



Photographs by Barbara Aizer for The New York Times

At Gucci, Ellen Fein, co-author of "The Rules," tries on a gray wool suit with sharp shoulders and slit slicing up the skirt. "The slit's a little much," she admitted.

SUIT-SHOPPING WITH  
Power Women

## Do Big Shoulders Make the Woman?

By DAVID COLMAN

**F**ORGET that the garment in question has been a staple of women's wardrobes for more than 150 years and a uniform for working women for half that time. The woman's suit has made a comeback, at least according to the swashy fashion romances that arrive with a mighty thud come fall.

And to fuel the big fashion moment, the cousin of the power suit — the 1980's designer vision of female authority (read: padded shoulders and collaring that reference men's clothing) — has been resuscitated in haute department stores and boutiques.

Indeed, designers have conjured up a variety of hard-edged women evocative of the power suit's prime: a Grace Jones villainess in black leather jacket and miniskirt; a no-bones Laurie Andersonesque artist in a heavy, man-cut pants suit; a sassy, aloof androgynous wise kid in Paul Smith; and last but not least, Joan Collins herself from her "Dynasty" days, big shoulders, sipped waist and all.

Whether Jane Doe feels the need to express herself in such power terms only the winter sale racks will tell (so far, according to several stores, the most simply tailored suits are selling best). Meanwhile, five successful women — suit enthusiasts all — agreed to ponder the pop nation of power and the suit as they perused fall selections. Is the power suit a redundancy or an oxymoron? Does it have pants or a short skirt? Or is it even — as one woman demonstrates — a dress?

### Laws of Nature

"I have very strong views that women should dress like women," Barbara Paul Robinson said. Such words may seem incongruous coming from some-



"Now that is a cocktail suit," said Ann Stock, in a dressy Thierry Mugler.



"I really only wear suits with pants," said Laurie Stranons, in Romeo Gigli.

one who is the first female partner of Debevoise & Plimpton, the Manhattan law firm, and was the first female president of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. But Ms. Robinson explains herself.

"I lived through a time when there were very few women in law," she said, "and I was frequently in a roomful of men, all in uniform, and I felt very much that I should not try to blend in. I remember when women started wearing suits and ties. I just hated that — the Brooks Brothers look."

Ms. Robinson does not wear pinstripes. She does not wear pants. As such, she was less than ecstatic about what she said she saw recently at Saks Fifth Avenue: "a lot of pinstriped suits, very mannish in shapes, as well as fabrics."

She's more than happy to continue wearing her favorite suit, a knee Carolina Herrera with, as she put it, "a collar that shows a little neck."

"I don't believe in uniforms of any sort," she said. "The most men can do is wear an interesting tie. A power suit is the same idea, that if you're a strong woman, you should do this. I try to buy things I think are appropriate but feminine and flattering."

To her, appropriate is a skirt that falls just above the knee — "not short but not dowdy." And she is unafraid to be colorful amid the fall's sea of neutral shades. "I'm a pushover for purple," she said.

As part of the tradition of being president of the city bar, a post she held from 1994 to 1996, Ms. Robinson recently had to have her portrait painted.

"So there's this historic building, 100 years old, full of huge portraits of men, and they've never had a girl," she said. "So that was a real challenge: what

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# The Big-Shoulder Question

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was I going to wear?

"I wore a dress and a scarf."

And the dress?

"It's purple."

## Dressing Has Its Rules

Although their world views could not be more different, Ellen Fein sounds just a bit like Ms. Robinson when discussing her clothes credo.

"You have to try to keep up and read fashion magazines, buy feminine clothes," Ms. Fein said. "But remember, don't be too much of a fashion statement."

Ms. Fein is co-author, with Sherrie Schneider, of "Rules II," which was published by Warner Books last week as the companion volume to "The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right." It includes new pearls of wisdom for successful women, like "There is nothing wrong with a movie star dating or marrying her personal trainer, bodyguard, gardener — as long as he pursued her" and "Don't tell the media about your love life."

A power suit, in her opinion, is a "contradiction in terms," since, she said, power is conveyed by actions, not clothes. On book tours and television shows and in meetings with editors and agents, she strives to look feminine and professional but not brash, in the spirit of "The Rules," which encourages women to take a Machiavellian approach to getting what they want.

And so at her favorite store, Barneys New York, she immediately nixed a pinstripe pants suit from Richard Tyler as too mannish, despite the lean lines. "When you're trying to look too much like a man, it's obvious," she said. "The point is too well made."

But she added: "You don't want to look sleazy. You want to look refined." The recent trend of letting one's bra straps show was "the worst."

A closely tailored navy skirt-suit from Ralph Lauren fitted her philosophy perfectly, although the skirt would have to be shortened for the new mini-power look that Ms. Fein does favor — better, she said, to show her legs.

On to Gucci, where Ms. Fein noted that the fall's signature, a similarly cut gray suit in wool with sharp shoulders, was sexier than the Ralph Lauren but unprofessional by dint of

a front slit in the skirt slicing up toward impropriety. "The slit's a little much," she said. "You would not ever want to wear this to work." (A plain-front skirt was also available.) "There's nothing masculine about this — especially with the slit," she added. She refused even to try on a pair of pants, saying, "I feel I would be misrepresenting what 'The Rules' is all about."

## Finding Freedom in Pants

For her part, the artist Laurie Simmons declines even to try on a skirt. "I really only wear suits with pants," she said. "I don't want to dress like a lady. I'm an artist, so I don't have to wear suits. Nobody cares what I wear." Still, she cares.

An avid wearer of trousers, Ms. Simmons was glad that at Miuccia Prada's flagship store on the Upper East Side, the fall collection was practically an ode to the mannishly tailored pants suit.

"When I was little, I used to feel sorry for men that they had to wear the same thing all the time," said Ms. Simmons, whose photographs tinker with clichés of fashionable feminine imagery. "But now I feel like they have a great freedom. I love to buy a suit and wear it every day. As a woman, it's exactly the right level — not too dressed up or dressed down."

One of Prada's understated, man's-cut gray suits was ideal. "Some women are wary of the idea that you have to dress like a man to be taken seriously," she said. "I just think that it's a great idea that men happened to have had first." Her own personal style goal: "I've always wanted to look like George Chakiris in 'West Side Story.' Plain, dark suit, colored shirt."

At Barneys, a light-colored suit rubbed her wrong, the same way a skirt does. "It makes it look too conservative, too ladyish, too grown-up," she said, pausing at a mirror to admire herself in a black suit by Romeo Gigli. "I have a bad association with beige."

## Corridors of Power

In Ann Stock's world, old-fashioned terms like "cocktail suit" are not out of date. "Believe me, I know all about cocktail suits," she said with a laugh. Last month, on her last week on the job as the White House social secretary, she took the afternoon off to get ready for her new post as a vice president at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing

Arts. For her, readiness has one look: the strong shoulders and tailored waist that still bespeak power in Washington.

Wearing a black Chanel skirt-suit, Ms. Stock cased the boutiques of Saks Fifth Avenue and Bergdorf Goodman with the cool of a bank robber, not the kind of woman who expects the door held for her. "I have to change so often into black-tie clothes at work that in a month all my work clothes are at the office," she said wryly.

Ms. Stock was easily able to sort everything she saw into one of three piles: yes (meaning she could wear it in Washington), maybe (meaning she could wear it in Manhattan, e.g., leather) and no. At Bergdorf, where she put herself in the hands of Betty Halbreich, Bergdorf's head of personal shopping, Ms. Stock found herself coveting a fairly fashion-forward item: a dressy, black-skirted suit with big shoulders and outsize pockets by Thierry Mugler.

"Now this is a cocktail suit," she said. But it did not meet her most pressing criterion: "that it be able to go from 6:30 A.M. till midnight, with just a change of accessories and makeup."

Still, her affinity for the Mugler cocktail suit was indicative of what she and many women want from a suit: to be at once feminine and feminist.

Of all the suits Ms. Stock saw, the most unlikely contender to get anywhere near her pocketbook was by John Galiano. In neat gray wool, with yellow and maroon piping on the jacket and a multipleated skirt beneath, the suit "looks like something for a schoolgirl," she said confusedly, as though she had stumbled into the wrong department.

As Ms. Halbreich confided in a stage whisper, "It's very difficult to wear, and it isn't selling."

## Tailoring a Statement

For Anne Hollander, who chronicled the suit's evolution in the 1994 fashion history "Sex and Suits," the suit is "the clothing of democracy" for men and women alike, arriving as it did around the time of the American and French Revolutions. As such, she said, she dismisses the notion that the suit follows an Adam-then-Eve model.

As for power, she said, the tailored suit "has been the feminist statement for the last 150 years, as a way for a woman to look serious and



Barbara Alper for The New York Times  
Ann Hollander admires the tailoring of a bouclé suit from J. Crew.

dignified and self-possessed."

On this day, she was looking for a sharp black suit for a forthcoming lecture tour. She found it at Yohji Yamamoto in SoHo. Form-fitting yet with a remarkable ease of movement, it measured up to what she said is her standard for good tailoring: "that it fit you like the skin of a cougar." Another suit, made of bouclé wool at J. Crew, was also a winner.

While exalting the new focus on tailoring, Ms. Hollander finds it interesting that it is lending a masculine credibility to fashion — often dismissed as female fluff, especially the elaborate creations of haute couture. "Tailoring," she said, "is known to be a very serious craft, with absolute honor. No frivolity there."

Few fashion investments pay off as well as a tailored suit, she added. "If you own one well-tailored black suit, you're in business. If you own 25, each different to some degree in style or fabric, even better. We're in a period in fashion now when the trend is not toward the distinctive. Suits are here forever. But if you want an interesting dress right now, you're out of luck."

But the highest rule of fashion, like that of luck, is change. Spring may not be in the air, but it is now on the march — down the catwalk, that is.