The modern style of clothes emerged in the Depression, and so did the focus on the figure beneath the fabric—with a startling result: as Americans' wardrobes became more similar, bodies diverged along class lines.

Arrive at a party in a fringed flapper dress or a hoop skirt, and you’re in costume. Come in the style worn by Katharine Hepburn or Barbara Stanwyck in the 1930s—a dress of woven silk gauze and chiffon that clings to the figure and plunges in the back—and you’re perfectly turned out. The story’s the same, minus the chiffon, for men. If you put on the shapeless “sack suit” of the turn of the century to attend a meeting, you’d look nearly as dowdy as you would if you were wearing a Civil War–era frock coat and sporting muttonchops. But if you appear in the artfully tailored suit favored by that international heartthrob the Prince of Wales circa 1933, you’re at the height of style.

The most-notorious fashion statements of the 1930s were the black shirts and brown shirts of fascism. Yet this era of dictators and worldwide economic depression also bequeathed to us the elements of modern style. That is the message of *Elegance in an Age of Crisis*, the handsomely illustrated volume accompanying this spring’s exhibition at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in New York. The same lesson surfaces in the glamorous retrospective of the couturier Charles James’s work on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art this summer, and in the sumptuous exhibition catalogue, *Charles James: Beyond Fashion*.

The way we dress now took recognizable shape during the 1930s. Men got jackets with substantial shoulder pads and darts at the waist. Women acquired sportswear, in fabrics and designs that followed the lines of the figure: clothes made for movement and ease—and equipped with pockets. They spelled escape from dependence on the handbag (or a husband’s pockets). The brassiere, an invention only a few decades old, grew molded cups for uplift and became standard garb. And where would we be without slacks? For women, they still counted as daring 80 years ago, but there was no doubt that they would catch on.

Look closely at the emergence of our modern style, and you can see politics in the fabric seams. Economic collapse and the search for social unity—the conditions that made the New Deal possible—created an unlikely alignment of tastes. Streamlined clothes appealed to the still prosperous, anxious to hide their wealth, and to the downwardly mobile, who hoped to conceal their slide. The sleek look in dresswear issued from Paris, where a pioneering generation of career women colonized the couture scene. The clean lines spread to New York’s Seventh Avenue, where an equally visionary set of American women designers, foremost among them Claire McCardell, spearheaded the sportswear boom. They shared a bold vision: to exploit the idea of femininity and sex appeal in order to achieve a more natural fashion, liberated from shifting conventions—a timeless style.

A timeless obsession took root, too. The elegantly simple creations inspired by this convergence of social tensions and taste disguised wealth, or the lack of it, but revealed an awful lot else. There was no hiding the figure under these clothes. The toned and exercised body became a marker of privilege, a status signal that has become only more glaring since. We have the 1930s to thank for a by-now-familiar paradox: Americans’ clothes became more similar even as their bodies diverged along class lines.

F or men as for women, the changes in fashion were startling. Suits were now designed to build a man up. The sack-suit jacket, a floppy construction, had revealed drooping shoulders; the pants readily slipped below bulging bellies. But the redefined suit, born in London and Naples, bid farewell to all that. On Savile Row, the Dutch-born tailor Frederick Scholte took as his model the scarlet coats worn by members of the Brigade of Guards, famous emblems of masculinity (and, infamously, the lust objects of gay men, as a series of sex scandals demonstrated). Scholte’s “drape” method of cutting cloth broadened the shoulders and narrowed the waist, making a man look taller, slimmer, and more muscular. Suddenly anyone could take on the dashing figure of a guardsman. In 1933, *Esquire*, a lavish 116 pages and 50 cents on the newsstands (this at a time when the average household income was about $29 a week), sold out its first print run. The magazine, conceived as a quarterly, turned monthly with its second issue.

For the ladies, accentuating femininity was the goal. The flapper’s straight, dropped-waist dress of the 1920s—a garment so loose that it could be pulled on over the head—was gone. Dresses were fashioned from clingy materials and cut on the bias, diagonally across the grain of the cloth; the technique exploited the stretch of the fabric to emphasize the curves of the body. New methods of weaving produced fabrics ideal for sinuous designs: mousselines and supple velvets, silk gauzes and chiffons. Every year, more body was exposed. At the beach and by the pool, women could dare to show off in midriff-revealing two-piece swimsuits. Evening gowns dipped down backs, displaying naked flesh. Nightgowns were slinky and slippery. It could be hard to distinguish between what 1930s women wore to galas and what they wore to bed at night.

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Hollywood hyped the new look, broadcasting it to the tens of millions of people who flocked to American cinemas every week during the movie-mad Depression. But the innovation in women’s fashion was chiefly Parisian. The new silhouettes of the 1930s were the product of a couturier world unlike any before or since. More than half of the leading Paris couture houses were headed by women—including the luminaries Coco Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet, as well as now-obscure designers such as Louise Boulanger and Augusta Bernard. Like Vionnet, who had toiled as a seamstress from the age of 11, these women were not born to the elite. Tremendous talent and perseverance propelled them to the top.

Vionnet occupied the pinnacle, and with her contemporaries, she outfitted a revolution. Her liquid draping, on display in the deceptively simple, lithe cut of a 1938 gold lamé halter-top gown, lapped the contours of the figure. But her aims went beyond beauty. Vionnet, who called herself an “enemy of fashion,” embraced women’s liberation and social reform. She sought to improve working conditions in her atelier, providing her employees with free medical and dental care, maternity leave and babysitting services, and paid holidays, too.

This was the Parisian world that the Anglo-American designer Charles James entered in his mid-20s. Working in Vionnet’s wake, he learned to design by draping fabric directly on the body; his technique was fundamental to the sculptural approach for which he later became famous. In the 1930s, James debuted a dress that took the body-hugging style to extremes. His spiral design—a progenitor of the wrap dress—wound around the body and was secured at the hip with three clasps. James left none of the erotics of fashion to the imagination: he branded his formfitting creation the “Taxi dress,” as in a garment that could be put on (and taken off) in a cab.

The streamlined style of the 1930s was, well, tailor-made for a self-conscious era. This was elegance for people who didn’t want to stand out: inconspicuous consumption for the rich few and inexpensive good taste for the newly hard-pressed middle class, desperate to keep up appearances. Between 1929 and 1932, the American economy had nearly ground to a halt by every measure: income, employment, manufacturing output, and retail sales. When the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd returned in the mid-1930s to Muncie, Indiana, the site they called Middletown in their classic study of American small-city life during the prosperous 1920s, they noted the circumspect mood of the times. People who still owned diamonds had stashed them in safe-deposit boxes. “They don’t have the face to wear them nowadays,” one man told the Lynds. Affluent Middletowners favored “less pretentiousness in dress.”

Sportswear epitomized what people meant when they invoked the “American Way of Life,” a phrase that came into frequent use during the Depression. The new clothing was democratic and unifying, pragmatic and versatile. On Seventh Avenue, Claire McCardell adapted Vionnet’s draped styles for ready-to-wear and was soon striking out in her own distinctively austere style. The machine-made version of James’s Taxi dress was sold at Best & Co. department stores in a cellophane package. And, courtesy of the new federal funding that had poured into vocational education starting in 1917, there were armies of women trained in home economics who, when they saw a dress they liked in a magazine or a movie, went straight to their sewing machines. The experts might have scoffed, but the untrained eye was hard-pressed to tell the designer original from the knockoffs.

Modern fashion in dresswear was a thrilling leveler, yet the minimalist style didn’t camouflage all differences. Whereas the new draped men’s suits worked magic on lumpiness, women’s fashions—those “ruthless new dresses,” in *Vogue*’s words—betrayed every imperfection. Whether or not Wallis Simpson actually uttered the line often attributed to her, “You can never be too rich or too thin,” the sentiment suited her time. Dieting wasn’t new. The first “reducing salon” had opened in Chicago in 1914, and flappers had pioneered the pursuit of thinness. But there was no disguising the body in 1930s clothes. Waists rose from flapper indeterminacy to their natural spot. Brassieres separated and lifted breasts, each to its own position, supplanting the monobosom of the preceding century. Small hips, broad shoulders, and a slim yet shapely torso were all necessary to carry off the look.

Designers, of course, imagined that in releasing women from their corsets, they were giving free rein to the body. “A woman’s muscles,” Vionnet said, “are the best corset one could imagine.” Yet the new aesthetic marked a swerve in the history of body ideals. Not so many decades earlier, poverty in the industrializing West had inspired a standard of beauty that emphasized amplitude. Fashionable Belle Epoque women padded their clothes to create a sense of heft, and to produce hips that were at least as wide as their shoulders. During the Depression, the poor starved and the well-to-do matron went hungry by choice.

Liberation from the corset meant enslavement to the reducing salon, to the appetite-suppressing cigarette, and to the girdle, its own popularity enabled by the invention of elastic materials like Lastex (an ancestor of Lycra), patented in 1931. A slender and athletic physique was often identified with Americans, in a reversal we might now envy: today French women don’t get fat, but then the Gallic type was classically zaftig. Still, as *Vogue* reminded its readers, trim perfection was not an American birthright: “It is not enough to recognize the fact that you have a figure. Unless you are one woman in three thousand you will have to admit that it is not ideal.”

To live up to the new sportswear, exercise would have to become a daily routine. The Works Progress Administration was building public swimming pools and tennis courts, city golf courses and gymnasiums, for pastimes on the rise in an ever sportier and health-conscious decade. But a languid game of golf, or an occasional set of tennis, wasn’t enough to eliminate what was politely referred to as avoirdupois. For men, challenged to look good in new torso-baring bathing suits, the bodybuilder Charles Atlas offered a remedy: develop washboard abs and be the hero of the beach. For women, *Vogue* and its ilk prescribed a focused set of attacks: bumping the rear against the ground to break down the tissues of the derriere, strenuously extending the arms to lift the bosom.

Still, the uncorseted turn had its skeptics. By theSecond World War, Charles James had more or less given up on the liberated female form. He’d never had Vionnet’s faith in its beauty: “The feminine figure is intrinsically wrong,” he complained in 1933. Always a rogue talent, James—chasing fame and bolting from his creditors—now sought immortality in a radical departure. The clothes he designed in the ’40s and ’50s were highly engineered, ingeniously bolstered by rigid, built-in understructures of buckram and metal wire. His postwar suits and coats stood off the body: high-waisted, bell-shaped styles that built a cocoon around the figure, hiding its dimensions. His ball gowns were fantastical, with stiff skirts that could exceed six feet in width. James’s clients were of course rich and thin, but he offered them the female form reconceived and perfected. “My dresses help women discover figures they didn’t know they had.”

“Nothing else looked like these designs before or has since,” the designer Ralph Rucci writes in *Charles James: Beyond Fashion*. But that is not quite true, for James in his post–Second World War incarnation flirted constantly—resplendently—with history. There was the bustle of the Gilded Age, the hoop skirts of the Civil War, and the high waist of the Napoleonic empire. In the course of his career, James deployed just about every innovation mankind had concocted to shield the female figure from sight, and added some more of his own devising.

James wanted a mass market. What he got was the adoration of the cognoscenti. Christian Dior is said to have credited him as the inspiration for his New Look of 1947. But retail success continually eluded James. Of his approximately 200 designs, the Taxi dress of the early 1930s was one of his few commercially viable ideas. Efforts to translate his idiosyncratic, technically demanding styles into ready-to-wear were mostly a flop. That he was a lousy businessman and difficult to get along with didn’t help. “Such a pity he is so difficult because I would like to like him and feel he is a genius manqué,” the photographer Cecil Beaton, a boyhood friend, observed. By 1964, James, nearly destitute, was more or less finished as a working designer. He spent his last 14 years holed up in the Chelsea Hotel, his bed littered with drawings and half-eaten sandwiches.

Charles James was America’s greatest, some would say only, couturier. Yet his innovations didn’t recast the direction of fashion. The body was here to stay. To be more accurate: the body loomed larger than ever, as the Viennese psychiatrist Paul Schilder astutely diagnosed in 1934. After several years living and practicing in New York, Schilder wanted to understand the disconnect between the way people’s bodies felt and the way people felt about their bodies. He was fascinated by how changeable, how dependent upon the evaluations of others, corporeal experiences could be. “The body which seems so near to ourselves, so well known to ourselves, and so firm, thus becomes a very uncertain possession.” Schilder coined a term for the haunting preoccupation: *body image*. In an era of tyrannies, a new one had arrived. Though minor by comparison with the other travails of the time, it proved to have remarkable staying power.