

Modish and Modest: Mary Quant's yellow nylon tights

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The object at Worthing Museum that drew my attention is displayed on the floor of a glass case in the Fashion Gallery. It is a pair of Mary Quant yellow tights in their original silver and black packaging with its iconic daisy logo, the centre of which reveals the colour of the product and is named 'buttercup' on a white daisy sticker on the pack (Fig. 1). The information on the packaging reads 'Will fit most figures up to 102cm/40" hips. 100% nylon. Made in England.' Shown alongside are two pairs of Wolsey and Kayser branded tights and their packaging with images of models wearing nude hosiery contrasts with the minimalist and youthful presentation of Mary Quant's bright and trendy tights.



Figure 1, Mary Quant 'One For All' buttercup tights displayed with Kayser and Wolsey tights.

Worthing Museum. Photograph by author.

The tights sparked a memory from an author event held at University of Brighton's Sallis Benney Theatre in 2015 where Linda Grant was discussing her novel *The Clothes on Their Backs*. I found an account of the story she told that night on her publisher's website:

Early one morning in the Seventies I stepped out to hitchhike from York to London and back in a day to buy a pair of tights. One type of tights alone was acceptable to me, I would have died rather than wear the flesh-coloured nylons of the day. Nothing would go on my legs but Mary Quant opaques which came in sizzling colours like purple, acid green, yellow and scarlet and as far as I knew, the only place you could buy them was in Liberty, in London.¹

Worthing Museum has a number of pairs of stockings and tights in their collection, which shows a particular strength of the museum's collecting practices in the representation of fashion in everyday life: practically all women have worn tights at some point in their lives. For Linda Grant, Mary Quant tights are an embodiment of her youthful self, and example of the way that 'women's memories can be stored in clothing.'²

The fashion designer Mary Quant (b. 1934) is as synonymous with coloured and patterned legwear as she is with the mini-skirt and hot pants and is often cited as the first designer of tights. She bemoaned the arrangement of stockings held up with suspender belts in her 1966 autobiography:

I simply hate suspenders. To me, they look like some sort of fearful surgical device. (...) I'd like to think that one day all suspenders will be flat and pretty, something like jewels, and invisible under the flimsiest of dress.³

Quant's aesthetic rejected the formal clothing of the previous generation, including tailored clothing in heavy fabrics, restricting underwear, and the rule that 'hat, gloves, handbag, scarf and shoes should all match'.⁴ Instead she produced a range of simple-shaped pinafores, puffed-sleeved dresses and knickerbockers inspired by school wear and dance classes for her King's Road boutique, Bazaar. Legs became even more of a focus as hemlines

¹ "Upstairs at the party, the new novel from Linda Grant," *Virago*. 1 July 2014.

² Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear* (Oxford: Berg, 2007) 5.

³ Mary Quant, *Quant by Quant* (London: V&A Publications, [1966] 2018) 162.

⁴ Wilson and Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: BBC Books, 1989) 157.



Figure 2. Mary Quant's design of mini-dress worn with mustard tights. 1967. Image: V&A

reached the upper thighs by the mid-1960s and lace, micro-net and fishnet stockings became fashionable in 'nude' and colours. Despite manufacturers producing extra-long stockings from the start of the decade, it was still impossible to maintain modesty, a difficulty that Quant solved with what was to arguably become her most successful product (Fig. 2).

Quant expanded her wholesale business after being encouraged to create 'designs that could be sold on to international buyers in the form of aspirational products (including cosmetics and hosiery)'.⁵ In 1967 Quant began to work with The Nylon Hosiery Co. Ltd, based in Nottingham, to produce her hosiery range, a collaboration that would continue until the end of the 1980s.

⁵ Christopher Breward, *Fashioning Dreams: Clothing and the Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) 158.



Figure 3. Advertisement for Quant's beret range produced by Kangol. Models wearing Quant tights in a myriad of colours. c1968. Image: Bridgeman Education.

A fashion spread in *Vogue* in September 1967 features green tights from Quant's boutique, Bazaar, priced at 18s 11d and yellow daisy tights sold in Selfridges for 19s 11d, while Aristoc brightly coloured stockings advertised in *Vogue* in November 1966 are priced from 4s 11d. Although coloured tights were almost four times as expensive as stockings they were still an affordable way to buy into the Mary Quant brand, to demonstrate knowledge of the latest fashionable look and, perhaps most importantly, to wear a mini-skirt without revealing underwear.

While brightly coloured legwear was a key fashion accessory in the 1960s, colourful hosiery has a long history. Handknitted wool and silk stockings were being produced in 16th century England for those who could afford them while most people made do with hose made from woven fabric. According to Jeremy Farrell, 'Women's stockings, though hardly ever seen under the long, full skirts could be very elaborate.'⁶ Nottingham became a centre for the manufacture of hosiery when the knitting frame was invented there in 1589. Stockings were produced in plain and purl stitches in a myriad of colours with silver and gold embellishments and embroidery of flowers and birds.⁷ The next great innovation was the new aniline dyes developed from coal tar, which led to a wide array of new fashionable colours in the last decades of the 19th century. By 1900 black stockings were the most common colour, 'the result of larger, dirtier towns, the wearing of leather rather than fabric footwear, and better dyes.'⁸ Fast forward to 1938 and the development of nylon by the American chemical company DuPont revolutionised the manufacturing and the wearing of stockings. Due to nylon, they became cheaper and stronger; nylon stockings 'had all the appearance of silk',⁹ did not wrinkle and kept their shape better than cotton or rayon (Fig. 4).

While designers including Rudi Gernreich, Christóbal Balenciaga and Pierre Cardin all began to produce coloured tights at around the same time, it is Quant's hosiery innovations that are most renowned. For over twenty years her company produced almost every conceivable colour and pattern of stockings, hold-ups, pop socks, footless tights, tights, knee-highs and

⁶ Jeremy Farrell, *Socks & Stockings* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1992) 10.

⁷ Farrell, *Socks & Stockings*, 23.

⁸ Farrell, *Socks & Stockings*, 60.

⁹ F.A. Wells, *The British Hosiery and Knitwear Industry: Its History and Organisation* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles (Publishers) Ltd [1935] 1972) 180.

socks. From her earliest plain coloured mesh stockings, the range grew to include seams, stripes, printed floral and abstract designs, motifs, fishnets, polka dots, lace and lurex (Fig. 5). Cultural historian Christopher Breward ascribes Quant's success to 'a combination of commercial know-how and the ability to promote her unique vision of King's Road permissiveness more widely through licensing deals.'¹⁰



Figure 4. Dupont magazine advert promoting nylon stockings. 1960s.

Image: Bridgeman Education.

¹⁰ Breward, *Fashioning Dreams: Clothing and the Metropolis*, 158.

Linda Grant's immense efforts to obtain her desired tights demonstrate the power of Mary Quant's brand years after they were an essential part of the 'swinging London' look. Fashions had changed but coloured tights managed to stay relevant and have continued to do so. Grant description of her appropriation of them as part of her student look 'coloured tights came to define me. [...] They had a bohemian element and I wore them with clothes that we now call vintage, and then were just called second hand'.¹¹ This could be a description of a young stylish woman of today.



Figure 5. Some of Mary Quant's earliest tights. c1967-8. Described as 'pants and net stockings' on the original box packaging. Beecher-Moore Collection, MAAS Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, NSW, Australia.

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¹¹ Linda Grant, *The Thoughtful Dresser* (London: Virago, 2009) 166.

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