

# Fashion Outlook

## Mature style

### Over 50 doesn't mean underdressed

By Mary Martin Niepold

There's a new woman out there. Actually, she's been alive since the 1930s. But the over-50 woman has inspired one of the hottest new segments of the apparel business. And as her numbers grow, so do her fashion needs.

"This growing market wants more up-to-date clothing," notes Ray Sessler, president of Leslie Fay II, a size-14-to-24 division of Leslie Fay. It was created one year ago to satisfy the new fashion needs of this older woman.

"She may be larger," Sessler notes, "but she doesn't want to wear something that's old-looking. Stores are spending more money in this market, and they understand, as we do, that this woman is more fashion-conscious than she's ever been."

In the year 2000, there will be 23 million American women aged 50 to 65; they will represent 17 percent of the total female population. Many baby boomers will be a ripe 50 to 55 years old at the turn of the century.

Right now, there are almost 20 million women in the 50 to 65 age range, and what they want from fashion is decidedly different from what their mothers and grandmothers saw as proper, "mature" dressing.

Forget dowdy. Forget head-to-toe black or navy, lace-up shoes or tea-time lace collars. The over-50 woman is vibrant. She keeps up with styles, feels good about herself and probably exercises. At least half of this age group works. As she reaches her mid 50s and 60s, her discretionary income is 30 percent higher than the national average, according to a comprehensive survey of this market by Celanese Textile Fibers.

What is her fashion philosophy? Ask China Machado. One of the top models of the 1950s and '60s, she is now over 50 herself. She is the fashion and beauty director of Lear's magazine. The glossy fashion- and lifestyle-oriented publication, which was launched early this year, is aimed specifically at the over-40 woman.

"I think good taste is the philosophy," answers Machado. "Clothes of quality. This woman has bought all the trends, and, for the last 20 years, she's learned much more about dressing for herself and her style of living. There's no reason why she should be covered from the neck to the ankles."

In keeping with its philosophy that women over 40 feel good about themselves — and are spending fashion dollars to prove it — Lear's pulls no chronological punches. It photographs real women who are over 40 and professional models who are 33 to 60 — facial lines and all.

"And the pictures are not retouched, even the cover," stresses Machado — a technique unheard of at other fashion publications.

"She's not a widow, for God's sake," Machado continues. "There's no reason why she can't look exciting. It's terribly important that she see glamorous pictures of herself. Because she's so used to seeing glamorous pictures of 20-year-olds, she should feel good about herself and proud to be just who she is."

To that end, Machado directed the Lear's advertising campaign, a series of seven photographs of real women, nude from the waist up, backs turned to the camera — and all of them 42 to 55 years old.

"If these women had been 15, no one would have taken a second glance."

Machado states. "If I had dressed them in business suits or even with jewels, no one would have paid any attention. But just because these (nude) women were over 40, people gasped." The campaign has just won the national ANDY advertising award for excellence.

Even if older women can't afford the Geoffrey Beenes and Calvin Kleins featured in Lear's they still want fashion-savvy looks. NBC's popular "Golden Girls," for example, dresses its three over-50 stars (and their characters) in pastels, prints, warm-up suits, "statement" jewelry, swirly skirts, sequins and silky fabrics.

"Number one, I think this woman is looking for fashion; number two, price," observes Bernie Blue, president and owner of a firm by the same name that manufactures moderately priced sportswear and dresses for this market and is carried in stores like Sears Roebuck.

"The older woman is looking for something that can be worn for a longer period of time. Something that is not going to make her look like she's trying to chop off 30 years," he continues.

Machado is also aware that this woman tends to like classics. She wants clothes that fit, but aren't too tight, and she avoids styles that are too trendy or difficult to care for.

In styling, Machado says, "She can wear just about anything. She should not, however, be extreme. That would be the only criterion."

So forget miniskirts, bustiers and really extreme, huge shoulders. But besides that, well, today's older woman looks just as exciting as anyone else.

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