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Modesty and Fashion — Sworn Enemies?

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Is the world of fashion the implacable enemy of modesty in dress? Pia Catton considers this question in a most interesting essay published in the current edition of *In Character*. In “[Dressing for the Occasion: When is Allure a Fashion Slip?](#),” she argues that modesty has been sacrificed in a head-long rush to emulate youth culture.

From her essay:

The relationship between fashion and modesty appears to be straightforward, even immutable. Fashion is the constant enemy of modesty. The former seeks to attract attention, notice, and comment. The latter, by contrast, is the rejection of such theatrics. Modesty in dress is about turning oneself out with consideration for occasion, taste, and economy.

More:

*It was not always this way. Modest dressing was dealt a blow in the middle of the twentieth century when fashion turned away from the woman and embraced the teenager. The change meant that a respectable look, with a suggestion of sexiness, gave way to a blatantly sexual look. The easiest way to see this shift is to look at the clothes women wore in the films of the 1940s and 50s. In *Woman of the Year* (1942), Katharine Hepburn plays a brassy newspaperwoman who dresses in sharp skirts and tailored jackets. She strides though the newsroom with pride and competence. Is she herself modest? Not really. She’s not a wilting flower, and she’s definitely not subtle. When Spencer Tracy leaves his hat at her apartment, she sends it back to him – in front of everyone in the office – in a giant hat box. But while she behaves in bold, attention-getting ways, her character’s mode of dress is never loud. In the film, she’s a head-turner because of her carriage and attitude, not because her skirt is too short.*

Further:

What happened to all that refinement? The youthquake – the Beatles – Twiggy. From that crucible emerged the miniskirt, one of the least modest pieces of clothing that can still be worn in public. Miniskirts are immodest because they are intended to show off the legs. One has to have the shapely, toned legs of a near-adolescent to wear them. They attract the eye almost magnetically. And when worn without tights or stockings, they reveal a lot of skin. As fashion continued to take inspiration from the youth culture, the exposure of skin became simply part of the program. The exposure of skin reached a high (or low) point in 2000 when the singer and actress Jennifer Lopez wore an obscenely low-cut green Versace dress to the Grammy Awards. She looked great, but she was no Kate Hepburn. Even in these bare-it-all times there are settings in which covering up is expected. At times, the rules are clearly written. In some churches sleeveless shirts and shorts are not permitted, surely in keeping with what Timothy has to say in the Bible. At other times, the gravity of the situation has its own unwritten rules. Showing up in court tends to force even the most scantily clad celebrity into modest kit. Case in point: Female rapper Lil’ Kim traded her usual pasties and miniskirts for conservative pants suits when she appeared in court on perjury and conspiracy charges. (She was later convicted and sent to prison.)

The recovery of personal modesty is the responsibility of all Christians — and modesty in dress is an inescapable part of that recovery.

Ms. Catton has written a very thoughtful and illuminating essay. She rightly links modesty with humility as virtues. She describes modesty as, “a lesson very much worth learning.” By the same token, her essay is very much worth

reading.

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