



Stuart Ramson / AP

A sweater tucks into the waistband of pantyhose, left, at a Miu Miu show. Derek Lam shows nylons for spring.
TRENDS

Back with sheer nerve

Bare legs beware. Pantyhose are showing up on runways and simultaneously making an ironic statement about modesty and style.

By Heather Murphy, Special to The Times
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JUST when you thought an article of clothing had become irredeemably horrible, fashion finds a way of resurrecting it and making it look good. Which might explain why, after years of the bare leg, pantyhose are on the runways.

It started with Miu Miu's fall show, with grandmotherly cardigans and pullovers tucked into the waistbands of flesh-toned stockings. Everyone thought it was a bit dotty, another "Grey

Gardens" moment. But the trend continued this season when Derek Lam's models glided down the runway in sheer black seamed nylons -- a pro-hose statement, for spring no less. British designer Giles Deacon put his models in matronly, flesh-toned knee highs to give his saccharine collection an edge, according to super stylist Katie Grand.



Pro-hose

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L'eggs, the vintage version. (L'eggs)

That's right, wearing pantyhose today isn't the conservative statement it once was. At least where fashion is concerned, it seems to be an ironic take on modesty in a show-it-all era.

The trend toward a covered leg should be a relief to the hosiery industry, which has seen sales plummet since the mid-'90s, when nylons began trickling out along with shoulder pads and perms. For the 12 months ending in September, sheer hosiery sales have grown by 4.9% after falling the previous year, according to NPD Group, a consumer tracking service.

Or course, anyone who has entered a courtroom or church lately knows that in some circles, the pro-hose contingent never stopped kicking. And although skin snobs might assume that the nylon insurgency is backed by Midwestern librarians -- close inspection reveals that, even in California, Team Nylon has many stylish, powerful women in its ranks.

Legs elegantly cased in hose have been spotted in corner offices across L.A. . . . even in the scorching heat of summer. Close inspection of photos of Hollywood's most powerful women -- such as Amy Pascal, co-chairwoman of Sony Pictures Entertainment -- reveals an apparent synthetic faux-nude shine.

"If you are at the CEO level, or your job concerns raising money or looking credible, it's necessary," said Michelle Sterling, founder of the Global Image Group, an image consulting firm.

Even strongholds of sartorial liberalism have not been without their hosiery flare-ups. Last summer, a 25-year-old Berkeley woman (who did not want to give her name for fear of her in-laws) was accused by her new mother-in-law of "indecent exposure" for failing to wear hose on her special day.

The mother-in-law might find solace in the fact that her views are supported by the president of the United States. One of his first actions upon taking office was to reinstate the White House dress code requiring, among other things, that women wear stockings in the West Wing. Exhibit A, Condoleezza Rice, the fashionable secretary of state.

Until a few months ago, the shipping company UPS required women in its corporate offices to wear hose . . . even in summer . . . even with open-toed shoes. "You would have thought they had given us all a bonus. It was the best day ever in the office," said Ronna Charles Branch, UPS national media relations supervisor.

In defense of naked limbs, stylist Heidi Meek of the Cloutier Agency, who has dressed Claudia Schiffer, Eva Longoria and Arianna Huffington, predicts hose will remain a relic, despite the runway resurgence. "I think living in a warm climate, you can pretty much wear bare legs year-round."

Katie Couric has been one of the most stalwart and high-profile bare-leggers, bringing her tanned gams into living rooms every day with the TV news. But the sight of bare legs is so repulsive to some that a forum has emerged on Stockingshq.com, a website for stockings fans, dedicated to persuading the chipper news anchor to wear pantyhose. Fundraisers, bribes and beatings are a few of the strategies discussed. One man lamented that he'd been forced to switch to Fox, where the legs are rarely naked.

About 70% of the impassioned commenters on Stockingshq.com are male, according to site founder David Bradwell. Their push for hose is about making "ladies" look sexy.

"It's about leaving something to the imagination," he said. "A gift which is wrapped and can then be unwrapped is better."

He also admits he's never tried to wear them.