Fashioning the College Woman:
Dress, Gender, and Sexuality at
Smith College in the 1920s
Kendra Van Cleave

On December 15, 1920, the student newspaper at Smith College—one of the largest and most prominent of the American women’s colleges, located in the small town of Northampton, Massachusetts—reported that the class of 1923 had begun a “dress reform” movement “…with the especial aims of appropriateness, modesty and good taste” (“1923 Launches Dress Campaign” 2). Students decided to create posters, hold fashions shows and play competitions, and spread the idea of dress reform through conversation and personal example (Class of 1923). The most striking aspect of this incident was the consensus among a number of Smith College students that there was a need for dress reform in 1920. The nineteenth-century dress reformers, generally mature women, promoted clothing that was quite removed from the fashionable mainstream (Cunningham 1–6). In contrast, the young women who attended Smith in the 1920s aimed to bring fashion back in line with their understandings of appropriate self-presentation. The Smith Alumnae Quarterly reported, “(The sophomore class of) twenty-three does not mean to start a dress ‘reform’ in the old meaning of the word. They feel that beauty is not incompatible with modesty …” (“Won’t You Take the Chance?” 234).

Scholars have documented that fashions of the 1920s, particularly as they related to changing gender roles, caused extensive debate in the media (Fass; Kitch 121–35; Latham; Peiss 134–66; Schreier 19–33; Standish 172–272; Steele 236–42; Yellis). But what meanings did women themselves ascribe to popular fashions and to what degree were those meanings contested? Margaret Lowe, who examined college women’s fashions at Smith and other campuses during this period in order to understand changes in body image, argues in Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930 that female students “…shaped their … attitudes about looks and self-presentation, with dating and marriage very much in mind” (111). Although this statement is true, other layers need to be investigated. Especially in the early years of the 1920s, Smith women found the fashion poses popular on campus to be controversial. Students linked fashion to women’s progress, managing changing ideas of femininity and feminism as well as their role in a national consumer culture. At the same time, these women used fashion as one means of negotiating not only their attraction to but also their discomfort with the image of the sexually assertive woman. Attempting to shape their peers’ appearances and the interpretation of them served as one method through which Smith students navigated the experience of being modern college women.

Kendra Van Cleave is senior assistant librarian at San Francisco State University. Her research interests include fashion as social history as well as the history of dress.
Historical Context

Women’s fashions—the general look of the clothes worn by women across ethnic and class boundaries throughout the United States—engendered debate in the 1920s, in large part because they signaled such a sharp departure from the carefully molded female figure of earlier centuries. The silhouette of the 1920s, evolving from the designs of French couturier Paul Poiret introduced in 1908, incorporated comparatively looser construction, shorter skirts, and more relaxed foundation garments (Ewing 92–108). As short hairstyles and visibly obvious cosmetics entered the mainstream, they added significantly to the perception of a break from tradition (Ewing 95–96; Peiss 170–71).

Yet much of this controversy can be traced to changing ideas about the relationship between fashion and identity. In the early twentieth century, advertisers, consumer magazines, retailers, and the motion picture industry aggressively promoted the new idea that individuals could achieve self-fulfillment by constantly recreating themselves through consumption. This shift had specific ramifications for women, as fashion and beauty products became fundamental to their construction and expression of public and personal identities. Elizabeth Wilson argues that one of fashion’s core functions is to define gender boundaries (117). As these boundaries shifted in the early twentieth century, fashion served as a logical focus for contention over changing gender roles and sexual mores.

Interpretations of fashion’s gendered meanings were contradictory. On one hand, some Americans understood the less cumbersome styles now gaining in popularity to be symbolic of women’s political, economic, and social progress. American women were increasingly active in the public sphere via higher education, employment, and political activism. Many perceived a woman’s increasing ability to move comfortably in her clothing to be both a product and a cause of her nascent political, and economic power (Standish 187, 195–96; Steele, 234–37). Meanwhile, female fashions had become connected to sexuality in the popular imagination. Christina Simmons argues that in contrast to earlier understandings of female eroticism, which were based primarily on women’s sexual availability within marriage, the model promoted in the 1920s was centered on premarital sexual assertiveness (158). Many Americans felt that the comparatively revealing clothing and visible cosmetics worn by young women were the cause, or at least a consequence, of this new conception of female sexuality (Fass 280–86; Peiss 154; Steele 237). Carolyn Kitch, James McGovern, and Maureen Turim have demonstrated how such debates originated in the 1900s and 1910s with the icons of the Gibson Girl and the vamp. However, they assumed a particular fervency in the 1920s as public attention fixed on the flapper, who represented the modern young woman in both behavior and appearance (Hirshbein 114).

As cultural critics considered the meanings of women’s fashion choices, so too did individual women, through both public debate and personal decisions. Those who attended Smith joined their peers at other women’s colleges in being at the forefront of changing gender and sexual roles (Solomon 157). Attending college was still relatively unconventional; only seven percent of American women aged eighteen to twenty-one did so in 1920, increasing to ten percent by 1930; women made up 47.3 percent of the US college student population in 1920 and 43.7 percent in 1930 (Solomon 63–64). However, as numbers grew, especially among women from upper- and upper-middle-class families, they led to an increased social acceptance for women’s higher education. Margaret Lowe notes that most Smith students in the 1920s were white, Protestant, and middle- or upper-middle class; about ten percent were Catholic or Jewish and a small number were African American (“From Robust Appetites to Calorie Counting” 37). The normalization of college attendance encouraged more conventional gender and sexual models for college women, particularly when combined with a growing national perception that single women and romantic female friendships were deviant. While academic
pursuits were still emphasized, both peer and institutional pressure urged students to turn away from relationships with women in favor of relationships with men. Dating fundamentally transformed life at women’s colleges after World War I as student attention shifted away from the college community (Horowitz 282–85).

All these trends informed the debate that occurred at Smith over the appearance of the college woman. The clothing styles worn on campus ranged from practical skirts and sweaters for classes to formal dresses for prom and other social activities (Figure 1), garments that were either purchased or sewn by students or their mothers (Van Cleave 56). Most significantly, this daily dressing took place in an era when clothing and style seemed remarkably laden with political and social meaning.

Fashion and Women’s Progress

Particularly in the early years of the 1920s, Smith students actively promoted the idea that popular fashions were both representational of and necessary to women’s political, economic, and social progress. Such interpretations derived from historical trends as well as contemporary media interpretations and served as a way for students to legitimize their growing interest in fashion, as well as to negotiate changing ideas of femininity and feminism. However, Smith women also simultaneously contradicted progressive arguments when they acknowledged the high level of maintenance required by popular styles and the conformity of consumer culture and placed their own restrictions on the so-called progressive styles.

By entering what was seen as a male realm, women’s college students of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had personified the New Woman, and that sense of pioneering was still palpable to later students. When the practice of seniors wearing academic regalia to classes during their final semester was ended in 1921, an editorial in the Smith College Weekly declared, “… it is the tradition of Smith to be free from tradition. And why should modern, emancipated American women deliberately adopt, even for two mornings a week, a cumbersome mediaeval (sic) garb?” (“Caps and Gowns and Tradition” 2). The bob—a short, chin-length hairstyle immensely popular in the 1920s—was often celebrated as a crowning achievement for women’s equality. An early editorial in the Weekly argued that the style represented “… a sensible method of fixing the hair … it seems to be a really rational style and, just like the sport skirt, should be considered a sign of progress” (“Bobbed Hair and Progress” 2). Some students even described the “fight” to wear popular fashions in terms that suggest women’s struggle for suffrage. The Weekly proclaimed that, compared with the hairstyles of earlier classes, “… the simple bob (is) singularly ingenuous. And we can’t help hoping that what (the class of 19) ‘21 wore will not be quite passé this spring after we tried so hard to achieve it” (emphasis added) (“Rally Stunt a Lesson in Social Evolution” 1).

Smith students may have considered current fashions to be progressive in part because mass media presented them as more comfortable than those of earlier eras, which were usually depicted as cumbersome and restrictive (Standish 229). This sense of historical improvement can be seen in descriptions of the Rally Stunt, a series of humorous skits performed annually by students, which provided “a Lesson in Social Evolution” in
1921 (“Rally Stunt a Lesson in Social Evolution” 1). The skits consisted of humorous representations of past classes, moving from the class of 1900, wearing “…pompadour (hairstyles) and huge sleeves and exceedingly long skirts…” to the class of 1921, in “…Jersey pinafore dresses and bobbed hair” (Kirsten, Letter to family, 23 Feb. 1921). The bob hairstyle was often singled out as representative of these new, supposedly more practical styles. Senior Martha Kirsten justified her bobbed hair in a letter to her family as “wonderfully comfortable” (5 Feb. 1921).

According to this definition, some of the fashions popularized in the 1920s can indeed be deemed progressive as they allowed women to participate in a greater range of physical activities. When Pauline Ames needed a sports dress for tennis, she was specifically interested in the cut of the sleeves and the resulting range of movement (Letter to mother). However, in truth, fashionable styles often required far more maintenance than students claimed. Women who wore the bob needed to wash and set their hair more often than those with long hair and regular trips to beauty parlors for trims and styling were also required (Zdatny 376). Ames complained in a letter to her mother that her current style required too much maintenance: “…what I’ll ever do about my hair—I can’t have it cut again as the curl’s all gone and I can’t curl it every day—There’d be nothing left of it or me…” Furthermore, the short skirts, light silk hosiery, and high heels popular among students were hardly practical for a semirural campus. A satirical column in the Weekly mocked those who placed a higher value on style than practicality: “There is a young Freshman named Fyle/Who came up to College in style./O’er campus she minces/On heels of four inches—/She’ll drop ere she walks half a myle” (“Newsance” 3).

Smith women used progressive arguments as a means to respond to those who sought to place limits on their behavior, such as when college regulations stipulated that knickers (short, knee-length trousers also sometimes called “bloomers”) be worn only for sports activities and not on public transportation or main streets (Smith College, Customs & Regulations 9). Students who protested this rule did so on the basis of women’s rights; one argued in the Smith College Weekly, “Just when society is making a step forward in progress and girls who really like to see how many miles they can hike or bicycle are no longer encumbered by skirts, but have a neat and much more convenient substitute in knickers, why should we at Smith be so ultraconservative and forbid them?” (“Killing the Use of Knickers” 2).

Significantly, the progressive interpretation of fashion was not seen as being incompatible with contemporary ideas of femininity. Although the disparate interest groups involved in the women’s rights movement endorsed a broad spectrum of goals, by the early twentieth century, activists had united around political rights (Cott 29). Women’s college students in this period tended to prefer practical garments that incorporated stylistically masculine elements, such as tailored suits, shirtwaists, and walking skirts. These fashions were understood to reflect students’ roles as intellectual and progressive New Women; yet they remained very much feminine garments, which countered suspicions about the dangers of higher education for women (Gordon 215; Lowe, Looking Good 81).

However, in the 1920s, there existed a perception that the feminist movement was undergoing a shift. Women were now understood to be advancing economically and socially, and many advocated women’s right to professional opportunities and increased sexual and personal freedom (Cott 148–54; Rapp and Ross 100–02). Evidence suggests that many Smith students felt that there no longer existed a need to lay claim to traditionally male territory through their appearance. As early as 1919, one student wrote in to the Weekly to report a conversation she had overheard on Alumnae Day: “What has become of the mannish girl?’ asked the ‘alumn’ in the seat behind me at Organ Vespers. ‘Do you remember how numerous and noticeable she was in our day? And now she is wholly gone.’ ‘She’s doing man’s work now,’ replied the other ‘alum,’ ‘and she isn’t wasting her energies just trying to look like one’ (emphasis added)” (“Public Opinion” 4).

Not all Smith women embraced the progressive interpretation of fashion. Many alternatively or simultaneously acknowledged that most stu-
dents wore popular modes in order to be fashionable. In the early years of the decade, novelty made shorter skirts and hair a challenge to convention. In 1921, Martha Kirsten was told she would need to grow out her bobbed hair before she could be offered employment at the Young Women’s Christian Association (Diary). However, within only a few years, the adoption of such styles was much more commonly understood to be motivated by conformity. The *Campus Cat*, Smith’s student humor newspaper, published a survey of “bobbed heads” in 1920; yet only a few years later, announced it was unable to keep up with the growing numbers: “The Cat regrets his inability to respond to the widespread demand for a new census of bobbed heads, but the fact is that the shearing of locks is increasing at such a rapid rate that he fears that, should he again take such a census, the figures would become incorrect before he could get them to print” (Untitled 1).

In fact, it was Smith women themselves who placed restrictions on these so-called progressive styles. In previous decades, women’s college administrators had offered guidelines and regulations for students’ clothing, which generally focused on encouraging practical styles and unostentatious wardrobes (Schreier 12; Warner, “It Looks Very Nice Indeed” 28–30). Although such guidelines persisted into the 1920s at Smith, the student government now took an active role in regulating campus fashion. Patricia Warner argues in “The Gym Suit: Freedom at Last” that while pains were always taken to minimize the masculine aspect of athletic uniforms, by the 1880s, most female students were wearing some version of a full blouse and knickers for gym classes and team sports (153) (Figure 2). These women received surprisingly little censure for wearing what was essentially a male garment, provided they did so only on campus and in front of female-only audiences (Lowe, *Looking Good* 50). When in the 1920s Smith students began wearing athletic clothing in the public (male) view, in town, or on public transportation, the administration admonished them (Smith College, *Student Handbook* 1922–23 82; Smith College, *Student Handbook* 1924–25 97; Smith College, *Customs & Regulations* 9). Significantly, it was the Student Council who codified this criticism, resolving, “Bloomers are to be worn only to classes when sports immediately precede (sic) and follow. Long coats are to be worn over them” (Student Council. Minutes. February 20, 1922; February 27, 1922; May 8, 1922; May 29, 1922; November 12, 1923).

Most importantly, new classes of Smith students joined women across the country in abandoning feminist arguments when more conventionally feminine styles were introduced in 1929 (Standish 273–317, 322–23). When students sang Dréan’s song, “Elle S’Était Fait Couper les Cheveux,” at the 1928 Freshman Frolic, they were still ascribing the desire to wear the bob to its supposed convenience (although simultaneously acknowledging its fashionableness): “Elle s’était fait couper les cheveux/Comme une petite fille, gentile/Elle s’était fait couper les cheveux/Parce que c’est la mode, commode . . .” (She had her hair cut/Like a nice little girl/She had her hair cut/Because it’s in fashion, convenient . . .). However, as quickly as the following year, growing one’s hair long was cast in another school song as being typical of the “modern college girl” (Untitled song). The college administration even authored a series of press releases in 1929 that declared “Smith Adopts Long Skirts” and reported that students were putting fashion before practicality by growing out their bobbed hairstyles: “Smith students, always very up-to-date, immediately put aside all idea of comfort so that in the question of hair, they would be, as they are in the question of clothes, the most modern of all college girls” (“Long and Short Hair at Smith College”). While perhaps these statements more accurately reflect the attitudes of college administrators, what is striking is that this transition occasioned little mention in student publications. Only one article in the *Weekly* addressed the issue, proclaiming matter-of-factly, “Popularity of ‘Shingle’ [a form of the bob] Wanes as Smith Sanctions Long Hair” (9). The connection between women’s progress and popular styles may have only served to reinforce the importance of consumption. By the time more conventionally feminine modes were introduced,
evidence suggests that the significance of being fashionable had long trumped any other goals.

**Fashion and Sexuality**

Margaret Lowe has illustrated how the advent of dating after World War I increased pressure on college women to create fashionably attractive and sexual appearances (*Looking Good* 103–33). However, what is also significant is the prevalence of criticism on the Smith campus, providing strong evidence that many of these women were to some degree uncomfortable with the model of the sexually assertive woman. Given the relationship between appearance and identity, students’ fashion choices were an obvious target for controversy and an arena in which influence could be powerful. Concern was not so much focused on specific garments, although more revealing evening dresses and heavily applied cosmetics were sometimes singled out. There is no evidence that Smith College women participated in those extremes of dressing that are stereotypically associated with the era, such as bound breasts or rouged knees. Instead, students responded to the national perception of an erotic overtone to female fashions as mass media promoted a connection between women’s sexuality and the general look worn by most American women in the 1920s (Schreier 26–27).

As dating evolved into a major focus of campus life, being considered physically attractive and sexually available became the primary way to attain success with men, which was now essential to status and popularity among fellow students (Bailey 27; Schreier 25–26). Ruby Jordan, who attended Smith from 1922 to 1926, provides a striking example of this concept. During her freshman year, Jordan confided in a letter to her mother that she felt left out by the popular girls in her residence: “I am quite the joke with them because I am so quite (sic) and insignificant looking. I guess they think I wouldn’t dare look at a boy edgeways” (3 Oct. 1922). When she was invited in her sophomore year to visit a men’s fraternity at Norwich University, she remade her identity into a fashionable and popular young woman. She wrote a detailed letter to her cousin and confidante in Boston describing her weekend:

Borrowed everybody’s things in Smith. Took Elsie’s hat box to carry my clothes in. Wore a dark dress of hers trimmed with red braid which flatters me to death makes me look *skinney* as a broom stick. Has a circular skirt. Wore light stockings, satin pumps—Had hair marcelled [waved]—bought cutest new spring bonnet—little brown polk straw—mother’s fur coat . . . [At the end of the first day] Don took me back to my room to dress for the Freshman Hop that night. I wore my red dress, silver slippers & stockings, my hair in a fan and my comb I got Christmas. Looked very nice. Had a wonderful time. Met piles of wonderful men. Danced till two . . . [The next night] I wore the most adorable dress of Elsie’s—a light blue taffeta with a square neck in front and V neck in back—also flatters me to death—rather short waist line—very narrow, plain gathered skirt with ruffle of silver & blue about a foot wide on the bottom. The dress is a dream. You should see it. I wore two little orchid flowers pinned on my left shoulder, silver stockings & slippers, my hair done in a fan and wreath of silver leaves across the fan—Well, Lillian, I achieved more than I dared hope—I looked knock out and was told by unanimous vote of the fraternity, I was queen of the hop . . . I’ll have to say this, anyway, that it was less my attractiveness and more the lack of competition . . . All I hope is, that if I ever have the good fortune to go up again, I will be able to maintain the impression I made. Poor things, how disillusioned they would be to see me as I am in everyday life. (Letter to Lillian Evelyn Peirce)

Although Jordan’s self-deprecation in this and other writings indicates that she did not consider herself to be particularly stylish or attractive, she embraced fashion’s possibilities in order to recreate her identity for this one weekend. Her social
triumph obviously informed later decisions about self-presentation, such as when she wrote a letter to her mother about the gratification she experienced when a male friend visited her: “I certainly was surprised to see him. Thank goodness I happened to look well. Sometimes I go around looking like such a wreck. Nobody should. Everybody should always be particular about their appearance” (Oct. 1924).

The connection between students’ fashion poses and their sexuality was a cause for concern among the Smith College administration. Chapelope Marion Olds, after escorting Smith students to a dance at a nearby men’s college, certainly connected these issues when she wrote a letter to college warden Laura Scales: “My attention was often fixed—I cannot say attracted—, by the behavior and immodest dress of one of the guests . . . it seemed to me, such a girl should not be allowed to attend college dances unless willing to dress and behave with common decency . . .” However, the administration did little to actually regulate clothing styles, relying instead on suggestions and the not inconsiderable influence of faculty, staff, and fellow students. At a 1929 meeting of the staff responsible for overseeing the student residences, Warden Scales announced:

… the college would take no official notice of the prevalence of bare legs [i.e. going without stockings] on the campus, since the prevailing fashion is not confined to Northampton but is a very general one and that it would be best to ignore rather than to challenge it. However, she [Scales] does not feel that this is true of our houses [student residences], where the effort is made to observe the proprieties—therefore she feels that either heads of houses or members of faculty may make the decision which seems best regarding the matter of bare legs in our dining rooms, or in class rooms. (Heads of House)

Paula Fass notes that during this decade, college administrators were aware that their regulations had little effect without the support of student opinion (194). The Smith administration may not have felt compelled to overly regulate dress because students themselves monitored each other’s appearances.

The threat of female sexuality was central to the complaints of those students who were involved in the dress reform movement, which, despite grander plans, was limited to a competitive fashion show, design exhibition, and skit contest. The skits, although humorous, exhibited obvious unease with the sexual overtones of women’s popular fashions. The most obvious, “Three Inches from the Floor” (Figure 3), depicted a Russian peasant girl, “Anna Crepedechinovich,” who attempted to convince her boyfriend to marry her by wearing seductive American clothing styles, but only succeeded in frightening him. When her sweetheart found her wearing traditional Russian dress, he immediately proposed (“Plays Reveal Follies of Present-Day Styles” 1).

The stereotype of the flirt, and the clothing that she wore, provided one means for Smith women to articulate the potentially negative ramifications of overasserting sexuality. Students used fashion to criticize those who focused “too much” attention on dating, characterizing them as vacuous women who squandered their educational opportunities. A column in the Weekly dismissed these women, proclaiming, “Minds, it seems, that hold memories of dances and anticipations of dresses are too small to contain anything else besides. We have, at Northampton as a result, a particularly select winter resort for young ladies” (“Sauve Qui-Peut” 3). Marjorie Guernsey was not the only one to articulate exasperation with her classmates’ focus on the less intellectual

Figure 3. The cast of “Three Inches from the Floor,” 1921 (Dress Skit Contest, Clothes and Fashions, Students). Main character, Anna, in her traditional Russian costume, third from the left. Photographer unknown. Smith College Archives.
side of college life: “Girls do get boring when they can’t talk about anything but men and their clothes and week-ends (i.e. dating and social activities)” (Letter to mother).

One specifically troubling aspect of the eroticization of fashion was its connection to the working classes. Although class differentiation did not disappear as the quality and affordability of readymade garments increased in the early twentieth century, it became less distinct (Steele 237). Complicating matters was the fact that some of the styles popular among college women in this era, notably obvious use of cosmetics, were also fashionable with working women (Peiss 170–71). As Smith students began to dress more provocatively, they may have felt a conflict between traditional models of class decorum and the pressure to present sexualized appearances.

Illustrating this class tension is one of the earliest fashion disputes at Smith, when in 1919–20 students began to ignore the tradition of wearing hats into downtown Northampton. The line of demarcation between the campus and the town was the popular store Beckmann’s, and the 1920–21 Student Handbook admonished, “Don’t go below Beckmann’s without a hat. Your reputation will go further if you do” (Smith College 97). The Student Council demonstrated its horror that Smith students were being mistaken for working-class women: “Do we want to have the same embarrassing mistake occur again that happened to the wife of one of our faculty? Twice in one week she accosted a Smith girl in a shop, thinking her a saleswoman. At least, with the addition of hats, the similarity will not be quite so marked” (“Council Notice” 2). This issue was taken seriously enough that the Student Council not only passed regulations enforcing the wearing of hats but also appointed “hat cops” who patrolled for violators (Student Council. Minutes. October 18, 1920; February 27, 1922).

At Smith College, the sexuality that was encouraged and debated through fashion generally appears to have been heterosexual. During the 1920s, romantic friendships among female students were discouraged as lesbianism came under suspicion at women’s colleges (Horowitz 282–83). Although the term “boyish” was sometimes used to describe popular female styles of this period, it is debatable whether the majority of American women’s appearances were actually considered masculine or lesbian. Contemporary modes deemphasized the womanly figure so popular in the nineteenth century and, certainly, some American women wore more radical fashions in order to express their lesbianism. There are a few women pictured in the Smith College yearbook, particularly late in the decade, who adopt the most boyish of the bob variations (the “Eton crop”), and wear suit jackets and ties (Figure 4). However, it seems unlikely that the styles worn by most American women were interpreted as homosexual. Laura Doan, writing about fashions in England in this period, cautions, “Since . . . fashion-conscious women of all sexual persuasions were obliged to ‘cross-dress’ by donning boyish or mannish attire and by cutting their hair short, we must be receptive to the multiple interpretive possibilities of the performance of female masculinity” (667). Valerie Steele goes further, arguing, “The ideal figure was not supposed to be asexual, androgynous, or masculine . . . The feminine ideal of the Twenties was not so much ‘boyish’ as youthful” (238–39).

What is significant is that there is no overt discussion of lesbianism in fashion at Smith; in-
indeed, the potentially cross-dressing women pictured in yearbooks do not elicit mention in extant campus publications nor personal writings. However, hints do emerge in the disparaging descriptions of the stereotypical student athlete, who preserved some aspects of the pre-World War I homosocial/homosexual student culture. Karin Huebner has demonstrated that the romantic friendships so prevalent at Smith College in the 1890s–1910s were in part predicated on the wearing of “masculine” sports attire (4). Of course, all Smith students of the 1920s would have been wearing these clothes for gym class and team sports. However, by poking fun at the stereotype of the athlete, Smith students were able to censure those among their peers who fit more comfortably into what were now passé sexual models.

The “athlete” was portrayed as enjoying opportunities to wear “mannish” sports clothes and lacking in physically feminine qualities. A particularly illuminating Campus Cat cartoon (Figure 5) depicting Smith stereotypes portrayed the “Southern Belle,” the “Aesthete,” the “Prom Trotter,” the “Beautiful but Dumb,” and the “Sweet Simplicity” as having feminine appearances: thick, wavy hair (of those that are bobbed, none are extremely short) and long eyelashes. Looking youthful, yet still recognizably feminine, are the “Freshman Runner” and the “Hail-fellow-wellmet.” In contrast, the “Girl who came to college to broaden her mind” has a relatively feminine face shape with severe hair, the “Collegiate to whom Prom is just another college activity” has a somewhat masculine face shape with long, feminine hair; but the “Athlete” is indistinguishable from a man with a thick neck, square jaw, and extremely short, masculine hairstyle (“Prominent Kallikaks” 6–7). Thus, although Smith students took advantage of growing opportunities to express their sexuality through clothing and appearance, they were also quick to place boundaries around that expression.

Figure 5. The stereotype of the athlete, 1925 (“Prominent Kallikaks” 6–7). Smith College Archives.
Conclusion

The women who attended Smith College in the 1920s negotiated new conceptions of gender and sexuality in part through fashion. Consumer products gave students the tools with which to create their personal and public identities, whether that was as a progressive feminist, a fun-loving flirt, or somewhere in between. While many students lauded new styles for their progressive nature, others sought to limit the extent of social change. Significantly, evidence suggests that Smith women felt a growing pressure to keep up with popular fashions simply because they were fashionable. To be modern and current became the ideal, so much so that the adoption of more conventionally feminine styles seemed quite natural at the end of the decade. At the same time, fashion served as an arena in which students could explore and manage changing conceptualizations of female sexuality. While Smith women of the 1920s experienced new opportunities and pressures to assert their sexuality through their clothing and appearance, the range of available sexual models simultaneously narrowed. For many, the assertive conception of female (hetero)sexuality, as expressed through clothing and appearance, enabled social success, for others, it raised concerns about class and sexual identity; many probably found themselves somewhere in between. What emerges as most significant is the overwhelming commitment of these women to consumption, a commitment that resonates strongly with the experiences of early twenty-first century women.

1. Rich documentation on Smith students is available in the Smith College Archives and Sophia Smith Collection. Diaries and letters to family and friends record personal experiences and opinions. All available student diaries and letters from 1919–30 were surveyed for this paper, excluding those written while studying abroad, including Marjorie Bradford Adams (class of 1922), Pauline Ames (1922), Anonymous (1920), Polly Ethel Bullard (1928), Helen Landon Cass (1920), Mary Elizabeth Clark (1926), Marjorie Lyle Crandall (1922), Alice Ellen Eaton (1929), Rachel Grant (1929), Marjorie Louise Guernsey (1932), Margaret Hays (1922), Charlotte Mary Hockridge (1927), Marion Hubbell (1927), Ruby Mae Jordan (1926), Lucy Eliza Kendrew (1928), Martha Amalia Kirsten (1921), Anna Lockwood Lackey (1925), Katherine de Montalant Lackey (1932), Harriet Page Lane (1925), Margaret Lockwood Oliver (1926), Harriet Rachel Rinaldo (1928), Katherine Bush Salmon (1928), and Dorothy Brewster Smith (1925). Students also expressed themselves publicly in the *Smith College Weekly* (the official student newspaper), the *Campus Cat* (the student humor newspaper), and student government. Although Lowe identifies the *Campus Cat* as an Amherst College paper ("From Robust Appetites to Calorie Counting" 45), it was indeed published at Smith College (*Smith College, Campus Cat Records*). Administrative and faculty attitudes were gleaned from publications and organizational records.

2. *Looking Good* examines students at Smith College, Cornell University (a coeducational university in upstate New York), and Spelman College (a historically black women’s college located in Atlanta). 3. Although these ideas have been developed by a number of scholars, my understanding has been particularly shaped by Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*.

4. I use the terms *progress* and *progressive* in the same sense that they were used by Smith College students in the 1920s: an often vaguely defined concept that usually seems to have indicated some combination of women’s increased access to social, economic, and/or political privileges.

5. The 1920 survey announced that 130 students had bobbed their hair, of which fourteen were seniors, thirty-four juniors, thirty-nine sophomores, and forty-three freshmen ("Progress" 1).

6. Interestingly, students generally agreed on their fashion choices with their parents (Van Cleave 61–62).

Works Cited

1. Rich documentation on Smith students is available in the Smith College Archives and Sophia Smith Collection. Diaries and letters to family and friends record personal experiences and opinions. All available student diaries and letters from 1919–30 were surveyed for this paper, excluding those written while studying abroad, including Marjorie Bradford Adams (class of 1922), Pauline Ames (1922), Anonymous (1920), Polly Ethel Bullard (1928), Helen Landon Cass (1920), Mary Elizabeth Clark (1926), Marjorie Lyle Crandall (1922), Alice Ellen Eaton (1929), Rachel Grant (1929), Marjorie Louise Guernsey (1932), Margaret Hays (1922), Charlotte Mary Hockridge (1927), Marion Hubbell (1927), Ruby Mae Jordan (1926), Lucy Eliza Kendrew (1928), Martha Amalia Kirsten (1921), Anna Lockwood Lackey (1925), Katherine de Montalant Lackey (1932), Harriet Page Lane (1925), Margaret Lockwood Oliver (1926), Harriet Rachel Rinaldo (1928), Katherine Bush Salmon (1928), and Dorothy Brewster Smith (1925). Students also expressed themselves publicly in the *Smith College Weekly* (the official student newspaper), the *Campus Cat* (the student humor newspaper), and student government. Although Lowe identifies the *Campus Cat* as an Amherst College paper ("From Robust Appetites to Calorie Counting" 45), it was indeed published at Smith College (*Smith College, Campus Cat Records*). Administrative and faculty attitudes were gleaned from publications and organizational records.

2. *Looking Good* examines students at Smith College, Cornell University (a coeducational university in upstate New York), and Spelman College (a historically black women’s college located in Atlanta).

3. Although these ideas have been developed by a number of scholars, my understanding has been particularly shaped by Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*.

4. I use the terms *progress* and *progressive* in the same sense that they were used by Smith College students in the 1920s: an often vaguely defined concept that usually seems to have indicated some combination of women’s increased access to social, economic, and/or political privileges.

5. The 1920 survey announced that 130 students had bobbed their hair, of which fourteen were seniors, thirty-four juniors, thirty-nine sophomores, and forty-three freshmen ("Progress" 1).

6. Interestingly, students generally agreed on their fashion choices with their parents (Van Cleave 61–62).

**Works Cited**


Class of 1923. Secretary’s Book. 9 Dec. 1920. SCA.


Notes

The author wishes to thank Nanci A. Young (College Archivist, Smith College) for her valuable research assistance and Laura Prieto (Associate Professor, Simmons College) for her early guidance. A previous version of this research was presented at the Western Association of Women Historians Annual Conference (2004). This project was supported by the Travel-to-Collections grants from the Sophia Smith Collection and Smith College Archives.


Dress Skit Contest, Clothes and Fashions, Students. SCA, 1921.


Guernsey, Marjorie Louise. Letter to mother. 25 Nov. 1928. Class of 1932, SCA.

Heads of House. Meeting Minutes. 1 May 1929. Dean of the College, SCA.


Huebner, Karin. “Fashioning the Masculine Other: Students’ Reconstruction of Gender at Smith College, 1890–1910.” Annual Conference of the Western Association of Women Historians. UC Santa Barbara. 24 May 2004.

Jordan, Ruby Mae. Letter to Lillian Evelyn Peirce. 1923 or 1924. Class of 1926, SCA.

———. Letter to Mother. 3 Oct. 1922. Class of 1926, SCA.


“Killing the Use of Knickers.” Smith College Weekly 17 May 1922: 2.

Kirsten, Martha Amalia. Diary. 24 June 1921. Class of 1921, SCA.

———. Letter to family. 5 Feb. 1921. Class of 1921, SCA.

———. Letter to family. 23 Feb. 1921. Class of 1921, SCA.


“Long and Short Hair at Smith College.” 20 Nov. 1929. Students, Clothes and Fashions, Student Fashions 1910–1938, SCA.


Olds, Marion E. Letter to Laura Scales. 20 Jan. 1925. Warden’s Office, SCA.


“Progress.” Campus Cat 18 Dec. 1920: 1.


Student Council. Minutes. 1920–23. SCA.


Untitled. Campus Cat 1922 or 1923: 1.

Untitled Song. June 1929. Alice Ellen Eaton Papers, Class of 1929, SCA.


“Won’t You Take the Chance?” *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* May 1921: 233–34.

