

On the Outside Looking Thin

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In New York City's Garment District in 1955, four men roll two racks of dresses up the street; one man stands between the two racks, his arms outstretched, grasping the front pole, carefully guiding the contraption with a giant smile on his face. It is easy to imagine the life behind Al Ravenna's photograph, which originally ran in the *New York Sun*. A young Jewish man immigrates with his family in the early 1900's and sets up a small workshop where he and his sons begin to produce clothes. The small workshop becomes a big workshop. The family buys a showroom down the street. Every Monday morning the man and his sons cart the racks of finished clothing—wearable works of art—up the street to the store. The man waves at his neighbor, who is sweeping the stoop outside his shop, preparing to open for the day. It is a time-honored ceremony, from the selection of fabric to the positioning of each lovely dress in the store window, a tradition that harkens back to the wild days of the roaring 20's and holds in mind the people who worked tirelessly to ensure New York City's place on the fashion map.

The Garment District arose in the early 20th century and is generally regarded to be between 42nd and 34th Streets and 5th and 9th Avenues ("Garment District"). During its rise, the district was a hub for fashion showrooms and designer displays, as well as workrooms and textiles. By 1931 this neighborhood of less than a square mile held the greatest concentration of fashion production and talent in the United States (Dolkart and Fitch). Many credit the immigrants pouring into the area with the creation of the new American style. As Abraham Cahan, a Jewish immigrant and an influential writer, said in 1917, "Foreigners ourselves, and mostly unable to speak English, we had Americanized the system of providing clothes for the American woman of moderate or humble means. The average American woman is the best-dressed woman in the world, and the Russian Jew has had a good deal to do with making her one" (qtd. in "Garment District"). Whether or not that is still true today is debatable. It seems that with the decline of the Garment District—and its metamorphosis to the Fashion

District—came a decline in American fashion as a whole. The object of the game now is not quality but variety, the ability to show the world through what you wear just how many sides of you there are. For the women who frequently stride the fashion-forward streets of New York City, the bar is set high, the competition steep. If New York City is a concrete jungle, the Fashion District is the watering hole for big cats—on the prowl, claws out, eyeing each other with a not-so subtle edge of rivalry.

I walk down Fifth Avenue every day on the way to school, and I am always struck by how beautiful everyone I pass on the street is—each outfit carefully selected, each accessory picked to complement, every strand of hair perfectly placed, makeup perfect. If you took a picture of a Fifth Avenue block, no one would believe obesity was a problem. With the exception of the occasional curvy girl, I see two sizes on this street: short-and-skinny and tall-and-skinny. Then I look in the windows of the shops: skinny mannequins and skinny models. Many of the stores don't even offer plus-sized clothing. This street is a club that only the beautiful can be a member of, and women work hard to earn that membership, often sacrificing their health and their minds to do so—and doing so drives the fashion industry.

This desire hits girls young. I go to acting school near Fifth Avenue, and one of the most striking things I have observed about my class is the number of young girls with eating disorders. I'll see a girl eat only carrot sticks every day—or nothing at all. A few get up to use the bathroom right after meals; I'd like to believe they really need to relieve themselves, but I know that's not the case. I'm not surprised that they're exhausted during class. I'm not surprised that they get sick more than my other classmates. I'm not surprised that they always sit in the back of the room. I just wonder if it's worth it. I am aware that much of the acting industry calls for a certain look, but what's the point of having that body if you are too tired, too sick, and too self-conscious to do what you love to do? Now when I walk up the street, I see an intricate web of stranger-women checking each other out, smooth and sly—cat-like—in silent and secret competition; and then all at once I see a woman with curves strut by in Prada heels. She is confident and beautiful, and I see my friends' eyes linger on her waist. Then they smile.

Perhaps seeing this girl, round and full rather than flat, brings these girls joy—at least one person is bigger than I am. But perhaps it is something else, something more sickly rooted in these girls' silent pact to stay skinny together. Maybe restless anxiety that their dangerous efforts are futile has contributed to the birth of these uncomfortable grins. I imagine a need to be justified is in their smiles, the need for others to see the curvy girl too, to recog-

nize her as something other than what they are. They need the separation between big and small to be verbalized; they need each other to dispel the doubts that they are killing themselves for nothing—doubts that grow with every secure step of that curvy girl’s Prada shoes.

I can remember being beaten over the head with tales of lives ruined by eating disorders from as early as fifth grade: love yourself or you will turn to self-mutilating behavior, and, as with all the other mistakes you could make, your life will be ruined. The 8th grade health teacher at my performing arts school was a prime offender, known to get swept up in her depiction of a slew of evils we all knew we’d outgrow. She especially loved to accuse the media of making us believe that skinny was the ideal. She used to bring in a pile of clothing ads, beginning with the GAP summer of 1995, making claims that were too simple and blatantly ignoring the complexities of the situation: that we are surrounded by media, that we are surrounded by each other, and perhaps surrounded by some other things of which we are still not sure. Because of that simplicity, I never took her seriously. I napped. I never believed an adult could understand what a young girl of my generation was going through.

We know that the world of fashion favors skinny as the image of beauty, so it was no surprise that, when LF USA launched the *Sidewalk Catwalk*, they chose nearly curve-less, ultra-thin mannequins as a base. This public art exhibit, erected in the summer of 2010, featured thirty-two identical mannequins, adorned and designed by top designers and placed throughout the Fashion District. In this neighborhood’s prime, it thrived on the fact that everything, from design to production to sale, happened within its bounds. When a designer needed a button, he walked to his favorite notions store. Now designers order the buttons in bulk, online. Though everyone plays into the modern convenience of the internet, not everyone is willing to let the old traditions of the District go completely, especially those designers who are long-established presences in the neighborhood. The *Sidewalk Catwalk* was created as a reminder of this tradition, using supplies and materials from the Fashion District exclusively. It gave designers a chance to create art rather than something functional, calling attention to the original craftsmanship that shot New York to the top of the fashion world. While each outfit was uniquely designed—from Betsy Johnson’s hot pink fashion fantasia to Donna Karan’s simple black-and-white sundress—the identical figure-bases unified the show. The project seemed innocent enough—a celebration of one of New York City’s defining traditions—but the implications of this piece run deeper than simple celebration.

In his essay “Fashion,” Georg Simmel explores the way fashion is constantly volleying between individual and general, past and future, upper and lower class. He notes that the general movement of fashion begins with the upper class and trickles down to the lower classes, then is changed into something more “modish” by the upper class again. The cycle is in constant motion. Just as a fashion is about to reach the masses, it is changed again. This change distinguishes one era of fashion from another. Simmel notices a kind of mutual understanding, or perhaps a general fear of straying too far out of the bounds of fashion. For women especially, “fashion gives . . . a compensation for [their] lack of position in a class based on a calling or profession,” yet even as a woman seeks distinction, she remains safely conspicuous: herself, but also a blend of everyone else (145). After all, the first thing I learned in school was, *dress well and you will be accepted*. Essentially, Simmel is saying that fashion is “the need of union on the one hand and the need of isolation on the other. Should one of these be absent, fashion will not be formed”(137). This is what gives us the culture of imitation we have today. This is why every other girl on Fifth Avenue is wearing lace-up ankle boots, myself included. It takes the common acceptance of a widespread population to keep fashion going, the “adoption by a social set, which demands mutual imitation from its members and thereby releases the individual of all responsibility—ethical and aesthetic” (155). It’s a group effort that we have bought into for safety’s sake. In a way, the streets of the Fashion District are a classless area teeming with class; you don’t have to have social class to be classy. Every social group can be located here, from the school girl with her weekly allowance in her pocket to the heiress riding around in her black Escalade, from the secretary who has replaced her flashy heels with a pair of sensible shoes to the tourist wearing orthopedic sandals and a fanny pack, all donning different mutations of the same style. They’ve gathered to fulfill the demands of an appearance-driven society, one that has come to cater most to the beautifully thin. In the face of fashion, many agree that it’s worth the extra buck for a chance to flaunt Prada, worth a little pain to stay in the ranks of what we call beautiful—whether that means wearing a pair of uncomfortable heels or starving to stay slim.

In her essay “Hunger,” Jane Stevenson explores the “death zone,” or the point that “human life cannot be sustained” (13). She examines this point as it pertains to two specific circumstances: climbing up Mount Everest and starving to death. She describes in horrifying detail the effects of both situations on the body, following the journey of four men climbing up Mount Everest, and also following the Mulrooney sisters, who in an act of religious

sacrifice decide that “forty days of fasting would be better than life” (17). In both cases, the bodies of the two groups begin to deteriorate, and in both cases, all parties persevere through the pain in pursuit of that final summit. At times it is hard to tell whether Stevenson is talking about the climbers or the Mulrooneys because the physical torture is so similar. She notes, however, that death from climbing is perceived as a heroic death, while death from starvation is seen as a preventable tragedy (17). She also seems to imply that it is more acceptable for men to put themselves in situations of physical pain than it is for women. Can we ever see what the Mulrooneys did—nearly forty days of starvation, silently locked in solidarity—as heroic? Probably not, but at the very least we must recognize the collective strength of will that sustained these women through unthinkable horrors.

Though it is an extreme example, the Mulrooneys’ willpower is the same as that which drives young girls to day after day of ingesting cardboard energy bars and chalky protein shakes, gym trip after gym trip. They’ve all agreed together that it’s worth it, and together they make the lifestyle work. Daily trips to the gym have become a daily chance to catch up with the girls; weekly lunch outings now take place at health fanatic restaurants. As Simmel puts it, “The very character of fashion demands that it should be exercised at one time only by a portion of the given group, the great majority being merely on the road to adopting it” (138). These girls have achieved the most esteemed shape of fashion, perhaps the one permanent thing that fashion demands, and through this shape, they have gained an elite status over those of us struggling on the elliptical machine. If it’s true that fashion only changes when nearly everyone has adopted the trend, then slenderness will always be in fashion because it is impossible for everyone to achieve.

It is hard to ignore that the *Sidewalk Catwalk* was not meant for the whole public—or, rather, that it didn’t celebrate the whole public. Not all public art must speak to everyone, and it won’t, but what do we do when a piece of public art glorifies one group over another? It can only be expected that a fashion show featuring A-list designers will target an A-list audience. The installation was created to celebrate the Garment District, yes, but it was primarily created to encourage people to buy clothes. Looking at the pictures of the piece, examining the different ways one could adorn the tinier-than-life mannequins, the installation only affirms fashion’s oldest rule: skinny is the ideal, skinny means you can wear all these clothes, fat means you can only dream. No one cared that all the mannequins were unnaturally thin because this is the shape of fashion we’ve accepted: we feel safe with that shape. Interestingly, the piece probably would have gotten more hype had it featured

normal-sized women, as it would have disrupted the order that has long been established in the fashion world. Every so often a health teacher will strive to break that order—and what if she were actually successful? An invisible, silent class system would come crashing down around us, a system we barely acknowledge but unknowingly seek refuge in, in which we find isolation and inconspicuousness.

In stark contrast to the skinny *Sidewalk Catwalk* mannequins, many of the female bodies of the art world share a much fuller figure type. One of the most beautiful images of a woman I've ever come across is Gaston Lachaise's *Standing Woman*, which now resides at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is cast in bronze, stands six feet tall, and is gloriously curved. Her eyes are closed and her arms are posed in a graceful outstretched position, her body forming a full hour glass that tapers into slender ankles. She is poised on her tip toes with most of her weight on her delicate right foot. She is not the slender ideal of beauty that commands power in the Fashion District, but she is unmistakably powerful. As Virginia Budny notes in her essay "Gaston Lachaise's American Venus: The Genesis and Evolution of Elevation," she is "a strange type, which stamps itself upon the memory" (63). The woman is a representation of Lachaise's muse Isabella, a charismatic and powerful woman. Although the piece represents an individual, it has also come to represent a much more universal form—a member of a "new genre of Venuses that may survive to immortality," Budny says: an unrestrained, unmanipulated image of real splendor, free to breathe (127).

Perhaps Budny and Lachaise alike hope that the slender ideal of beauty, the shape that has persisted since the corset was invented, will one day be abandoned. Perhaps one day an entire generation will upheave fashion's little mind and give birth to a huge realm of possibilities. As I gazed up at *Standing Woman* in an open room at the Met, I felt humbled by her majestic, confident stance. She exudes a sense of peaceful self-acceptance, a love for the entire woman that she is, and I can't help but compare her body to my own, imagine her next to a swimsuit ad. Clearly there is some tension between the image of beauty in art and the image of beauty in the media. I can only believe that art has given us so many versions of the body, tinkered with so many perceptions of beauty because it, like us, is constantly grappling over what a person's beauty is, constantly fighting with the narrow and frightened mind of the streets outside. Within the confines of the Met, I feel safe to consider this woman's beauty, but back in the reality of the street, I feel forced to think skinny again.

But will we be forced to think thin forever? My health teacher seemed to think it was a mental battle that could be overcome through sheer force of will, but we are keeping it that way through our own will and our own fear. However, the tunnel isn't all dark. Christian Rudder and *OkTrends*, a dating research source for a matchmaking site called *OkCupid*, recently released a graph of the correlation between self-confidence, body image, sex drive, and age. Not surprisingly, eighteen-year-old women who identified themselves as skinny and thin had the highest self-confidence, followed by curvy and "average" women, then women who identified as "full figured" and "a little too much," and finally, overweight women. As women mature, however, the "curvy" and the "average" women begin to creep up in self-confidence, finally meeting the level of the "thin" woman, while the "skinny" woman (a term Rudder identifies as the negative for thin) falls way behind. He notes that by age 29, "curvy women pass skinny ones in self-confidence and never look back." The tragedy here lies in youth—that these young girls are killing themselves to meet an ideal that isn't really *their* ideal. They do it to be accepted, to feel beautiful, to rise to the top. But it is also a desperate attempt to feel the warm embrace of thousands of minds thinking alike, the impenetrable strength of wills united in suffering in an attempt to cast out doubt.

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