

Playing Fashion's New Angles

A-line mini dresses. Lucite shoes. This spring, designers are pushing futuristic clothes that echo the '60s. But fearful the bold styles could flop, some retailers are watering them down. How to look just mod enough.

By CHERYL LU-LIEN TAN
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In styles reminiscent of the 1960s mod era, designers are ushering in a wave of futuristic looking clothes with simple lines this spring. Twiggy-style mini shift dresses are back. So is the trapeze dress, which is fitted at the shoulders, then flares away from the body. Geometric patterns are big, too -- often in white paired with black or eye-popping bright colors such as electric blue and hot pink.

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Bryan Helm (photographer); Sarah Shirley (stylist); Nebosja Plavsic (hair/make-up)

Mini dresses such as this \$295 Milly shift are prevalent -- for women who want to show less leg, retailers suggest wearing them with leggings or over skinny pants.

These stark styles represent a big change from the Bohemian peasant look and other embellished clothing that has dominated the racks for years. Fashion designers and retailers who have been suffering slow sales see that as an advantage. Because women aren't likely to have anything approaching these looks in their closets, the hope is they'll spend big to make over their wardrobes, rather than just add a few pieces.

But that upside comes with risks. Any dramatic change in fashion has the potential to flop, and this past fall, when the shift away from Bohemian styles began, wasn't a blowout season for the industry. That's making it more difficult than usual to predict how the edgier, mod styles will play with shoppers this spring.

In a sign of how wary they are, some retailers are being careful to water down the runway looks -- in many cases, more substantially than is typical. Ann Taylor, which designs its own clothes, will stock several mod-style dresses, but instead of midhigh hemlines, they'll end just above the knee. The chain also steered clear of full trapeze shapes, which can look like a tent, and went with silhouettes closer to a conservative A-line. And while robot-like metallic outfits were shown on some European runways, Neiman Marcus is pushing the look through smaller touches, such as a bright silver handbag and a clear plastic shoe.

"The futuristic trend as a whole is not going to be an easy sell outside of New York and some parts of Los Angeles," says Robert Burke, head of an eponymous New York luxury goods consulting firm. "But retailers need to have something new...(and) there were not a whole lot of new messages out there for spring."

The new styles are an attempt by the industry to pump up dismal apparel sales. Last year, U.S. sales rose an estimated 2.7% to \$178 billion, according to market researcher NPD Group. But growth slowed sharply in the fall, increasing only an estimated 1.5% in December, largely due to the warm winter, says Marshal Cohen, chief retail analyst. Mr. Cohen predicts they'll increase just 2% this year as women spend more on shoes, handbags and electronics.

The weather could also pose a problem for retailers in the coming months. Cold weather has just hit some parts of the country, and shoppers may not be ready to think about spring.

Trying to push out a dramatic new look is also more complicated than it used to be. The broad trend in fashion in recent years has been toward personalization, mixing new pieces with older clothes, rather than wearing a new trend head to toe. The Manhattan boutique chain Searle, for example, is promoting both knee-length shorts and super-short shorts (as shown by Chanel on the runway) for spring. And in shoes, retailers from Saks Fifth Avenue to Gap's new Piperlime.com Web site are pushing flats, peep-toe heels, platform pumps, wedges and espadrilles. Some shoes combine several styles: New platforms from Fendi have a chunky wedge that ends in a delicate kitten heel.

One convert to the new silhouette is 31-year-old Lauren Balkin, a dietician from Florham Park, N.J., who just bought three mod-style Tory Burch dresses. "I want simple lines," she says. "They look different."

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Cheryl Tan talks about the new back-to-the-future fashions. [Hear the podcast](#)².



Bryan Heim (photographer);
Sarah Shirley (stylist);
Nebosja Plavsic (hair/make-up)

Chanel dress, \$2,010; Dior shoes, \$420

On the spring runways, designers baffled some fashion followers by showing exaggerated tent-like dresses and Star Trek-inspired ensembles. The looks are popping up in stores now in different iterations -- some pared down, some just as eye-catching. Below, the big looks for spring:

Runway: Bright gold metallic leggings by Balenciaga

Reality: Silver and metallic colors in purses and shoes

On the runway, designers such as Ralph Lauren showed glittery silver dresses, but some retailers will offer less-flashy versions. At Barneys New York, women's fashion director Julie Gilhart picked a \$4,800 silver-gray trench coat by Vionnet to highlight because, she says, it's a more tailored way to wear silver. J.C. Penney has dresses in a matte silver, gray or in "fabrics that are not obviously metallic but have some sheen to them," says Karolyn Wangstad, vice president of trend.

For the less daring, designers suggest trying the metallic or shiny look in shoes or a handbag. Shoe designer Christian Louboutin estimates that a third of his spring collection features some sort of "mirrored shine," up from 10% last spring.

Runway: Short trapeze dress

Reality: Less-extreme A-line in dresses and coats

This tent-like silhouette, which popped up in Europe in fall 2006 shows by labels such as Lanvin and Balenciaga, dominated New York designers' spring collections. The versions hitting stores now tend to be tamer than the exaggerated triangular runway creations.

Boutique chain Intermix is showing jumper-like trapeze dresses by up-and-coming brands like Privee that are more like mod shifts. Banana Republic has cropped "swing" jackets that flare out gently from the shoulder -- the retailer is showing them with skinny pants.

Madison Riley, strategist with consulting firm Kurt Salmon Associates, thinks the styles will sell because they're less fitted and "more flattering to more people."



Courtesy of the Company

Platinum layered metallic ribbon sheath by Carmen Marc Valvo.



Bryan Heim (photographer);
Sarah Shirley (stylist);
Nebosja Plavsic (hair/make-up)

Diane von Furstenberg dress;
Brian Atwood shoes; Yves
Saint Laurent clutch;
Swarovski Glacier ring.

Runway: Massive prints in loud colors

Reality: Slightly less massive prints

Many dresses and separates are appearing in eye-catching graphic patterns that recall the bold prints of Pucci and Marimekko. Diane von Furstenberg is selling wrap, shift and trapeze dresses in big geometric patterns in white, orange, yellow and pink. Neiman Marcus has a \$290 pair of Just Cavalli white jeans with a red floral pattern -- one flower covers almost half the back side. Ann Taylor has dresses with patterns that are 12 or 13 inches long, about twice the size of those it usually carries.

While retailers are betting the look will feel fresh, Mr. Burke says large graphic prints "can be overwhelming" and may not go over well. Gili Rashal, a personal shopper in Sherman Oaks, Calif., says most women avoid them.

Runway: Super-high wedges with architectural heels

Reality: Some showy styles, but ballet flats may sell better

Platform wedges have come back over the past year, and now have more details such as cut-outs in the heels. Chanel has a \$4,650 3.5-inch high wedge whose heel is dotted with gold and silver crystals and has a cut out you can see

through. Piperlime.com is selling a \$145 Vince Camuto wedge with a large hole cut out of its wooden heel. A tamer option: ballet flats -- especially in silver or bright-colored patent leather -- which can be a good match for mod looks.

Clear plastic is also big in shoes. Saks Fifth Avenue has \$890 Brian Atwood sling backs with 4-inch Lucite heels. At Christian Louboutin, one style has a clear plastic front with a grosgrain bow affixed to it. "You can barely see the shoe," the designer says.

Ms. Rashal predicts that wedges and flats will be popular, but says that Lucite heels can be "trashy and cheapen the look, even if it's a high-end shoe." She suggests reserving them for evening, paired with tailored dresses.

Write to Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan at cheryl.tan@wsj.com³



Courtesy of the Company

Gucci's low-heel shoe with red piping, purple heel and silver hardware, \$525.

Metallics



RUNWAY: In Paris, **Balenciaga** designer Nicolas Ghesquière showed robot-inspired metal-plated leggings.



REALITY:

Tone down the metallic look with accessories like this \$795 silver and patent leather **Gucci dutch** and **Sigerson Morrison's** \$365 silver flats. **Julie Haus's** champagne-colored dress (\$378 at Intermixonline.com), has just one metallic detail: a gold hem.



Bold Prints



RUNWAY:

Designers such as **Diane von Furstenberg** showed large, mod-style prints a la Marimekko.



REALITY:

Oversized patterns can make women look like "the dress is wearing them," says personal shopper Gili Rashal. Smaller, busier prints like the one on this \$235 **Rachel Pally** dress at Oliveandbettes.com, are easier to pull off. Another option: trying the trend in a purse with a graphic print. Above, the \$295 floral "Devon" dutch by **Botkier**.

Trapeze

RUNWAY:

Chaiken showed striking minidresses in geometric "trapeze" shapes reminiscent of Yves Saint Laurent's iconic 1950s silhouette.



Architectural Heels

RUNWAY:

High-end labels such as **Louis Vuitton** trotted out shoes with architectural heels that have eye-catching cutouts or clear





REALITY:

Ann Taylor's \$148 version is more A-line in shape, with a belt that emphasizes the waist. Banana Republic's take on the trend is a \$128 "swing" jacket that flares out from the shoulder.

REALITY: Slightly more subdued options include this Fendi \$475 patent leather shoe that combines a wedge with a kitten heel, and a Brian Atwood peep-toe shoe with a Lucite heel (\$890 at Saksfifthavenue.com).

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