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Fashion in the 1920s (Overview)

By 1920, there were 9 million working women in the United States, constituting over 23% of the workforce. In addition, by the end of the decade, women represented 47% of college enrollments. This increase in women entering the workplace and academia called for a new form of appropriate attire.

This shift in women's lifestyles contributed to a revolutionary departure from fashions of the past, from cumbersome corsets and petticoats that restricted women's movements, toward a sleek, versatile wardrobe made up of comfortable, form-fitting separates that reflected modern attitudes about femininity and beauty. This new look would reign throughout much of the 20th and early 21st centuries, as its most basic elements would endure as staples of women's fashion decade after decade.

Proper Attire

In the early part of the decade, wealthy women were still expected to change from a morning to an afternoon dress. These afternoon or "tea gowns" were less form-fitting than evening gowns, featured long, flowing sleeves, and were adorned with sashes, bows, or artificial flowers at the waist. Worn for formal luncheons or afternoon teas, the waistline fell to the hip, and the hemline tended to end at mid-calf or just above the ankle, a length that is still sometimes referred to as "tea length" today.



Evening dresses were typically slightly longer than tea gowns, in satin or velvet, and embellished with beads, rhinestones, or fringe. Unlike the exaggerated silhouettes of the past, 1920s evening dresses were more likely to be a sheath. These sleeveless tubes came with deep scooping necklines or extreme V-necks. Some also featured a similar deep V shape down the back, which might be offset by a long strand of pearls or beads draped down the back. Waistlines were hip level, when the gowns weren't cut along the bias, an innovation that gained favor throughout the decade.



For working women and college students, the endless cycle of morning, teatime, and evening wear was not feasible. These modern young women needed elegant dresses and suits that could be worn from morning to evening and a growing number of fashion designers and department stores began making these versatile pieces throughout the decade. Even women who did not work began wearing a single outfit rather than the numerous outfits that middle class and wealthy women were expected to wear throughout the day in past decades.

Meanwhile, working-class women looked for modern forms of dress as they transitioned from rural to urban careers. Taking their cue from wealthier women, working women began wearing less expensive variations on the day suit, adopting a more modern look that seemed to suit their new, technologically focused careers as typists and telephone operators.

Fashion Icons

Prior to 1900, clothing styles changed slowly as compared to the more accelerated pace that took hold during the first decades of the 20th century. The increasing popularity of nationally distributed magazines and especially movies accelerated fashion trends. At the dawn of the era of celebrity, movie stars like Gloria Swanson and Joan Crawford inspired young women to emulate their look. They even endorsed brands of accessories.



Fashion icons like Louise Brooks, Clara Bow, and Theda Bara gave women an ideal to aspire to that was in stark contrast to the fictional, ultra-feminine Gibson Girl of the previous generation. These real-life women were sleek, slender, and independent. Fashionable women of the 1920s changed their eating habits and even their behavior to emulate them.

Modern Life, Modern Art, and Fashion

In the 1920s, the booming economy meant that more people were working. Earning more money allowed Americans to spend more and indulge in more leisure activity, much of it more casual, more health conscious, more active, and more athletic than leisure activities of the past. Fitness became a valued commodity, and women and girls were encouraged to adopt exercise regimens, eat healthy and even diet. Diet and exercised helped women feel more confident in the decade's new form-fitting, leg-revealing attire.



Women were more politically active than before as well, gaining the right to vote in 1920. The decade's most rebellious young women, called flappers, were famous for defying other norms of behavior, by smoking, drinking (despite prohibition), driving, and embracing a more sexually liberated lifestyle, epitomized by the scandalous practice of wearing cosmetics.

Upwardly mobility also had an affect on fashion. Some young women viewed money spent on clothes as an investment. Because modern technology made it possible to emulate the fashions of the wealthy for less, many young women, and men, believed that having the right clothing would ease their transition into the higher ranks of society. Others viewed spending money on clothes as a vain indulgence.

The modern lifestyle was not the only influence on fashion. Designers like Coco Chanel, for example, embraced a modernist aesthetic that paralleled similar movements in painting, sculpture, architecture, and interior design. Geometric textile patterns and the scaled-down simplicity of visual movements like Art Deco architecture also shaped the decade's fashions. The 1922 discovery of King Tut's tomb inspired jewelry makers and textile designers to emulate patterns and styles found in the newly opened crypt.



Shifting Standards of Beauty

The decade's ideal silhouette, thinner and more boyish than the idealized figure of the previous generation, reflected an idealization of athleticism; however, it also signaled an idealization of adolescence as the epitome of feminine beauty, a troubling shift that would echo throughout the remainder of the century and after. The flapper look incorporated an unsettling combination of pre-adolescent and sexually mature elements. The era's dresses, for example, with their shorter skirts with longer waists, resembled to little girls' dresses of the previous decades.

Raised hemlines brought greater attention to women's shoes than ever before. One of the first 1920s trends was adding a heel to a shoe style previously worn by little girls: the Mary Jane. Another childish fashion repurposed for young women was a feminine version of the sailor suit, a clothing style worn during the Victorian era by children of both sexes.

The flapper look also incorporated elements of androgyny, including modified menswear, such as the middie blouse, a variation on the striped shirts worn by sailors, unisex Fair Isle sweaters, and tailored vests and jackets worn with matching skirts. Some women even began wearing pants in public, though it was prohibited in many settings, such as fashionable hotel lobbies.

Offsetting all this androgyny and childlike styling were feminine accessories, such as long beaded necklaces, turbans and scarves, cloche hats with decorative hatpins, and "illusion" or costume jewelry.

A Changing Fashion Industry

Modern women with less time to sew embraced the new ready-to-wear clothing options made possible by new technologies. The decade's streamlined silhouette facilitated the transition from custom made to mass-produced synthetic textiles, such as rayon, acetate, nylon and polyester.

The modern fashion cycle, established in the 1920s, still dominates the industry today. Fashion trends originated with Paris couturiers, which introduced collections twice a year. An increasing number of these fashion innovators were women, including most prominently Coco Chanel. These designers favored separates in new fabrics like jersey that could be mixed and matched for work and modern, informal, unchaperoned social activities like attending films or the theater and car rides.

Though simple lines and minimal adornment reigned on the runways, the 1920s weren't free of luxury. Expensive fabrics, including silk, velvet and satin were favored by high-end designers, while department stores carried less expensive variations on those designs made of newly available synthetic fabrics. The use of mannequins became widespread during the 1920s, and served as a way to show shoppers how to combine and accessorize the new fashions.

Increasingly Hollywood stylists and high-end designers dictated what women across America wore. For the first time, women from all regions of the country could find out about fashions at nearly the same time. An outfit designed by stylist Edith Head for movie star Clara Bow, for example, might appear in movie theaters and film magazines and, within a few weeks, variation on that outfit could be copied by a department store in-house designer and sold to young women. At the same time, movie stars traveled to Paris, where they were outfitted by top designers, creating a synergy between celebrity and fashion that still exists.

Coco Chanel

One designer, Coco Chanel, was a celebrity in her own right. Along with actress Louise Brooks, she helped popularized the short bob haircut. Slender and elegant, Chanel was as iconic as any of the women she dressed, and originated many trends in women's wear that still proliferate today. What she didn't invent, she quickly adopted, popularized, and accepted credit for.

A former orphan, Chanel's style was called "poverty deluxe" by rival designer Paul Poiret. Her rise from obscurity

