

The Fabrics of Our Past

textiles and fashions, 1860s–1960s

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A textile timeline

From spinning jennies to chemical concoctions, looms, and sewing machines, the advance of technology has affected the fibers and textiles we've used and the styles and colors of the clothing we've worn.

Natural plant- and animal-based fibers have been used for centuries: cotton, flax, jute, hemp, and sisal; wool and silk. **Artificial** fibers are manufactured from natural products. **Synthetic** fibers are mixed from chemicals and extruded by machines.

1856—the first synthetic dye, an aniline called mauve, is discovered. A brilliant fuchsia, it faded so quickly that today's idea of the color mauve is nothing like its original appearance.

1858—the second synthetic dye, magenta, is followed over the next 20 years with methyl violet, Hofmann's violet, Bismarck brown, aniline black, methyl green, methyl blue, malachite green, Biebrich scarlet, and synthetic indigo.

1891—the first man-made fabric, an artificial silk, is made from natural cellulose derived from wood pulp or cotton rags.

1900—the Shah of Persia forbids the use of aniline dyes for rugs.

1910—artificial silk is first produced commercially in the United States.

1924—artificial silk called rayon is used for clothing, home furnishings, and industry. In the mid-1920s, silk costs more than twice as much as rayon.

1930s—yarns are made with glass fibers.

1935—the first synthetic fiber, nylon, is created from petrochemicals by DuPont. Initially used for hosiery, during World War II it is used exclusively for parachutes and airplane tires.

1941—the first polyester fiber, Terylene, is manufactured; Dupont invents the first acrylic fiber, Orlon

1942—Owens Corning produces Fiberglas

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A textile timeline (continued)

1948—Textiles are the second largest industry in the United States, and the average consumer uses 27 pounds of cotton, 6.3 pounds of rayon, and 4.9 pounds of wool annually.

1949—Olefin and Modacrylic are invented.

1950—Acrylic fibers and Dacron polyester herald the start of wash-and-wear clothing.

1954—Arnel is the first commercial production of an American triacetate.

1956—One person out of seven employed in the United States works in textile or apparel industries.

1956—Two new acrylics, Creslan and Verel, are introduced.

1958—Eastman Kodak introduces Kodel polyester.

1959—DuPont invents spandex, which can stretch at least 500 percent without breaking.

1964—Permanent press fabric finishes are used for the first time.

1965—DuPont produces Kevlar: strong, lightweight, and flame- and abrasion-resistant.

1968—For the first time, more man-made fibers than natural fibers are consumed in the United States, with polyester growing the most quickly.

1972—The production of polyesters surpasses nylon production for the first time.

