

GIRLS GONE WILD: THE FLAPPER DRESS

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The Flapper Dress was considered a symbol of sexual liberation during the Roaring 20's. The artifact this essay will center upon is an iris colored flapper dress made out of silk and cotton, decorated with lace bedazzled with pearls and thick fabric. The owner of this dress is unknown. This dress is currently being held in the Museum of Southern History. At a glance, this piece might seem as any other dress from a time personally unknown to contemporary generations. However, the flapper dress became one of the arms the defying women of the 1920's used to make their mark in American history. In previous generations, women were taught to speak softly, carry lipstick, and wear their hair down. Through the impact of the flapper girls, those days became history.

To begin with, the 1920's were a period in American history that incorporated the fastest economic expansion in United States history, a new source of values, modernism, and a crash that changed the outlook of the United States until this day. The economy of the time incorporated rising stock prices, corporate profits, personal income, and gross domestic product (GDP). During this time, automobiles became largely available, movies, invented in the 1880's, made debuts, dance music included jazz, and young, modern women joined the provocative culture of the time. Fashion played a crucial role during this time, and women were no longer content having to wear layers upon layers of clothing, nor long haircuts that became burdensome. Young women defied the status quo and became what we now know as "Flapper Girls."

In the same way that the economy of the Roaring 20's played a crucial characteristic in the decade, the Flapper Girls created a challenge for the sexual status quo of the time. The term "flapper" originated in England to describe a "teenage girl." However, the flapper girls were not simply seen as teenage girls. They were seen as a new breed of women with defiance towards what was considered proper behavior. Characteristics used to define flapper girls included independence, outspokenness, and pleasure-seeking; these women were self-governing, confident, and sexy. Flapper girls wore make up, had short hair, wore loose-fitted, long-waisted dresses, and were generally frowned upon by conservatives of the time. The flapper girls groomed and began the practice of feminism along with the search for social equality in the 1920's.

Feminism in the Roaring 20's was a concept that many were blind to. When looking at this treasure in the museum, the viewer can become absolutely perplexed and lost in its meaning. This dress symbolizes the social *liberation* of women. During this time "women had the right to enjoy themselves socially as much as men did, whether through drinking, sex, or indulging in the pleasures of urban nightlife." The flapper girls were not understood. Just like in most aspects of life, society fears what it does not know or understand. Women were objects of softness and lived under the stereotype of following the rules set by those in power. During the 1920's new customs were put in play and, although misogyny was still very alive in decades to come, the defiance to step above what was dictated for decades have aided women of contemporary society to continue seeking social, political, and economic equality to men.

In contemporary society, women are millions of steps ahead in comparison to the 1950's, when women had to fight to obtain jobs and equality in every social aspect of life. However, the fight still continues. For example, for every dollar a man makes, a woman has only earned 83 cents; by the time a woman is 60 years of age, she will have made \$450,000 less than a male co-worker in the exact same position. In 2013, there were over 700 bills proposed to regulate a woman's body, males still lead in every single industry, only one out of four STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) jobs are taken by women, and one out of four women are sexually assaulted in our streets, yet society still asks, "What was she wearing?"

On a very personal level, the flapper dress signifies rebellion in its simplest form. Through this dress, I observe personal sovereignty and freedom from the gender roles women have slaved under for centuries. I believe feminism involves working hard for what is desired, and knowing when to stand up for what you deserve. "[Feminism is] not about demoralizing others; it's about self-empowerment. It's not about being arrogant; it's about displaying your confidence and intellect as a badge of pride. It's not asserting any inherent superiority or self-entitlement, but recognizing your own self-worth and value." The flapper girls that lived during the 1920's were not considered "mothers to be," they were considered rebellious and self-entitled. However, without their stands against what society demanded, the feminist movement that arose in later decades following the Roaring 20's would have not been possible. If I had had the absolute pleasure to see this piece of clothing during its time in the 1920's, I would have appraised its beauty and the owner. I cannot imagine anyone refusing to wear such delicacy and abiding by laws that prohibited skirts three inches above the ankles.

In conclusion, the artifact I have described is a flapper dress from the period of the Roaring 20's. The 1920's were characterized by economic expansion, social change, and modernism. However, the flapper girls that flourished during this time in history became one of the most iconic subjects of fashion and feminism. This artifact embodies the belief in the fact that nobody gives you power. You just take it.

Works Cited

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