with its food supply.

I cannot argue that the gasoline supply situation has had no effect on the kinds and sizes of cars the public is buying. I can say, though, that if there were no gasoline shortage, standard cars would still be getting shorter and higher because a fashion trend has reached its extreme and must change direction.

This brings me to my second main point—namely, that *fashion cycles display a regularity that puts them effectively outside the influence of external events*. These events, however, can always be given as excuses. World War I had no discernible effect on the skirt width cycle. Neither did that war disrupt the mode of shaving popular among men.

Once a new fashion trend is set in motion, there is little—whether it be technological innovation, political edict, functional change, even basic economics—that can be done to stop it or change its course. Therefore, specialists in these fields are of limited use to style policy.

Impact—or lack of it—of the safety razor

If technological innovations did influence the movement of fashion, then we should certainly find evidence of that influence on sideburns, beards, and moustaches. The trend toward removing all facial hair began around 1885 and grew steadily until 1970. So one might suppose that King C. Gillette's introduction of the safety razor, which simplified the task of shaving, would have accelerated the trend toward beardlessness. Yet the data do not bear out such an expectation.

Gillette's safety razor appeared on the market in 1903; by 1905 sales records show that the public was responding to this innovation with some enthusiasm; by 1917 razor sales had risen to more than one million a year and continued to soar, so that by 1960 the company had sold an accumulated worldwide total of almost a half billion razors. But my face counts suggest that other factors were at work in influencing what men did with their whiskers.

The safety razor may well have given a final reinforcement to the clean-shaven style. But by 1905 beardlessness had been on the rise for more than

20 years, and, even more significantly, its rate of advance was nearly as marked before Gillette began to make his fortune as after.

The foiled central planners

Central planners have fared no better than technological innovators. As Professor Marshall I. Goldman, prominent Sovietologist, has shown, even the Russian consumer refuses to buy clothing and other articles of daily life that a state-controlled consumer goods industry turns out, if the industry disregards the negative impact of monotonously repetitious and unimaginative design.³ In fact, consumer resistance has led to excess inventories of headache propor-

enough orders for suede skirts to run a privately owned leather factory for two years until the authorities caught up with him. He ingeniously took over a handbag-producing factory, got shipments of hard-to-procure suede from places up to a thousand miles away, hired a brigade of tailors, and paid their wages, even though they were not registered as workers at the factory. "Uncle Grisha" is now a fugitive, perhaps fleeing straight for the New York garment district—where his initiative and enterprise would be looked on more favorably.

Dr. Goldman concludes: "Doubtless with time and no war the Russians will have their industrialization and their fashion. Nonetheless, before both goals are attained, the centrally planned economy of

1896



1900



1903



tions for Soviet central planners. So it happened that "to promote variety in fashion and reduce the size of unwanted inventories, considerable administrative decentralization has been found necessary in the manufacture of certain consumer goods."⁴

Fashion cannot breathe in the absence of free choice. Recent newspaper accounts show that the demands of the Russian consumer are promoting actions even more uncharacteristic than decentralization. A man known as "Uncle Grisha" apparently had

the Soviet Union may have to submit to some revolutionary changes."⁵

Fashion and function

But surely function plays some part, you say. Actually, in the consumer's lust for design change, utility or functional qualifications play the subordinate role. That this point is not self-evident is largely due to the fact that performance improvements provide pretexts to dress up the appeal of design changes. Of course, a dress must cover and a car must move (more or less, in either instance), but covering and movement are not what people buy.

3. "From Sputniks to Panties," *Business History Review*, Spring-Summer 1963, p. 81.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

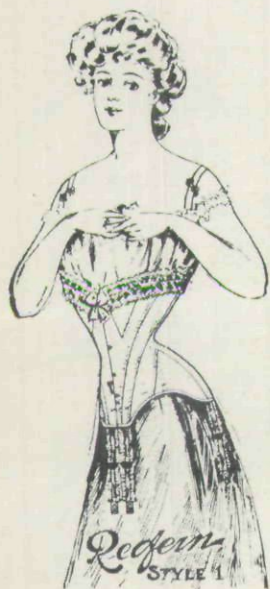
5. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

The wraparound windshield, first introduced in 1954, is an illustration of this principle. It was hailed as a triumph of engineering technology directed toward improving the driver's visual field. I argued just a few years after its introduction that the wrap-around had been introduced not so much to improve the driver's field of vision as to stimulate the eye of the beholder. I got some flak about this from automobile people as well as friends. It was only after a year or two of patient sleuthing that I was able to confirm my suspicion. In the course of an interview with a great automobile stylist, he assured me that the wraparound windshield design had encountered every sort of resistance from the engineers. After recounting in almost gory detail the efforts of those who put the windshield across in the

through the acquisition and possession of things that are comparatively scarce—and, therefore, so much the harder to get.

Fashion creates that scarcity by discarding old forms. But gearing up production for newly styled articles takes time and money. The number of durable goods produced for any purpose in the past will obviously greatly exceed those that can be produced in any recent period of time. The recent, then, is scarce, compared with the total stock. But there would be no practicable way of distinguishing the recent from the old design unless the design of new products were continually altered in a recognizable way. Thus the everchanging consensus of fashionable taste fulfills an all-too-human need.

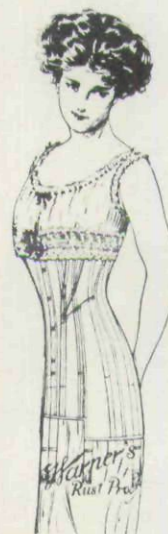
1906



1909



1910



face of such die-hard resistance, the designer thought a moment and added, "You know, visually it wasn't so bad."

Some unfashionable notions about fashion

If function, political edicts, technological innovations, or even economy cannot explain the fashion cycle, then what does? I believe that the explanation lies in the fact that fashion is a behavioral phenomenon, probably growing out of status competition. In jockeying for positions of higher social status, people seek to demonstrate the extent of their purchasing power. One way that they do this is

Imperious consumer

The consumer's restless search for scarcity or novelty would seem to contradict the popular notion that fashion change is forced on the consumer by the producer. But isn't it, rather, the consumer who demands innovation in design from the producers? What is more, it seems to be a small group of innovative consumers that plays a significant role in and provides stimulus to the entire economy.

This small group (invariably regarded as eccentric) conceives and nurtures the nascent style at least a quarter of a century before it comes to be considered even slightly acceptable by either the establishment or the general public. The discerning designer picks

up on what this avant-garde has been doing and selects a style that he or she thinks the general buying public is ready to accept. This is not easy; the true influencers are by no means always just those with the fattest pocketbooks. Then, if the style is right for the time, it is adopted by a fashion elite and eventually filters down to the mass consumption level.

To ascertain that the consumer is no sitting duck in style innovation, you have only to read the histories of taste to find that great connoisseurs were as instrumental in changing styles as producers, and evidently took precedence over the latter. Even where the consumer "arbiter of taste" is faced with a single seller of a product, he can simply abandon

often change the orbit of the taste of a whole epoch . . . in the world of fashion, be it clothes, interior decoration, or flowers, they continually assert fresh values. Madame Eugenia Errazuriz [1859-1951] was such an influence."⁶

Josiah Wedgwood, whose career as a manufacturer of pottery led to his becoming the richest self-made man in England in the late eighteenth century, said nearly the same thing: "Fashion is infinitely superior to merit in many respects; and it is plain from a thousand instances that if you have a favorite child you wish the public to fondle and take notice of you have only to make choice of proper sponsors."⁷ What I discovered about Josiah (and I am sure the same is true of any entrepreneur in the realm of

1913



1917



1919



the product—and has done just that, as the Soviet central planners can attest.

Quiet leaders

Cecil Beaton, a noted photographer, critic, and stage costume designer, once wrote: "Someday, perhaps, a volume will be written about the quiet, authoritative people who, without attracting attention to themselves like noisy comets, yet, by the sheer, gravitational pull of their individual choice, influence and

highly styled goods) was his complete dependence on the example of the great connoisseurs of his day as the arbiters of his design policy—people like Sir William Hamilton, Lord Townley, and the Duchess of Portland.

Still, I am tempted to put forward Mme. Errazuriz as my shining example. Beaton, who has no ax to grind, points her out: "Her effect on the taste of the last fifty years has been so enormous that the whole aesthetic of modern interior decoration . . . can be laid at her remarkable doorstep . . ." including the first use of white walls.⁸ Instrumental in launching both Picasso and Balenciaga on their paths to fame, this woman was one of that small number of great,

6. Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), p. 200.

7. Eliza Metyard, *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood*, vol. 2 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1866), letter to Bentley, July 19, 1779, p. 378.

8. Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion*, p. 200.

innovative consumers to whom others look for a definition of their own tastes. The work of such a consumer is, as Beaton says, like that of an artist, "selecting and giving meaning to the things that make up the daily tenor of existence."⁹

Recommendations to the product planner

In making recommendations—that is, making fashion analysis applicable to the product planner—what is needed is not so much a neat list of do's and don'ts as a few general pointers.

Taste watchers

First of all, since the coming taste will be at complete variance with the current one, the long-range planner should train his or her eye to select from among all the minority forms of exhibition of taste those that seem most outrageous to the conventional taste. This may sound a little like brainstorming. But as a most flagrant illustration, look at the VW Beetle when it was introduced around 1950. Nothing could have been more at variance with the solid-gold Cadillac, the American dream car at the time. Nonetheless, as soon as a mere one or two thousand reasonably well-balanced Americans had bought the Beetle, the prognosticator should have taken it seriously as a harbinger of a popular new style of car.

No planner, short- or long-term, should concentrate his attention on what producers and their professional engineers are doing to the exclusion of what amateurs (collectors, hobbyists, sports enthusiasts, and buffs) are doing. Hobby magazines, for one thing, are treasuries of information, and are usually accurate because their readers demand accuracy. For example, such journals pick up on antique crazes for period styles of a variety of articles, whether they are clothes, furniture, or cars. It is sociologically unthinkable that if millions of people are opting for Edwardian men's suits and women's dresses, Tiffany glass or Art Deco, or Duesenbergs and Bugattis, such associations are not going to have some effect on what people are looking for in new products (in terms of shape, texture, ornamentation, and all the rest). The runaway success of the British Broadcasting Company's Masterpiece Theatre television series

"Upstairs, Downstairs" should speak volumes to tastewatchers in all walks of life—and to those in merchandizing.

Harley J. Earl, the great GM stylist (who worked there from 1926 to 1963), stressed this point in a letter to me of October 23, 1963:

"For the last ten years I have been on the Federal International Automobile Contest Committee for the United States, and I am also serving as National Commissioner of NASCAR, the National Stock Car Racing Association. You may think this peculiar, but I have always felt it allowed me to be in contact with the people who really live automobiles and everything I got from them was spontaneous and not channeled."

Earl's comment not only bolsters the case for paying attention to hobbyists, but it should also reinforce my earlier point that the producer cannot dictate fashion terms to the consumer. It may seem a long way from the pit stop to the rarefied strata in which Mme. Errazuriz worked her magic; but if we consider the race car driver and the Chilean woman as diverse examples of consumers, then we may be able to see who really decides what style will be popular at what time.

Sic transit

Equally important, the product planner should keep in mind that while some successful designs are so persistent that they seem almost immortal, they never are. I have already talked about the automobile's long, low look as being merely a passing fashion. All too frequently top professional designers themselves are quite blind to the transitory nature of the most impressive of design directions.

I remember a comment that was made several years ago when I visited the styling division of one of the major automobile companies. The man who was then the company's top designer said to me with all the tact he could muster: "Surely, you aren't going so far as to claim that the long, low look is anything less than the ultimate standard in automobile design?" When I answered that indeed I was going that far, adding that we should even be prepared for a return of the upright look, he and his associates looked at me with tolerant incredulity.

9. Ibid., p. 215.

Steady progressions

Finally, the product planner should, above all, make himself familiar with the fashion cycle for his particular product. He may not find the century-long span about which I have spoken, but he will find a definite pattern bounded by extremes. If a planner knows where in the cycle his current design is, he can fit design to changes in consumer taste. This holds true for both the long- and short-range planner.

Perhaps the short-range planner may ask what use a 50-year design shift is to him. But, after all, a 50-year change amounts to an average yearly adjustment of 2%. Once a product cycle is plotted, the planner should be able to see at what yearly rate the design moves toward its extreme limits. For the products surveyed in this article, the annual rates of progression varied from a low of about 1.5% to a high of 3%. I suspect that most products' yearly rates of design change fall within this range. On this basis the product planner should have a sporting chance of deciding what the buyer will want next year or ten years from now.

However, most of my observations about the scientific possibilities for design planning are offered to people outside of fashion's traditional home—women's dress. It would be presumptuous for me to try to tell Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, or their humbler competitors that they should be mindful of such obvious things as the "trickle-down" phenomenon. The garment industry has learned this lesson so well that it's second nature. Yves St. Laurent may seek inspiration from the street, but the proprietor of Au Pair Apparel, Inc., occupying the twentieth floor of 820 Seventh Avenue, can't see down that far. If he looks down too often, he is likely to jump.

What I am arguing, finally, is that fashion, in its remorseless march from one polarity to the next, is not all that unpredictable. Its predictability, even if it is not exact, should prevent planners from standing pat and should help them prepare for any new twists of the consumer's fancy.

The quest for civilization

Everything we see done all around us is a response to man's need to transcend nature in the raw. It requires no apology, only understanding. In a world where so many substantive things are either commonplace or standardized, it makes no sense to refer to the rest as false, fraudulent, frivolous, or immaterial. The world works according to the aspirations and needs of its actors, not according to the arcane, ordained, or moralizing logic of people who pine for another age—an age which, in any case, seems different from today's largely because of the fact that its observers were then children. In the world of adults, the seller has no choice but to try to understand the problems and aspirations of the actors to whom he directs his efforts, and then try to find ways to hook onto these for his commercial advantage. Both sides will generally benefit from the effort. The heightening of expectations and the embellishment of life that are the intentions of church

architecture and the poetry of T.S. Eliot are no more worthy for the sensibilities to which they appeal than the appeal to the senses we observe in Elliot Noyes's design of computers and lipstick containers or William Bernbach's composition of lithesome advertising copy. In both cases the "product" is what people feel with their senses, not just sterile objects like granite, paint, steel, copper wire, and letters on a page. In both cases the artisan and the poet each correctly assumes that his audience requires more than sterile functionality—that people are trying to solve the problems of life and living at levels that transcend pure primitive functionality.

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