

The Fabrics of Our Past

textiles and fashions, 1860s–1960s

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A fashion timeline

1860s—Women. Wide, very full skirts with hoops or cages; short waists and long, sloping, almost horizontal shoulders. Bodices fastened down the front with buttons; necklines for daytime were at the base of the neck, often with a small collar. Sleeves were wide and billowing and wide belts were common. Hair was parted down the center and pulled tight behind the ears. During the Civil War, older garments were often altered. **Men** not in uniform wore loose-fitting coats that became shorter, narrower and with tighter sleeves as the decade progressed. Vests had narrow lapels and collars. Stiff shirt collars were for dress-up; everyday shirts had fold-down collars. Beards were popular, and hair was parted on the side.

1870s—Women. From 1870 to 1876, women wore a bustle at the back of the skirt, with the sides drawn in and back. About 1874 waistlines began to lengthen and two-piece dresses became the fashion, with a long jacket bodice (perhaps open over a vest) and separate skirt. Colors tended to be dark, and there was a plethora of pleating, ruffles, and flounces. **Men's** jackets became closer-fitting, although loose jackets were worn casually.

1880s—Women. Ready-made dresses became available for work or casual wear, and there were more style choices than before. After 1882, skirts became fuller, and in 1883 the bustle returned, peaking in 1886 and deflating in 1887, forming droopy, deep folds at the back of the skirt. Bodices were tight with high collars and narrow sleeves that ended short of the wrist. **Men** stopped wearing the loose “sack” coats; their fitted coats closed high at the throat, almost covering the necktie. Lapels were very narrow, as were the sleeves, and shirts were mostly white with a stiff or folding collar. Mustaches became popular.

1890s—Women. At the start of the 1890s, tops of the sleeves at the shoulder had little puffs, expanding by 1892 to the upper sleeve and by 1893 to the tight wrist. By 1896 the leg ‘o mutton sleeve was at its most extreme. At the end of the decade, sleeves returned to a narrow shape with a shoulder puff. Women wore shirtwaists, and skirts were full in front, often from pleats and puffs. Men's jackets got even shorter and narrower; the sleeves were so short the shirt cuff was exposed. Dress shirts were white, but work shirts varied in color. A hanging tie joined the popular bow tie.

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A textile timeline (continued)

1900s—Women. The fashion was for mature, sophisticated, well-bred ladies wearing flowing, organic forms that reflected the Art Nouveau style. Long full skirts gradually became narrower and shorter, eventually forming “hobble skirts” and offering glimpses of ankles. Haute couture flourished in Paris and was sought after by the wealthy. The start of World War I in 1914 brought a temporary end to fashion developments and, at the same time, introduced women to a much greater degree of freedom as they stepped into jobs once held by men who were now on the battlefields.

1920s—Women began to liberate themselves from constricting clothing and undergarments and embraced more comfortable styles like pants and short skirts, although fashion remained conservative until about 1925. Then, revolutionary styles of the flapper era emphasized youth, hems rose to the knee, and waistlines disappeared.

1930s—Women. Fashion became more conservative during the Great Depression. Skirts became longer and the waistline returned. Metallic lamé and rayon were glamorous evening fabrics, although fashion designers still preferred silk.

1940s—Women. War once again influenced fashion, with cloth rationing and a restrained mood leading to drabness and uniformity. People “made do” by mending and repurposing clothing they already had. Rationing led to shorter skirts and boxy jackets; a maximum of three buttons per item of clothing was allowed. Nylon was scarce and women were encouraged to wear ankle socks with bare legs.

1950s—Women. The “new look” at the end of World War II carried through the 1950s, with a return to luxurious fabrics, rounded shoulders, longer full skirts, and narrow waists, worn with ornate accessories. Hemlines changed every year, building obsolescence into mass-produced and couturier fashion typified by Christian Dior. The return of Coco Chanel offered elegant stability, but Paris was losing its premier fashion position as the first boutiques were created and Mary Quant designed her “Chelsea look.”

1960s—Women. The decade was marked by a shift to ready-to-wear and an emphasis on youth and relatively cheap, throw-away fashion typified by “Swinging London.” Short skirts prevailed, although the maxi was introduced by Yves Saint Laurent at the end of the decade along with geometric sheaths, Pop Art fashion, and see-through blouses and dresses. The concept of “unisex” clothing was introduced by 1967, although women were more likely to wear pants suits than men were to don skirts.

