

Shape of Women – Part 2 – 20th century to the Present Day

Belle Epoque & Gibson Girls (1890-1914)

Around 1905 the *Gibson girl* ideal emerged. This fashionable s-shaped hourglass, first drawn and publicised by the illustrator Dana Gibson was brought to life by the model Camille Clifford. This look centred on wearing a straight fronted corset (“Swan Bill”), which pushed the pelvis backwards to emphasis the bust and hipline, and created the appearance of a “distinctly diminutive” waist.

Lingerie as a term was born in the Edwardian period and discussed far more in fashion terms than ever before, a significant move away from Victorian prudery. There were far fewer undergarments, but they were floucier than ever before. Chemises were gradually replaced by camisole combinations, which had a much tighter fit over the hip. Expensive flounced lace petticoats which rustled when the wearer walked were the height of fashion. Corsets became longer, running right over the hips to create the required silhouette. “Nuform” corsets introduced around 1911 were much shorter above the waist, which resulted in the introduction of bust improvers, bodices and girdles, the forerunners of modern brassieres (bras).

Womenswear after 1900 was still dictated to a large extent by French haute couture. An alternative to the Gibson girl look, were the high-waisted dresses produced by French designer Paul Poiret c. 1911. These dresses harked back to the early 1800s “neoclassical” styles (**see Part 1**). They were suspended from the shoulder and raised the position of the natural waistline to the empire line (under bust) in order to create a long sweeping linear silhouette. Poiret was also responsible for creating hobble or kite skirts in which the wearer’s legs were essentially clamped together in a skirt that was unfeasibly narrow from the knees to the ankles, meaning the wearer had no choice but to walk very gingerly! The juxtaposition with this being around the same time as the suffragette movement was emerging is particularly jarring. Thankfully this was another short-lived trend on the path to fashion freedom!



Left: Silk wedding dress with Maltese lace, worn by Annie Jarvis at her wedding to Tom Sewell at Great Dunmow, 1907.

Centre: Black and white photograph of a navy coloured wedding dress c. 1910: bodice, skirt, waistband & underskirt.

Right: Jokey cartoon photograph – “The Hobble Skirt” – the speed limit skirt!

At this stage, wealthy ladies were still expected to change their outfit several times per day. The pre-war period had been typified by high necklines, long trailing skirts, frills and ruffles. Evening wear featured multi-layered chiffon tea gowns worn with long gloves and typical accessories included velvet and fur stoles and heeled boots.

The onset of the First World War in 1914 simplified women's fashion. The whalebone industry never fully recovered, as clock spring steel covered with rubber and celluloid began to be used for corsetry. Clothing had to be practical and easy to launder. The term lingerie was often now replaced with the word "undies" to reflect a more practical and realistic approach to foundation garments. The long clinging high-waisted dresses were swept away in favour of chemise dresses (with petticoats underneath) or combinations such as an open neck blouse and barrel skirt (cut wide over the hip). Around 1915 skirt knickers were introduced which were essentially petticoats divided into two wide legs, much like culottes! Post-war, it was all about easy to wear elegance! Peg top and A-line skirts were particularly popular.



Above: Wedding dress, off white silk with fringe detail, worn by Fanny de Burgh at her wedding to Mr G.L. Monk on 9th February 1915.

1920s – Boyish Ideal

Clothes of the 1920s, 30s and 40s were unboned and more loosely flowing. Social emancipation and a growing interest in sport led to a fashion for shorter skirts and a boxy tubular silhouette emerged. This period was characterised by dropped-waistline dresses, which were just below knee length, and combinations such as pleated skirts and jackets. It was almost child-like, with bare arms and legs below the knee on display, but no other flesh revealed.

For some the boyish 20s silhouette was more freeing, but for the vast majority it would have been far from emancipating. It's true that there was now a huge range of foundation garment combinations to choose from: under vests, camisoles, corselettes, suspenders, cami-knickers, cami-bockers, with new variations being introduced all the time. However, this "juvenile shape," a "glorification of youth" which had become the latest "feminine ideal" meant wearing numerous

restrictive and very uncomfortable body flatteners. If you had any form of curves, these foundation garments would have been at least equal in discomfort to the earlier tight-laced corsets.

“The designers appear to have forgotten there are women inside these dresses. Clothes must have natural shape.” (Coco Chanel, 1928)



Cotton day dress with drop-waist typical of the 1920s, pale blue with lace sleeves and metallic floral embroidery around the hemline. Worn by Ann Freeman from Radwinter.

Heavy beaded flapper tunic dresses in Art Deco inspired patterns were hugely popular at this time, as were geometric prints. Mass produced versions were made in Georgette with machine-stitched beading, whilst couture versions were made bespoke, with elaborate hand-stitched beading and over-sewn seams. Very few of these dresses survive in good condition now in museum or private collections, as the heavy weight of the beading puts pressure on the fabric and the shoulder seams usually start to split and fray over time.

1930s

The early 30s saw a trend for glamorous bias-cut dresses in sculptural silks and satins. Glamorous movie stars started to wear more daring styles, such as halter neck backless gowns, and “escapist glamour” definitely started to cascade down through society. Generally women’s fashions at this time became more practical. They were now cut to follow the lines of their real body, unlike the boyish styles of the 1920s. This period saw the introduction of zip fasteners and rayon (the first commercially used man-made fabric). More flexible fabrics like cotton and wool jersey separates, almost like sportswear, were more frequently worn. Prints clearly showed Art deco and Cubist influences and features like flared sleeves, pussy bow collars and costume jewellery were also popular.

The Second World War brought rationing and the need for practical durable clothing, which was less restrictive and easier to wear. In terms of foundation garments, the term bra was coined in 1937, a significant development from the “shapeless” bust improvers and bodices worn at the turn of the century. Corsets of woven porous elastic or rubber were still worn right over the hips. Two-way elastic stretch fabric known as “Lastex” was created to produce corset belts and roll-ons, and there were new step-in versions produced with zips. Knickers were shortened now and well over the knee, becoming panties and were later shortened again to create trunks, with the aim of creating a more streamlined silhouette.



Left:

Royal blue lace evening dress, c. 1930s

Right:

Rose coloured corset and suspenders c. 1930s onwards made and sold by CWS Desbeau Corsetry (Co-Operative Wholesale Society)

1940s

Fashion from the Second World War period has been described as the “era of drab uniformity” and it is true that a form of civilian uniform was created, based on simplified designs without trimmings marked with the CC41 utility clothing mark. 34 Utility designs – including coat, suit, afternoon dress and suit dress for the office were created, reflecting the fact material and labour were in such short supply. Some of these military inspired looks were cold, very square-shouldered and severe. However, elements of amazing tailoring can still be seen in the clever detailing and panelling, which were utilised. Items like the siren suits have paved the way for modern jumpsuits and staples like the tea dress, still remain hugely popular to this day particularly as part of a vintage revival. Tighter shorter skirts were popularised at this time, publicised by Vogue in 1941 with the tagline “you must skimp to be chic.” More synthetic and manmade fibres began to be used in clothing, with Rayon become the dominant fabric of this decade. It had the appearance of silk but was non crush and did not shrink or stretch. Heavier linen varieties were used for suits, whilst lighter crepe rayon varieties were used for dresses. Patriotic and propaganda prints were popular. Other popular fashion features from this period include slacks, trench coats, gingham, sequin and bead detailing; bolero jackets and jersey shift dresses.

In 1947 French haute couture designer Christian Dior created the “New Look,” with its origins in the 1930s, it heralded a return to the curved hourglass with wasp waistline silhouette. This necessitated a return to wearing tight corsetry. Lines were softer now though and the designs were based around glamorous separates such as bolero jackets paired with full skirts. Short corsets, girdles (elasticated panels worn around the waist), brassieres and waist cinchers became the basis of fashions during this period helping women to achieve this hyper-feminine look – dresses were long-sleeved, all cinched in waist, kicking out to a full skirt which was just below knee length, supported by structured padding on the hips and petticoats.



Above Left: Wedding dress handmade by Joyce Sturge for her wedding, August 1942



Above Right: Blue dress, mauve silk oversize bow and belt loop decoration. Made from rayon crepe. Worn with a matching jacket c. 1940s

1950s

Post-war there was a desire to dress in more classically feminine luxurious and glamorous designs. Wasp waists, strategic padding, tight corsetry (e.g. bustiers) and structured underwear continued from the late 1940s. The growing middle class were responding to the dawn of a new age and had optimistic hopes of living their lives in different ways. Glamorous ready-to-wear evening gowns, such as dramatic puffball styles were required for attending cocktail parties. Tailoring still continued to be popular for women. Smart two-piece suits and belted coats with architectural shapes and sculpted lines were produced, influenced by women continuing to work more outside the home. Wash and wear fabrics appeared in the 1950s, reducing time consuming laundering and a much wider range of clothing was available as rationing had ended and mass manufacturing was in full force. Gloves, slacks, ballet shoe pumps, net petticoats, pencil skirts (hobble style, cut narrow with a split at the back), empire line shift dresses (the original little black dress), fur stoles, oversized detailing, sack dress, sheath dresses, wide belts, pedal pushers and capri pants (calf-length trousers), trapeze style swing coats and dramatic full skirts were all typical of this period. Glossy magazines advocated that women should look well turned out at all times, even when doing the housework! (Again grating for a modern audience!). No outfit was complete without matching gloves, handbag and shoes.



Left:

1950s Printed cotton day dress, geometric design, full pleated skirt. British made, machine sewn. This would originally have been belted to cinch the waist in further.

1960s

The 60s saw fashion become more fun and experimental with a new sense of freedom. Young British designers took the lead over French couture, and street fashion began to dictate style. New fabrics including vinyl and PVC were utilised. Fashion highlights of this period include Mary Quant shift dresses and tunics with high hemlines, as well as bold psychedelic Biba and Pucci prints. The designer Paco Rabane experimented with chain-mail, leather, plastic, plexi-glass and elastic bandages. Popular styles during this period were influenced by Pop Art, space age features (metallics and plastics), pinafore dresses, mini-skirts paired with mini-coats, hippy aesthetic (kaftans and maxi dresses), bold geometric prints and experimental cut-outs (sheer and transparent sections). There was also a return to “old world nostalgia” with Laura Ashley’s hippy aesthetic designs, particularly feminine floral sprig prints on dresses, smocks and aprons. Girdles continued to be popular as foundation garments to create a smooth silhouette.



Left:

Orange and gold crimplene dress c. 1960s.

1970s

Yves Saint-Laurent introduced pant suits with square shoulders and bouffant sleeves. There were chiffon and silk based designs by Ossie Clark, a decorative arts and crafts revival and Japanese fashion influences. Punk music had a significant influence on clothing at this time most notably by the designers Vivienne Westwood, Malcolm McLaren and Zandra Rhodes. Their designs focussed on the use of chains, tartan, ripped fabric, spikes and safety pins. Denim and leather were more frequently worn. Developed from the WW2 siren suits, jumpsuits began to be worn, as they linked in to the space age futuristic ideal and were seen as the ultimate in stylish leisurewear because they were utilitarian and functional, maybe less so when they had flared trouser legs! Short skirts were increasingly replaced by long, loose A-line dresses, with flower power patterns, tie-dye, paisley prints, wraparound fastenings, kaftan styles, feminine fabrics and a slightly softer colour palette. Garments were accessorised with beads, tassels, headscarves and turbans. Disco was another popular trend typified by sparkly halter-necks and hot pants, bright neons and stretchy Lycra, satin and velvet.



Above Left: Cocktail dress 2-piece, pink and pink-lurex, homemade c. 1970s

Above Right: Day dress, floral sleeves and pussy-bow collar, late 1960s/early 1970s

1980s- Present day

Economic depression at the beginning of the 80s, resulted in androgynous styling in the form of oversized suit jackets, checks, plaid, tweeds and brogue shoes becoming popular. By the end of the 80s, this style had been replaced by far more body conscious styling, with stretchy form fitting clothing becoming more popular, no doubt influenced by dance and sportswear trends. Power dressing is another fashion look which was synonymous with the 80s: heavily padded shoulders, vibrant colours, big hair-dos and bold accessories, influenced in part by more women asserting themselves in traditionally male-dominated work environments. Over time this look has been refined and combined with expert tailoring to create looks which aim to combine authority with glamour.

Streetwear has increasingly had an influence on fashion. For those of us who grew up in the late 1980s/early 90s, how can we ever forget the pain of wearing multi-coloured shell-suits! But there

are sportswear looks that have prevailed far longer and become embedded in fashion – cycling shorts, leggings, hoodies, loungewear and tracksuits (particularly glamourised versions such as Juicy Couture). Celebrities and royal figures now influence fashion far more than designer runway collections. Fashion in the 21st century is a pan-global industry fuelled by mass TV, social media influencers, celebrity culture, red carpets and extravagant marketing campaigns and endorsements.

We may not feel it sometimes, but there is still more freedom in fashion than ever before and it can be far more personalised. The growth of social media has linked special interest groups together as a result there are pockets of niche “counter culture” fashion which at certain times emerge into the mainstream, for example goth, skater and steam punk culture. Social media has also helped to link together individuals with costume speciality interests, which has resulted in hundreds of costume history, vintage and re-enactment inspired groups.

New fashions and styles are created all the time, but there are also trends which re-surface again in different time periods and in different forms, such as jumpsuits and empire line dresses. Fashions are appropriated and altered all the time. Music festival goers for example wearing traditionally practical agricultural wax jackets and hunter wellies but combining them with bohemian and grunge details to create a festival chic look.

In 2020, emancipation is still an issue. 4th wave feminism is focussed now on social media channels, publicising the body positivity movement, to challenge society’s body ideals and show that beauty comes in all forms, shapes and sizes and there is increasingly a focus on breaking down barriers surrounding diversity in race, disability, age, gender and sexuality.

There are still some small but crucial fashion victories which need to be won. Pockets! Even in the 21st century women’s clothes with pockets still seem largely elusive! In many cases pockets on women’s clothing are fake or sewn shut, as it is felt that they negatively affect the silhouette of an outfit. That would never ever be considered the case with mainstream male fashion. Hopefully pockets on women’s clothing will become a future fashion trend or maybe Victorian bustles will make a fashion comeback you never know!

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