

1920s Fashion in Auckland, New Zealand

“When, in future years, some energetic historian sets out to write the last word on the evolution of the world’s fashions, he or she as the case may be – probably he – will need to ponder seriously over Spring 1927.”¹

While this historian happens to be a she, and Spring 1927 did not provide anything in particular to ponder about, I am certainly energetic and 1920s fashion as a whole provided a lot to ponder about.

From the 1920s to 1940s, Auckland was a destination where department stores and magazines flourished as key fashion destinations. The department stores of central Auckland were hotspots of fashion, and ideas of trends were fed into popular imagination by prominent women’s magazines such as *The Mirror*. As women gained autonomy over their lives and decisions, fashion evolved, and so did the ways fashionable clothes were bought and worn. In this article series, I will explore ideas of women’s fashion in Auckland city during this period, focusing on the relationship between trends and department stores.

The Stores:

As New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland was the leader in fashion. From the late 19th Century, department stores dominated shopping in Auckland. Six department stores, positioned in the heart of the city centre, acted as key shopping destinations. Smith and Caughey, Milne and Choyce, and John Court Limited on Queen Street, Rendells and George Court on Karangahape Road, and Farmers’ Trading Company on Hobson Street.² All of these, except Farmers’, had origins as draperies, meaning that the fabric and clothing sections of these stores flourished and was the attracting feature for customers. These stores then evolved into the multi-storey, multi-department stores of today, with wide ranges of goods. These stores had sewing machines and everything needed to make clothes, along with large selections of off-the-rack and made-to-order clothing.³ Department stores generally appealed to a middle class to upper-middle class customer base, but there was a range in pricing, making them accessible to a wider range. Milne and Choyce and Smith and Caughey attracted a more affluent group than George Court, which advertised “prices within reach and fashion with economy,”⁴ and Rendells, which attracted their customer base through their bargain sales.⁵

¹ The Mirror, “Vanitas Vanitatum October 1927”, 17.

² Laurenson, “Going Up? Going Down! The Rise and Fall of Auckland Department Stores,” ii.

³ Farmers’ Trading Company, “Catalogue 7, 1925-1926”, 416, 468, 469

⁴ George Court, “Advertisement: Fashion within Economy.”

⁵ Rendells, “Advertisement: Rendells Cheerful Bargains Sale.”



Image 1: View of John Court Department Store from Queen Street in 1917 (Photograph by Henry Winkelmann from Auckland Libraries Heritage Images Winkelmann Collection).



Image 2: Image of Farmers' in 2023 in the old John Court Building (Photograph by Caitlin Kilpatrick).

These department stores valued and capitalised on cultivating a positive customer experience, turning shopping into a spectacle that became important for women and society. Farmers', Smith and Caughey, Milne and Choyce, and George Court all had tearooms in their stores, ensuring there was a destination for customers to relieve themselves from a hard day shopping.⁶ Farmers' also ran a free bus between Queen Street, Hobson Street and

⁶ Farmers' Trading Company, "Catalogue 7, 1925-1926," 1.

Karangahape Road from the early 1920s, providing accessibility to all the department stores and furthering the perception of department store shopping as a full-day event.⁷ Stores held “dazzling fashion parades” to show off the latest clothing and attract more customers to the spectacle of fashion. These tactics, combined with the stores' central locations, positioned these stores as the most essential fashion destinations, making them indispensable in consumers' minds.

The Inspiration:

Fashion also came from magazines, in particular the Auckland-based *Ladies' Mirror*, later renamed as *The Mirror*, which was a gateway for Aucklanders to fashion all over the world. *The Mirror* informed women about the latest fashion trends, with their exclusive ‘Paris Fashion Letter’ in issues through the late 1920s keeping women updated on “Paris: the world’s fashion centre.”⁸ Throughout the magazines, pictures were displayed of prominent British and French women, inspiring Auckland women on what they could wear to embody fashion itself.⁹



Image 3: Fashion in England used as an example for New Zealand women in 1928 (Photograph by unknown for the *Mirror*, March 1928)

The European influence on fashion urged New Zealand women to think carefully about their clothing choices. New Zealand’s position in the Southern Hemisphere and France’s in the Northern led to a delay in these articles, with winter fashions displayed in January, the

⁷ The *Ladies' Mirror*, “The Farmer’s Union Trading Company advertisement”, iv.

⁸ The *Mirror*, “Paris: The World’s Fashion Centre”, 18, 19.

⁹ The *Mirror*, “English Social Patrons of Winter Racing”, 22.

height of the New Zealand summer.¹⁰ This ended up working to the benefit of New Zealand women. The distance from Europe to New Zealand often meant there was a delay in the current fashionable materials arriving in New Zealand. Hence, these columns acted as a forewarning to New Zealand women on what they should wear in the following season.

The department stores of Auckland City took these global ideas and included them in their advertising identities. Smith and Caughey and Farmers' both boasted multitudes of European materials "coming forward by practically every steamer."¹¹ All department stores embraced European fashion, but Smith and Caughey mainly took this as part of their identity. Part of the Smith and Caughey experience was knowing you were viewing fashion from all over the world. The store had buyers "purchasing direct from British and French manufacturers"¹² and directors having constantly visiting London and Paris to find the "latest novelties shown in these fashion centres."¹³ Rendells took the same approach, focusing on British imports to appeal to the English Patriotism that many New Zealanders still had. Rendells held a "British Empire Trade Week" where it was boasted that "Buy British, and you buy the best."¹⁴

Newspapers followed this trend of placing global cities at the centre of fashion, with the *Auckland Sun* declaring in 1928 that "Paris still leads the fashionable world, though [it] has its rivals in London and New York."¹⁵ Europe still ruled the fashion world in the 1920s, although the 1930s and 1940s saw the beginning of the United States' domination of popular fashion.

The personified 'Madame Fashion' (or 'Dame Fashion') was used in magazines and newspapers to describe and discuss the latest trends. In an ad for Farmers' in the *Auckland Sun*, it is stated "Madame Fashion this season has a gown to conform to her slightest whim,"¹⁶ discussing the newfound variety of clothing in stores. 'Dame Fashion' was also used to appeal to a sense of community that came from fashion, with the *Auckland Sun* stating "Doesn't womankind in general like to be let into a secret, more especially when it's one concerning the whims of Dame Fashion?"¹⁷ The 1920s saw fashion beginning to be defined as in and out, the beginning of trends as we know today. This made it important for women to stay up to date with the whims of Dame Fashion.

The 1920s marked a new era of fashion – the era of women choosing what to wear and using clothing as an avenue of self-expression. Following the overseas death toll of World War I and the domestic death toll of the Influenza Pandemic, a general uncertainty was the tone of the early 1920s. However, this time period saw women stepping up to work more frequently, providing increased freedom that carried through to fashion. A 1922 article from the *New Zealand Herald* discussed this new-found freedom from the War, where "women

¹⁰ The Mirror, "Our Paris Fashion Letter January 1928", 39.

¹¹ The Ladies' Mirror, "Fashion's Whims and Fancies for Autumn", 29.

¹² The Ladies' Mirror, "The Mirror of Fashion: Spring Among the Frocks", 17.

¹³ The Ladies' Mirror, "Spring Fashion", 22.

¹⁴ Rendells, "Advertisement: British Empire Trade Week."

¹⁵ Auckland Sun, "Dictator of Fashion: People not Designers."

¹⁶ Farmers' Trading Company, "Advertisement: Silks and Sequins: This Season's Moods."

¹⁷ Auckland Sun, "Fashion Secrets Will Out."

did not stop to ask men what they might wear, in fact, the men were not there to ask.”¹⁸ This writer understood the War to be the catalyst in allowing women choose what to wear themselves. Whether or not women wore what they truly wanted is debatable, but it is undeniable that the 1920s saw a relaxation in fashion rules that had dominated the previous years. Some believed “the fashion of the future must be what women want, not what Paris wants ”¹⁹ which provided an interesting contrast from the more common understanding of European fashion being the most important. *The Mirror* embraced both perspectives, focusing on European fashion as well as the idea that there has “been no period in history in which women have had such opportunities at dressing to better advantage and making the most of themselves.”²⁰



Image 4: Winter Fashion in 1922 (Photograph by The Ladies' Mirror for the Ladies' Mirror July 1922)

The Clothing:

The new-found fashion freedom of the 1920s increased women's choices in clothing. Hemlines crept up through the decade. Initially ankle-length and uneven,²¹ hemlines became

¹⁸ New Zealand Herald, "Woman Emancipated."

¹⁹ New Zealand Herald, "Woman Emancipated."

²⁰ The Ladies' Mirror, "The Mirror of Fashion: The Triumph of Line", 16.

²¹ Farmers' Trading Company, "Catalogue 3, 1920-1921," 390-391.

mid-calf in the middle of the decade.²² The end of the 1920s saw hemlines becoming much shorter, at “a couple of inches above the knee for day-time wear, and a couple of inches below for evening gowns.”²³ Hemlines were often uneven, which paired well with the low-waisted style and draping that was so common.²⁴ Relaxation of lines, away from severe straightness²⁵ also provided a looser, more wearable approach to fashion. Yet, silhouettes were still critical, with the Auckland Sun stating that “a woman simply must look slim, whether she possesses the necessary figure or not.”²⁶ Underneath every outfit was a stash of important undergarments – corsets, girdles, petticoats and more. These were used to achieve the desired silhouette – a combination between straight lines and effortless femininity.²⁷ This effortless femininity was inspired by the past. 1922 Fashion was inspired by the “semi-classical lines”²⁸ and “charm and statuesque draping”²⁹ of the Victorian era, not unlike the way that 2022 fashion was inspired by the rugged charm of the early 2000s.



Image 5: Summer Fashion in 1927 (Image by The Mirror from The Mirror, December 1927)

Catalogues held a pivotal role in determining fashion. The Farmers’ Trading Company regularly sent out mail catalogues, allowing women to view their shopping options before making the journey to the stores.³⁰ These were a space where the new wide range of clothing items and styles became visible, becoming pivotal in influencing a new modern fashion style. Cardigans became more popular during this decade, cementing themselves as

²² Farmers’ Trading Company, “Catalogue 7, 1925-1926,” 461.

²³ The Mirror, “Vanitas Vanitatum September 1927”, 19.

²⁴ The Mirror, “Vanitas Vanitatum November 1927”, 17.

²⁵ The Ladies’ Mirror, “The Mirror of Fashion: Spring Among the Frocks”, 17.

²⁶ Auckland Sun, “Dictators of Fashion: People not Designers.”

²⁷ Farmers’ Trading Company, “Catalogue 3, 1920-1921”, 308.

²⁸ The Ladies’ Mirror, “The Mirror of Fashion: The Triumph of Line”, 18.

²⁹ The Ladies’ Mirror, “For Evening Festivities”, 24.

³⁰ Farmers’ Trading Company, “Catalogue 7, 1925-1926”, 468-469.

a timeless staple in women's fashion.³¹ Alongside blazers, walking skirts, and costumes, hats played a critical role in overall fashion. Looking at hats, "shapes [were] many and varied" and heavy on adornments, according to *the Mirror*.³² Everyday hats were wide-brimmed with upturned fronts, while occasion hats varied wildly between extra wide and extra narrow brims, extra heavy on the embellishments.³³ Women did not go out in public without a hat, so it is understandable that these would play a key role in the perception of a woman's style.

Magazines and newspapers were interested in what people were actually wearing and had long columns detailing the specific outfits of prominent women out and about. For example, for a tea party at Government House in Auckland, "Lady Jellicoe wore bronze-coloured satin draped with georgette, bronze feather boa and becoming hat of the same shade."³⁴ Events such as the Ellerslie Races reigned supreme in these columns, with detailed descriptions of outfits: "Lady Herdman wore a black pleated crepe faille gown, under a black coat, with grey furs and a small black hat."³⁵ These in-depth descriptions of clothing were long, but also prominent in many magazines. Being able to see what the wealthiest people in society were wearing acted as a motivator for what everyday women should be wearing. From fabrics to embellishments, these society pages were the fashion influencers of the 1920s.



³¹ Farmers' Trading Company, "Catalogue 7, 1925-1926", 460.

³² The Ladies' Mirror, "The Mirror of Fashion: The Fascination of Early Spring Millinery", 14.

³³ Farmers' Trading Company, "Catalogue 3, 1920-1921", 355-356.

³⁴ The Ladies' Mirror, "In the Mirror: Social Doings in Various Centres", 5.

³⁵ Auckland Sun, "Furs and Coats at Ellerslie Today."

Image 6: Women's Fashion at Ellerslie for the Auckland Cup in the 1920s (Photograph by Auckland Weekly News from Auckland Libraries Heritage Images Collection).

1920s fashion was personified by a step towards modernity and fashion freedom. The decade emphasised straight lines, upwards-creeping hemlines and heavy embellishments, all of which the Auckland department stores were more than willing to promote and provide. The next decade, the 1930s, continued with this pattern of department stores directly feeding into fashion trends. Yet, the 1930s saw significant transformations in women's style once again, due to influential world events, and continued discussion on women's role in society.

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