

FASHION

How does the world economy affect your skirt's hemline?

Skirt lengths, it's said, rise and fall with the financial markets. So what should we make of today's zigzagging hemlines?

BY ELLIE PITHERS

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1 / 10



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In the world of quack economic theories, the Hemline Index is up there with the Pizza Principle (a slice of New York's thin-crust always matches the cost of a subway ride) and the Cockroach Theory (trouble comes not in single spies, but in battalions). The adage goes that skirt lengths rise and fall with the stock market. Skirts were short in the prosperous Twenties and Sixties; in the impoverished Thirties, hems fell. The theory comes apart, however, during the war years, when despite national penury skirts were shorter than they had been before. Then there was the recession of the early Nineties, when skirts were long – not to mention the fact that it's deeply unfeminist to hold women's skirts to account for the health of the FTSE.

And yet. Was it mere coincidence that fashion designers, in their post-Brexit, pre-Trump malaise, fashioned hemlines that zigzagged wildly in the s/s 2017 collections they showed in September? As I write, the weak pound continues to depreciate and inflation continues to rise. America is yo-yoing into a world of wilful mendacity punctuated by the news that Donald Trump spent more money on branded hats than on polling – and still won. The world at large – the Middle East, Africa... hell, even Iceland – is in a state of unprecedented flux. Flick over to the catwalks, then, and designers start to look spookily clairvoyant: hemlines across the board – at Louis Vuitton, Chloé, Marni, Preen by Thornton Bregazzi, Proenza Schouler, Rodarte, Sacai – are helter-skelter this season.

“We were thinking about the breakdown of society after Brexit,” confirms Thea Bregazzi, on the subject of designing Preen's spring collection with her husband Justin Thornton in the wake of a national identity crisis. (The full effect of the foundering was presumably rammed home by Samantha Cameron wearing a Preen dress to watch her husband tender his resignation as prime minister on the morning of June 24 – the dress being a “silver lining”, as Bregazzi puts it.) Preen's response was dresses with hems that rose and fell with the sharpness of points on an approval-rating chart: lopsided chiffons ruffled across knees at 45-degree angles in sugary blues and yellows, edges left to fray and “decay”; others featured pointed shards of white sequins that hovered around the calf. It was an extreme version of the scarf hem that has gently persisted in Preen's collections for the past few years: it lends its dresses an easy, fluid nonchalance that belies their black-tie formality. The fluid effect was more controlled at Loewe, where Jonathan Anderson showed dresses and skirts with handkerchief hemlines in linen, cotton and burlap. His now established

fit-and-flare silhouette undulated stylishly: some trailed yards of rough-edged linen, others comprised choppy fringed layers of wool that frothed at the ankle. Earlier in the month, at his eponymous JW Anderson show in London, the Northern Irish designer had adopted an even more deliberate approach: ombré minidresses swooped and dipped, cut straight and then allowed to spiral into longer S shapes at the hips – not forgetting a dress constructed entirely out of white Irish linen handkerchiefs, cleverly laid on top of one another. Their simplicity appealed to Anderson. “I was in the South of France this summer and found these handkerchiefs in a flea market. I liked the purity behind them,” he says.

Hemlines have always had an emotional resonance Hemlines have always had an emotional resonance. In the Twenties, when “skirts crept upwards like the mercury column on a midsummer's day,” as Cecil Beaton put it, women in short skirts were banned from church. When Monsieur Dior took his revenge on ugly wartime clothes and plunged hems to ankle-skimming length in 1947, savage fights broke out in Paris as early New Look adopters had their full-skirted dresses ripped from their backs by other women who merely saw a frivolous waste of material. The mini ruled the Sixties, but as the Seventies loomed it was all about midi- and maxi lengths. In 1968, Women's Wear Daily banned miniskirts from the office, explaining in a memo: “We all know minis are dead.” Still, that didn't stop national groups in America boycotting midis as sexist, a capitalist conspiracy designed to force women to cover up. Sure enough, by the mid-Seventies, retailers were lopping lengths off their midis in desperate attempts to sell them as minis.

But back to 2017: is the zigzag an all-inclusive hem? Yes, says Yasmin Sewell, Style.com'shion director, who favours fluted styles. “There's something about an uneven hem that feels easy to wear, and more flattering because it doesn't just cut you off in one place,” she says, citing Proenza Schouler and Esteban Cortazar as key purveyors of the look for spring. “I'll be wearing this with a lot of length, quite oversized, so that the only bits you can see are my ankles and my neck.”

Sewell is wise to focus on the slimmest parts of the body: the danger with uneven hems is that their occasional fussiness can prove swamping. Keep volumes slim and simple on top to emphasise the fluidity of the cut below, make use of sculptural, mismatched earrings

and bangles to punctuate wrists and necks, and seek out belts that cinch in the waist to break up the silhouette. Make sure you catch the behind-view, too: undulating hems can expose areas one might rather keep under wraps, such as the backs of knees. And as for shoes? You need a proper high heel. Think of it as doing your bit for the FTSE. □

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