

LAURA ASHLEY:

Dressing up the Past

Angela McRobbie

The pleasant comfortable image of English life conjured up in the clothes, fabrics, and furnishings of Laura Ashley partly accounts for the fond tones of the establishment assessing her life in the light of her recent death.

But to praise Laura Ashley for evoking old England is no less shortsighted than a quick dismissal on the grounds that her ideal woman was an earth mother in the kitchen baking bread. Laura Ashley's clothes are, and have been, as reflective of shifting definitions of femininity as Burton's new image marks the emergence of the smart casual man (Derek Hatton being the best example.) If the most recent Ashley branch on Regent Street is anything to go by, the slightly scruffy Posy Simmonds mum has given way to the preppy professional woman. The clothes here are less uniform than the Burberrys and wool skirts of the elegant but avowedly unstylish upper-middle-classes. But they are ladylike and low key. If teachers, social workers and middle-income, middle-range professionals now shop in Next, where colours are at least vibrant, and some gestures are made to designer shapes, Laura Ashley seems set on dressing 'lady' doctors and 'lady' lawyers.

In the early 70s it was teachers, along with girl students wanting a change from jeans, who were Ashley's most loyal customers. This was the time when Biba girls were shot in soft focus, demure and sylph-like but with overtones of auto-eroticism and drug-induced calm. Elsewhere there was such a rush to Forbidden Fruit for their expensive, lavishly embroidered Indian smocks. Laura Ashley borrowed from both.



She replaced the Indian embroidery with English floral 'granny' print, and removed the deviant drug connotations which accompanied rural dropping out. She did this by focusing on the image of the mother. Even though many of her admirers were in fact working, the idea of motherhood had a resonance then which now seems like a luxury. Laura Ashley's granny print smocks expressed the best and the worst of that particular ideological moment. They suggested a ripe, fertile femininity where sex was directly linked with motherhood, rather like *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The female body was allowed to find its own shape in these simple but voluminous dresses. Although the publicity shots made strongly nostalgic references back to the Victorian or Edwardian girlhood, the clothes themselves were more in line with *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. Ashley started off a mother working from her own kitchen. In her dresses breasts could expand, babies could be fed, stomachs could rise and fall and guests could be entertained in the evening. From the vantage point of the lean mean 80s, this sounds horrible, but in marketing terms it was unfaultable and

at least it put mothers into the picture.

These clothes also gave the illusion of being *almost* made at home. They could just as easily have been run up in the living room, and suggested the satisfaction of small-scale domestic production. This set them apart from the tacky world of mass fashion. It also paved the way for a new and highly successful approach to selling. A whole range of domestic products, from country-style muesli to granary bread, now utilise this conscious referencing to a cottage industry type of production. Ashley's country motif worked in the same way. What she was marketing was not so much country life, as the *idea* of country life. She created the country inside the centrally-heated town house, where stripped pine formed a calming background against which other quasi-rural activities could be pursued.

Following a traditional middle-class pattern the home then became the country *within* the city. Not as what it might be for youth or the working classes, somewhere to be escaped from. In fashion terms it was this which marked out Ashley's work. Almost the entire history of modern fashion is devoted, one way or

another, to romanticising the city and to using it as an exciting backcloth against which leggy models stride unhindered. Ashley tried to make it fashionable to stay at home.

It's not surprising then that the more recent collection avoids any of the overtones of the crisis-ridden 80s. Even the more softened signs of post-punk are missing. The tones are subdued, the prints Morris miniatures. Where designers have been using an inverted pyramid as a basic body shape, Ashley has replaced her 'natural' form with a lean rectangle, reminiscent of Princess Di. The muslin blouses, fair isle sweaters, and slim wool skirts imply dressing for the town rather than the city. Of course, in line with the 80s, these also are clothes for work - unobtrusive, conservative and designed to merge with the oak panelling of the board room. For 'evening wear' Ashley retains the velvet and white lace collars.

There is no enthusiasm, no vitality and little life in the new Laura Ashley. Only tradition. In 1985 she offers an image of England held only by blinkered Americans. Her women were better off blousy and jolly at home.



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