

RATIONALIZING BEAUTY:
ARTISTIC DRESS REFORM IN AMERICA

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Abstract

After a brief discussion of the failure of Bloomer reform—the most famous nineteenth-century effort to reform women’s popular dress—this paper examines the longer-lived and more effective dress reform movement of the 1880s and 1890s known in America as “correct”, “rational”, or “artistic” dress. Although the movement began in England with a group of male artists, the American women who picked it up made it a specifically American movement and a specifically female one. American rational-dress reformers deliberately avoided linking women’s clothing with political or economic goals, and instead treated fashion as worthy of reform in and of itself. In their publications and in the interviews they gave to the popular press, these reformers displayed an astute awareness of the importance of fashion to most women and a determination to recreate fashionable dress as something that was both comfortable and attractive. Their efforts preceded the popularization of more casual clothing styles in America and in Europe, a cultural change that concretely impacted the everyday lives of a large number of women. Through this example, this paper raises questions about the relationship between clothing and culture: changes in fashion are typically assumed to be precipitated by cultural shifts, but, in the case of late nineteenth-century dress reform, clothing itself was deliberately and carefully reformed, and cultural change followed.

Key words: dress reform, artistic dress, aesthetic dress

In the United States, women’s dress reform began in the mid nineteenth century with the Bloomer reform movement, followed by undergarment reform that was particularly focused on the constraints of petticoats and the corset. By the late nineteenth century, a more effective movement began that was known as “correct dress”, “rational dress” or more commonly, “aesthetic or artistic dress”. In order to examine artistic dress in the United States, it is necessary to provide context with regard the origin of the movement in England, as well as to briefly discuss the earlier reform movements that laid the foundation for artistic dress reform in America.

The Bloomer Reform as Private/Political Statement

The Industrial Revolution changed nearly every aspect of human existence, including the clothing people wore. Men's garments simplified into the basic components of the business suit (shirt, trousers, jacket, possibly vest) that is still worn today and upper- and middle-class women picked up the burden of conspicuous display, wearing the rich, heavy fabrics and closely-fitted styles that were no longer deemed practical for men. A man's wealth could now be judged by the wardrobes of his wife and daughters, rather than by his own dress, and a woman's worth became equated with her beauty, rather than with the economic or reproductive facilities she brought to a union.

In America, this change occurred rather abruptly. In just a few decades, the relative openness of women's economic opportunities—and the relatively relaxed female dress—that characterized the early Colonial Period solidified into the more structured gender roles and costumes of early industrial society. The granddaughters of the revolution dressed in garments that were much tighter, heavier, and more voluminous than their foremothers had, and the undergarments which supported these styles—particularly the bone-lined corset—became increasingly tight and constricting. The fashions of the 1830s and 1840s seemed to be designed to literally keep a woman in her place. It is therefore no surprise that the first group of American women to attempt to reform the political and economic rights of women were also interested in reforming the clothing that they wore. And yet, as clothing was popularly understood to be a form of self-expression and individuality as well as a social signifier, these earlier reformers downplayed the political significance of their sartorial changes.

Elizabeth Smith Miller, a lifelong supporter of what is now considered the first wave of the American women's right movement, claimed she was simply hot and tired the morning, in the spring of 1851, that she came in from her garden in New York state and altered one of her full-length skirts into a short skirt and pair of trousers—a style soon adopted by friend Amelia Bloomer and then publicized as the “Bloomer” in national newspapers. Miller claimed to be simply tired of the look of the reform costume when, after years of wearing Bloomers on the

streets and in the dining rooms of New York State and of Washington, D.C., where her father served in Congress, she returned to conventional clothing. Her immediate family was supportive of her wardrobe choice and the crowds on the streets were largely indifferent. What she could not bear, what drove her back to fashionable dress, was the way that her shortened skirts draped around her knees when she sat in an armchair. “The [Bloomer] dress looked tolerably well in standing and walking, but in sitting it produced an awkward, uncouth effect. It was a perpetual violation of my love of the beautiful (Smith, 1892, p. 494).”

For Amelia Bloomer, it was purportedly a change of setting which undid her resolve. Although she found that the Bloomer costume handicapped the process of making friends when she and her husband moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1855, Bloomer was determined to remain loyal to her comfortable and functional attire, until the high winds in Council Bluffs rendered her shortened skirts exceedingly dysfunctional by gusting beneath their hems and tossing them up over her head. She tried weighting the hems of her skirts with buckshot, but this only led to bruised shins (Fischer, 2001, p. 104). And so she returned to long skirts. Other reformers who adopted and then abandoned the Bloomer costume justified the decision as a shrewd political move. Frequent public speakers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony complained that when they wore the Bloomer costume, their audiences were more interested in their clothing than in their thoughts on women’s rights. Thus many first-wave feminists returned to conventional dress in order to avoid making their personal sartorial choices a distraction from the larger public issues that were their greater concern.

The Bloomer did cross the Atlantic before dying its quiet death, reversing the usual flow of fashions from Europe and England to the United States. Just a year after the Bloomer was invented by an American, it made it into the London papers. The first description, complete with illustration, of the Bloomer costume in England, appeared in July of 1851, in the *Illustrated London News*. This piece reprinted an article that had been written by a Boston physician, which praised the Bloomer for health reasons (Cunningham, 2003, p. 66). The accompanying illustration (Figure 1), however, portrays the bloomer as a tasteful and attractive garment, worn by a fashionable and very feminine woman (complete with bouquet of flowers in her hands). It

wasn't long, however, before the Bloomer became an object of fun in the British popular press. *Punch*, in particular, made great sport of the gender-bending behavior that was supposed to be the inevitable result of such "masculine" garb (Figure 2).

In England, as in America, the Bloomer soon disappeared from the streets, retaining a place in the wardrobe of the everyday woman only as spa attire (to be worn while "taking the water cure"), as a work garment worn by rural women, or as exercise apparel (Severa, 1995, pp. 204-205). The decline of the Bloomer did not mark the end of women's attempts to reform popular fashion. Future efforts, however, would be less prominent and less politicized.



Figure 1: This image, which appeared in *the Illustrated London News* in 1851, depicts the "American Ladies'" Bloomer costume as a tasteful and elegant alternative to traditional attire. ("The American Ladies' New Costume", from *the Illustrated London News*, July 19, 1851. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)



Figure 2: Not long after the *Illustrated London News* printed its elegant illustration, *Punch* depicted women in the "American costume" as square-chinned, cigar-smoking radicals who most certainly did attract unwanted attention in the street. ("Bloomerism – an American Custom", created by John Leech, printed in *Punch*, 1851. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)

Undergarment Reform Provides a Foundation for Change

Following the demise of the Bloomer as an item of everyday attire, fashions did what they have always done—they changed. Throughout the 19th century, changes in fashion originated in France, and were then adopted by women in America, England, and other European countries, who studied French fashion magazines and the dress of the Paris-based upper classes. In the mid-1850s, the five to ten petticoats that women wore beneath their skirts to create fullness were replaced by the “cage crinoline”, a tape-stiffened pyramid hung from the waist that, although mocked in the popular press as one of fashion’s excesses, was a welcome liberation from the weight of multiple petticoats. In the 1860s, the full, round skirt of the previous decade morphed into an oval shape, with a flattened front and full, extended back. This fashion evolved into the bustle of the early 1870s, in which the skirt fabric was secured in a padded bulge behind the waist and, later in the decade, leveraged lower on the legs, almost behind the knees. By the end of the decade, skirts had slimmed down remarkably and were worn in a fashion known as the “tie back,” characterized by an extremely close fit to the front of the legs and the hips, and gathered fullness against the back of the knees and thighs. This style sometimes required women to tie the fronts of their skirts to the back of their legs, utilizing straps sewn into the seams (Severa, 1995, pp. 292-319).

What remained consistent during these decades was the perceived need of a corset. The later, seemingly more reasonable, slender skirts required a woman to lace her corset even more tightly than she did when wearing a crinoline, in order to create the desired hour-glass shape between the bust, waist, and hips. The corset was a central item of upper- and middle-class women’s wardrobes in America and Europe throughout the nineteenth century, defining dress that was fashionable and socially acceptable. A woman not wearing a corset risked being associated with “loose” (meaning loosely-laced) women, specifically prostitutes, or the rural poor (Roberts, 1977, p. 565). It also meant that fashionable dress, designed for a corseted figure, simply would not fit correctly. Besides reducing the size of a woman’s waist, corsets presented a smooth base upon which fashionable dress bodices were closely fitted, resulting in a tight, wrinkle-free fit with very little ease.

Throughout the nineteenth century, corsets were also an easy point of attack for those who questioned the health effects and comfort of women's fashionable attire. Doctors and healthy-living advocates linked corsets to low energy and lack of vigor, and compared corset wearing to the practice of Chinese foot binding (Roberts, 1977, p. 561). The first reform undergarments were "union suits", patented in America in 1868. While not necessarily taking the place of a corset, this combination shirt and drawers shifted the weight of a woman's skirts onto her shoulders and kept her warm beneath her dress. The Emancipation Suit, consisting of an unboned bodice and a gathered compartment for the breasts, was first manufactured as an American corset replacement in 1875. Other un-boned underbodices were available on the American market by 1880 (Figure 3) (Cunningham, 2008). As with the Bloomer movement, Americans were on the vanguard of undergarment reform. Those interested in improving the health and comfort of women's dress in England and in Europe consulted with American reformers and patented and sold reform undergarments based upon American designs (Cunningham, 2003. p. 82).

In addition to improving women's health and overall well-being, the availability of new types of foundational garments made possible new styles and silhouettes of dress. Other factors, including the wider range of accepted public activities for women and the increasing eclecticism of fashion in the period, rendered the late 1880s ripe for dress reform. Costume historian Joan Severa (1995) connects the decade's increasing availability of fabric, trimmings, patterns, and sewing machines to a new level of personalization and experimentation in American dress (p. 372). Parisian designers, so influential in shaping fashion around the world, were similarly affected by a broadening of possibility. In 1890, *Harper's Bazaar* printed the following observation: "In the pages of the Bazaar for years Emmeline Raymond has reported what is worn in Paris....She had repeatedly told us that, as the seasons go by, new forms become popular without displacing those that prevailed before, until *now* she tells us that there are almost as many styles as wearers (Steele, 1890, p. 955)." The French even normalized the Bloomer, at least as a bicycling garment. In 1893, the *Arena* reported that the "divided bicycle dress is so common in Paris as to excite no remark."



Figure 3: This corset replacement, manufactured by C. Bates and Co. of Boston, was advertised as a reform garment. Note the buttons at the waist to which a skirt could be attached. ("Garments in all styles. Bates Waist (perfect substitute for corsets.)", from *Youth's companion*, Apr 3, 1890. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)

French provocateurs George Sand and Sarah Bernhardt wore men's trousers in public, even when not cycling, an act of rebellion which caused a stir but was certainly not the most scandalous thing either had ever done (Cunningham, 2003, pp. 73-74).

Artistic Dress Introduced and “Rationalized”

In England, the most prominent innovators in post-Bloomer dress reform were famous men rather than famous women. During the 1850s, Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais cultivated a subculture of “natural” beauty which, among other elements, idealized the free-flowing movement of loose fabric over uncorseted bodies. In their paintings and illustrations, these artists depicted their female subjects in dresses reminiscent of medieval or Greek gowns, sometimes relying upon pieces of draped fabric to create the illusion of classical garments and sometimes commissioning clothing in this style for their models to wear (Cunningham, 2003, p. 105). These painters were associated with, and in many cases friends with, proponents of the Arts and Craft Movement headed by William Morris, which condemned the cheapness and uniformity of fashionable, mass-produced items and encouraged the production of individualized items of art and décor using traditional methods. The loose, draped, often waist-less garments depicted by these painters and then worn by the wives and followers of both the Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts proponents (Figure 4) came to be known as artistic or aesthetic dress.

The principles of aesthetic dress came to United States in the 1880s through a variety of sources, including essays by William Morris and other art critics in popular magazines and the lecture tour that Oscar Wilde undertook in association with the American tour of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operetta *Patience*. Under titles like “Slaves of Fashion” and “Women’s Dress”, Wilde’s lectures condemned the corset, praised Japanese and classical art, and advised women to suspend the weight of their clothing from their shoulders rather than cinch it to their waists (Cunningham, 2003, p. 135). The Americans who picked up Morris’s and Wilde’s message were not famous artists or writers but reform-minded upper-class women, mainly New Englanders.



Figure 4: The families of William Morris and the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones in 1874. All of the females in this photograph are wearing what were considered artistic or aesthetic gowns. Left to right: Edward Jones (Burne-Jones's father), Margaret Burne-Jones, Edward Burne-Jones, Philip Burne-Jones, Georgiana Burne-Jones, May Morris, William Morris, Jane Morris, and Jenny Morris. (Source: Wikimedia commons; public domain image.)

These women took aesthetic dress out of the male-dominated art world and made it a women's movement, for women and by women. While the British aesthetic dress movement was part of a subculture which questioned all aspects of modern life, American reformers focused on the single issue of improving women's everyday lives by improving their clothing. Instead of the descriptors "aesthetic" or "artistic," American reformers favored the terms "correct" or "rational" dress. In the succinct formulation of American reformer Helen Gilbert Ecob (1892), "Artistic dress is common sense in dress (p. 208)."

The blossoming of the American artistic dress reform in the late 1880s was marked by a cluster of publications. In 1887, Annie Jenness Miller printed the first issue of *Dress* (Figure 5), a monthly magazine which presented her opinions on healthy living and attractive clothing and served as a catalogue for the reform garments and undergarments she designed. In conjunction with the publication of her magazine, Miller began what became a much-reported-on lecture series. In front of audiences of women and the occasional curious man in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles, she appeared in various examples of her reform garments and spoke colorfully and energetically of their advantages over conventional dress. The reform periodical *The Arena* took up the question of dress reform around the time that Jenness Miller began lecturing. Under the editorial guidance of journalist Benjamin Orange Flower—the only prominent male among the American artistic reformers—the magazine printed articles on conventional and reform clothing by Flower, Frances Russell, Frances Steele and others. In 1892, Steele and her sister Elizabeth Livingston Steele Adams published a monograph on artistic dress, titled *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*. That same year, Helen Gilbert Ecob (1892) authored a similar text, *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals*.

Lessons Learned from Previous Failure

One problem repeatedly addressed by proponents of the American rational-dress movement—and completely absent from the discourse surrounding British aesthetic dress—was the disappointment of the Bloomer costume. The failure of this first attempt to improve women's wardrobes haunted American reformers, even forty years after the fact. Every American who had something to say about artistic or rational dress had a theory as to why the Bloomer failed and expressed a determination to avoid the mistakes of the past. Frances Russell blamed the conspicuousness of the short skirt. Annie Jenness Miller accused the Bloomer reformers of wearing their costumes at times and in places that were not appropriate. Helen Gilbert Ecob believed that the Bloomer simply wasn't beautiful enough. Ecob (1892) wrote, "Their costume



Figure 5: Annie Jenness Miller's publication changed names regularly. Variations include *Dress: A Monthly Magazine*, *Dress: the Jenness Miller Magazine*, *Jenness Miller Monthly*, and *Woman's World*. This particular cover is from the April 1896 issue of what was then called the *Jenness Miller Monthly*. (Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)

met only partially the demands of hygiene and utterly ignored the laws of beauty and it has made the subject of rational dress a byword and a hissing (p. 129).” Jenness Miller was so determined to distance herself from the Bloomer failure that she refused to even use the word “reform”. In an 1888 article titled “Improvement in Dress”, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* quoted her as saying, “I dislike the phrase ‘dress reform’. Nobody wants to be reformed. If a man proposes to reform men he is liable to have his head broken. Women do not break heads, but what is quite as bad, they won’t reform. Therefore, I prefer the phrase ‘dress improvement’ (p.9).”

Women’s studies scholar Amy Kesselman (1991) has characterized Bloomer reform as “an exemplary action model of social change that assumed that a few intrepid individuals who had the courage to live according to principle would inspire other people to transform the world (p. 495).” American rational dress improvers very clearly stated that women could not and should not be expected to dress “intrepidly,” or have principles other than beauty and good taste

on their minds when getting dressed in the morning. This group of reformers judged the personal to be so important that it merited a reformation on its own terms, of its own terms, and according to standards that did not ask for an unreasonable sacrifice. As a group, they were astutely aware of the importance of female beauty and female dress and refused to advocate any changes which would undermine the personal pride and social comfort a woman experienced when she was well dressed.

While deference to beauty was a defining characteristic of post-Bloomer reform in America, reformers did not speak monolithically on the subject or rely on any party line. In their writings, they exhibit great insight into the personal and public significance of a woman's clothing, insight grounded in their own inclinations and experiences. Frances Russell (1891) celebrated dress as a social signifier: "Every woman's dress expresses, not only something of her own individuality, but it expresses, even more, her unity with the race, the common history, and the status of her sex (p. 356)." Helen Ecob (1892) appealed to the authority of a popular textbook: "Professor William James in his *Principles of Psychology* says 'The body is the innermost part of material self in each of us. The clothes come next. The old saying that the human person is composed of three parts—body, soul, and clothes—is more than a joke (p. 227).'" Frances Steele (1892) grounded her view theologically: "If women, always and everywhere, desire to be beautiful, that desire is a God-given endowment, pure and right, not necessarily misleading or evil (p. 507)." In *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*, Steele and Adams (1892) link beautiful clothing to peace of mind: "We have all heard of the woman who declared that the 'the sense of being well dressed gives a feeling of inward tranquility which religion is powerless to bestow.' Courage and clothes have so much to do with one another. A well-ordered dress helps to put one at leisure from one's self (p. 14)."

These proclamations appear in the first paragraphs or chapters of American artistic reform literature. By starting with such acknowledgements, the writers establish an understanding with their readers—while they are asking people to change what they are wearing, they are not (as the Bloomer reformers were viewed to have done) trying to bully them into adopting unattractive styles for the sake of a political statement or even a healthier life. Beauty

was *the* primary concern for this group of reformers. Fannie E. Whiting, a member of the Chicago Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress, used an interview with the *Chicago Daily* to reassure the public as to the society's non-radical aesthetic aims. "Every other society I have heard of, in trying to do away with the absurdities in woman's dress sacrificed beauty entirely to comfort and utility," she said. "We do not intend to do that at all. I think it is every woman's duty to make herself as sweet and attractive as possible (1888, p. 25)."

The Corset Reconsidered, Again

Like previous dress reformers, rational-dress advocates had nothing good to say about the corset, but the criticisms of the 1880s and 1890s took a new tactic, focusing on aesthetics rather than personal health. Health arguments do appear in American artistic dress reform literature, but healthy diet and exercise are presented as steps toward the larger goal of achieving true beauty, rather than as ends in themselves. Helen Gilbert Ecob (1892) dedicates six of sixteen chapters in *The Well-Dressed Woman* to the deleterious effects of fashionable dress on the female physique, with the aim of convincing women to abandon their corsets in order to be able to draw the deep breaths supposedly necessary to the development of noble traits of character, such as "courage, self-reliance, self-control, truth of being, spiritual freedom (p. 23)." Steele and Adams (1892) celebrate physical attractiveness as the ultimate aim of exercise: "No woman can be ideally beautiful without the full glow of health, or without such muscular development as proves vigorous well being (p. 49)." In an interview with the *New York Times* conducted at the 1894 Christian League Fair in New York City, Annie Jenness Miller went so far as to suggest that women should exercise only in order to develop figures which would be suitable to her designs.

Artistic dresses were a clear departure from conventional fashion. Artistic dress was not only designed for natural figures; it was meant to hang from the shoulders and drape over the figure in clinging folds. A corseted figure, even without the corset, did not offer the base that these drapes and folds relied upon. Bodies which had been forced into corsets in adolescence or young adulthood became so adapted to their constraints that they retained a corseted silhouette

even when the support was removed. In an 1887 article in *Godey's Lady's Book*, Rosamond Dale Owen describes the difficult physical process of abandoning her corset:

For six months I felt as though I were 'coming to pieces', as I have heard one woman express it. That made me realize more fully how abnormal I had grown, my muscles had become so weak that they were unable to support me. By degrees, I found I was growing much stronger and larger. I had never worn tight stays, but I grew four inches around the waist and across the chest the first year after I left them off (pp. 152-153).

In *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*, Steele and Adams (1892) anticipated the concerns of women who had come to rely on their corsets (Figure 6). To the woman who was supposed to complain that she couldn't sit up without a corset, they advised exercise: "You have large muscles. If they are weak from disuse, train them (p. 33)." To the "very stout" woman who was supposed to protest that she should "should look like a tub without a corset", they counseled a sense of perspective: "It is no worse to look like a tub than an hourglass. You will move more easily, and therefore your size will be less apparent, if your clothing is loose (p. 33)." And to the woman who might simply believe that she was "too fat" to wear artistic dresses, they cautioned, rather pitilessly: "'Reduce and conceal [the fat]; do not force it upon the public notice in a conventional gown (p. 33).'"

Reforming Beauty Itself

The new look advocated for and worn by rational-dress reformers required a new body, which required exercise and the possibly painful loss of a corset's support. Although artistic gowns were presented as more comfortable and easier to wear than conventional garments, the effort of making oneself ready for the new styles could be significant. This later group of dress reformers, anticipating the difficult question of why any women would or should bother to make the effort, supplied a simple answer: to be more beautiful, nothing more and nothing less. The potential danger with his reasoning was that most women wearing conventional dress already considered themselves and their clothing beautiful. The challenge for American artistic reformers was to



Figure 6: The ideal versus reality. In this 1893 cartoon, artist Charles Taylor makes fun of dress reform “converts” eager to don artistic dress before their figures are ready for it. The “popular advocate of dress reform” in the top panel may well have been Annie Jenness Miller. (“The point of view”, from *Puck*, reprinted in *The picture magazine*. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)

convince these women that they were wrong. These reformers were not merely trying to alter what women wore, but attempting to transform their notion of beauty itself. In this effort, they shared a common goal with the British artists from whom they had borrowed the basic principles of their “new” artistic designs.

It was a considerable philosophical challenge to disconnect what was fashionable from what was beautiful in a culture which equated the two. Reform articles cast fashion into question

by printing side-by-side sketches of women wearing extreme examples of the past thirty years' fashions—a belled hoop skirt, a shelf-like bustle, a tubular tie-back—and asking how such a wide variety of garments could all possibly represent beauty (Figure 7). Writers suggested that women view these fashionable silhouettes as distortions rather than styles—“women would be in despair if Nature had formed them as fashion makes them appear (Ecob, 1892, p. 182)”—and suggested that beauty was an eternal standard in contrast to fashion, which changed every few years. Frances Russell (1892) added a final touch to this argument by citing an acknowledged authority on beauty, the poet John Keats:

They say it is for beauty's sake that woman submits to the discomfort and restraint of her costume, but how many of the styles of dress depicted in a quarter of a century's file of fashion plates can stand the test of Keats's famous line—‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever.’ Each one is declared ugly when it has gone out of fashion (p. 499).

In addition to impugning the beauty of conventional dress, reformers questioned its theological soundness. Fashionable women were accused of two offenses—the sin of hubris and the crime of devaluing human health and thus human life. Frances Russell (1892) warned women that donning a corset was tantamount to suggesting that God's work needed correction:

Are professed followers of Jesus bearing witness to the truth of God's creation when they falsify the human shape and represent women as having the outline of hour-glass, churn, pyramid, or dromedary? Women is not hallowing her Creator's name, she is not glorifying her Maker, when she tacitly accuses Him of bad taste in the formation of her body...(p. 501).

Ecob (1892) asserted that God had meant women to be as strong and healthy as men, and that their clothing was undermining these intentions. “To assert that this state of invalidism is preordained for the female race is an impeachment of Divine Justice. We are forced to believe that it is the result of false principles and methods of living (p. 15).”



Figure 7: "The Vagaries of Fashion" – Thirty years of fashionable gowns and four very different silhouettes. (From B.O. Flower, "Fashion's Slaves", *The Arena*, Sept. 1891.)

Having rejected contemporary fashionable principles of beauty as false, American reformers, like their British precursors, took on the task of proposing an alternate definition of beauty. To reformers on both sides of the Atlantic, truly beautiful dress was simple, flowing, and fitted to the natural female shape—everything that fashionable dress was not. While Americans never idealized mediaeval gowns as the British pre-Raphaelites did, they did share an obsession with the styles of ancient Greece. Steele and Adams' text is full of photographs of Greek statues, along with sketches contrasting the gentle curves of the sculptures with the harshly sculpted bodices of contemporary corseted women. The Venus de Milo was celebrated as a natural beauty *par excellence* (Figure 8). Ecob (1892) characterized the statue as “the grandest embodiment of the female form which art has ever produced (p. 186).” According to an 1894 article in the *Chicago Daily*, The Chicago Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress advised that its members look at a reproduction of the Venus daily.

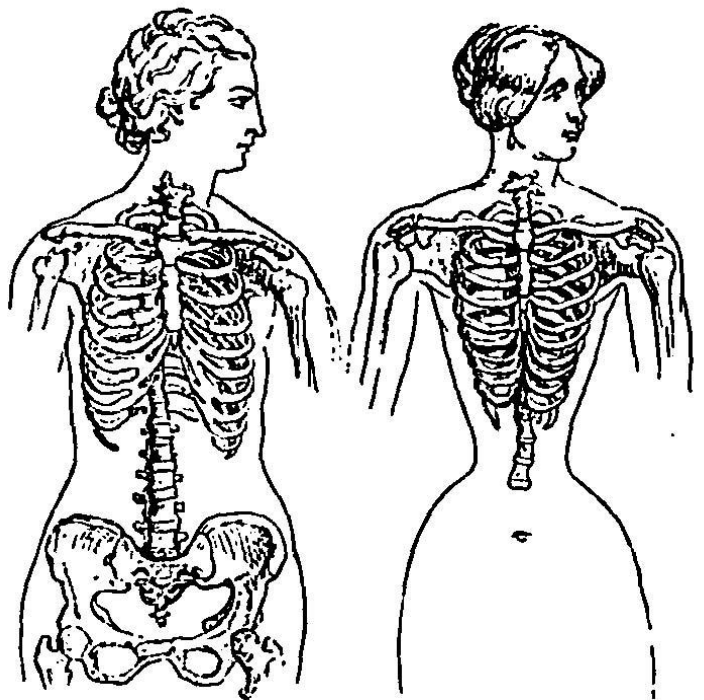


Figure 8: B. O. Flower's best guess as to the placement and size of the anterior thorax of the Venus de Milo and of a fashionable woman. (B.O. Flower, "Fashion's Slaves", *The Arena*, Sept. 1891.)

Anterior view of thorax in the Venus of Medici.

The same in a fashionable corset-wearing lady of to-day.

Repeated viewing of standards of natural beauty, represented by (for example) the Venus de Milo, was considered a necessary corrective for women whose perceptions had been warped by a lifetime of exposure to fashionable silhouettes. The prevalence and celebration of corseted torsos was believed to have corrupted taste to the point where women were no longer capable of making lucid judgments about a topic as vital to them as beauty. Ecob (1892) wrote, “Vice grows by that which it feeds upon, and at length woman has actually learned to glory in the shame of her physical degeneracy (p. 19).” Women were not to be blamed for this error; outside forces had led them astray. The economic argument had long been leveraged against reformers—Frances Russell (1891) recalled that, once “hoop-skirt factories sprang up all over the land,” those who opposed the style were met with the argument that “it would be a sin to oppose the fashion, lest the ruin of the factories should throw thousands out of employment (p. 354).” Helen Gilbert Ecob (1892) turned this argument on its head by proposing that employment in the manufacture of fashionable clothing was an ultimately unproductive enterprise, “the kind of temporary aid which Ruskin compares to that of setting people to building houses of snow. It is the waste of labor on things which perish (p. 250).” Others took a simpler approach, blaming the “greed of fashion-makers and the confederated interests which fatten on women’s folly” for women’s fondness for fashion, and fashionable spending (Flower, 1892, p. 643).

French culture, through French fashion was yet another force believed to be leading American women astray. In the late 1880s, American reliance on the fashions of another nation (one that many Americans saw as decadent) began to be questioned. B. O. Flower, the lone man among the artistic dress reformers, was also the most prone to patriotic bombast. “Teach the girls to be American,” he wrote in an 1893 article published in *The Arena*, “to be independent; to scorn to copy fashion, manner, or habits that come from decaying civilizations, and which outrage all sentiment of refinement, laws of life, or principles of common sense (pp. 137-138).” One foreign producer that remained an acceptable source of inspiration for American artistic reformers was the British firm Liberty of London. Founded in 1875 as a producer of Arts-and-Crafts inspired fabrics, by the 1890s the firm also offered custom-made gowns constructed from

Liberty fabrics and Liberty patterns, which were advertised as modernized versions of medieval and ancient Greek designs (Cunningham, 2003, p. 192).

While many American reform garments closely resemble Liberty styles, Americans acknowledged only the borrowing of principles from England, never of fashions themselves. Whether or this was intentionally duplicitous can be debated. What is certain is that most American artistic dress reformers—with the exception of Annie Jenness Miller, whose living depending upon people buying the garments she designed—considered the principles of artistic dress to be far more important than the dresses themselves. In their book-length treatises, Steele and Adams (1892) and Ecob (1892) never once explicitly defined what was meant by correct dress. Instead, they made vague suggestions (“Something must be planned that is flowing, graceful, and free, something that will hang from the shoulders (Steele and Adams, 1892, p. 103).”), supplied broad directives (“The aim of clothing should be not a figure cased in clothes, each portion being accurately fitted with a case of its own, from the neck to the feet, but a draped figure (Ecob, 1892, p. 208).”), and displayed photographs of elegant, uncorseted women leaning against pillars with their hands clasped at their waists. The intention was to rouse, to suggest, but never to mandate. It was up to the reader herself to take charge of her life and transform her clothing into an adornment that pleased and honored her personally. As Helen Gilbert Ecob put it, “One cannot give a recipe for an artistic garment as for a plum pudding (1892, p. 208).”

Even the businesswoman Annie Jenness Miller regularly reassured women that they need not look “uniformed” in comfortable clothing; that among the many options she offered, each could choose an outfit that was particularly suited to her body, activities, and social circle. As long as a woman looked attractive, it was assumed that she would not attract unwanted attention (Figure 9). This strategy seems to have worked for Miller herself, at least in regards to the image created for her by the popular press. In an 1889 article titled “Woman and Home”, the *Los Angeles Times* recognized her as a new answer to an old question:

A heritage from the crude, radical, and uncultured pioneers in the reform of women’s habiliments is a prejudice in the public mind against such movements and such movers. But if dress reform will produce a race of women like Mrs.

Miller, if the abandonment of steel cases and bone racks for our delicate exotics will bring them into the full development of superb womanhood which Mrs. Miller has attained, the world would submit to a conquest of dress reform that Bloomerism could never have enforced (p. 7).



Figure 9: This cover illustration from the November 1895 issue of *Jenness Miller Monthly* captured the artistic-dress ideal of tasteful, uncorsetted beauty. (Courtesy of the New York Public Library Picture Collection.)

A Reform of the Everyday

Unlike the Bloomer costume, artistic dress did have a lasting influence on popular fashions in America and in Europe. The “tea gowns” or “house dresses” that became popular in American by the turn of the twentieth century were very similar in style and fit to many of the artistic reform gowns. The “shop girl costume,” consisting of a shirt waist and a long, A-line skirt,

typically worn by working girls in American department stores and factories was a practical and affordable variation on the more casual of the styles sold by Annie Jenness Miller. And the ubiquitous “S-silhouette” upon which most early twentieth-century fashions were based had more in common with artistic principles of beauty than with the hourglass figure that the reform styles worked to replace. Across the Atlantic, the corset-free styles created by the influential French designer Paul Poiret exemplified all of the principles outlined in American rational dress literature—and with his harem pants, Poiret even made Bloomers fashionable. By the 1920s, fashionable dress had ceased to even acknowledge the female waist and shortened skirts offered more freedom of movement than late nineteenth-century reformers dared demand.

Of course, it would be stating the case much too strongly to claim that the great relaxing of twentieth-century female fashions was a direct result of the efforts of dress reform advocates like Helen Gilbert Ecob and Frances Russell. And yet, the fact that rational-dress reform efforts preceded a great change not only in fashionable dress but also in women’s political and economic opportunities may be more than coincidence. In their writings, interview statements, and lectures American dress reformers of the late nineteenth century demonstrated a determination to reform one of the most ubiquitous and blatantly restrictive elements of their everyday lives; to take the right of defining attractive and acceptable dress away from male designers and a male-dominated society and make it their own. While it is easy to disregard an obsession with fashion as a conventionally gendered concern, rational dress reformers recognized that it was fashion that most affected the way women literally embodied a place in the world. The freedoms to vote, to hold a job, to own property, to maintain custody of children after a divorce are all vital freedoms, but the freedom to feel comfortable and strong, to take deep breaths and wide steps, to raise arms overhead and kick up legs when dancing are vital as well. The American woman who spearheaded the rational dress reform movement recognized the importance of these freedoms and dared to propose a reform of these freedoms themselves, a reform of the everyday.

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