

Vidal Sassoon and his “Quant Cut” of 1963

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## Background

Vidal Sassoon had an unlikely start in hairdressing. He was born in 1928 in Shepherd's Bush, London. When he was four years old, his father left his mother Betty to care for their two children, Vidal and Ivor. They moved to a two room apartment on Petticoat Lane in London's East End, and Betty worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week selling dresses in a sweatshop to make ends meet. Since his mother had to work such long hours, at the age of 5 Vidal was sent to the Orphanage for Sephardic Jews in Maida Vale. He was not a gifted scholar, but he was an enthusiastic athlete. (Sassoon 1968, 27-28) His mother married Nathaniel Goldberg in 1939, 6 years later, and took her sons back home. (Fishman 1993, 20)

At the age of 14, his mother dragged him most unwillingly to the salon of "Professor" Adolph Cohen to be apprenticed as a hairdresser, because he "ought to learn a trade." After a brief conversation, Cohen agreed to take him on as an apprentice for the sum of 100 guineas. As his mother had nowhere near that sum, they apologized and Vidal held the door for his mother as they were about to leave. But then, Cohen called him back, impressed by Vidal's good manners, and agreed to apprentice him for no fee. (Sassoon 1968, 32)

Vidal Sassoon made the most of his time with "Professor" Cohen and worked diligently to learn his craft. He attended hairdressing classes and stayed late to practice on models. He even practiced cutting men's hair by recruiting "hobos" from the local home for indigents, because Cohen said to him, "Look, you're here to learn, aren't you? To learn as much as you can. Someday, maybe, there's going to be a slump, and women aren't going to be getting their hair done anymore. But men—they always need their hair cut, right?" (Sassoon 1968, 37)

Cohen told him that “Genius is fine, but sheer hard work is better. The only place success comes before hard work is in the dictionary,” words that Sassoon applied to his life, and tried to impress upon his employees later on. (Sassoon 1968, 34) He worked for Adolph Cohen for two and a half years and left him “a well-trained hairdresser.” (Sassoon 1968, 39)

After leaving Cohen’s salon, Sassoon worked for several other hairdressers in London, including one that catered to high-end call-girls. At each salon, would learn as much as possible about hairdressing, and then move on to the next one. He continued to take classes at the Charlotte Street hairdressing academy to “learn every new technique.” Eventually, he was asked to manage a salon in Maida Vale, which he did with success. (Sassoon 1968, 42)

After World War II ended, members of Britain’s fascist party were released from detention. Shortly thereafter, Sassoon joined the “43 Group,” a militant anti-fascist group in London, mainly comprised of British Jews and many decorated war veterans. After several physical altercations and an arrest, Sassoon was recruited to join the Israeli army, to fight in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. As joining another nation’s army was illegal, Vidal was smuggled to a camp in France to await being shipped to Israel. While at this camp, he heard first-hand accounts of the holocaust, which made an enormous impression on him. In 1982, he would found “The Vidal Sassoon Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism and Related Bigotries.” (Fishman 1993, 24)

He fought in the Negev for a year, defending a hill that would be named after his fellow officer. (Sassoon 1968, 64) After the war was over, he returned to London.

After returning home, he went back to work in a succession of different salons in London. It was at this time that he started entering hairdressing competitions, and was trying to find his unique style.

While working for Raymond, a high-end London salon, he was offered the chance to open a salon for them in Cardiff, Wales. Sassoon was excited by the idea and agreed to do it, on one condition—that the salon be called “Vidal Sassoon at Raymond’s.” That was not acceptable to Raymond, so they parted on amicable terms. But the idea was now in Sassoon’s head, and he started looking for spaces to open a salon of his own. (Sassoon 1968, 77-79)

In 1954, Sassoon found a backer in a former client, and found a spot for his first salon at 108 Bond Street. It was a tiny space on the third floor, with only enough room for twenty clients. When pitching the idea of his salon to his new backers, he explained,

“In most salons,” I told them, “the client tells the hairdresser what she wants, and he gives it to her, no matter how hideous, how ludicrous the result.

“In my salon, they will get what I think is right for them. If they don’t want it, they can take their business elsewhere....

“... We’re going to put all our energies into creating great work....

“We’re going to shock a lot of people. But by God, we’re going to be noticed. We’re going to make our mark. We’re going to shake some life into hairdressing because just now, it’s dying.

“We’re going to have a lot of fun, too.” (Sassoon 1968, 80-81)

So, Sassoon hired assistants and stylists, opened up his shop, and waited for the clients to come in. His first client was an old friend from the neighborhood, and actress Georgia Brown.

The salon served thirty clients their first week, and operated at a loss of £7. 18. 9d. Their income doubled the second week, and that week saw the first true test of Sassoon’s philosophy.

A wealthy client arrived in a Rolls Royce and demanded an unflattering hairstyle. Sassoon stuck to his ideals, refused to cut her hair and she left in a huff, swearing to tell her friends. (Sassoon 1968, 84)

Sassoon continued to hone his style and work at creating something truly new. His salon was making some money, but his backers were beginning to be discouraged, and suggested he move to the suburbs. Instead, Sassoon got a new backer, and on April 7, 1959 opened a new salon at 171 Bond Street. (Sassoon 1968, 100-107)

Sassoon had had a professional and creative relationship with Mary Quant since the “early days” of his first salon at 108 Bond Street. Her models all had their hair done by him, and he tried to make the hair reflect the design of the clothes.

In 1963, Quant asked for something different.

She said to me, “Vidal, I’m sick to death of all these chignons we’ve been using at the shows. I know we can’t have hair hanging down over the models’ shoulders, but surely there is some other way to keep it away from the clothes than making it climb up the back of the head like ivy.”

“Sure,” I said. “You could cut the whole damn lot off.”...

“Mary,” I said, “I’m going to cut the hair like you cut material. No fuss. No ornamentation. Just a neat, clean, swinging line.” (Sassoon 1968, 134-135)

As the collection was being shown in 4 days, Quant volunteered to be his guinea pig and he did his first geometric bob on her. The hair was long in the front and short in the back. Quant loved it, and had him cut her models’ hair in the same style the morning of the show. To strengthen the impact, all the models were asked to wear scarves over their hair until the show that evening. After the show, the model Grace Coddington was photographed by Peter Rand, and Sassoon’s “Quant Cut” got a full page in both American and British Vogues. (Sassoon 1968, 136-138)

Sassoon had made his mark

### Sassoon's "Quant Cut" vs. Kenneth's Bob of 1963



Figure 1- Vidal Sassoon's "Quant Cut" modeled by actress Nancy Kwan, photographed by Terence Donovan, 1963



Figure 2- Hairstyle by Kenneth Battelle featured in the March 1963 issue of Harper's Bazaar.

These two photographs show two very similar hairstyles executed differently by two very different hairstylists. Although they both seem to be trying to say the same thing, the execution is completely different.

Figure 1 is a photo of actress Nancy Kwan in Vidal Sassoon's "Quant Cut" bob. The hair is smooth, shiny, and has a natural swinging movement. This is a young, fresh hairstyle—one that embodies the atmosphere of 1960s London. It mirrors the pared down straight silhouettes and geometric a-line styles of the youth fashion of the time. There is nothing superfluous or antiquated about this design. It looks soft. The angled cut plays up the actual physical dynamic movement of the hair itself. This style will move and swing with the wearer, whether she is a model walking down a catwalk, or a girl frug-ing the night away at a London club. This is the hairstyle of the "switched on" kids of the 1960s.

The hairstyle, which according to Sassoon required no setting whatsoever, is truly Modern. The shape is based on straight lines and geometry, and the style of the hair is entirely dependent on the *cut*. The *set* was the most important factor in how the elaborate bouffant styles of the late 1950s and early 1960s were achieved. If the woman wearing the style had straight hair, she could wash it, comb it, and let it air dry, with no roller, setting, or hairdresser required.

So, while this hairstyle perfectly embodies its time, it also transcends its time. It is instantly classic and of the moment at the same time. This is a hairstyle for the Modern woman.

Figure 2 is a photo of stage actress Joan Wetmore in a similar hairstyle by Kenneth Battelle of New York City. "Mr. Kenneth" was most famous for doing both Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy's hair. He was an established hairdresser in the old school when this photograph was taken.

The first thing one is struck with when looking at this hairstyle is how static it is. There is no movement whatsoever in the style. Even the model's stiff, straight pose communicates the immobility of the hair.

This style is primarily dependent on the set, rather than the cut for its shape.

Instead of a soft hair, it looks like some sort of molded hat or helmet affixed to the model's head. Absolutely nothing is left to chance or nature. The hair was set in rollers and the front and the crown were teased and shaped. The one curl at the cheek was carefully and meticulously created. Every last hair was manipulated into shape, and the whole lot was then lacquered into place.

This is a hairstyle for a woman who would like her hair to look exactly the same in the evening as it looks in the morning. She is more conservative, and most likely much older. This is not hair to go out dancing in. This is the hair of the old guard.

Despite the hairstyle's attempt at modernity, with its new, short cut, it misses the mark, as it is executed in an old-fashioned method. It comes off looking like a compromise, as if Kenneth said, "OK you want a short bob? I can do a short bob," but then used bouffant and beehive techniques to achieve the bob silhouette. Kenneth attempted to channel his correct instincts about smaller hair and a new look for hair, but he used antiquated needlessly complicated methods to achieve it, because that is the vocabulary that he has built. It's a bit like imagining Christian Dior making a caftan with a corset built inside. Totally convoluted and completely unnecessary.

The silhouette of the hair also has a strange, unnatural look. The teased crown and teased front make the wearer's head look lumpy. There's very little harmony or logic to the shape. It comes off as a visual compromise, and fails to be attractive.



As a result, the Kenneth hairstyle looks hopelessly dated, while the Sassoon hairstyle is something one could see on the street today, or ten years ago, or ten years from now. It is simply good Modern design, and good design is timeless.

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