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**THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF THE HEMLINE**

by Owen Williams

In a year which has seen buttock-revealing hemlines become not only acceptable but fashionable, it is hardly surprising that the underwear market has undergone a few changes.  This summer the fashion has been largely for sturdy, hotpants-style panties, which are seen as more appropriate for display than the cotton, lace or silk knickers of yesteryear.  Yet this preference is by no means a universal one.  Many women spotted by this reporter in the malls and streets of London in the last month have been wearing conventional cottons, and even a few thongs have been in evidence.

The fashion for miniskirts, it seems, comes and goes.  But these days, when it goes, it never goes for long.  Hemlines began to creep up in the Twenties, but they soon sank back down as the Great Depression put an end to such frivolity.  In the mid-Sixties, they crept up again, with microskirts and microdresses being practically all a young woman could find to buy for herself in the shops by the end of that decade.  By the mid-Seventies, skirts were longer again, and for a while disappeared almost completely with the ubiquity of flared jeans.  The mid-Eighties saw miniskirts re-appear to a certain extent, but by the early Nineties they were out of favour ... and then back in favour.  By the end of the millennium, diversity of hem-length was the watchword, with skirts of all lengths seeming equally acceptable.  To a large extent that state of affairs still exists.  But in 2005 the fashion for young women began to swing towards the shorter skirt, as a string of movies depicting strong female characters in very short miniskirts pervaded the public's subconscious.  Clothing companies jumped on the bandwagon one after the other, creating ranges of appealing and original microskirt designs which grew shorter with each successive year.  By 2006 the first of the buttock-grazing hemlines were appearing, and the massive popularity of movie heroine Greta Stone, as played by Kirsten Dunst in the 2007 hit movie "Bombshell", sparked a new eagerness among clothes-buying young women for 'nanoskirts' and 'nanodresses' - skirts and dresses that reveal an inch or two of buttock.

Critics of this trend are apparently as ignored as they are outspoken.  Feminist author Frida Marshall has condemned the current output of the fashion industry as "the biggest step backward in sexual equality for forty years".  Other feminists, however, disagree.  Maria Volonte, editor of 'The Independent Sex', says, "Sure, men love these fashions.  But [for women] to stop wearing them because men like them is as stupid as wearing them for that reason.  There are other clothes out there - if women wanted to wear longer skirts they could.  It's the demand that drives the market, not the other way around.  And if some women want to show off their asses, then I'll champion their right to do that."

It has taken the underwear manufacturers slightly longer to catch on, but finally they have done so.  Television commercials featuring women in nanoskirts are as likely to be advertising the revealed underwear as the skirts themselves.  Brighter colours and sturdier designs have been the trend amongst many manufacturers, with see-through lacy undergarments dramatically losing popularity (although with the recent hugely successful release of the eye-popping "Bombshell 2" this may undergo a sharp reversal).

The famous Arlene Jackson case in 2007 has ensured that no length of skirt warrants arrest for indecent exposure, so one has to wonder how high the hemlines will climb.  This summer has seen some of the shortest yet - nanoskirts that show up to six inches of buttock at the back and reveal plenty at the front, too.  What will next summer bring?  Will the trend continue, stabilise or crash?  Looking back over the evolution of fashion in the last century, this reporter suspects that while their popularity will undoubtedly fade, the nanoskirt is here to stay.  And the underwear manufacturers will continue to prosper in a decade that has seen their products receive more exposure than they could have possibly dreamed of just five years ago.