

*the women
we wanted to look like*



7 Freedom Fighters

Men, it is true, have given us most of this century's fashions, but all along it has been women who have tried to make our lives a little easier. Once in a while, when clothes have got out of hand, a woman designer has taken fashion by its elegant neck and given it a good shake until all its complications, restrictions and fussiness have fallen away. Chanel did it twice, once in the twenties and again in the fifties. Mary Quant did it for young people in the late fifties and early sixties. Biba had a sideways crack at it later on in that decade, and in Italy Nanni Strada is trying to do it again today.

Gabrielle Chanel could not understand why anyone should expect men to be able to design clothes for women, and she had the greatest contempt for her male colleagues in the fashion business. 'They don't understand the importance of a beautiful long neck, the need to emphasize the length of the leg, to make shoulders just so . . . to make the jacket so you can raise your arms.' Being a woman, and an energetic and lively one at that, Chanel did understand and she prided herself above everything on her ability to make clothes that 'women can live in, breathe in, feel comfortable in, and look young in.' She has been named 'the inventor of twentieth-century woman' because at a time when others were obsessed with silks and satins and feathers and lace and all sorts of frivolous nonsense, Chanel dared to sell simple jackets and waistless dresses in plain cloths. 'In 1916,' says her most recent biographer, 'she made such decisive changes in fashion that she compelled it to change centuries.'

A photograph of Chanel taken in the South of France in the twenties shows her in an outfit that would look good today: navy sailor trousers, a navy blue jumper, rows of pearls round her neck and a navy blue beret on her head. It is almost impossible to believe that barely ten years earlier, women had been struggling about in long skirts and picture hats. At first Chanel's was called the 'Poor Look' because it was so understated and because the fabrics she chose—jersey, flannel, tweed—looked so drab. Designer Paul Poiret, a rival whose once-bright star was fading when Chanel's was in the ascendancy, described it cynically as 'poverty de luxe'. That was nearer the mark, for the secret of the Chanel look was to wear the plainest garment and then pile on to it a mass of costume jewellery (you could use the real stuff she said, so long as it was so extravagant it looked like junk) along with other well-thought-out accessories which gave the outfit richness and glamour without altering its basic simplicity. Chanel taught us the lesson we dress by today: that

Left: Quant photographed with her husband Alexander Plunket Greene in the early sixties. She is wearing one of her own typically pared-down dresses.

Overleaf: Coco Chanel, the greatest designer of all. Here, she is wearing her favourite colour combination of black and white.



Left: A moody Sarah Moon picture for Biba. The model is Ingrid Boulting, now a film actress.

Above: Barbara Hulanicki in 1977.



In 1972 Barbara Hulanicki daringly took over the vast department store that had been Derry and Toms in Kensington. She now had the chance to apply her romantic, nostalgic (some said decadent) taste to all aspects of fashion and to household goods as well. Sheets in the new store were in dark brown or beige satin, lingerie harked back to the thirties, lampshades were heavily fringed or draped with lace shawls, palms and aspidistras stood about in Art Nouveau pots, and clothes drooped from curly hat stands. The counters were in black glass, the walls were dark, the lighting sombre. Stepping into that store was more like going to the theatre than shopping, the entire building looked like an elaborate exotic stage set, an uninhibited mixture of Art Deco and Art Nouveau, with some Victoriana thrown in for good measure.

Some customers loved it, but many pundits predicted disaster. Nothing like this had been tried before, and they said the Biba people seemed to be ignoring the basic economic principles by putting palm trees and sofas where they should have had more counters and some hard selling. No doubt nothing so outrageous will ever be tried again, for although Biba became the most talked-about place in town, the pundits were right and it was a financial disaster. Within three years the store had closed, and Barbara and her husband left to live in Brazil.

Nanni Strada's revolution is just beginning. Ten years after her training as a fashion designer in Italy, and in the middle of a successful though unspectacular career, Nanni Strada was in London preparing for the birth of her daughter when, she says, the scales suddenly fell from her eyes. It dawned on her that she utterly disagreed with almost every rule that the fashion business, which included herself, took for granted. Like Chanel she did not feel that fashion should change every season; she thought the business of making garments in different sizes ridiculously complicated, and she 'no longer wanted to design clothes that were a hollow mould for the human body'. She decided, in fact, that the only thing for her to do was leave the fashion business altogether.

That was in 1967. Nanni Strada was only twenty-six and resilient, and she chose instead, fortunately, to tramp round museums and archives in Britain and in Italy, learning all she could about Oriental clothing, which seemed the nearest expression of the fashion revolution she had in mind. She experimented, too, with different methods of cutting and constructing clothes, always searching for simpler and more sensible solutions to the age-old problem of making a flat piece of cloth fit a rounded figure.

Ever since she learned to hold a pencil she has been a compulsive designer. 'I drew everywhere and on everything,' she says, and admits that she became used to people commenting, 'This child will become somebody one day'. Yet her success has not come easily. In 1974 Nanni Strada entered a competition sponsored by President Ghaddafi of Libya to find a modern



Left: Nanni Strada wearing one of her own designs: a dress made from a single piece of cloth with no seams and only ties for fastening.

national costume for his country. Her design was a dress made of a single piece of cloth with no seams at all, and only some ties for fastening. Nanni Strada was pleased with it because it met all her self-imposed conditions: it fitted all sizes, it could be worn by anyone, of any age, it displayed the fabric perfectly, it could be packed flat and was therefore easy to distribute. But Miss Strada's dress did not win the contest, and what is more, when she defiantly tried to put the dress into production herself in Italy, she could not persuade any of the conventional manufacturers to take on anything so unorthodox. She turned her back on the rag trade and took her design to the household linen manufacturers; and it is the tablecloth and sheet people who now turn out the revolutionary dress which is 'aimed at all women and not just a sophisticated elite'.

In the meantime Miss Strada had made a film about her researches, *The Cape and the Skin*, which has been shown at the Milan Triennale and by the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York. Her workmanlike but clever designs (which now include jackets, skirts, pants, shirts and children's things as well as dresses) sell well in Italy now, but she is still innovating, still experimenting. 'I would like to see my clothes become the new classics' she says.

I have great faith in her, a girl who looks more like an earnest art student than anyone involved with the fly-by-night world of fashion. Perhaps it is because I have one of her Libyan dresses myself and every time I put it on I marvel at the ingenuity of the idea. It is so simple, so comfortable—one can't imagine why no one invented it years ago.

Overleaf: When Biba became a department store, Barbara Hulanicki had the opportunity to apply her taste to household goods as well as to fashion. Everything in this picture bears the Biba label.