The New York Times

August 11, 2010

Fashion, which has always been as much a narrative about the body as it is about clothes, has rarely taken kindly to the idea of flesh. Much as we may wax nostalgic about the Rubenesque ideal or the buxom, wide-hipped wenches of Restoration comedies, in its modern iteration fashion has steadily downsized the human scale. Flesh suggests messiness, privileging the indiscipline of life over the fierce control of art, the unaerobicized body spilling over the contours of an artificial silhouette, be it Christian Dior's New Look in 1947 or Marc Jacobs's New Look for Louis Vuitton this fall. Flesh also suggests the threateningly female, moistness and blood, the hothouse clutches of a heavy-breasted mother — off-putting images for male fashion designers, who are more often than not gay. (Think of Karl Lagerfeld's withering disdain on hearing that a German magazine would now be using only regular-size women in its fashion spreads: "No one wants to see curvy women. . . . You've got fat mothers with their bags of chips sitting in front of the television and saying that thin models are ugly.")

Indeed, well before the concept of a size 0 or 2 became ensconced in the clothing racks of Barneys (where you will be hard put to find a size 12) or Bergdorf Goodman (which deigns to include a few 14s), Audrey Hepburn was a designer's dream — Hubert de Givenchy's dream, to be specific — in large part because she lacked all curves. Her swanlike neck and wondrous face undoubtedly helped endear her, but from a fashion point of view, she might as well have been an animated hanger. Watching her recently in "Paris When It Sizzles," it is impossible to take your eyes off her razor-thin presence as she sliced through some of the film's sillier moments with aplomb. Nothing disturbs the surface of the pastel wardrobe of suits and tailored dresses Givenchy has created for her to wear (although how a typist-for-hire would get within gazing distance of clothes that are clearly a couturier's vision is conveniently ignored), no sign of breasts or hips strain at the enclosure of fabric.

Still, our current phobia about flesh — not when it comes to showing a sexy glimpse of skin but rather when it comes to revealing wobbly or lumpy parts of the body that have not been toned to a fare-thee-well — is at an all-time high. Our collective fear of fat and idealization of thinness has resulted in a seriously askew notion of the physical self that has produced an epidemic of body-dysmorphic illnesses like anorexia and bulimia, which increasingly have included young men as well as young women among their victims. "In a modern capitalist patriarchy such as the United States," observes Kathleen Lebesco, author of "Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity," "fat is seen as repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene and above all, as something to lose." One would be hard put to disagree with this assessment, no matter that this unforgiving reality inevitably stirs a cultural response that attempts to rectify the balance by embracing, on one end of the

spectrum, the fleshily figurative in art and, on the other, a TV show about fat camp called "Huge." Over the past three decades a clutch of more radically conceived phenomena has also emerged, including fat studies and fat activists ("body liberationists") who engage in fat politics, which attempts to fight the anti-fat stigma head-on by positing the big body in all its perceived abjection as an option to be accepted and even celebrated. "I'll take my naked body to the streets in protest," writes one such defiant revolutionary named Mariko Tamaki. "I'll pummel the public with what it insists on denying and avoiding: tons of mountainous, sexy flesh. I'll bare my bare boobs and squish my sweaty bum at strangers. . . . I'll gather an army of fat angry naked soldiers and we'll take to the streets." Into the fray, Beth Ditto!

This season's fashion narrative, ever mindful of populist sentiment, has tipped its hat in the direction of size diversity by featuring some curvier styles replete with circle skirts and cantilevered breasts among the usual array of pared-down ones, clothes for "real women" instead of starved models. Clothes, that is, made for the amply endowed Christina Hendricks of "Mad Men" instead of for the bevy of skinny lovelies on just about every other TV show. Be this as it may, it's safe to say that flesh isn't going to become the new black anytime soon. The days when Sarah Bernhardt was the object of derision because of her thinness are irrevocably gone. According to a new biography of the actress by Robert Gottlieb, jokes about Bernhardt's ostensibly skeletal physique once abounded: "She's so thin that when she swallows a pill, she looks pregnant." "When she takes a bath, the level of the water goes down."

In their place is a perspective that looks upon Marilyn Monroe as suspiciously full-figured instead of pleasingly zaftig and insists on an undeviatingly lean aesthetic as the beauty ideal. "It doesn't matter that whole human epochs have celebrated big men and women," Sallie Tisdale writes in her essay "A Weight That Women Carry," "because the brief period in which I live does not; since I was born, even the voluptuous calendar girl has gone. Today's models, the women whose pictures I see constantly, unavoidably, grow more minimal by the day." For confirmation, one need look no further than the example of Filippa Hamilton, the Ralph Lauren model who, at 5 feet 10 inches and 120 pounds, was pink-slipped last year and claims it was because she was regarded as overweight. Or to the non-model extras that Miuccia Prada reportedly fired last December while she was designing the costumes for the Metropolitan Opera's recent production of Verdi's "Attila," deeming them impossible to dress. "I need models!" this reputedly open-minded, deep-thinking fashion star is supposed to have said.

How, one might well wonder, did we manage to come to such a pass? How, in an age that seeks to empower women's standing, has the female image become honored mainly in its diminution? Judeo-Christian tradition has always had its own problems with the flesh, of course, evocative as it is of the carnal and thus sinful (and, by further implication, slothful and unclean). Christian iconography has tended to be half in love with flesh as an object of

mortification, as in the crucifixion of Christ, while the Judaic tradition strictly regulates the exposure of flesh for both men and women. Meanwhile, as Lebesco demonstrates in "Revolting Bodies," an ethnographic view of fat shows it to be a more fluid construct, one that is governed by prevailing economic and cultural interests rather than the negative idée fixe our contemporary eyes have been conditioned into seeing it as. (The stigmatizing term "obese," from the Latin obesus, originally meant "having eaten well" until it was reclassified by 19th-century doctors and health workers, just as "fat" was once a flattering term used by the Greeks.) In premodern times, for instance, chunkiness in women was generally seen as a positive signifier, indicating fertility in a time when food supplies were scarce or irregular and human reproductivity was endangered; fatness, it appears, was perceived as a kind of internalized abundance. Similarly, during the early part of the 20th century in southern Italy, where back-breaking work was necessary for survival, corpulence was valued because it was equated with wealth and beauty. By the 1960s, however, when the vast majority of the population was adequately fed, fat people began to be marginalized and pathologized. Perhaps most interesting, in stark contrast to our own culture of endless dieting and food fetishism, are certain primitive societies that engage in an actual "fattening process," like the Annang of Nigeria, whose women until very recently were deliberately fattened up in fattening huts before marriage. This approach sounds so antithetical to our own "Am I fat?" anxieties (generally asked only by girls and women who are safely thin) as to verge on the surreal.

All the same, it is hard to imagine that flesh in all its ungainly specificity will ever be given its due so long as a woman's power continues to hinge more often than not on her beauty, and so long as beautiful equals thin. Harder yet to imagine that young girls who are overweight or who deviate from the cultural norm of extreme thinness will ever feel significantly better about themselves — the efforts of fat activists notwithstanding — than Judith Moore, the author of the haunting memoir "Fat Girl: A True Story," felt about herself: "I hate myself. I have almost always hated myself. . . . I do not hate myself for betrayals, for going behind the back of someone who trusted me. I hate myself because I am not beautiful. I hate myself because I am fat." There is something in us that doesn't like fat, something deeply ingrained in us that draws us to thin. Female consumers of all sizes, according to a recent study, seem to prefer looking at ads with thin rather than plus-size models. The origins of this preference are complex, having to do with tangled notions about purity versus contamination, self-indulgence versus self-control, and the ambivalence with which we regard our own appetites. In some sense fashion designers are merely messengers, delivering up to us our own grotesque parody of religious grace, in which food substitutes for sex and the sinful pleasures of the flesh lead only to the purgatory of size 14.