

# a common thread

Columnist Jonathan Cane explores the inextricable worlds of fashion and the home

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In 1917 Emily Burbank wrote – **problematically, to be sure** – that a woman is ‘an important factor in the decorative scheme of any setting – the vital spark to animate the interior decoration’. My grandmother **had her own spin on this**. She was a home economist who came of age in a bombed-out London where everything, including clothes were rationed. The 66 coupons issued per adult per year during the 1940s made being in fashion virtually impossible. (For two coupons you got a scarf, for seven a skirt; 11 bought a new dress.)

The government-sponsored propaganda campaign, ‘Make Do and Mend’, encouraged women to make clothes last longer and to do more with less. ‘Why not an upholstery frock, a pillowcase babygrow, or a blanket coat?’ asked a Ministry of Supply film from the period.

Sewing circles made every piece of home fabric fair game. (Years later granny sewed herself a pair of culottes out of out-of-fashion drapes torn from our dining-room windows. I remember her wearing the home-made slacks to the beach, to my mother’s great consternation, for just as World War II

Academy Awards but didn’t clinch an Oscar for best costume because, in fact, that category was only invented in 1947.)

The curtain dress – made from upcycled green velvet drapes and gold tassels torn from Scarlett O’Hara’s tattered post-Civil War plantation mansion – is a desperate and ultimately comic act of class drag. Readers who are one generation older than me will recall Carol Burnett’s quick-witted parody of Scarlett’s tragic circumstances, involving a golden curtain rod and numerous ‘wind’ jokes. The cult TV show RuPaul’s Drag Race has staged a number of satirical ‘Gone with the Window’ drag challenges, clinched this season by Bob the Drag Queen, who is, by the way, fabulous and totally going to win season eight. Hailing from New York City, Christopher Caldwell (Bob), who has

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produced thrifty seniors, it created its converse too: consumer baby boomers.)

Across the English Channel and across the battle lines from granny, in Austria, the Von Trapp family of yodelling Aryans welcomed a new governess – Fräulein Maria, the wilful novice from a Benedictine abbey. In the 1965 film adaptation of the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *The Sound of Music*, Julie Andrews famously yanks down the bedroom drapes and then drags her blonde retinue around Salzburg in avo-coloured damask Lederhosen and day dresses singing about a few of their favourite things. (Costume designer Dorothy Jeakins was Oscar-nominated for her designs but lost to *Doctor Zhivago*. *The Sound of Music* did win five Oscars – including best score, obviously.)

Film history, however, will remember Vivien Leigh’s ‘curtain dress’ from *Gone with the Wind* as the most influential furniture-inspired frock. (The film cleaned up at the 1940

a fierce wit and an urban attitude, wore a hand-made pastel damask A-line skirt and matching patchwork upholstery clutch.

Making do with what you have at hand is not always funny or ironic. For his autumn/winter 2000 collection fashion designer Hussein Chalayan evoked the flight of refugees from Kosovo. In a moving statement about the relationship between home, war and fashion, Chalayan’s models walked a runway that had been decorated with furniture and homeware, which they then stripped bare – converting cushions and chair covers into clothing and folding chairs into luggage, the models clothing themselves in the household accoutrement.

As international conflict increasingly forces larger and larger groups of the world’s population across borders, making of them refugees, migrants and exiles, the question of ‘home’ will become more urgent.

How much can we carry? With what materials will we fabricate new homes? What kinds of new houses can we imagine? ◻