

Outdoor café scene Collins Street, c 1960

It's late summer or early autumn: print dresses and short sleeves indicate that the day is warm. Women have thrown off the encumbrance of hats, once de rigueur, but they still comply with the expectations of Collins Street society and wear gloves and carry handbags. The man wears a dark suit, also obeying society's dress code despite the heat. Further down the hill of Collins Street a tall building has started the tall-buildings trend. Here the pavement is busy with people, but at a curb-side table, two women are engrossed in conversation, not noticing those around them. At the next table the passing parade is observed and commented on by two friends, who position themselves facing the passers-by rather than each other. What has caught their eye? Is it the young woman who walks attentively with...her mother? Her grandmother? Perhaps it is the young woman's frock, with its fashionably flared, gathered skirt fitted to her slim waist. Or has something at the entrance to the bar caught their attention? Maybe a display in the window of OPSM has prompted a conversation – one of them wears spectacles, or sunglasses against the glare. The proximity of Georges department store may be the source of the women's parcels, and this nearby outdoor café is a good place to meet and exchange experiences in the fresh air after shopping there. Their bright individual clothing indicates these women have the leisure to shop and pause at an outdoor café – women who work in nearby 1960s offices and shops wear the uniform of plain dark skirts and jackets. This bright scene with its sunlit ruffled sun umbrellas might be viewed longingly by typists and shop assistants through their office and shop windows.

Sixty years later does sunlight still filter through plane-tree leaves, casting shadows on the pavement and warming the backs of outdoor café patrons? Georges has gone. Fashions change, not just in dress: the same Collins Street streetscape in 2020, with tall buildings lining both sides of the street, is dark despite there being blue sky above. Although they no longer need sunshades, and the air may no longer be as fresh, outdoor tables and chairs still extend an invitation to stop, sit and enjoy a leisurely break, perhaps while watching the passers-by....

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