

The Power of Style I
Joan L. Roccasalvo, C.S.J.
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There is a comical scene in the movie, “The Scarlet Pimpernel,” starring Anthony Andrews in the title role. In 1792 during the French Reign of Terror, the Scarlet Pimpernel rescues aristocrats from being guillotined while posing as the wealthy but empty-headed Sir Percival Blakeney. Percy marries the beautiful French actress Marguerite St. Just. Still, her previous relationship with Paul Chauvelin, Robespierre’s agent, endangers not only the Pimpernel's life but also his plans to save the young Dauphin, eldest son of the last King of France, Louis XVI.

The Scarlet Pimpernel seizes every chance to ridicule Chauvelin for his “monstrous” attire; it’s “intolerable.” To upbraid Chauvelin is to criticise French fashion and French politics, and most dangerous, the French Revolution. It is to play roulette with the guillotine.

Style, in General

Everyone has a theory about style in hairdos, in dress and in the arts. In fashion, style connotes a particular way of dressing with combinations of colors and cuts, types of materials with their corresponding buttons. Style, as we know it, is quite a stretch from its original meaning; the *stylus* was an instrument for writing. Styles come and go: the unisex, the gothic, the hippie and the preppie, the androgynous “non-obvious girl,” the “anything goes” style.

The Classical Style

Then there is the Classic look. Haute couturiers like Hubert de Givenchy and Oleg Cassini designed elegant fashions for elegant women: Gene Tierney, who married Cassini, Audrey Hepburn, Rose Kennedy and her daughter-in-law, Jacqueline, “first lady of fashion.” They wore un-adorned, graceful lines, Grecian-style gowns that enhanced the feminine figure.

Bows or flounces? Even these demonstrated the simplicity they valued. In a gown or dress, suit or slacks, they preferred simplicity, but the simplicity of elegance. They streamlined their look and offered a modern counterpoint to other famous women who chose gaudy and garish, leopard prints or polka dots.

Though attractive, Tierney, Hepburn, the Kennedys played it down. Whenever we see them in movies or in photos, we delight in the power of their beauty. Millions of women have copied their style to achieve their effect. Simply beautiful! “The appearance of beauty, of the beautiful, makes us happy without our having to ask what use it can serve,” writes Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI. We see God’s glory, from which all beauty derives, even in the beauty of a woman’s attire because it prompts us to break out in astonishment and joy. The beautiful is essentially delightful. Therefore, by its very nature, it stirs desire and produces love.

Then there is functional style in the type of work a person does. College students are typically critical of their profs, their teaching style, their appearance, their preparedness, or the lack thereof. A woman who dresses seductively in a class of college freshmen will inevitably invite ridicule.

The well-dressed man knows the basics of tasteful attire and sticks to them. From Steve McQueen to Michael Bloomberg, and to all those tastefully dressed men in between, they have kept their wardrobe simple. From haircut to shirt, tie, suit, socks and shoes, all complement one another to render a pleasing unified whole.

Fairly or not, what we wear in public sends out a signal even before a word is spoken. Oscar Wilde had it right: “Our style is our signature.”

