



NEW MANNEQUINS IMPACT HOW SHOPPERS SEE, BUY CLOTHES

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Mannequins may be putting on a few pounds. Those life-size fiberglass female forms that can be seen sporting the latest fashion trends in retail stores in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere, have emerged with larger measurements, most notably those of the backside. Some say it's a move toward more accurate body representations while others think it's just a new way to sell more clothes.

Clothing retailers have begun to display their wares on shapelier mannequins and pants forms. Tight, low-rise jeans hug the 38-inch hips of the voluptuous pants forms. Plus-sized mannequins now appear in sizes up to 20, well above those of the traditional sizes 2 to 6.

Shops that sell clothing will do whatever they can to boost sales, and shapely mannequins appear to be doing the trick for many retailers. Women apparently like seeing clothes on more voluptuous frames, since the displayed clothes are hot sellers.

"Anything we put on the mannequin, people buy it," clothing retailer Fredy Shabani told The New York Times. "The women love them. They see the pants look good."

Curvy mannequins may be a result of the fashion pendulum swinging back to the more voluptuous female shape. Or they may be the logical result of millions of female consumers who are just tired of looking at nothing but stick-thin women -- both real and fiberglass -- modeling clothes intended for diversely shaped women's bodies.

Evolution of the 'ideal' woman's body

Women's fashions have often alternated between ideals of curvy and slender. In the past 100 years alone, the ideal feminine figure -- as dictated by the fashion of the times -- swung from voluptuous to skinny and back again, time after time.

Starting with the extreme hourglass frame of the Victorian era, women began to embrace the skinny, boyish "flapper" look of the 1920s. In the 1940s and '50s the size 14 Marilyn Monroe Hollywood "bombshell" ideal was the rage, followed by the slender, leggy "Twiggy" look in the 1960s. In the 1980s, women climbing the corporate ladder influenced a period of more masculine, big-shouldered styles.

The "ideal" female shape in the 1990s reached perhaps its most emaciated incarnation, with what was sometimes called "heroine chic," supposedly influenced by the skeletal quality of a drug addict's body. To achieve this, women and girls seeking "perfect" bodies often developed eating

disorders, emulating fashion models who typically were 5 inches taller and yet weighed about 25 pounds less than the average woman.

Urban influences

Fashion trend watchers credit American pop and urban cultures for the rise of the bigger mannequins.

Rap artist Sir Mix-a-Lot declared that he appreciated large posteriors in the 1992 hit song "Baby Got Back." Actress/singer Jennifer Lopez drew raised eyebrows for flaunting her well-proportioned derriere, and R&B group Destiny's Child produced the song "Bootylicious" in tribute to feminine curves and sexuality. Rap artists Queen Latifah and Missy Elliot showed the world that stars can be big and beautiful ... and sexy.

People magazine noted in 2001 that more actresses were becoming comfortable with a curvier frame, a stark contrast from the pencil-thin ideal many in Hollywood try to embody. The magazine identified Drew Barrymore, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Kate Winslet among the women who were not afraid of a little more flesh on their frames.

Cultural criticism

However, some people see the emphasis on a rounder rump as another step toward cultural degradation.

Michael Steward, executive vice president of mannequin design company Adel Rootstein USA told The New York Times, "It's not creating an image of a woman as an elegant creature. It's a little bit down and dirty, a little crass."

Meanwhile, others are gratified at the apparent loosening of rigid beauty standards.

Susan Bordo, author of "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body," told the San Francisco Chronicle, "I don't feel nearly as ashamed to wear tight pants and a top that shows off my shape as I would have five years ago. And that's thanks to hip-hop culture."

--By Emily Birr, Online NewsHour

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