

STYLE

THE NEW DEFINITION

SAHAR KHAN discovers the bold fashion forms that are now taking centre stage

Changing outlooks and outlines

Balmain's Christophe Decarnin has created quite a stir in fashion. In one sharp move, he reconstructed the shoulder to mimic an inverted triangle, giving the jacket silhouette a cheeky, rock-star makeover. It was embraced immediately by women for whom street/rock chic is a style mantra, and the fortunes of the brand skyrocketed. Tweaking a simple silhouette couldn't have had a bigger moment. Whether they're on a bulbous eggplant fur jacket or a sizzling gold lamé gown, shoulders became the exclamation points in an otherwise restrained conversation. And Decarnin is not alone in experimenting with atypical contours. The advent of unusual shapes in clothing has advanced from the obscure fringes of experimental design into mainstream fashion.

"Fashion changes significantly every decade," says Barbara Kerin, assistant professor of fashion design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York. "Designers are looking for that next thing; they're in that transition."

At Kimberly Ovitz's autumn show, the CFDA nominee explored rectangular and asymmetrical outlines, seen on baggy straight-line coats, boxy clean-cut blazers and a Nehru-like Oxford with off-centre buttons. Her upcoming spring collection is inspired by the square. "These shapes reflect the exaggerations of our physical form, and that's what keeps fashion interesting," says Ovitz. "When designers provoke, they make you question the possibilities."

Cristóbal Balenciaga's 1950s designs are widely credited for dramatically altering the geometries of modern dressing. Balenciaga took the established hourglass shapes of the era and



KIMBERLY OVITZ

NEHRU COLLAR

INVERTED TRIANGLE

BALMAIN

turned them around, introducing the chemise dress, the broad shoulder, the high-waist baby-doll dress and the bubble skirt. Linear forms and loosened waists ushered in a slashing modernity, in stark contrast to the period's signature voluptuousness. A few decades later, Yves Saint Laurent added to the momentum with his free-flowing tent dresses and streamlined Le Smoking, which opened the domain of men's suiting to women.



Evening dress by Cristóbal Balenciaga, 1951



Yves Saint Laurent's Le Smoking, circa 1967

GETTY IMAGES; AFP; KIM WESTON; ARNOLD; DWAIPIYAN MAZUMDAR

Indian innovators

Indian designers are also at the forefront of silhouette experimentation. Leading the charge is Manish Arora—in his latest autumn/winter collection, Arora played with dropped waists, padded hips and bat-wing sleeves. He also sculpted shoulders into *Jetsons*-esque pieces of futuristic design. In short, he brought a new point of view to the contemporary women's choice of silhouette.

In Shrivani Narresh's autumn/winter 2010 collection, designers Shrivani Bhatia and Narresh Kukreja created softly capped shoulders that defined without padding, and a double-V-shaped frock with exaggerated hip

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pockets—both playful experiments with form and function. The duo excels in intriguing structures, evidenced by the stamp of approval they've earned from fashion's majority.

"A woman's body has always been a great communication tool to understand the behaviour of our society," say the designers. "It's a perfect way to read and understand where our society is headed next."

They add, "Shapes are the greatest saviour. You have the freedom to tuck behind a trapeze or camouflage behind blocks of colour to give the illusion of an hourglass figure. It's the 21st-century rule for smarter dressing, while still loving who you are."

Arjun Saluja's design mastery lies in his ability to make clothes that are subtle enough to blend in, but surprising enough to make you stop and think. Calf-length skirts

worn over colossally wide-legged pants added a divergent viewpoint to his always wearable pieces.

Varun Sardana is another designer who doesn't just push the shape envelope—he tears it open. Sardana's proportions are startling. His last fall collection featured a jellyfish-shaped coat topped with a medieval, helmet-like hood. ■



HOW TO WEAR

the new shapes

Separates are becoming more geometrical and fluid; at times they're even looped and twisted into new shapes. Here are *Vogue's* standouts:

LONG AND LEAN

Longer lengths are always good, irrespective of height. Mid-calf is the hot new length for dresses.

WORKS FOR: All shapes

WEAR IT WITH: High heels, preferably in nude tones to elongate legs.

BILLOWY

Low-crotch, voluminous harem pants are back, but this time the shape is less *I Dream of Jeannie* and more avant-garde and sultry.

WORKS FOR: Petite and hourglass

WEAR IT WITH: While petite women can carry this look with a loose-fitting blouse, hourglass and pear-shaped women should go with a neatly tailored tank or tee. A blazer is optional, but vertiginous heels are a must for this trend.

CUT-OUTS AND SLASHES

Peek-a-boo clothing fires up the imagination, as strategically placed nicks show slivers of skin.

WORKS FOR: Lean, petite and hourglass

WEAR IT WITH: Covered arms and legs. Expose only the cut-outs for a more dramatic, sultry flair. Petite women can afford to display these elements around the waist and hips; hourglass and pear-shaped women should try for

slashes on either the chest, shoulders or arms to shift the focus.

MODERN GYPSY

Yves Saint Laurent introduced the bohemian look in the '60s. Today's gypsy plays with subtle touches like ruching, or the loose fluidity of an off-the-shoulder blouse.

WORKS FOR: Boyish, petite and pear-shaped

WEAR IT WITH: Though this look can be worn with almost anything to add a romantic touch, it works best in combination with clean, simple lines—the look is perfect for petite women. Hourglass and pear-shaped women should cinch their waists with a belt to create statuesque proportions.