



Trouser-skirt: Breaching the boundaries of good taste

FASHION

## The New Legshow

**In a year when hem-lines have been going up Sarah Mower looks at what makes the fashion industry tick in the harsh economic climate of the late 1980s.**

Fashion editors seem to have forgotten just who it was who invented that hoary formula about the length of skirts being related to the economy: when it's up, they're up, when it's down, they're down - or was it the other way round? In any case, 1987 has seen much groping for a reason for the sudden, dramatic and controversial shortening of hemlines, but falling back on the pseudo-scientific rationale has proved no help at all. In the sixties, it was said, the mini skirt showed optimism in a buoyant economy; in 1987, with a crash on our hands, the short skirt is because ... well, nobody quite knows what, but it's brought on a great flurry in the headless chicken school of fashion theory.

One reason the industry prefers to find a mysterious mythical-mechanical answer is that many like to forget that, actually, we have short skirts because fashion editors wanted short skirts. Anna Wintour spent her brief but decisive reign as editor of *Vogue* making sure that nothing longer than knee-length disgraced her magazine. Yards of surplus hem were ruthlessly lopped off designer samples before they could be photographed for the ultimate glossy's pages - often to the great chagrin of the people who had devised them, who never meant their work to be part of the new legshow. Once the shortened version had been seen in *Vogue*, the retailers began to order skirts four inches shorter than the length they were originally shown at, and the consumer was left with a choice: the 'modern', *Vogue*-endorsed length, or the 'droopy' long one. Much has been made of the 'bravery' of new short skirt, but for those with pretensions to being fashionable, the truly brave choice has been to stay with longer

lines, for fashion dictatorship has returned with a vengeance.

The short skirt has certainly been effective in gathering up interest and giving the industry a clear look for the late 80s - in uncertain times it has provided the illusion that here is something definite to concentrate on. All looks must have their champions, and a new hero has been found in the Paris couturier Christian Lacroix, whose first own-label collection last July was heralded with as much publicity as Christian Dior's new look exactly 40 years before.

Lacroix is significant for more than just the brevity of his hemlines. In pre-crash months, he was the perfect symbol and justification of the mood of spend-thrift, devil-may-care opulence in fashion. That he is a couturier is important: his work is not off-the-peg, but made to measure the individual customer - a woman who is one of the 2,000-strong international clique who alone support the Paris couture houses by buying dresses that cost upwards of £8,000 a go.

The world thought couture was dead when Mary Quant brought out cheap, democratic mass-made fashion for the young in the 1960s. Lacroix represents an absolute about-face: his are clothes for the super-rich elite to whom the even moderately fashionable and moderately well-off are now, hopelessly, encouraged to aspire. In fashion politics, he is the standard-bearer for the renewed power of Paris as the world's one-and-only fashion capital - a position it has not enjoyed for the past 20 years. Though inter-house jealousy has been keen (particularly at Yves Saint Laurent, who has jibbed at being deposed as king of couture), overall, a triumphal smile of self-satisfaction spread through the xenophobic Parisian

fashion salons this year: Lacroix was there to show those upstart Italians, Americans, Japanese and English: 'what for'.

But the 'discovery' of Lacroix pre-dated the crash. News of trouble on Wall Street filtered through at the Paris collections just as Lacroix was showing his 'Luxe' line: a staggeringly expensive range of dollyish, decorative party frocks embellished with hand-made hearts and roses, buoyed up on mini-tutus of frothing net. Pundits were too carried away on the hype and the conscience-free enjoyment of technical virtuosity and couture 'wit' to think how these clothes might look in a cold economic climate.

We are still wondering. In the short term nothing dramatic gave: Lacroix took the collection to Bergdorf Goodman in New York at the beginning of October and sold \$350,000's worth of frocks. But the fact is this: Lacroix's 'madcap' influence

has left us with a genre of frothy little-lady clothes that suddenly look 'ridiculously out of step with the sombre mood of the times.

Not that they weren't fun, for a moment, as an antidote to the pinstriped straight-jacket of the executive suit. But the Lacroix approach is expressly designed for the non-working woman - for the idle rather than the unemployed, that is - and, with its constricted waists, plunging necklines, high heels and short skirts is singularly uncomfortable and unsuitable for earning a living in. Except, perhaps, in the *boudoir*.

So here we have it: will women, in a climate of economic fear, choose frothy escapism in a line of fashion that implies dependence upon inherited wealth or sugar daddies? I guess not. My money for next year is on the 'utility look' - the revival of the austere clothing of World War II - so much more in keeping with the outlook we're facing now. •



Sweetie Pie: Dressing for Lacroix's born again dolly bird



Gianni Versace's inflated idea of wit in fashion