

Dress Styles from the 20s through the 60s

by Pamela Fay

Today's fashions are influenced by dress styles that women wore 50, 60, even 90 years ago. Old fashioned dresses are currently enjoying a surge in popularity for dress enthusiasts. Vintage lovers can easily find dresses dating back to the 1950s and beyond. These old fashioned dresses are distinguished by decade and are currently worn with the addition of a few modern accents.

The 1920s Dress

Although the flapper dress was not the only dress style of the decade, the 1920s is most remembered for the flapper dress. The old-fashioned flapper dress was a straight shift with spaghetti straps, embellished with sequins, feathers or fringe. It was knee length or above. However, short dresses were only in vogue for a brief time between 1926 and 1928. The flapper dress was frequently worn with a cloche style hat and confining undergarments, such as a corset, girdle and bandages to bind the chest so that the silhouette was streamlined.

The 1930s Dress

The 1930s ushered in a more ladylike appearance. Dresses became simpler to accommodate the absence of maids, busier lives and women who worked outside the home. Rayon began to replace silk. Long, flowing dresses, known as Trousseau's, were introduced. These old-fashioned dresses featured a low v-neck and were designed to accentuate feminine curves. Cut on the bias to maximize movement, they were snug at the waist and flared slightly over the hips in soft gathers or pleats.

The 1940s Dress

Just as Americans were pulling out of the Great Depression, World War II was underway. Fashions were austere and practical with few details, designed to conserve rationed materials. Dresses, in dark colors like Air Force blue, were made from viscose and rayon instead of wool and silk. American designers introduced separates to give the illusion of a larger wardrobe for tight budgets. Embellishments such as pockets and ribbons were abandoned for simple designs and clean lines. Material was conserved by making dresses slimmer and shorter, although some evening dresses featured short, frilly skirts. Styles of the decade included tubular-style knit dresses or chemises, with cinch belts and one strap dresses with asymmetrical hemlines.

The 1950s

Following the end of World War II in 1945 and the reopening of Parisian fashion houses in 1947, women were eager for new styles of dresses. Dresses of that era were feminine and romantic, interpreting the whimsy of post-war luxurious excess into the practical reality of everyday working women and housewives. By the 1950s, a teen market emerged, too, as teenagers began to purchase their own clothes and distinguish themselves as neither children nor adults. For women, both young and old, lady-like dresses were the mainstay of the wardrobe.

In the '50s, women dressed to accentuate an hour-glass figure. The big-shouldered severe look of the war years was replaced by feminine lines and lots of fabric flowing from a narrow waist. The decade's old-fashioned dresses were typically nipped in at the waist, either with vertical darts at the torso or with a belt. A cropped jacket might top the dress to draw attention to a slender waistline. Girdles were mandatory to keep the curves under control and preserve the silhouette. The first Parisian styles of the decade ushered in the trapeze dress, a triangular shape that flared from shoulders to hem, became popular during this period, as well. A simple wrap dress with large patch pockets was a common silhouette for around the house. Circle-skirted dresses and bouffant skirts were frequently worn with stiff crinoline slips and fancy tiered petticoats to add volume. But for day wear, unpressed pleats, full dirndl and soft gathering were the most popular ways to add volume.

The 1960s

Dress styles in the early sixties resembled the 1950s. Swing and pleated skirts were typical, as was the shirtwaist dress. Color and patterns became bolder and more vibrant. However, by the end of the sixties, several styles emerged, such as the polo dress and short shifts, that are still worn today. The tent dress, with bold geographic patterns, was also popular.

References

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