

The Rise to Prominence of British Fashion in the 1960's: Economic, Cultural, and Political Foundations

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Although British fashion writers in the 1940s argued that England's strong textile and tailoring traditions would be the sole factors determining the international prominence of British fashion, it was, in fact, English designers' and consumers' willingness to turn their backs on established traditions and to capture the mood of the new era—a move that propelled British fashions to previously unseen heights. A new spirit of artistic innovation took root in a British society that was more youthful, affluent, politically liberal, and egalitarian, and Britain rose to dominate the world fashion scene in the 1960s. In tandem with the Beatles' music and the new pop art, innovative British fashions were exported throughout the world. However, this dominance could not and did not last, as the “mod” youth culture evolved into the flower-power, hippie scene, and other countries caught up with Britain and became fashion centers in their own right. Nonetheless, British fashion, with its characteristic turn towards youth and equality, continued to assert itself through other movements including Punk in the 1970's and Rule Britannia in the '90s, assuring that British fashion would not return to its staid past.

In 1945, Alison Settle of the British magazine *Picture Post* asked: “London: can it be a world fashion center?”¹ Her conclusion was that England's strong textile and tailoring traditions would allow it to take a prominent role in fashion, “provided always that she keeps to tailored suits and coats, to sports clothes, clothes of ceremony, and elegant yet not dressy frocks.”² Within twenty years, England became the true leader in world fashion—but not simply because of its textiles. On the contrary, England rose to prominence and ended France's hegemony as a fashion capital because England turned its back on its traditionally tailored roots and embraced new ways. The primary reason for the rise of British fashion in the '60s was that its young, leading fashion designers catered to the youth. By designing for a younger crowd and eschewing the old-fashioned traditions of the establishment with new “mod” styles characterized, in part, by bright, flamboyant colors and innovative looks such as mini-skirts made from vinyl for women and tight-fitting clothes for men, British designers and boutique-owners ushered in a fashion revolution that captured the mood of the era and spread worldwide. With liberal politics and wider affluence than ever before, England was a ready for the change.

1940's and 50's: Roots of the Fashion Revolution in Britain

Before experimentation in mod British fashion first began in the late 1950s, the only thing Britain was truly known for in fashion was an “inheritance of tailoring craftsmanship and the wonderful fabrics made in Britain.”³ While high fashion flourished for years elsewhere, patronized by the wealthy and celebrated by all, it enjoyed less support in Britain. Part of the reason for this was that “the powerful Protestant ethic traditionally militates against show and excess...The frivolity and hedonism associated with fashion goes against the perceived grain of Britishness.”⁴ Well-tailored suiting and classic, modest pieces fit with tradition in Britain. As opposed to Catholic countries with their long histories of lively pageantry and decadence, England had little support for bright fashion.

It was during World War II when Britain began to realize its own potential for growth in fashion. As the fashion leader throughout the modern period, Paris had created high fashion as an industry.⁵ The basis of this fashion was *haute couture*, the most expensive and prestigious type of fashion. Translating literally as “high sewing or stitching,” *haute couture* denotes garments that are custom-made to an individual's measurements, primarily by hand.⁶ Couture existed outside of Paris as

well, but until WWII, the best designers, whatever their nationality, all went to Paris and the most celebrated designs all came out of it. Within England, couture did not truly begin to appear until after WWI, as up until then English high fashion was restricted to the work of the court dressmakers of London's West End.⁷

During WWII, with Paris occupied by Germany, communication with the outside world about fashion was limited and other nations were forced to develop their own fashions. The 1942 founding of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, “the first organization to consolidate and co-ordinate the activities of Britain's high-fashion industry,” was an important benchmark in the development of British fashion.⁸ The wartime activities in the fashion industry whetted the appetite of British fashionistas to play a greater role in fashion instead of always deferring to the authority of the Paris establishment. Yet with the debut of French couturier Christian Dior's first collection, including the revolutionary New Look, British hopes were temporarily dashed.⁹ With its full skirt and soft feminine shape, the New Look offered a complete contrast to the utilitarian clothes of the wartime and provided the dominant style for women's fashions through the 1950s.

Yet it was also in the '50s that British fashion first showed the signs of taking on a distinctive shape of its own—for this was the decade when the Teddy Boys



Dior's New Look. Source: New York City Fashion Geek Blog.

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took to the streets and Mary Quant opened her boutique. Teddy Boys were the first youth fashion subculture of the post-war period, marked by working-class, macho young men who combined Edwardian dress with the American “zoot” suit.¹⁰ They wore long sideburns, carefully coiffed hair, and were the first group of men to be preoccupied with shopping and appearance without sacrificing their masculinity. Meanwhile, Mary Quant opened Bazaar on King’s Road in Chelsea, planting the first seed for the boutique experience.¹¹ She also gained



Teddy Boys in Manchester, 1955. Source: “1950 The Beginnings of Rock and Roll.”

fame for inventing the mini-skirt and other mod fashions during the ’60s, but a decade ago prior, she was already experimenting with simple, young fabrics such as poplin and gingham, unfussy designs that contrasted with the prevalent Dior-inspired trends elsewhere.¹² The British art schools long known for providing an excellent fashion design education to designers who would then leave to work in France, began to witness a shift, as the well-educated young designers increasingly stayed in Britain to lend their talents to their native fashion scene.¹³

Although there were economic problems lurking below the surface that would come to plague England in the late ’60s and ’70s, for the time being, at least, the average Brit enjoyed a period of affluence. Shorter working hours, higher wages, and a decreased birth rate meant smaller families with more money to spend.¹⁴ If there was one group that most benefited from and reveled in these changes, it was the youth who came

of age in the 1960s and who held the key to the triumph of British fashion.

1960’s: Rise of the Youth Culture

After the war, birth rates had skyrocketed before they began to decrease in the 1960s, and “The peak of the post-war baby boom in 1947 meant that unparalleled numbers of teenagers reached puberty in 1960.”¹⁵ With new rises in affluence, these new teenagers also had more money to spend than ever before, and they loudly proclaimed their generation to show that they were different from their parents and grandparents. Clothes were the greatest expenditure of the young, and with boutiques that frequently changed their merchandise, there were always new styles to browse and buy.¹⁶

Caring little about the Paris establishment or the traditions of couture, young people wanted fashion that distinctly reflected their generation. As opposed to the fashions of another youthful decade, the 1920s, where the youthful styles were worn by fashionable women of all ages, the young styles of the ’60s were meant only for the young.¹⁷ Not only was the “London Look” aimed at the young, it made them look even younger. Mary Quant was the first great innovator, and her simple, clean designs incorporated “the sort of garments and fabrics worn by children: skinny pinafore dresses, knee socks, leotards, black stockings, gingham, and flannel.”¹⁸ Much of what we think of as the mod look in fashion—including the mini-skirt or the use of plastic PVC (polyvinyl chloride) as a fabric—originated with Quant and spread from her Chelsea boutique Bazaar.¹⁹

Quant’s clothes were not necessarily cheap but they were affordable—and for clothes that were the apex of fashion to be affordable represents a great step. Now, instead of fashion being divided along social class lines, the only dividing line that existed now was between the old and the young. Quant quipped that her clothes were “bought both by the daughters of dukes and the daughters of dock workers, but were intended to emphasize the distinction between her generation and that of her mother’s.”²⁰ Fashion reflected the idea that there was little place for the old aristocracy

in the new world order. Instead, there was a new aristocracy based not on class but on style, which was populated by Quant and her “Chelsea set” of young artists, thinkers, show business-people, and other colorful figures.²¹ Young Britain’s rejection of class and wealth provided another key to its fashion ascent, for only by appealing to a wider audience, as opposed to the elite, could the fashion truly spread.

The Spread of British Fashion Worldwide: the Boutique



PVC raincoat and hat by Mary Quant, 1963. Source: Breward, 122.

The medium for the spread of this new fashion, and the common space for all of the young and fashionable, was the boutique. Although the boutique was coined in Paris, originally meaning the stores out of which couture designers sold limited lines of ready-to-wear, the boutique of ’60s London was something distinct.²² As opposed to *haute couture*, the term ready-to-wear refers to clothes that are made in pre-determined sizes and are available to be picked out, tried on, and purchased as-is from a retail outlet such as a boutique.²³ Although ready-to-wear was already prevalent in America with its large department stores, the British boutiques represented Europe’s first inclusion of ready-to-wear as perhaps the principal part of international high fashion.

The space of the boutique in '60s England was almost as innovative as the fashions themselves: featuring an entire mod experience, with loud pop music, darkened interior, cutting edge art and décor, and an edgy display of clothes within the shop and in the windows that attracted buyers.²⁴ This represented an entirely new kind of shopping experience, with merchandise that was frequently rotated so shoppers could return frequently and find new garments. Shopping at boutiques was another of the key aspects that set British fashion apart in the '60s, for the boutiques provided both a conceptual and an actual physical place within which the young and fashionable rotated. The hip space of the boutique, with its integration of fashion, music, and art represented the entire point-of-view of the classless, young audience who came to the boutiques not only to buy clothes but also just to hang out and check out the scene. Boutiques sprang up around Mary Quant's Chelsea Bazaar, and particularly on London's King's Road and Carnaby Street.²⁵ The most prominent of these boutiques was Biba in Kensington, opened in 1964 by Barbara Hulanicki.²⁶ Biba was cheaper and its clothes were even more widely worn. The clothes were softer and more feminine and drew more influence from romantic, retro styles inspired by Victorian and Edwardian times or by '20s and '30s Hollywood.²⁷ Meanwhile, in Carnaby Street, another boutique-fueled revolution was happening in menswear, with tight-fitting, brightly colored clothing, as "almost overnight the British male changed from being perhaps the most conservative dresser in the world to become a peacock."²⁸ The boutiques were an integral factor in codifying the fashion of the '60s as an entire experience—and if it was a definable experience with a reproducible product, it was only one step farther to export it elsewhere.

Even within the space of the boutiques, fashion went together easily with pop music and art decorating the stores. Thus, when a new kind of pop music made its way to America in the form of the Beatles, so too did fashion. Eagerly consumed by American fans, the Beatles look was born out of the look of the Chelsea dandy from the boutiques on

Carnaby Street.²⁹ The background and the nuances of British '60s fashion was boiled down and lumped together as "mod," which Americans took to mean "anything new coming out of London, including elements as arbitrary as Lord Snowdon, Carnaby Street, restaurants, Mary Quant, nightclubs and Vidal Sassoon."³⁰ Although American fans did not necessarily fully appreciate the nuances of British fashion or, say, the distinction between Bazaar and Biba, their hunger for the looks and their eagerness for British culture were highly significant in terms of bringing British fashion to the world stage. Part of the reason that British fashions were considered the height of style in the '60s was that they were so widely recognized by so many people. Without the influence of the Beatles and the fact that the clothes were packaged together with the music and then exported, for example, the rise of the fashions might not have been as possible.

1970's and Beyond: Decline of British Fashion on the Worldwide Stage

Once British fashion took off, French designers were slow to follow its lead and to make the switch from designing for the elite to designing for a wider range of consumers.



As opposed to the young designers who had

Biba satin dress, 1969. Source: Breward
127.

trained in British art schools and were happy to innovate and challenge their predecessors' status quo, "the Paris creators came from a rather different background—most had trained at the *Chambre Syndicale* school and been apprentices or assistants to the great couturiers."³¹ As Paris fell behind in fashion, its designers began to innovate to fall closer in line with the British model. Yet instead of rejecting the *couture* tradition entirely, as was the case in fashionable London, Paris reformed from within, with designers continuing to create for a *haute couture* market but also adding ready-to-wear to their repertoires—eventually using *couture* to advertise their designs but creating ready-to-wear as their main money-maker.³² Enjoying more government and industrial backing than the British ever did, French designers bounced back from their period of decline and continued with these joint *couture* and ready-to-wear ventures on a greater scale than was traditionally possible in Britain.

By the beginning of the '70s, Britain was again becoming eclipsed as a world fashion center, partially as a result of France's regaining footing. Yet the beginning of the fall had also begun to manifest itself from within British fashion. After 1963, when Quant's designs were so famous that they began to be mass-produced for the US market, there was a shift as Quant-style mod resolved into a different look defined by Hulanicki's Biba, which was based more on romanticism and nostalgia.³³ In 1966, Biba moved to larger Kensington premises to cope with higher demand.³⁴ Yet at this time, "as with other areas of pop culture, the demand for ever-evolving newness forced a distraction from innovation and invention towards a plundering and interpretation of historical styles."³⁵ The designers could not keep up with demand. With the fashions becoming more and more widespread, designers also had to lose some of their authenticity.

By 1967, there was also a new cultural atmosphere in Britain and elsewhere. In 1967, the *Daily Mirror* of London reported "The kooky kids of '66 have been replaced by the flower girls of '67. Swinging London is awash with Hippie fashions."³⁶ The mod, frenetic early '60s that centered squarely

on London was being replaced by a drug-fueled, psychedelic experience that had more to do with San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district.³⁷ What had been a rise in affluence in the earlier part of the decade was receding into economic recession.³⁸ Mostly run by young designers who were inexperienced as business people, the boutiques increasingly could not survive. Lacking the business acumen or simply the interest necessary to survive and struggling beneath the weight of broad forces like recession and specific problems such as widespread shoplifting, the boutique era was largely over by the early '70s.³⁹ Meanwhile, as the stars of Paris, New York, San Francisco, and Milan rose, London now found that it could not keep up in terms of fashion. The Swinging Sixties and the dominance of British fashion were over.

Yet if the 1960s was the beginning for British fashion as a force to be reckoned with, it was not its end either. Before the '60s, Paris was the unquestioned apex of the fashion world; after London showed that fashion could come from elsewhere, the door was open for everyone else to question and grapple with Paris. After the '60s, trends could come and go in any of a half-dozen or more fashion cities and could capture attention away from Paris. Although London never again achieved prominence on the level that it had during the '60s, it was never again discounted as a fashion capital. Other fashion movements, such as Glam Rock in the early 1970s, Rule Britannia in the '90s, or perhaps most importantly, Punk in 1976, brought attention to London fashion.⁴⁰ London burned bright but fast during the 1960s, but its demise was not the end for the history of British fashion. Its turn towards youth and equality was exported everywhere, and it ensured that no matter

what happened, British fashion would never again return to its staid, provincial past.

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