COVER STORY

Hemlines: Who Cares?!

By Valerie Smith-Madden

1988 will probably go down in the annals of fashion history as the year of the great consumer revolt. It has been the year when the American working woman said no to the mini, dashing the hopes and trashing the lines of those American and foreign designers who had said otherwise.

Cheryl Brown, a coffee-colored woman with a short afro flecked with gray said, "I love the mini. I loved it the first go 'round, but I just cannot bring myself to spend money on those things now. Much of my clothing budget goes to clothes for work. I just can't afford to spend money on frivolity."

The eighties have given working women the "Dress for Success" look, with its severely tailored suits in regulation navy or grey, complete with high-collared blouses and silk ties. Women, caught in the throes of social change and eyeing the fast track in the job market, eagerly took the fashion bait and made the look a uniform.

The large number of women entering the work force had a profound impact on the fashion industry. The working woman, with her larges sums of disposable income, would become a force to reckon with.

Several designers paid attention to the changes and were able to parley social change into a tremendous business success.

A well-known designer for the working woman is Liz Claiborne. Claiborne understands the needs of her working customer. Her moderately priced, tasteful garments fit perfectly into the ever-changing lifestyle of the working woman. Season after season, Claiborne gives her customers what they want, including a variety of skirt lengths.

Claiborne has been so successful that she was able to create a nifty fashion empire, complete with a spot on the New York Stock Exchange. Perhaps the best testimony of her success came in 1986, when the Wall Street Journal identified her line as one of the three best selling in the country.

The prolific designer shared the honors with the now troubled Esprit De Corps of California and the Columbia Ohio based, The Limited.

Marketed by The Limited, Forenza, introduced in 1985, caused such a sensation with its shaker knit sweaters, that teenage consumers were often heard asking for a "Forenza" sweater. Pleased with that kind of reception, The Limited countered with some good advice, "accept no substitutes."

The Forenza look enables the line to indulge in some fashion experimentation without taking a financial bath. And it

was in this line, that the mini appeared, en masse, in its stores across the country. In 1987, The Limited urged, "Thigh High by the Fourth of July."

While buyers for the chain moved forward with the shorter lengths, buyers for other retailers across the country moved with more caution.

"Last August (1987)", explained an executive of a D.C. based retailer, "we all sat down and brainstormed as to how our stores would look going into the next season. There was the mini in two lengths, the casual 22" (mid-thigh), and the career length in 24 or 25 inches (just below the knee)."

He continued, "We were high on it, but our buyers weren't. As the season progressed, we decided that we had to make a fashion statement. We called our vendors and ordered skirts in the two lengths, the shorter ones in denim. The denim took off." And the skirts in the career department? "Women just wouldn't buy them," he said.

A sales associate griped, "Women would come into my dressing room and complain that they did not want to buy the shorter skirts. They all wanted the longer skirts, nothing over the knee."

Pamela Trent, a sales associate for T. H. Mandy's, a D.C. based retailer echoed the observation. "Some women would buy them, but most wouldn't. And when it was purchased for work, it was purchased by a white customer."

"My white customers usually bought them," said Maggie Shropshire of Maggie's Place, a quaint boutique in Baltimore.

When asked the reason, Maggie replied, "I think black women like the longer skirts better."

Debbie Jones, a third year law student clerking in a D.C. firm, observed, "A lot of black women are conservative in the workplace. I know I am. And with me being in this field, I have to be taken seriously. So my clothes tend to reflect that. I hope they say 'I am serious,' because I am."

Edna Murphy, a retired government worker said, "Miniskirts are for young girls. And I hate seeing women who are close to my age wearing them. Everytime I see Tina Turner, I want to scream. Women need to start acting their age and wearing clothes that reflect their maturity."

Barbara Thompson, a plump, handsome woman in her late thirties, disagreed with Ms. Murphy's view. "I wear them and I like them. I don't think of it as something for young girls only. If you look good in something, I think you should wear it. And I like the way I look in short skirts."

Cheryl Goodman, an arts administrator asked, "Given the recent Supreme Court ruling on sexual harassment in the market, why would anyone want to wear shorter skirts on their job?"

She added, "Women have been fighting long and hard for equality in the workplace. It seems strange to bring the mini back now."

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