

## Fashion on the Ration: 1940s Street Style

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In between small model spitfires and Sherman tank key rings, visitors browsing the shelves of the Imperial War Museum's gift shop will find their gaze met by the reassuringly familiar smile of a round-faced rag doll, beaming from the side of a tote bag. The doll's soft body might seem out of place amidst the more mechanised symbols of conflict, but its smile belongs to Mrs Sew and Sew, the iconic mascot of the Ministry of Information's Second World War Make do and Mend scheme, here to celebrate the museum's exhibition *Fashion on the Ration: 1940s Street Style*. While the visual appeal of this 1940s icon is undoubtedly strong, the reproduction of Mrs Sew and Sew on museum merchandise is, like the exhibition itself, about more than fashionable nostalgia – she demonstrates the firm grip that Second World War fashion still holds on the collective imagination of the British public. Despite the increasing popularity of fashion exhibitions in recent years, by combining popular sentimentalism with the politics and social upheaval that must be read into the surviving garments, *Fashion on the Ration* provides a rare opportunity for visitors to take historical fashion *seriously*.

The experience of total war, and its impact upon life on the Home Front, is viscerally captured by the unprecedented level of government intrusion into the private realm of dressing the body during the Second World War. More than this, as the material embodiment of one of the darkest historical moments of the 20th century, wartime garments are able to break away from the negative perception of dress as an insubstantial historical source, perceived as limited by its gendered and superficial concerns. Instead, Second World War garments have come to represent a morally acceptable form of fashionable consumption, one that represents thriftiness in its Make do and Mend culture, egalitarian values through rationing and Utility design, and the patriotic sacrifice of frivolous sartorial desire for social good. As a result, the mythologies of fashionable sacrifice continue to permeate our collective conscious, and wartime fashion is considered a safe space in which to celebrate dress, despite challenges to many of these assumptions by historians who have demonstrated the continuation of luxury fashions for a wealthy, urban elite (1) and the limited reach of official Make do and Mend propaganda on a society where, for many, the need to reuse was a long term economic necessity.(2)

This well trodden narrative of sacrifice and ingenuity is echoed by the gallery layout of the exhibition, which is divided into six familiar categories, taking the visitor on a sartorial journey from military uniforms to the New Look, stopping along the way to examine functional clothes, rationing, Make do and Mend, Utility clothing and the beauty industry. While these categories offer little new perspective into the cannon of Second World War fashion history, and in fact strongly echo the themes of the Imperial War Museum's 1997 exhibition *Forties Fashion and the New Look*, and the accompanying publication written by Colin McDowell (3), beneath the glassy surface of *Fashion on the Ration's* exhibition cases something is afoot.

The items on display defy the strict categorisation of the exhibition, and counter narratives emerge as the material objects push back against the boundaries of accepted fashion mythologies, raising questions about 1940s class and gender politics that challenge a nostalgic view of the egalitarian war years.

Indeed, the inclusion of a wide range of official government publications and advertising material alongside the garments demonstrates the role fashion can play in exposing inconvenient historical truths, although the exhibition fails to explicitly refer to the problematic features of wartime fashion. This omission is a shame since, as the exhibition's curator Laura Clouting told the press, fashion can give us an intimate insight into life on the Home Front (4), and the objects on display do as much to reveal the sexism and social inequality of the period as they do to highlight the ingenuity and adaptability of a nation at war.

Garments may provide the bulk of the gallery's contents, but it's the trove of 1940s commentary running through the exhibition in the form of personal letters, which discuss clothing across various circumstances, that provide the backbone. Often featuring charming illustrations, the letters demonstrate some of the day-to-day challenges of wartime fashion as well as the continuing importance of personal style in many people's lives. These letters are particularly effective in the exhibition's section on uniforms, as it is refreshing to see examples of military and civilian uniforms accompanied by commentary on what it was like to actually wear them – recognising that many people during this period experienced dress as 'civilians in temporary fancy dress'. (5) In another much welcome move, examples of male and female uniforms are displayed together, acknowledging a parity in wartime sacrifice, while highlighting the differences in gendered experience through garment design, construction and even quality.

Although this presentation shows how uniforms were able to 'disguise or break down divisions of class and gender' (6), the subsequent sections on functional fashion and Make do and Mend demonstrate that class and gender divisions were alive and well in civilian life during the era. The functional fashion section primarily deals with garments suitable for domestic chores and factory work, however it also features siren suits – an item largely purchased as a curiosity by affluent urbanites – and images of decorative glow-in-the-dark broaches sold at up-market department store Selfridges. It is quickly apparent from these items that the precise meaning of function in dress continued to have sharp class divisions, even during a time of national crisis.

Unfortunately the exhibition is less effective at acknowledging the class boundaries of the government's Make Do and Mend scheme. Make Do and Mend is presented as the catalyst for a home sewing revolution, inspiring women across the land to reinvent their wardrobes with personal creativity. However, the exhibition does not mention that while this scheme is well known today, it was actually something of a failure at the time. In the same way that rationing had a disproportionate effect on less affluent individuals with smaller wardrobe reserves, the call to remake and reuse was, for the majority of the population, at best patronising. Government figures demonstrate that the biggest take up of official sewing classes was by those interested in recreational crafting, rather than remaking out of necessity. (7) This class divide is clearly demonstrated by the garments on show, including the beautifully decorative underwear set made out of silk maps for Countess Mountbatten, and the exquisitely symmetrical patchwork housecoat, exemplifying the professional skills of two Sussex dressmakers, rather than the needs of an enterprising housewife. While it is often these decorative items that survive the ravages of time while other more practical garments are worn out, it is disappointing that the exhibition fails to acknowledge that Make do and Mend, as presented here, was largely the preserve of those with the necessary means and leisure time.

Both the Functional Fashion and Make do and Mend sections are devoted almost exclusively to women's wear. While this seems logical when dealing with workplace dress due to the substantial changes in women's occupational roles occurring at this time, there is no commentary as to why home sewing was presented as the exclusive realm of women. With a similar lack of critical engagement, the exhibition makes much of the importance of appearance during this difficult time, again by focusing on women. The Beauty as Duty section discusses the promotion of cosmetics as patriotic, but fails to tackle the discrepancy between the nature of women's war work and a social expectation that women should endeavour to be aesthetically

pleasing.

By far the highlight of the exhibition is its enlightening display of garments and film related to the wartime Utility scheme. Utility regulations, which governed much of the ready-to-wear industry through controls on garment design and materials, is often conflated with rationing. By giving Utility its own space, the exhibition is able to provide an unusual depth of information on the formation of the Utility scheme and the rules governing clothing design, as well the ways to break them, such as a tendency for men to order extra long trousers to get around the ban on turn ups. Rather than simply dwelling on the much discussed inaugural Utility collection, created by London's couture fashion designers, the exhibition displays a variety of garments. Ranging in origin from designer Digby Morton to high street staple Marks and Spencer, this display demonstrates the unexpected variety of choice available within the confines of the Utility scheme, both in terms of style and quality, and gives a real flavour of everyday dress during the 1940s. Alongside the garments are a selection of fabrics for visitors to touch, with the heavy, scratchy wools in particular providing a pertinent reminder of the physical differences between 1940s and contemporary clothing, something easily forgotten when looking at some of these surprisingly modern Utility designs.

Recognising that rationing and regulations not only continued beyond the declaration of peace in 1945, but that shortages intensified following the war due to the cumulative effect of the preceding years, the exhibition spends its final section tackling the post-war rebirth of fashion and the emergence of the ubiquitous New Look. The battle between the excesses of French fashion and British austerity is framed with familiar sources including, most prominently, an image of Dior's famous bar suit and Marjorie Beckett's much quoted *Picture Post* article, 'Paris forgets this is 1947'.<sup>(8)</sup> Nevertheless, the garment chosen to represent the New Look resists this directly oppositional narrative. The blue Dereta ready-to-wear suit on display exemplifies the simpler London Look style and encapsulates the importance of developments in ready-to-wear to the future of British fashion and demonstrates how the Utility scheme left a legacy of efficient manufacturing and quality controls.

Fittingly, this celebration of British ready-to-wear is accompanied by a display on the Demob suit, itself a demonstration of the technological capabilities and mass-manufacturing prowess of Britain's multiple tailors in the immediate post-war era. Drawing on the IWM's excellent collection of images detailing military demobilisation, the visitor is guided through the process of selecting a demob suit. The suits on display demonstrate the wide variety of sartorial choices available to returning servicemen and highlight the quality of the garments provided, with a reminder that the retail value of such a suit would have been around £450 in today's money.

Both academic studies of 1940s fashions and popular exhibitions such as *Fashion on the Ration* speak to contemporary concerns about sustainability and the frivolity of fast fashion, and the exhibition concludes with video interviews that draw clear comparisons between wartime shortages and current trends towards sustainable fashion consumption. However, these interviews fail to acknowledge that a reduction in clothing consumption was only achieved in the 1940s through draconian government restrictions. While restrictions did temporarily change some aspects of consumer behaviour, causing people to focus on features such as garment quality, the majority of respondents to Mass Observation surveys in the late 1940s were unashamed in their desire for a return to unbridled consumption.<sup>(9)</sup> In fact, as the exhibition acknowledges, one of the greatest legacies of wartime fashion was the standardisation and efficiencies learnt in mass garment manufacture as a result of the Utility scheme <sup>(10)</sup>, directly enabling the system of fast fashion that causes so many problems today. This discrepancy between historical evidence and the legacies of 1940s fashion in popular culture exemplify the problems of presenting such a complex period in fashion history under the guise of a uniform narrative.

Despite *Fashion on the Ration*'s many successes in presenting exciting objects, there are some notable problems that run throughout the exhibition. In particular, this review has refrained from using the exhibition's generally overlooked subtitle, *1940s Street Style*, as these words sit uncomfortably with much of the exhibition's content. It is clear that the areas where the display excels are those surrounding the IWM's

excellent collections, especially in relation to official government material. However, to suggest that these represent fashion as worn on the street is inaccurate, and occasionally directly misleading. For example, many of the images described as depicting street style were produced for the Ministry of Information in order to promote British fashion during the war, and feature dressed models. This reflects a wider exhibition issue regarding the treatment of sources, which are rarely interrogated. Visitors are led through the exhibition by the narrative style of the labelling. While this creates a smooth flow between a variety of different objects, incorporating them into a cohesive narrative, it also leaves little room for information about the provenance of objects. This is not only problematic from the point of view of precise dating (frequently there seems to be an assumption that fashions remained entirely static and continuous throughout the war), but can also be actively misleading, such as grouping documentary photographs and official government photo shoots together with no acknowledgement of their sources.

The lack of information about the objects in the exhibition imposes limits on our understanding of place. The majority of the fashion images in the exhibition seem to be taken in London, while the examples of work wear originate from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, yet there is no discussion about how the experiences of wartime fashion varied between geographic locations. This apparent fear of localism is symptomatic of the inability of the exhibition to fulfil its grand scope. While it portends to give an overview of British clothing during the period, *Fashion on the Ration* is largely limited to telling the story of fashion as experienced by urban middle class women. By dislocating these garments from a sense of place, they become disembodied and separated from the circumstances of their wear. In this denial of the individual agency of the bodies that wore them, much of the narrative power of the garment is lost. Women in particular are treated as passive recipients of fashion; in one of the exhibition's most significant missed opportunities, it fails to explain the power of dress to embody an act of resistance against government regulations and social expectations. A disembodied New Look style skirt can only speak of changing hemlines, not the use of skirt lengths as a political protest against ongoing post-war austerity. In this treatment, clothes are relegated to aesthetic objects, rather than tools for change.

In spite of the exhibition's highly impersonal narrative, in which dressed bodies are presented as uniform and compliant outputs of war, *Fashion on the Ration* reminds us that the British population was as diverse and contrary as ever during the 1940s, in spite of clothing controls. The darned overalls, worn thin with the toil of manual labour; the playful underwear set, a lustful gift from a boyfriend; the communal hope of a wedding dress, lent out 12 times— these garments all ooze messy, embodied experience that sticks to the visitor. Alongside the garments, photographs serve as a reminder of the bodies that wore these clothes, demonstrating that fashion is not just about what you wear, but how you wear it. These photographs show the multiple ways of wearing 1940s dress, and the possibility of indicating defiance with the angle of a hat or attitude in the drape of a scarf. *Fashion on the Ration* may not be representative of what was worn across the whole of Britain during the 1940s, but it achieves something far more important in reminding us of the humanity of the men and women who existed through those difficult times. In this role, the exhibition is a testament to the power of clothes, as the medium through which we experience our environment, to tell us what it was like to live in a certain place and time.

Underneath its categorical insistence on adhering to fashion mythology, *Fashion on the Ration* is a deeply thoughtful exhibition that draws on surprising sources to challenge assumptions about not just what was worn, but the experience of wearing fashion during a turbulent time. However, its calls to use fashion as a source for re-evaluating life on the Home Front are too often drowned out by a fear of deviating from its self-imposed narrative structure. This exhibition contains the raw ingredients necessary to re-write the popular history of women's wartime experience, if only it was bolder in using material culture evidence to signpost the counter narratives contained within the objects on display.

## Notes

1. N. Taylor, *'The Ancien Regime Dies Hard in England': the Place of Luxury in the People's War*. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Royal College of Art (2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. M. Wood, *We Wore What We'd Got. Women's Clothes in World War II* (Exeter, 1989), p. 21.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (London, 1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. L. Crossley, *Fashion on Rations: How Style on the Home Front Was Anything BUT Black And White as Second World War's Enduring Influence on the British High Street Is Revealed* <  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2885421/How-style-home-black-w...> [2] [accessed 13 July 2015].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. A. Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God*, (London, 1987), p. 305.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Fashion on the Ration: 1940s Street Style*, Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ, (23 May 2015).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939–1955*, (Oxford, 2000), p. 121.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. M. Beckett, 'Paris Forgets This Is 1947', *Picture Post* (27 September 1947).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Mass Observation, *FR 2502: Clothes Buying and Wearing*, (1947), p. 3.[Back to \(19\)](#)
10. C. Boydell, *Horrockses Fashions: Off-the-Peg Style in the '40s and '50s* (London, 2010), p. 27–9.  
[Back to \(10\)](#)

#### Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/mar/08/fashion-on-the-ration-imperial-war-museum-review-pluck-hope-humour-grace> [3]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-two/11381542/Imperial-War-Museum-Fashion-on-the-ration.html> [4]

Standard Issue

<http://standardissuemagazine.com/arts/review-fashion-ration/> [5]

Rarely Wears Lipstick

<http://www.rarelywearslipstick.com/2015/05/review-fashion-on-the-ration/> [6]

Vintage Frills

<http://vintage-frills.com/2015/03/11/fashion-on-the-ration-at-the-imperial-war-museum/> [7]

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