

A Quick Tour Through the Last Century of Fashion

1900s

Women begin to wear looser, lighter-weight clothing. A popular style is a starched white blouse, with a dark blue or black ascot scarf, and a long, full skirt. The “Gibson Girl” look – independent, athletic, poised, intelligent, yet feminine – is created by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson. Women’s hair is worn high on the head. It begins to become acceptable for women to uncover more parts of their body, although a skirt three inches above the ground is considered scandalous.

1910s

World War I. Fashions are conservative, with women’s clothes following more or less natural body lines. Women are asked not to wear corsets (the stays were often made of steel, which was needed for the war effort), and replace them with girdles.

1920s

The end of World War I brings new freedom. Women also gain the right to vote. The flapper, boyish look takes over. Women cut their hair short, into a “bob.” They bare their legs, with dresses that are straight, unfitted, and end at or a little above the knee. Maturity ceases to be in fashion for men and women; there’s an emphasis on a more youthful, almost childish look. For example, men’s clothing is no longer designed to make them look as large and powerful as possible, but slimmer and younger.

1930s

The Depression. Seriousness and maturity are back, and reflected in heavier styles (e.g. men’s pants are cut fuller) and darker colors. Skirts are longer, and styles follow a woman’s figure, with graceful curves and lines. The look is feminine, movie star glamorous (think Ginger Rogers or Greta Garbo). Make-up is very important, and curls and waves are popular for hair. Women begin wearing pants in informal, private situations.

1940s

With the start of World War II, women enter the workforce and wear pants publicly, to work. Clothing is long-wearing and functional; there are limitations on how much fabric can be used for garments. The first nylon stockings are widely available, and nylon is marketed as a “miracle material” – lightweight and strong. In the second half of the decade, with the war over, there is new interest in fashion and a renewed sense of femininity, evident in tight-fitting bodices and long, full skirts. Narrow-heeled shoes are in fashion.

1950s

Ready-to-wear clothing is the big deal, and styles begin changing very quickly. It is not socially acceptable for women to work; a woman’s “place is in the home.” Women wear pants around the house, but still

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wear skirts when they go out. Tight-fitting dresses and shorter hemlines are popular, but so too are the circle skirt, bobby sox, and a sweater set. For men, previous to 1950 they wore both single-breasted and double-breasted suits. Fashions changed very little for them. In the 1950s, many men switch to single-breasted suits, with narrow lapels and natural (i.e. unpadded) shoulders. They also begin wearing colored shirts with business suits. Teenagers begin wearing different clothes than their parents (the term teenager was first used in 1953), and everyone starts to wear blue jeans. Marlon Brando, in the 1954 movie *The Wild One*, gives birth to the black leather jacket.

1960s

A time of social change and freedom. Clothing becomes much more colorful. Women's thighs are bared. Looser fitting dresses come into style, as do very short, tight miniskirts. Boots or platform shoes accompany many outfits. Women wear tapered pants. Bell-bottom pants also come into fashion. Both men and women wear more casual clothing; sportswear becomes popular. Clothes are made from new materials like plastics, metal, and even paper (e.g. disposable outfits). Jacqueline Kennedy is a fashion icon. Thinness, epitomized by the model Twiggy, starts to become the ideal.

1970s

Women head out into the workforce, and wear skirts of every length. They have distinct "dress-for-success business" versus softer "at home" looks. Some women rebel against the fashion industry and wear simple T-shirts with baggy pants or jeans. "Charlie," a perfume marketed in ads showing women doing independent things like signing their own checks, becomes an overnight hit. Polyester fabrics are everywhere. Men wear shirts in checks, stripes, and many colors with business suits. Wide ties are in fashion in fancy prints, stripes, or bright swirling colors. Men wear their hair longer. This is the decade of disco, with John Travolta as its icon.

1980s

Influenced by MTV, anybody can pretty much wear anything – from the big shoulder pads on the TV show *Dynasty* to the fairy-tale wedding dress of Princess Diana to black leather pants and jackets. Madonna promotes the "material girl." Power outfits, thinness, and youth are in. The fitness craze begins. Models become superstars.

1990s

The relaxed attitude toward dressing is evident in trends like see-through blouses for women. Business casual becomes widely accepted. Fashion and corporate logos merge. Designer names are everywhere. There are many who argue that the North American obsession with fashion, youth, and beauty has gone too far. Images of beauty are constantly thrust in front of us through billboards, TV, movies, and magazines. Most of these images have been computer-enhanced. A wide range of fashions is available – yet strangely, everything looks much the same.