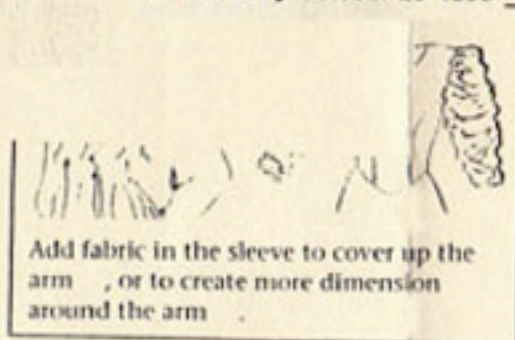
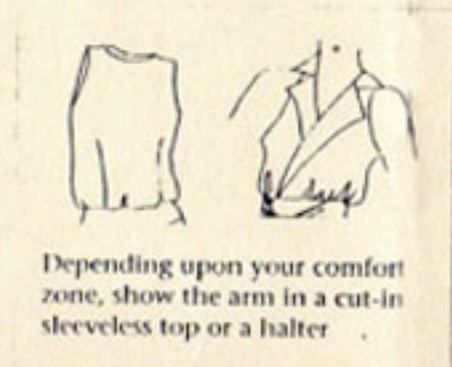


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Add fabric in the sleeve to cover up the arm, or to create more dimension around the arm.



Depending upon your comfort zone, show the arm in a cut-in sleeveless top or a halter.

**T**here is now a way that women dress for work known as "image consultant look". Don a knee-length, neutral coloured skirt, with matching blouse, contrasting power jacket and dynamic brooch and there you have it — a woman who so clearly means business she has taken the time and trouble to have her colours analysed and body shape professionally assessed.

The "image consultant look" can be spotted at business meetings, seen at assertiveness groups, noticed in networking niches.

It is the product of women's dilemma over how they can look smart, professional, powerful and feminine all at the same time. It is a need that has created an industry which is rapidly growing as women gain ground in the boardroom.

It has created a genre of dressing which is the female equivalent of the suit and tie. It has its place.

Without a doubt many women who have used image consultants have become more self-confident and smartly attired as a result.

And the image consultants would argue that in learning to make the right choices about clothes many women have saved money too. Their efforts must be applauded.

However, despite the fact that image consultants do not generally encourage women to diet and say they should dress the body that they have, there is implicit in the industry the notion that there is a right and a wrong way to look.

For example, it is assumed that pear-shaped women want to camouflage their shape and balance the size of their hips using shoulder pads.

It is assumed large women want to draw attention away from their body and on to their face.

**E**arrings are considered essential — the woman's equivalent of a man's tie — and strong perfume, mini-skirts and high-heels are thought to be inappropriate in the place of work.

It is into this context that a radical approach to the trade of wardrobe advice has come. From across the Atlantic, California to be precise, arrives a new book and a new concept for British women — creating your own individual style whatever

# Putting choice back into the female image



Women are being offered more complex advice on how to dress in the wake of the 'image consultant look'. Jo Ind investigates.

your size, shape or colouring. *Timeless Beauty* by Carla Mason Mathis and Helen Villa Connor is a book which has no implicit assumptions about the way women ought to look.

Rather, there is a whole section on the theme that creativity is a process first and a product last.

The authors start with no preconceived ideas about the end result, just the notion that developing a sense of style is important and helps women feel good about themselves.

Helen explained it like this: "We work with three basic principles.

"One is that every woman is beautiful and she can start to understand her own beauty.

"The second is that everybody wants a style which is recognisably her own.

"The third is that as a woman aspires to beauty she is moved psychologically and it becomes a healing process."

The basis of Carla and Helen's philosophy is neither "it's what you're like inside that counts" at the one extreme, nor is it the body fascism of women's glossy magazines at the other.

Rather, they have succeeded in developing a consultancy based on the idea that who you are inside is affected by your growing appreciation of your own body.

The book is striking in that it uses works of art as illustration rather than photographs of women with idealised looks (tall and thin with no blemishes). Works by artists like Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, Picasso, Gauguin and Van Gogh are used instead, with the result that there is no one implicit role model to which women are urged to aspire.

Women with wide thighs, protruding rib cages, shelves below the waist, full upper arms, asymmetrical faces and thick ankles are all represented as works of art.

So when they offer advice to women with

large tummies or full derrieres or sloping shoulders there is not an assumption that these physical attributes, which deviate from popular notions of beauty, should be hidden.

Rather the authors offer readers a choice of two ways of dressing that part of themselves — by camouflaging it or by highlighting it.

**W**omen with full thighs are encouraged to either wear a long tunic that falls over the thigh area to detract from their body shape, or to wear a tight fitting dress that follows the curve of the thigh to enhance it.

Any book which is not working on the assumption that women with large bottoms or bandy legs will want to cover them up, is radical and, if there is a market for it, indicates a change in the way women think about themselves.

"It has been very well received in America," said Helen.

"It has touched deep things in people and is used as a text book in some fashion and design colleges.

"There has been a great deal of interest in having it translated into Italian, Dutch, German and particularly French."

Helen agreed that the work was radical. "We are redefining beauty," she said. "I think it is popular because normal women have got into the workforce and they have developed some economic clout.

"We have got our own power and are learning to value ourselves. For a long time beauty has been defined according to the trends of the fashion industry. Well, not any longer."

The process of choosing clothes is therefore being reversed.

Rather than a woman looking at clothes on a model and deciding that she wants to have that kind of image, she starts with her



Show off the tummy by highlighting it with a striking draped effect that goes around the tummy as seen in Renoir's *Dancer with Costards*. Notice that the tummy is balanced — skirt that is flared — A. Also, curve of the tummy is repeated in the garlands of flowers that cascade down the skirt. These garlands tend to camouflage the tummy slightly by drawing the attention to other parts of the body as well.

*Dancer with Costards*, Pierre-Auguste Renoir



If the top is slightly darker in colour than the skirt, then the eye is drawn to the narrow skirt.

own body, assesses its size, shape, bone structure, texture and colouring, then demands the clothes that suit her.

"When women can learn to do this," Helen said, "however long it takes, and when they can teach their children how to do this and they in turn can teach their children, there is hope for big changes.

"Every woman wants a style that is recognisably hers, just as we can recognise a Picasso from a Lautrec, or a Rembrandt from a Renoir. Likewise, in the art of dressing, style with a capital 'S' means that a woman's unique personality is very clearly reflected in the way she dresses.

**“W**e liken it to music that is expressed with the heart, so that we may hear the sounds of the soul — ringing true, clear, and free.”

The language is unmistakably Californian. The message is universally true.

■ *Timeless Beauty* by Carla Mason Mathis and Helen Villa Connor is published by Piatkus on October 25 and costs £10.99.