

Can You Be a SEX Goddess in a Cardigan?

As designers find inspiration in such disparate characters as Betty Crocker and Mrs. Roper, spring fashion could offer a one-way ticket to Frumpsville. But, as one brave woman discovers when she tests two of the season's biggest looks, showing your sexy side is easier than you'd think

By Candace Bushnell
Photographs by Alexi Lubomirski

Isometimes think it would be nice if fashion really did exist in a vacuum: If, for instance, fashion were merely odd costumes that we put on every now and again when we had to do things like go to black-tie events at the Metropolitan Museum or ladies' lunches at Cipriani. Unfortunately, we all know by now that fashion is larger than this—it is bigger than mere pieces of clothing. "Fashion" has "meaning"; it has sociological implications; it reflects our subconscious desires and society's underlying feelings about women, where we belong (home, office or dancing in a titty bar, for instance) and how we should be living our lives. People have even gone so far as to believe that skirt lengths can predict whether the stock market is going to rise or fall. But let's face it—there are only two things that are really predictable in fashion: One, everything that is old will become new again; two, the price of designer clothing continues to skyrocket obscenely.



Bushnell in dare-to-go-there Roberto Cavalli at a Metropolitan Museum of Art gala

Okay, it's *only* fashion, you say. Under normal circumstances, I would agree, until I was forced to confront "spring." (This word being, of course, insider fashion lingo for the panoply of what has been hanging in stores since January, most of which tends to follow a similar theme.) Spring 2005 can be summed up as follows: Tom Ford is dead (okay, technically he is still breathing, but as he is no longer running the show at Gucci, he is the equivalent of dead in the fashion world) and, more importantly, Betty Crocker and *Three's Company* housewife Mrs. Roper are back. In other words, sexy is out and demure is in. Butt cracks and belly buttons are passé; cinched waists, full skirts and cardigans are so now. Showing your lingerie? Over. Wearing a padded bra under your sweater? Fabulous. Spiky high heels? Ouch. Flat shoes with rounded toes? Yummy. Skintight evening gowns? No. Muumuus? Absolutely. "Pretty" is perfect. Sex-seeking single career gals are out, and desperate housewives are in. ▶



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The author poses in a full skirt,
ladylike cardigan and round-toe

Mary Janes—what could be
more charming? Sweater, \$925,
skirt, \$1725, and shoes, \$485,
Marc Jacobs. 212-343-1490.
See Where to Buy for details.

Fashion editor:

Mary Alice Stephenson
BEAUTY BAZAAR

Take a demure sweater and
skirt from sweet to sexy with
glossy cherry-red lips. To
get the look, try Divinora
Colour & Shine Lipstick
SPF 12 in No. 222 (\$22) with
Divinora KissKiss Gloss in
Cristal Désir (\$22). Both by
Guerlain

Ladies, I will now ask you to do only one thing: Please put on your critical-thinking caps and follow along with me. Contemplating clothes can sometimes be more important than actually wearing them. Therefore, before I proceed to rip apart this pretty silly season, as a favor to all smart, self-respecting females everywhere, I must first point out that there is a perfectly logical reason for this new extreme—and it isn't necessarily President Bush. The reason is as old as the hills; it is about that natural phenomenon that many of us women fear more than God, and it is called Getting Older: the realization that a little bit of aging will, in fact, happen to us someday (even though, as with death, we tend to believe it will happen to everyone except us). And it has much to do with the fact that while we still feel that deep down inside we are absolutely not one day older than 18, when we look in the mirror, we are sensible enough to know that perhaps it's not wise to dress as though we still are. To put it succinctly: Once you get past a certain age, what the hell are you supposed to wear? How do you go from your 20s to your 30s, to your inevitable 40s, 50s and 60s, with grace and style? And is this season of "pretty" the answer?

Let's take a closer look. First of all, what is *pretty* anyway? Pretty is achievable. Pretty is what men like. (The superbeautiful, supersexy Victoria's Secret model is what men fantasize about but are secretly terrified to have in the house on a daily basis.) Pretty, therefore, is safe. It is not sexy, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. In the past two decades, we women have had more sex shoved at us than a stud pony. When you're 25, sexy matters. By the time they're 35, most women have realized that they have a brain and don't need to be advertising "sexy" all the time to get attention.

They understand that there are other things in life besides sex, such as becoming the head of a multinational corporation or making sure that the kids get to soccer practice on time, and that it might be a good idea to concentrate on that for a change. So, on the surface, pretty is fine; it seems like a fairly acceptable option. But is this version we're seeing this spring really as innocent as it looks? No, it is not. You see, much of this pretty that everyone is telling us to wear is really a souped-up version of the '50s housewife. It is demure, and demure whispers "non-threatening" and "compliant." It murmurs, "I will not bite your head off." It sighs that feminism never happened: Women never went to college, never had a job, never took over the world—and in these clothes, even if women wanted to, they couldn't. A pastel sweater with a sweet bow and dirndl skirt are not appropriate for the workplace, unless you are an actress or another celebrity and your workplace can be considered the red carpet at various media events.

Even more insidious is the silhouette of this look. The nipped-in waist, full skirt and tight sweater (with, presumably, a prodigious pair of Marilyn Monroe knockers underneath) is just a step away from the Victorian ideal of exaggerated bustline, tiny

waist and emphasized bottom. Women in corsets and girdles with a cinched-in waist have the power squeezed out of them, rendering them helpless and harmless. Does anybody ever consider the reason men won't allow their waistlines to be pinched? The answer is not, simply, "beer." An unfettered midsection is literally the key to power, allowing the bearer to move freely and act painlessly. Power is, essentially, about being able to take action; it's hard to think about conquering the world when a waistband is squeezing you like a Slinky. If you're in your 20s and have a flat tummy, I suppose it doesn't matter what you put around your waist. But after a certain age (30, I think, for most sensible women), you realize that you do not want to spend the rest of your life either a) doing that many sit-ups, or b) going to the gym at all.

Which happily brings us to our next spring option, the caftan. Or, as we disdainfully referred to it in the '70s, the muumuu. Back in the days when 54 percent of the American population was not overweight, the muumuu was what fat women wore. It was also the garment of choice for grand ladies of certain years, aging hippies and artsy types. But now that we are all a bit heftier and a tiny bit older, the

caftan is a fashion choice that may finally be appreciated for its reasonable elegance and simplicity. Okay, it takes a bit of getting used to, but once you can accept the idea that you are, actually, wearing a more glamorous version of the muumuu, the caftan can come in mighty handy. You grab it off the hanger, throw it on, put on a pair of shoes and you're ready to go. Is it sexy? It can be, in the way that Scottish kilts are sexy—bringing to mind the question, what is she wearing underneath?

And does it really matter? Wearing a caftan is the equivalent of saying, I am so darn sexy and powerful that I can drape myself in a huge piece of fabric and not care what anyone thinks. And this, of course, is the key to the caftan's appeal: confidence. Only an extremely self-possessed woman can get away with wearing one, and even if you are not a goddess or a stateswoman, you will feel like one in a caftan. Billowing fabric implies a billowing personality. It's what Mrs. Roper knew all along: There is something inherently intimidating about a woman who has the guts to swathe herself in a dress the size of a large bedsheet. Think about it: If Hillary Rodham Clinton had worn caftans instead of those disastrous pantsuits, she might now be president. When considering the caftan, you do need to know that some work better than others. If you're going caftan, go all the way. Don't choose some wimpy little thing in a sweet design that resembles a bathing-suit cover-up. You have to go bold, with acres of fabric and strong detail around the neckline. And don't neglect your hair. Forget about mousy ponytails and chignons—you don't want to resemble a pinhead. Add hair extensions. Frizz your hair into an Afro. Then go out there and take over the world. ■

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A Talitha Getty-inspired caftan emblazoned with coral can be just as sexy as a body-skimming gown. Caftan, \$3900, Andrew Gn. Barneys New York; 888-8-BARNEYS. Pearl earrings, \$2955, and quartz ring, \$2600, Kara Ross. Bergdorf Goodman; 212-753-7300. Sandals, Christian Louboutin for Andrew Gn. See Where to Buy for details. Hair: Dennis Lanni for Bumble and Bumble; makeup: Yuki Wada; manicure: Roseann Singleton.

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A neutral lipstick shade balances the impact of a dramatic outfit. Try Shiseido The Makeup Perfecting Lipstick in Acorn (\$20)