

Mary Quant: Defining the Swinging Sixties

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[ABSTRACT]

Mary Quant is the quintessential fashion designer of the 1960s whose epoch-making dress and, most notably, the miniskirt had an abiding influence even on today. Along with her fellow designers of contemporary London, she attempted to overturn the staid reserve associated with traditional British fashion by presenting a range of innovative looks. The new clothes culture which Quant helped promote was more than a matter of fashionable dress. It was built on the socio-economic foundations of the day and addressed, in sartorial terms, the decade's central concerns. It thus informed new perceptions and attitudes towards gender, class, youth and modernity. Therefore, the Mary Quant fashion, rather than simply marked for its quirky aesthetic appeal, should be viewed as charting the complex interplay between individual identities, social mores and dress. With this in mind, the present thesis considers the significance of Mary

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Quant in terms of the social history of sixties London rather than of the confined boundary of fashion *per se*. It places her in a broader context of social and material renewal of the times, focusing on her engagement with the decade's prime issues: youth culture, feminism and consumerism.

‘Fashion...reflects what is really in the air. It reflects what people are reading and thinking and listening to, and architecture, painting, attitudes to success and to society.’ – Mary Quant 1966

Mary Quant (b.1934) is the quintessential fashion designer of the 1960s whose epoch-making dress and, most notably, the miniskirt had an abiding influence even on today. Along with her fellow designers of contemporary London like John Bates, Foale et Tuffin or Ossie Clark, she attempted to overturn the staid reserve associated with traditional British fashion by presenting a range of innovative looks. The new clothes culture which Quant helped promote was more than a matter of fashionable dress. It was built on the socio-economic foundations of the day and addressed, in sartorial terms, the decade's central concerns. It thus informed new perceptions and attitudes towards gender, class, youth and modernity. Therefore, the Mary Quant fashion, rather than simply marked for its quirky aesthetic appeal, should be viewed as charting the complex interplay between individual identities, social mores and dress. With this in mind, the present thesis is intended to consider the significance of Mary Quant in terms of the social history of sixties London rather than of the confined boundary of fashion *per se*. It will place her in a broader context of social and material renewal of the times, focusing on her engagement with the decade's prime issues: youth culture, feminism and consumerism.

In Britain, as elsewhere, the 1960s was the decade of liberal social change and reform. The Labour Party, which regained power in the general election of 1964, attempted to complete the construction of the welfare state begun in 1945. The government drew upon Keynesian mixed economy, pursuing the socio-economic modernization of Britain by dint of state intervention (Bedarida 1991, 192). It aimed to enhance productivity through a series of forward-looking policies, including the provision of social services and the sponsorship of corporations, with a view to expanding social democracy with its commitments to education and health (Jessop 1992, 14). The great social movements of the day — civil rights, anti-war, counter-culture and feminist ones — defined the radicalism of contemporary politics. The British economy, which had been shackled in austerity during much of the 1950s, was being recovered by the post-war reconstruction and full employment.¹⁾ The level of national revenue increased by sixty percent, which entailed the rise in living standards. The enactment of social democratic policies rendered the national prosperity distributed equitably.

The period witnessed the expansion of British higher education and government subsidies to art schools like the Royal College of Art enabled an unprecedented number of working-class students to pursue careers in fine and applied arts (Lobenthal 1990, 14).²⁾ It was a time when, as a Conservative Party slogan of the 1950s put it, “you never had it so good” (Wilson 2003, 176). The “affluent society” opened up the age of consumerism. It also led to the development of service industries involved

1) For a social history of sixties Britain, see Porter, 1995, 344-63.

2) The Royal College of Art produced some of the leading designers of the decade.

in popular culture including fashion, design, photography and music. The icons of cutting-edge pop culture such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks and the Who flaunted the liberal cosmopolitan spirit of London. Diana Vreeland, editor of *Vogue*, celebrated London in 1965 as “the most swinging city in the world at the moment” (qtd. Crosby 1965). Likewise, the *Time* magazine in the issue of 15 April 1966 saluted the rejuvenation of the time-honoured British capital:

During the shell-shocked 1940s, thrusting New York led the way, and in the uneasy 50s it was the heady Rome of *La Dolce Vita*. Today, it is London, a city steeped in tradition, seized by change, liberated by affluence ... In a decade dominated by youth, London has burst into bloom. It swings; it is the scene. This spring, as never before in modern times, London is switched on. Ancient elegance and new opulence are all tangled up in a dazzling blur of op and pop. The city is alive with birds (girls) and beatles, buzzing with minicars and telly stars, pulsing with half a dozen separate veins of excitement. (32)

These currents laid the groundwork for the rise of youth counter-culture and of the revolution in social norms and lifestyle, breaking free of the rigid social strictures of the previous era. The youth culture of the 1960s was in essence innovative, optimistic and consumerist the aspects of which were manifested through the modes of dressing among other things. The youth culture, a central element of which was consumerism, was associated with economic shifts in consumer industries which were in a constant demand for new extended markets. Arguably, it was the pop culture itself, rather than the political activism, which redrew the social map of the sixties.³⁾ The contention that “the personal is political” encouraged

consumer behaviour and impulses for the individuals whose prime pre-occupation was the fulfilment of desires as the key expression of identity. It eroded the distinction between the private and the public, eliminating “the public sphere as the forum of a specifically political engagement” (Radner 2000, 134). The post-war teenagers, who had redoubled disposable income in the full-employment society, emerged as promising consumers in the increasingly diversified markets of leisure and especially of fashion and pop music (Buxbaum 1999, 81). They led new trends of taste and shopping and entrepreneurs readily noticed the immense commercial potential of the burgeoning new culture, capitalizing on the libertarian spirit of the youth-quake for the so-called “rebellion industry” (Gitlin 1993, xviii).

The youth culture movement was initiated by young men about town, Teddy Boys⁴⁾ and then Mods,⁵⁾ who set out to challenge the exclusiveness of the cultural establishment. They, first and foremost, sought to break down prevailing class and gender barriers through their iconoclastic outfit and lifestyle. They thus adopted subcultural dressing which featured a variety of competing looks including sharp-tailored suits, denim, leather and ethnic costume. Carnaby Street served as a backdrop of their presence and became synonymous with the idea of Swinging London.

Located at the heart of Soho, Carnaby Street had been well-established as the site of London’s rag trade. In the post-war era, it became a popular

3) My argument here is indebted to Radner’s. 134.

4) Teddy Boys are young men of British subculture who are characterized by a predilection for rock-and-roll music and for the Edwardian dandy look with sharp suits, tight trousers and slim ties, revived by Saville Row tailors in the post-war period.

5) The Mods, short for moderns, originally referred to a group of well-dressed scooter-riding young men but the term was soon extended to the fashion-conscious youth of both sexes. The Mod-girl look was embodied by models like Twiggy.

shopping area the latest fashion of which catered to the middle-class and working-class youth. It sold trendy affordable merchandise which epitomized the prevailing spirit of sixties London. In 1954 Bill Green launched there Vince, a shop for underground fashion, patronized by a small number of style leaders.⁶⁾ John Stephen's store, opened in 1957, appealed to a wider clientele. A specialized retail boutique for menswear, it disseminated the Mod look so extensively that Carnaby Street came into nationwide spotlight. The idiosyncratic fashion represented by these purveyors mirrored the sexual and political emancipation and identity politics of contemporary London. By 1970, alongside the successors like Barbara Hulanicki's Biba and Tommy Roberts's Kleptomania, they led the hippie and retro-chic look of British fashion. All these stores were involved with the fashion revolution of the sixties. They took a lifestyle approach to buttress their retail success and brought the key sixties ethos of fun, innovation and iconoclasm into the realm of everyday life. The revolutionary style promoted by them was in itself a political manifesto. Roy Porter articulates the epitome of sixties culture:

A culture materialized that was irreverent, offbeat, creative, novel. Politically idealistic and undogmatically left-wing, it broke through class barriers and captured and transformed many of the better elements of traditional London: its cosmopolitanism and openness, its village quality, its closeness, its cocktail of talent, wealth and eccentricity. There was a rare alliance between youth culture and commerce, aristocratic style and a new populism. (363)

6) For a detailed account of Carnaby Street shops and contemporary British fashion, see Buxbaum, 1999, 81.

The Mary Quant style should be placed within this socio-cultural context. The designer acknowledged that her dress was part of a wider social change: “We were in at the beginning of a tremendous renaissance in fashion. ... The clothes I made happened to fit in exactly with the teenage trend, with pop records and espresso bars and jazz clubs” (Quant 2012, 65-67). Quant was a well-trained artist. Upon completion of a diploma from Goldsmith’s College in London, she did her apprenticeship at Erik, a high-end custom milliner in Mayfair before embarking on designing her own clothes. Together with her business associates Alexander Plunket Greene and Archie McNair, she built a creative partnership. Her career as a full-fledged designer began in 1955 when the team opened Bazaar, a boutique of the King’s Road, Chelsea, which dealt in an eclectic mix of garments, accessories and costume jewellery for teenage and twenty something customers.

The fact that Quant launched her landmark shop in Chelsea claims notice. The quarter had been the seat of the city’s bohemian life and of the avant-garde arts including protest drama and beatnik music.⁷⁾ Towards the late fifties Chelsea attracted a group of writers, painters, architects, actors, photographers and socialites, known as the Chelsea Set, who formed the center of the social life in the district. As the originators of contemporary cultural renaissance, they represented the ideas of anti-establishment and egalitarianism. Their outlook, lifestyle and way of thinking had far-reaching consequences (Quant 2012, 31). The Chelsea Set had a profound effect on Quant’s formative years as a designer and her products

7) The Royal Court Theatre, where *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne’s play on British working-class life, was premiered in 1956, stands on Sloane Square near the King’s Road.

were in tandem with the ethos which they espoused.

The boutique Bazaar was an instant hit with young trend-setters of the time. It was beautifully decorated in the vividly colored Pop Art style then in fashion and known for its eye-catching displays. Quant took a fresh approach to fashion. Her clothes, some of which were featured in *Harper's Bazaar*, were decidedly modern with clean-cut lines and simple geometric shapes (Fig. 4). They were hugely popular among the local residents and others including artists, professionals and those from more privileged backgrounds, and the success was phenomenal. The designer herself rose to the status of a celebrity. Her image, with her Chelsea look and archetypal Vidal Sassoon coiffure, was countlessly reproduced and circulated to become an icon of sixties fashion (Figs. 1-2). In 1966 she was awarded an OBE and in 2014 was made a dame in recognition of her contribution to British fashion (Lidbury 2014).



[Fig. 1]



[Fig. 2]

In the 1950s British fashion was, by and large, dominated by its elitism, as is recounted below:

In the post-war period exclusive dressmakers and their wealthy clients set the standards, just as they had done before. They looked to Paris for inspiration but their work and lives revolved around the West End in London. There was a distinctive London style, shaped by traditional tailoring, the events of the Season (Ascot, Henley, Glyndebourne) and a very English sense of decorum. The epitome of elegance was represented by the twelve most prominent Mayfair couturiers who belonged to the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers. By the early 1960s this Mayfair generation was fading in significance, its sophisticated and elitist approach at odds with the new spirit of egalitarianism. (V&A)

The high fashion of this period was dictated by the great Paris couture houses like Dior, Givenchy or Balenciaga (Connikie 1990, 9). It celebrated the ladylike look of mature women with corsets, stilettos and coordinated accessories (Fogg 2011, 17). The vogue began to change with the advent of the youth movement of the sixties. The young who eagerly partook in the social and sexual revolution of the day subscribed to new concepts and new styles. The decade's ideal type was not a lady with a contoured silhouette but a "skinny nymphet playfully experimenting with her sexuality," illustrated by the contemporary top models like Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton or Penelope Tree (Seeling 2000, 395).

In the fifties the stores to cater specifically for the youth market were non-existent. Without youth-specific fashion available, girls had no alternative but to dress like adults. Quant directed her attention to them, creating clothes aimed at teenagers' wardrobe. In other words, she designed principally for the *jeune fille* with an affiliation to young customers. The hallmarks of her design — the ease of movement, affordability and youthfulness — were all created in response to the needs of this new

generation. Accordingly, she denounced the rigid formality of fifties fashion and offered a fresh youthful look. She employed a bright colour palette of mustard, prune and green and presented simple practical easy-going designs like the pinafore, the shift dress, the miniskirt and knee socks, creating the Lolita and Schoolgirl looks. The Quant design caught on.⁸⁾ It spread to the rest of the world and was produced in diverse price ranges.

Quant played a crucial role in reshaping contemporary shopping culture. She was among the first to open a small trendy shop called “boutique”, selling a range of youth-oriented fashions. This type of shops with a rapid turnover of stock proliferated on the King’s Road and Carnaby Street, by then the shopping meccas of British fashion, replacing old select establishments on Bond Street, Mayfair. The sixties’ new fashion can be summed up as “popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky and glamorous” (Donnelly 2005, 95). Quant’s youthful clothes epitomized all these qualities, representing the look of the post-war generation. A jersey dress of 1967 designed by her is a case in point (Fig. 3). Simple, casual and easy-to-wear, the dress is a loose-fitting smock without bodice, inspired by a football player’s strip. With the hemline raised to mini-length, it is matched with a panty-hose. The elements of ease, exercise and elasticity “add up to the foundations of modern fashion” (Phaidon 2001, 382). With all the stress on the sportive, however, the garment flaunts the charm of fashionable femininity in its minimalist line and geometric pattern.

8) Contemporary reactions to the Quant look was mixed. It was considered shocking and outrageous by the establishment but was well-received among the masses (Steele 1997, 54). The impact of London youth style was tremendous, extolled as “Pop Art in motion” or “*la mode junior*”, and influenced the Parisian versions of youth-quake by couturiers like Saint Laurent, André Courrèges and Pierre Cardin (Steele 1997, 61).



[Fig. 3]

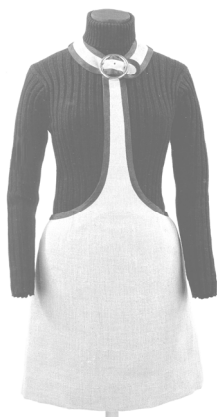


[Fig. 4]

A more elegant example is found in Peachy (1960, Fig. 6), an A-line shift dress with vivid red tone and youthful appeal, which is deemed as a seminal work of Quant. A hessian dress with black polo-necked jumper, produced in 1965, is another *tour de force* (Fig. 5). It features an engaging design in which an extended belt forms a halter-neck fastening with an oversize metal buckle on it. The clean-cut line, two-tone colour and graceful proportion are reminiscent of Coco Chanel. This is Mary Quant at her most sophisticated. The dress illustrates the point that her creative repertoire consists of more than practical dexterity, spelling out “lifestyles and aspirations of the King’s Road habitués” (Breward 2006, 14). The fashion historian Christopher Breward cogently comments on the outfit:

It was clearly easy to wear and maintain, well adapted to the increased pace of modern city living. But stylistically it moved beyond comfort and practicality to suggest bohemian revolt (in its emphatic use of black), graphic sophistication (in its play with textures, interesting shapes and bold accessorization) and schoolgirl innocence (the dress,

whose form tends to narrow the hips, was worn with a schoolboy cap in matching linen material). (14)



[Fig. 5]



[Fig. 6]

The lawn dress, made of Liberty heritage print, is yet another example of Quant's ingenuity.⁹⁾ The designer appropriated lawn, a fine cotton fabric traditionally used for children's wear, for her "dolly bird" dress. Bright, simple and spirited the garment mirrors the ambience of its age and captures the essence of young British fashion (Phaidon 2001, 286).

Quant's products, as illustrated above, evince distinctive feminist orientations. She observed: "I want free-flowing feminine lines that compliment a woman's shape, with no attempt at distortion. I want relaxed clothes, suited to the actions of normal life" (qtd. Lister 2006, 40). In the

9) Liberty, founded in 1875, is a luxury emporium which specializes in quality textiles and interiors. It is noted for its long-standing collaborations with avant-garde designers and has been associated with the decorative arts of Britain like the Arts and Crafts Movements of 1880s, Art Nouveau of the 1920s and youth fashion of the 1960s.

sixties, alongside other minority groups, women began to pronounce an increased awareness of their rights, gaining a voice which had been suppressed. The second-wave feminism of the sixties was grounded upon a new feminist ideal – young, active and economically independent – which Quant helped to consolidate and which eventually led to the outspoken feminism of the seventies (Radner 2000, 128). The new ideal, incarnated by the working girl rather than by the socialite, challenged the patriarchal construction of womanhood and revised traditional gender norms. Quant was alert to women’s emancipation and expressed the feminist cause through her daring designs which allowed for women’s activity and comfort. Quant’s attire was definitely intended for liberated women. She reacted against the stiff repressive women’s wear of the fifties or “matronly clothes” affected by the Paris collections (Hulanicki 1983, 62). She liberated the female body from the constraints of such clothing by creating designs which permitted women “to run, to jump, to leap, to retain their precious freedom” (qtd. Lobenthal 1990, 11).

Quant made popular many women-friendly developments like the miniskirt, pants suits, hot pants, color pattern tights and shoulder-strap bags. The miniskirt, in particular, is among the greatest sartorial inventions of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁾ As a defining item of the sixties, it epitomizes the fashion revolution of the era. The miniskirt was concerned not only with skirt lengths but, more significantly, with a new social milieu in which prevailing gender norms and attitudes were challenged and open to discussion. It is indicative of the shifting roles and places of women in private and public spheres. Donning a super-short miniskirt was making

10) The miniskirt, popularized by Quant, was first invented by André Courrèges and John Bates (Steele 1991, 134).

a statement. It was an assertion of a new femininity associated with such qualities as mobility, confidence or independence. The miniskirt called for new types of underwear. Stockings and suspenders were replaced by hassle-free tights and pantie girdles; the push-up bra, by the unboned bra (Connikie 1990, 14). The release from the restriction of traditional foundations provided women with greater freedom. All these radically altered women's fashion, setting new sartorial standards. In this manner, Quant envisioned modern femininity in the modern world in an era of intense socio-cultural transition.



[Fig. 7]

Furthermore, Quant contributed to the democratization of fashion. Her signature style was the fusion of street fashion and haute couture.¹¹⁾ That is, she reinterpreted haute couture and appropriated its essentials — ele-

11) Wilson aptly defines the Quant look as a “marrying of the style of the Chelsea art student with Chanel” (89).

gance, style and quality — for the mass-produced market (Fig. 7). She furnished average working women with an inexpensive version of high fashion by keeping her prices within their range. Quant's clothing, stylish, feminine and affordable, were patronized by the ordinary girls, who, instead of well-off ladies, became pace-setters for the first time in fashion history. With Quant, dress was no longer a sign of social standing. It was disassociated with snobbery and pretense. In sum, she challenged the fashion hierarchy based on the Parisian haute couture system. The designer states her democratic creed:

Once only the rich, the Establishment, set the fashion. Now it is the inexpensive little dress seen on the girls in the High Street. ... they are alive ... looking, listening, ready to try anything new ... They may be dukes' daughters, doctors' daughters or dockers' daughters. They are not interested in status symbols. They don't worry about accents or class ... Snobbery has gone out of fashion, and in our shops you will find duchesses jostling with typists to buy the same dresses. ... They represent the whole new spirit that is present-day Britain, a classless spirit that has grown out of the Second World War. (67-68)

Quant was a dedicated designer who held a belief in innovation. She acted as an intermediary between fashion and state-of-the-art technology. She developed methods of producing everyday wear with high-tech synthetic fabrics, materials originally intended for purposes like space travel or sports. It is best illustrated by the Wet Collection (1963), made of PVC, vinyl and plastic (Fig. 9). Quant thus made an equally brilliant career as an entrepreneur. She presented a corporate identity, the readily recognizable black daisy logo which appeared on all her products (Fig. 8). In 1962 her

designs were adopted by the franchise J. C. Penny to be mass-produced for the American market. In 1963 she opened a second branch of Bazaar in Knightsbridge and also set up the Ginger Group, a lower-priced line for a wider public, available at the department store. The Mary Quant label, extended to accessories, underwear and cosmetics, was to appear worldwide.



[Fig. 8]



[Fig. 9]

The Quant style has become an integral part of twentieth-century fashion. She is credited with presenting a style which remoulded the face of the sixties, bringing British fashion to the forefront of international fashion.¹²⁾ With Quant and her fellow designers, London superseded Paris as the new world capital of fashion and style. The eminence of Quant lies in the fact that she viewed fashion as part of wider social change. She had a flair for reading the currents of her time. She captured the zeitgeist and reworked it in sartorial terms.

Quant has noted that designers are like newspapermen in that they should keep pace with “public opinion and public needs”. Good designers,

12) The London look of the sixties was internationally acclaimed, inspiring both high and low arts. It was featured in films like Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) or Nicolas Roeg’s *Performance* (1970) and in fashion magazines like *Queen* and *Town*.

according to her, should “catch the spirit of the day and interpret it in clothes” (66). It is this philosophy of hers that enabled her to create a style perfectly in tune with modern life about town, making her a prime mover of the Swinging Sixties. Little wonder, then, that the fashion journalist Ernestine Carter pays tribute to Quant, ranking her alongside two of the greatest couturiers of the twentieth century: “It is given to a fortunate few to be born at the right time, in the right place, with the right talents. In recent fashion there are three: Chanel, Dior, and Mary Quant” (qtd. Lister 2006, 40).

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국문 초록

메리 퀴트: ‘스윙잉 식스티즈’를 정의한 패션 디자이너

최지안*

메리 퀴트는 1960년대의 핵심적인 패션 디자이너로서 미니스커트를 비롯한 그녀의 복식 디자인은 ‘창의와 실험’이라는 당대의 시대정신을 구현하며 패션사에 한 획을 그었다. 전환기의 디자이너로서 그녀는 스트리트 패션을 혁신했으며, 상류사회 지향적인 파리 쿠튀르 컬렉션과 참여한 대조를 이루는 대중적인 ‘퀴트 룩’을 창안했다. 동시대 런던에서 활동했던 젊고 도전적인 동료 디자이너들과 함께 일련의 독창적 스타일을 선보임으로써 그녀는 전통적인 영국 패션의 격식 및 보수적인 부르주아 복장규범을 전복하고자 했다. 퀴트가 길을 연 새로운 복식 문화는 패셔너블한 드레스의 유행 이상을 의미한다. 그것은 60년대 영국의 특수한 이념적 물질적 토대 위에서 구상되고 실행된 것으로서, 젠더, 계급, 근대성 등 그 시대의 중심적 관심사를 복식의 언어를 통해 진술한다. 환언하면, 퀴트 룩은 전후(戰後) 유럽의 경제 재건과 소비주의의 도래라는 사회경제적 조건 하에서 배태되었다. 그것은 또한 ‘뉴웨이브’로 대변되는 60년대 유럽의 반체제 정서 및 진보적인 정신적 조류 안에서 형성된 것으로, 기성 제도권 문화의 엘리트주의에 반기를 든 당대의 전위적 대항문화 및 청년 하위문화의 부상과 궤를 같이한다. 따라서 메리 퀴트 스타일은 단

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순히 이채로운 의장(意匠)이나 형식미의 차원에서 접근하기 보다는 패션을 둘러싼 복합적인 역학관계 - 개인적 정체성, 사회규범, 그리고 의복간의 - 에 대한 표지(標識)로서 간주되어야 한다. 이런 맥락에서 본고는 퀴트 룩의 의의를 복장의 양식사라는 제한적인 범주를 넘어 60년대 런던의 사회사적 관점에서 고찰하며, 특히 그녀의 복식 혁명이 당대의 핵심 이슈들인 청년문화, 페미니즘, 상업주의와 관계 맺는 양상들을 검토한다.

