

FASHION & STYLE

Taking the Plunge at the Awards

A Cleavage Trend Reveals a More Natural Décolletage for Hollywood Stars on the Red Carpet

By TATIANA BONCOMPAGNI FEB. 12, 2014



From left: Michelle Dockery at the Screen Actors Guild awards, and Amy Adams and Robin Wright at the Golden Globes. Ms. Wright had a peekaboo moment onstage.

From left, Frederic J. Brown/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images; Paul Buck/European Pressphoto Agency; Paul Drinkwater/Reuters

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Out with the Wonderbra, in with the ... sag? (And we don't mean the Screen Actors Guild.) Dresses with revealing necklines have been stealing the spotlight this awards season, signaling, perhaps, a new era in red-carpet décolletage.

At the Guild's awards last month, Michelle Dockery, a star of "Downton Abbey," wore a black and white J. Mendel dress that exposed much of her chest, while at the Golden Globes, more than a half-dozen actresses (Amy Adams, Sandra Bullock and Kate Mara among them) turned up in low-cut frocks that seemed to defy the use of regular brassieres.

This is a new kind of cleavage ideal: Not the often artificially inflated breasts of yore, but a more naturalistic teardrop shape that harks back to the 1970s. Tired, perhaps, of exposing the top of the breasts, with the obvious leers that practice inspires, stars are now exposing the sides (sometimes at their peril: witness, along with a tsking Twitterverse, the "House of Cards" star Robin Wright's flash of a pasty during her acceptance speech).



Rihanna at the Grammys. Jason Merritt/Getty Images

At the Globes, Julianna Margulies and Margot Robbie, from "The Wolf of Wall Street," also went nonchalantly low-cut.

Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, has noticed the shift. "What we had before was so much controlled and presented sexuality," she said, referring to the corset-style gowns and push-up bras that have ruled the red carpets in awards seasons past. "The newer look is more dégage, more natural."

"Very Studio 54," agreed the Hollywood stylist Jeanne Yang, adding that she had showcased a similar halter-style silhouette in her spring 2014 collection for Holmes & Yang, a fashion line Ms. Yang designs with the actress Katie Holmes. "It's a really flattering look," she said. "It can make you look taller and leaner. And in a strange way it's sexy, but it's not like your cleavage is out there."

Andrew Gn, who designed the black and gold gown Ms. Margulies wore to the Globes, wrote in an email that the neckline on Ms. Margulies's dress gave "sizzle to a deliberately austere dress." "The contrast between the fairly covered body and the deep neckline makes it very modern," he wrote.

Mary Alice Stephenson, a style consultant, credited musicians like Rihanna, who wore low-cut Armani to the Grammy Awards in 2012, and Jennifer Lopez, who drew attention in a plunging Zuhair Murad gown at the 2012 Vanity Fair Oscars party, for starting the trend. She also cited young designers like Peter Dundas, artistic director at Emilio Pucci, and Carly Cushnie and Michelle Ochs of the New York-based brand Cushnie et Ochs, for trying to "reinvent glamorous dressing" with design elements like cutouts and deep necklines.

"Fashion is pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable," Ms. Stephenson said. "It's less about being ladylike and more about being powerful."

Johnny Talbot, who is a designer of Talbot Runhof, a ready-to-wear line based in Munich, believes celebrities are vying for the public's increasingly divided attention with ever-more-scandalous ensembles. (Kim Kardashian in the black Givenchy dress she wore during the last Paris Fashion Week comes to mind, as does Lady Gaga.) "The competition is so fierce among these girls," Mr. Talbot said. "Everyone wants to be younger and sexier and chicer, and it's all about exposure. And part of this is exposure of the skin."

Take, for example, the black and white Cushnie et Ochs frock the actress Malin Akerman sported to the People's Choice Awards on Jan. 8. It featured a daring — not to mention inventive — T-bar cutout on the chest that left little to the imagination. Heidi Klum, meanwhile, drew attention to her poitrine in a black Giorgio Armani gown with a deep V neckline, and earlier that same day — at a charity luncheon, no less — the "Glee" actress Dianna Agron (in a white blazer dress) and the singer Natasha Bedingfield (in a cleavage-revealing black dress) also appeared to have foregone their bras.

"It's like they're all letting it all hang out," Ms. Steele said.

Some plastic surgeons concurred that there has been a shift in focus away from the top of the breast, which they call the upper pole, to the place where the breast tissue meets the chest wall, referred to by doctors as the inframammary fold.

When it comes to the Barbie-doll look, "people don't really ask for that anymore," said Dr. Oren Tepper, assistant professor of plastic surgery at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx.

Dr. Chia Chi Kao, a plastic surgeon based in Santa Monica, Calif., said, "They want something that looks more natural and fits their frames better." He added that revisions — the removal of overly large implants in favor of smaller ones, followed by a breast lift — now accounted for roughly 80 percent of his breast surgery business. "Women are more sophisticated, and they're more professional," Dr. Kao said. "They don't want to look frumpy in a suit jacket."

Improved techniques, like under-the-muscle placement of implants and innovations in fat transference (from, say, the hips to the upper pole of the breast) as well as the approval of so-called gummy bear or tear-drop-shaped implants by the Federal Drug Administration, have given plastic and reconstructive surgeons the ability to create more natural-looking breasts, said Dr. Adam Kolker, an associate clinical professor at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan.

Dr. Shirley Madhere, a plastic surgeon in New York City who wore a cleavage-revealing Gucci dress to a gala for the New York City Ballet, said she's noted a connection between what is happening on the red carpet and on fashion runways and what her patients are hoping to gain (or not) on her surgical table. "It's not about volume anymore," Dr. Madhere said. "The new mantra is, contour is queen."

However natural, the new look can require as many props as the old one. Ms. Yang said she uses Topstick, a toupee tape, to help her celebrity clients avoid wardrobe malfunctions.

David Kirsch, the fitness expert, meanwhile, said he amps up the number of chest presses, pull overs and other exercises his clients do before award season to help give breasts a boost. "The stronger and more toned the underlying muscles are, the perkier your breasts will be," said Mr. Kirsch, who owns the Madison Square Club in New York.

Good posture also helps.

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