

The Fabrics of Our Past

textiles and fashions, 1860s–1960s

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Real Fashions, Real Folks: Fashion Fun Facts

Women rebelled against restrictions of Victorian dress codes through the Dress Reform and Rational Dress movements. Criticisms of corsets in general led to wide-spread condemnation of “tightlacing,” which was viewed as vanity (whereas corsets were considered by many to be “healthy.”)

One great way to see how people actually dressed is to look at a Sears catalog for the era. Mail order catalogs promised fast delivery, not high fashion. Catalog clothing had to appeal to a wide audience and had to be available in large quantities at reasonable prices for immediate shipping.

Long Johns, or Union Suits, were first sold in 1868. They were originally designed as women’s reformed underwear but were quickly adopted by men, and continue in use today as “long underwear” for cold weather.

During the Edwardian era of 1901–1910, Queen Alexandra of England popularized the high dog collar (hers with pearls and diamonds) the princess-line dress. At the start of this era, a good corset-maker was said to be more important than a dress-maker, because the corset was essential for creating the wasp-waisted, arched-backed figure.

The skirts introduced in 1911 were so narrow they were called “hobble skirts,” and they severely restricted movement. Hidden slits and pleats helped fashionable women manage to walk in these high-style hobble skirts.

In the 1920s, fashion demanded “ensembles” with matching dress, hat, shoes, and coat.

Gloves were the most important accessory in the 1930s, a decade that also saw the introduction of the backless evening gown.

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Fashion fun facts (continued)

Studying historic clothing can tell us how garments were constructed, but only photographs can tell us how they were actually worn, from the tilt of a hat to the slouch of a flapper.

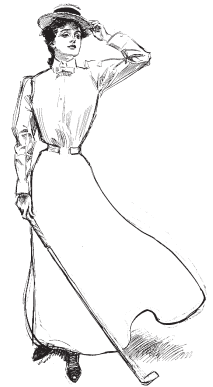
Elsa Sciaparelli introduced squared shoulder pads for women's costumes, incorporated bark, glass, cellophane, and straw in her fabrics, and invented the color "shocking pink," all in the 1930s.

Rationing during the 1940s led to fanciful hats, cork and wooden-soled shoes, and the use of accessories to change the look of limited clothing choices. Wearing slacks and denim overalls became common as women replaced men in the factories.

By 1919, pregnancy was a publically accepted fact, and dresses and corsets for maternity wear began to be designed.

"Sleeping suits" (pajamas for women) were introduced in 1921.

Shirtwaist blouses, the signature of the "Gibson girl," became so popular that the 1905 Sears catalog had 150 models, ranging from a 39-cent cotton lawn style to one made of silk taffeta for \$6.95. A shirtwaist paired with a skirt is the earliest example of sportswear.



Nylon stockings first appeared in the Sears catalog in 1940; they had vanished three years later as nylon was diverted to WWII uses.

Sometimes a photograph will suggest that the portrait subject is wearing "best" clothing because fold wrinkles show that the garment has been recently removed from protective storage.

The huge, dome-shaped skirts of the 1860s were supported by "crinoline cages" made of metal hoops hung from cloth tapes. This system was much lighter and more practical than wearing numerous voluminous petticoats to achieve the desired silhouette. With a skirt 6 feet in diameter, it was difficult to walk through doors or to get in and out of carriages.

Except for costumes and square dance outfits, petticoats are no longer fashion-forward, although there was a brief revival of stiffly starched, very full crinolines in the 1950s and early 1960s.

To prevent ripping a hobble skirt by taking long strides, some women wore a "fetter" tied around their knees under the skirt to insure they took only tiny steps.

Enormous bell-shaped skirts transitioned to skirts with their fullness on the sides and back in the early 1870s: the first bustles. In the 1880s, bustles tended to be high "humps" over the rear end of the wearer. A bustle support could be a crinolette cage, a wire frame, or cloth padding tied around the waist under the skirt.

