Fashion models of the Eighties march down runways from Paris to Los Angeles, leaving perfumed trails of spicy Giorgio, but rarely smiles.

Today’s military styles of camouflage and epaulets worn by these somber women heralds the aggressive image of the new woman, contends Phoeby Lundy, history professor at Boise State University.

Lundy first studied fashion, and its effect on the lives of women, three years ago when she helped coordinate a costume display for the opening of the new wing of the Idaho Historical Society.

"Clothes mark the rites of passage in women's lives," she said, referring to graduation finery, bridal gowns and dressing for successful job interviews. "For upwardly mobile women, clothes are a part of the packaging.

Until the French Revolution in the late 18th Century, men flaunted their wealth and status by wearing satin suits and powdered wigs. After the revolution the new bourgeois worked and could not spend the day wrapped in pale green silks and delicate Brussels lace. To display their success to the world they turned to their women, decorating them with elaborate fashions and flashy jewels.

Thus wives became ornaments and status symbols for men. Apparently many women did not object to this adornation. Yet "the gift of clothes is a power play; it says 'I am so good to you, now you be good to me'" Lundy said.

"In our lives we have been laced, hooped and hobbled," she said. "Our stride has been limited by tight skirts; our waists have been cinched into bone bodices; and our feet squeezed into wobbly, high-heel shoes." The results of these high fashions have included respiratory diseases, back problems, bunions, torn ligaments, fragility. Some women even resorted to removing a couple of ribs to reduce their waistlines according to Lundy.

Working women could not afford to be sick with "the vapours," immobile with bustles or risk atrophied back
muscles caused by stiff corsets. They did not lace-up as tightly as the upper classes, earning the title “loose women,” from their “straight-laced” sisters Lundy explained.

After World War 1 a freedom in fashion emerged. By the early Twenties beaded and bouncing flappers kicked up their stubby heels to the Black Bottom. Unencumbered by long multi-layered skirts and tight bodices, they played tennis, croquet and other sports previously not considered acceptable for women.

According to Lundy, it was no coincidence that this was when women received the right to vote. “Women of the Twenties were encouraged by men to be flippant to distract them from the seriousness of voting. Women were more to be looked at than listened to. More seen than heard,” she said.

Currently, women are in transit from the role of being pleasant to look at, to earning an equal place in the work force. The Dress for Success syndrome emphasizes the anxiety women are experiencing, Lundy said.

“As women move into more responsible jobs in business we have adopted a female version of the men’s suit and then use jewelry or shoes to cover our anxiety and show that we are still feminine. We dress our ambitions for corporate goals with suits and Oxford shirts then turn around and address our anxieties with high heel shoes.”

From the fashion advertisements of today Lundy predicts that we are moving toward confusion. The layered look covers up women’s feelings of anger and frustration. “It would take an archeological expedition to uncover those layers. We hide who we are by the clothes we wear,” she explained. “The mean looking fashion with studs, chains and camouflage flirts with an admiration for totalitarianism, fascism and military power that is dominated by men.”

In her book, “The Language of Clothes” published by Vintage Books, Alison Lurie documents attempts to limit female mobility through customs such as foot-binding by Chinese and hanging heavy bangles around the legs of African women. The tight skirts and high-heeled shoes seen on the streets of many American cities today also effectively restrict women’s mobility and, writes Lurie, “makes sure that once a woman is caught she cannot run away, and even if she stays around she cannot keep up with men. The career woman who wears these clothes is announcing to the world that she is willing to be handicapped in relation to men, and men reward her by finding both her and her clothes attractive.”

Lundy concurred. “No fashion image, no matter how serious it looks, how professional it looks, can overcome inequality for women. We must stop being ‘to look at’ and make our presence felt in political arenas,” she said.