

# U.P.G.

by Silvia Bombardini



Moncler 4 Simone Rocha – SS19

With an apron at her waist and a bonnet on her head, she sailed her way to ‘the land of opportunity’, knowing not what to expect. That New Amsterdam, now known as New York City, may be peopled once more with young girls in high-necked, floor-sweeping pioneer dresses, is a singularly acute symptom of millennial nostalgia: now harking back to the prehistory of the United States, to forfeit the present in a time machine of broderie anglaise. But there’s more than escapism and longing for a forgotten hopefulness to her getup. The urban prairie girl, shortened by The New York Times to a U.P.G. acronym, may romanticise to a fault the role of the pioneer, but she carries with her at the same time a bundle of timely history lessons. For this fabled age, when America was still in its infancy, would not have been great either if measured up to the standards for which the country is said not to be great today. Indeed, what were the settlers who we now think of so virtuously, but immigrants in pursuit of pastures greener than those they’d left behind in Europe, for their families and themselves? Which brings us to those pastures, the prairies. It is significant to name these skirts

after such an inarguably North American grassland, for which a steppe would be too coarse a term, a pampas too characterful, that isn't quite as unruly as a meadow despite its being the French word for it. Prairie evokes something tame, temperate and plain, easy to fertilise into fruitful farm land.

Hardly a caption that would suit or please the woke youth of the big metropolis. Yet they're the ones who've been swapping the aspirational body-con wraps of seasons past for roomy, heavy, mumsy frocks rife with ruffles – the prairie dresses that, as a recent, much-echoed headline at The Washington Post puts it, “*are the most provocative thing in fashion right now*”, and that's perhaps precisely by virtue of their disconcerting domesticity. Penned by Robin Givhan, the article itself is a review of the spring 2019 collection of Batsheva, the young clothing line of meteoric rise that, with styles which call to mind the silhouettes and sensibilities of 1960s and 70s Holly Hobbie greeting cards, has come to be held responsible for popularising the prairie girl look. But if not with quite the same single-minded dedication, others, tellingly most of them womenswear brands with women at the helm, have indulged in it too. Pioneer dresses have slipped into the runway shows of Ulla Johnson or Rodarte, while this side of the pond, the Moncler 4 Simone Rocha capsule collection for spring features poke bonnets, black veils, and “*collapsing frills*”, and is worn in her lookbook by models carrying gardening tools, looking mysteriously solemn in the sunshine. Shrimps' Hannah Weiland, whose lookbook was shot on her new husband's family farm in South West England, unveiled a collection inspired by the *Little House on the Prairie* saga, replete with minute daffodil prints, puff sleeves, and high collars hemmed with frills – and it's in London's Belgravia, as well, where concept store egg trades in the wholesome, round clothes its name implies, that a well-to-do U.P.G. can purchase made-to-order taffeta bloomers in a pale pink 'morganite' colour. Though they're all sold out now.



egg, Holly Hobbie

Let us pause on these bloomers for a moment: loose-fitting and concealing, they would seem at first sight the least provocative a undergarment can get, a far cry from the burning bras and too docile even for the underwear-as-outerwear trend fashion occasionally relapses into. But bloomers, that got their name from women's rights' advocate Amelia Bloomer, were once upon a time the stuff of scandal. Mrs Bloomer, who in the mid-1800s edited and published *The Lily*, the first American newspaper "devoted to the interests of women", once famously wrote that "the costume of women should be suited to her wants and necessities. It should conduce at once to her health, comfort, and usefulness; and, while it should not fail also to conduce to her personal adornment, it should make that end of secondary importance". Prairie skirts are provocative in similar ways. It has been suggested, with good reason, that the anachronistic resurgence of pioneer styles should be seen as a reaction against the gratuitous exposure of the female body in much contemporary clothing. But they're not solely about that. Yes, the U.P.G. eludes the male gaze, but she's not taking cover for shelter. On the contrary, in the words of a *Vogue's* review of the same Batsheva collection, her clothes are even "a little loud for loudness sake". Invisibility isn't what she's after. Her deflection of the viewing pleasure of the men who look at her is a dismissal: in the third millennium, pioneer dresses uphold matriarchal ideals.



*Meek's Cutoff* (2010)

When I think about pioneer dresses and female resolve, I'm reminded of Kelly Reichardt's 2010 film *Meek's Cutoff*. Inspired by true events, it tells the story of Stephen Meek, a frontier guide who, in 1845, loses his way whilst leading three families of settlers on the Oregon Trail. Initially, the pioneers' wives in their pastel gowns and sunbonnets keep silent as their husbands discuss their options with Meek, but as the weeks roll on and their water supply dries out, after the death of Mr Tetherow, Michelle Williams' Mrs Tetherow challenges their guide and takes charge. "I'm at your command" says Meek, submissively, in the final scene. Apparently, Reichardt had

forbidden the washing of costumes for the sake of authenticity, and the weighty calico dresses grew dirty, smelly and dusty over the filming weeks. Yet they still look stately on screen. No wonder Meek got lost: prairie skirts are designed to disorientate men. Or if it weren't in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that shall be their purpose when worn today. *"I want to make clothing that is a bit challenging and confusing"* Batsheva Hay, who models her own lookbook and started her label as a hobby, agrees when I suggest this to her, *"the viewer should be slightly uncomfortable and think about what is feminine and pure, and maybe question these ideals a bit"*. It's a provocative look, indeed, and it can get slightly eerie: of prairie gowns, beware.