

# The History of Women's Suits: Past Trends

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# Women's Suit Fashion Icons Timeline



**Anna Muthesius**

1900s



**Clara Bow**

1920s



**Lauren Bacall**

1940s



**Audrey Hepburn**

1960s



**Princess Diana**

1980s



**Celine Dion**

2000s



**Zendaya coleman**

Present



1910s



**Denise Boulet**

1930s



**Joan Crawford**

1950s



**Audrey Hepburn**

1970s



**Bianca Jagger**

1990s



**Alicia Silverstone**

2010s



**Britney Spears**

# Women's Suits

## 1900s



Figure 1. Riding Habit

During the 1900s, the Gibson Girl's highly structured form was still prominent at the start of the decade. Many women were beginning to work outside the home while the wealthy donned the lavishly embellished fashions of the 1900s. These women required something more practical to wear, which was provided by the "tailor-made." In the 1900s, both working and wealthy wore these suits, which were first introduced in the late 1800s. Eastern patterns, the Arts and Crafts movement, and Greco-Roman loose draped clothes all influenced aesthetic dress in the 1900s. Aesthetic clothing was mostly worn at home, but some ladies managed to incorporate it into their daily attire. Liberty, a London department store, is noted for incorporating artistic fashion influences. Japanese and Chinese silks, as well as Middle Eastern embroideries, were admired for their aesthetic qualities and gorgeous coloring, which provided an alternative to the early 1900s trend of subdued colors and soft, fading effects. "For these, many women chose outfits intended to serve both as sporting wear and as serviceable, neat daywear," Milford-Cottam wrote of the attire used for these activities (Reddy & Reddy, 2019b). Anna Muthesius was a fashion icon in the early 1900s. She urged women in the early 1900s to dress separately, promoting period-appropriate aesthetics. She authored *Das Eigenkleid der Frau* (Women's Own Dress) in 1903, urging readers to avoid Paris styles (Hennessey 236). The appearance of this varied, but common themes included practicality, flexibility of movement, and Art Nouveau designs. While Anna's legacy may not be well-known now, the aesthetic and creative dress movements had an impact on Paul Poiret's and others' designs in the early part of the next decade.

# Women's Suits

## 1910s



Figure 2. Suffragette Suit

During the 10s, fashions began to soften as the decade progressed. In the early part of the decade, the tight S-bend design was popular, but it gradually smoothed out into a more natural shape. "The bust was no longer thrust quite so far forward, nor the hips so far back," writes Laver (Reddy & Reddy, 2019b). Front-hanging floppy blouses were a thing of the past. Skirts and flowy tops became slimmer, as did oversized sleeves and enormous sleeves. Waistlines were higher, and the tubular silhouette that would become fashionable over the next two decades began to take shape. The trendy silhouette had changed drastically over the first decade of the century. The smart woman was pyramidal when Edward VII came to the throne, her extravagantly long hem reaching upwards to the pinnacle of a high-dressed haircut with a tiny hat. The pyramid was turned upside down by the time he died in May 1910, over a decade later, with exaggeratedly wide-brimmed hats tapering downwards into narrow hems, and a neatly shod foot forming the point of the new heart-shaped silhouette. While ornamentation and lengthy skirts lingered from earlier in the decade, trends were quickly shifting towards the slimmed-down shapes that would dominate the next two decades. Denise Poiret was a fashion icon in the 1910s. Denise Poiret, Paul Poiret's wife, was living advertising for her husband, who used her as the prototype figure for his Empire line gowns: "Muse as well as model, Denise Poiret was a living advertising for her husband, who used her as the prototype figure for his Empire line dresses." Her small physique, which was ahead of its time, would later become all the rage in the following decade, and Poiret's chemise dresses were created expressly for her. In 1911, Denise wore her husband's infamous harem trousers to an enormous costume gala dubbed "The Thousand and Second Night." In 1913, he applied the same style in costumes that he created, and they made their debut outside of the world of the costume later that year. In the 1910s, she and her husband were the epitomai of avant-garde fashion.

# Women's Suits

## 1920s



Figure 3. Cardigan style jackets

During the 20s, the aftermath of the First World War was still being felt around the world. In the 1920s, fashion was all about the full package, and there were even trends in how the body was dressed. Fashion's basic lines and androgynous proportions looked best on bodies without curves. While the above-mentioned designers manufactured and sold their styles, as did department stores and the like, the simplicity of the prevalent mode during the 1920s made it easy for women of all means to duplicate those fashions at home. This, paired with influence from normal working-class ladies' clothes and the usage of fabrics like jerseys and imitation silk, resulted in the 1920s "democratization of fashion."

# Women's Suits

## 1930s



Figure 4. Zebra Print



Figure 5. Sequins jacket

Reddy, K., & Reddy, K. (2019, April 5). *1930-1939. Fashion History Timeline*. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1930-1939/>

During the 30s, the boyish style of the previous decade gave way to the feminine silhouette of the early thirties in women's fashion. Hemlines decreased to ankle length and waistlines returned to their natural place after the stock market crash in 1929 and the start of the new decade. Europe had entered the Second World War, but the United States had yet to emerge from the Great Depression. The popular style of broad, padded shoulders, nipped-in waists, and shorter A-line skirts that would dominate the early 1940s had already emerged as the 1930s came to a close (Reddy & Reddy, 2020c). Padding, layers of fabric, and other embellishments were used to create the exaggerated shoulder, which was a characteristic of 1930s design on suits and dresses. Wool, silk, metallic thread, and sequins were among the most preferred materials. Joan Crawford was a fashion icon in the 1930s. Joan demonstrated in 1932 how powerful movies could be in influencing fashion. Crawford wore a diaphanous white organdie gown in the film *Letty Lynton*, which spawned hundreds of duplicates across the US. The garment, designed by MGM costume designer Gilbert Adrian, with whom Crawford would collaborate on and off-screen for years, was a departure from the body-skimming gowns that had been popular in the early 1930s. Instead, the white gown featured a nipped waist, voluminous skirt, and massive puffed sleeves made of layers of translucent white organdie (Reddy & Reddy, 2020c). The dress was so successful that it was replicated at all price levels, a phenomenon that we are familiar with now but that was new with the emergence of the cinema business. In 1932, Macy's alone sold over half a million replicas of the Adrian design. Its design inspired a return to romanticism in 1930s fashion, and it impacted designs that did not exactly duplicate it but took inspiration from the feminine aesthetic, as shown in a Vionnet gown from the mid-1930s and a Lanvin gown from 1937. Despite the popularity of the *Letty Lynton* dress, Adrian devised stunning outfits for Crawford that flatter her body shape, and she also wore the decade's slinky fashions.

# Women's Suits

## 1940s

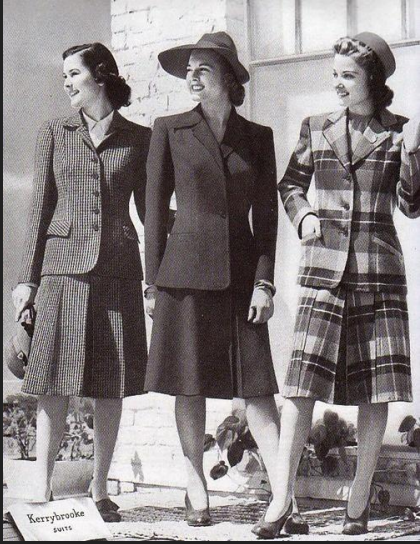


Figure 6. Women's 1940s Utility suit



Figure 7. Women's 1940s Victory suit

The women's suit in the 1940s changed from the very feminine silhouette back in the 1930s to a more masculine silhouette. One would say that these new suits were militant in style. Thus began the new trend known as the *utility suit* and/or *Victory suit*. The utility suit was “simple but stylish, with good proportion and line. It incorporated padded shoulders, a nipped-in waist, and hems to just below the knee” (Reddy, 2019). The suit had a boxy silhouette. It consisted of an A-line skirt with a matching Jacket. The jackets had shoulder pads to create the illusion of broad strong shoulders and a tiny hourglass waist. Some of the most popular fabrics used to make these suits were cotton and wool as it was easier to access during the war. The men's military suits were made from these fabrics, therefore oftentimes the women's suits resemble military uniforms. The suits were limited to a few colors such as black, blue, grey, red, brown, and green. Plaid prints were very popular prints worn by women.

# Women's Suits

## 1950s



Figure 8. Christian Dior's New look



Figure 9. Chanel tweed suit

In the 1950s, after WWII the women's suit transitioned back into a more feminine look once again. Christian Dior led what would become the new fashion trend for women in the late 40s to the mid 50s known as the “New Look.” Christian Dior's new look consisted of a jacket that had a “nipped-in waist and full-skirted silhouette”(Reddy, 2020). There were many new designers that became popular during this time such as Charles James, Hubert de Givenchy and Cristobal Balenciaga. These new designers brought in new stylish designs, thus the straight cut suit was developed. This new suit embodied the opposite of the new look. Unlike the new look which was tightly fitted to emphasize the women's hourglass shape, the straight cut suit “emphasized a woman’s natural shape (Reddy, 2019).” This new silhouette was much slimmer and straighter. After the war many women wanted to look more elegant and perfectly groomed. This brought forward a demand for luxury items. Some of the fabrications that were used for women’s suits during the 50s were cotton, wool, tweed, nylon, corduroy, and Rayon. During this time many synthetic fibers were introduced to the textile industry. There were many natural and synthetic fiber blends introduced to the market. Some popular prints during the 50s were plaid, polka dots, gingham, florals, and abstract prints.

Reddy, K. (2019, June 2). *1950-1959*. Fashion History Timeline. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1950-1959/>

*100 YEARS OF FEMINIST HISTORY EXPLAINED IN 10 WOMEN'S WORK SUITS: MBA@UNC.* UNC. (2021, May 25). <https://onlinemba.unc.edu/news/feminist-history-in-womens-work-suits/>.



# Women's Suits

## 1960s



Figure 10. That 60s Girl

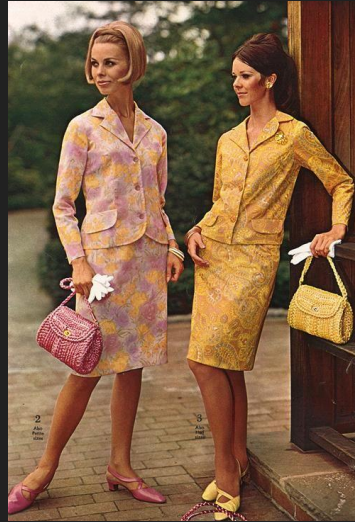


Figure 11. 1967 Women's Fashion

In the 1960s there were three major trends that were the leading influence in the fashion industry at that time. These three fashion trends were “the lady-like elegance... the fun, youthful designs popularized by swinging London, and the eastern influenced hippie style” (Reddy, 2020). Skirt suits were amongst one of the most popular women’s suit styles. Many women also wore A-line sheath dresses paired with a matching crop blazer. Mary Quant was the leading designer in the youthful swinging London designs. She offered simple colorful designs that attracted young women that wanted to accept the “child-like” styles Quant created. Quant provided an alternative style to the teenage girls and young women who did not like the more mature and sophisticated look. She also brought us the miniskirt. The miniskirt was often paired with a blazer as well for a more youthful business women attire. During this time many women embraced bold prints such as florals, stripes, tie-dye, and stripes.

Brewer, T. (2021, January 24). *60's Fashion for Women (How to Get the 1960s Style)*. The Trend Spotter. <https://www.thetrendspotter.net/60s-fashion-for-women/>.

Leaper, C. (2019, January 7). 1960s Fashion: The Icons And Designers That Helped Shape The Decade. Marie Claire. <https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/fashion/1960s-fashion-icons-designers-trends-34260>.

Reddy, K. (2019, July 23). *1960-1969*. Fashion History Timeline. <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1960-1969/>.

# Women's Suits

## 1970s



Figure 10. 1970s Trouser suit

During the 1970s women in the workforce began to wear clothing that was inspired by the menswear suits. The trouser suit became very popular for women in the workforce. It became widely accepted by women as a garment that can be worn to work. Although many women wore trouser suits only a few were daring enough to wear suits that resembled the men's suits. These suits were made from the traditional stripe fabric and boxy silhouette. However, most women who wore trouser suits used more feminine prints and colors. Most women continued to wear the traditional skirt and jacket/blazer to work because there were policies put into place by companies on what clothing was acceptable for women in the workplace. Many women who dared to wear trouser suits that resemble mens suiting were sent home for the day. Some very popular prints during the 70s for women's suits were floral prints, animal prints, and light or dark colors depending on the season.

Bass-Krueger, M. (2019, October 2). *History of the trouser suit: how a once divisive fashion statement became a wardrobe staple*. Vogue India.  
<https://www.vogue.in/fashion/content/how-trouser-suits-for-women-became-a-wardrobe-staple-rihanna-julia-roberts-marlene-dietrich>

*20th Century Fashion History: 1960-1970*. The Fashion Folks. (2017, March 23).  
<https://www.thefashionfolks.com/blog/20th-century-fashion-history-1960-1970/>

# Women's Suits

## 1980s



Figure 13. Joan Collins in Dynasty, 1980s.

Sullivan, K. (2016, November 7). *The Fascinating History of Women Wearing Suits*. Allure. <https://www.allure.com/story/women-suits-history>.

After the 80s early recession, American pop culture was a success and influenced the 80s fashion trend in women's wear. A popular TV show called "Dynasty" carried the trend of "power suits" and influenced the trend of office wear. In the decade of the '80s, suits have become iconic of women's power, social equity, and feminism. The suits in the '80s were called "power suits", it represented the masculine side of women which means that women can be successful like men do. A few popular influencers who carried the trend of 80s women's suits are Princess Diana, Madonna from American pop culture, and Nancy Reagan, an American popular film actress. Women begin entering workplace society and become more ambitious to succeed in their careers. The silhouette of women's suits in the 80s is oversized, boxy style with shoulder pads and lapels, also with bright colors and decorative buttons on. The ideas of the suit was inspired from mens tuxedos. Therefore, the designs of the "power suits" looks buffer and boxy. In the late '80s, the power suits have transformed into a softer feminine look. The cuts and silhouette are different from the early 80s suits, for example, the boxy straight cut suits have transformed into slim fitted cut suits which show the curved waistline of women such as Saint Laurent "Le Smoking" suit.

# Women's Suits

## 1990s



Figure 14. Fran Fine in a leopard print suit. CBS



Figure 15. Stacey Dash and Alicia Silverstone in "Clueless" in 1995. Paramount Pictures/Getty Images

Schild, D., & McDowell, E. (2020, October 1). 25 fashion trends from the 1990s that should make a comeback. Insider.

<https://www.insider.com/best-90s-fashion-trends-2019-7#plaid-blazers-and-skirts-are-an-example-of-90s-fashions-that-made-an-intentional-nod-to-the-past-13>.

Grindell, S. (2021, April 27). 33 of Fran Fine's most wild and iconic outfits on 'The Nanny,' from latex suits to animal-print mini dresses. Insider.

<https://www.insider.com/fran-fines-most-iconic-outfits-from-the-nanny-ranked-2021-4>.

In the era of the 90s, everything was booming such as Art and Music, Technology Advancement, and the Economic rise. The 90s were modern, everything was new and advanced like Video games, Tv-Shows, music, sports activities and more. American pop culture was a huge influence in society, especially pop music. The fashion trend in the 90s was influenced by pop artists such as Britney Spear, Stacey Dash, and Alicia Silverstone in "Clueless" in 1995, Jennifer Lopez, and others. The popular fashion trend in the 90s was washed jeans, leathers, mini skirts, biker shorts, and printed outfits. The design of suits in the 90s were in neon colors, printed and plaid styles. They were three pieces suits, skirt suit, vest suit and leather suit. For example, in the American teen film "Clueless", Alicia Silverstone was dressed in an eye-catching yellow plaid suit set. Also, the print was very popular in the 90s decade especially leopard print. In the American Tv series "The Nanny" Fran Drescher is the wildest and iconic print outfit master, she was wearing a different leopard print suit set in the tv series. Besides that, she was also wearing different blazer in the show such as printed blazer, neon blazer and neon pink blazer dress.

# Women's Suits

## 2000s



Figure 16. Credit: Getty Images

Cosmopolitan stated that “The 2000s were a confusing time for style.” (Manning, 2020) In the 2000s trend, there are different elements was blended in one style, for example, a person is wearing a bohemian top with a mini layered skirt and below knee boots. During the 2000s era, women's suits weren't that popular anymore. People are more into denim style, bohemian style, and tracksuits. Even though suits were not as popular as before, there are certain elements from suits applied on 2000s fashion trends such as random ties and capri pants with suit jacket sets. For example, Celine Dion wore the tie as a scarf with a denim suit set and a white tee.

Sutton, S. (2019, November 27). *16 Questionable '00s Trends That Have, Unfortunately, Returned*. InStyle. <https://www.instyle.com/fashion/early-2000s-fashion-trends-style-came-back>.

Manning, C. (2020, October 23). *17 Trends From the Early 2000s That Are Hilariously Cringeworthy to Look Back on Now*. Cosmopolitan. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/news/g5852/early-2000s-celeb-trends/>.

# Women's Suits

## 2010s



Figure 17. Daniel Zuchnik / Getty Images



Figure 18. Frazer Harrison / Getty Images

Streetwear style is popular in the 2010s decades brands like Supreme, Off-White, Bape, and Kith are well known by the youngster due to the influence from social media. The fashion trend has gone into a unisex trend which is anyone could fit in that category. Brands that sell unisex clothing are Nicopanda, Chelsea Bravo, One DNA, and others. Women's suits trend has become loose-fitted style which is the idea came from stealing boyfriend's clothes. Boyfriend blazers have become popular among women. (Comroe, 2020) Women these days like to wear loosely fitted outfits especially people who want to cover their imperfect figures. In the 2010s, there's a lot of changes in society, especially in sexualities. People started to accept same-sex marriage. After the same-sex marriage is officially legal, designers started to create gowns for the gender spectrum such as Margiela, Chromat, and others designers. Billy Porter was wearing a black ballgown blazer to 91st Academy Awards Ceremony. (Krentcil, 2019)

Comroe, S. (2020, May 21). The Fashion Trends That Defined the 2010s. MarieClaire.

<https://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/g32448581/2010s-fashion/>.

Green, J. (2019, June 13). 29 countries where same sex marriage is officially legal. USA Today.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/06/13/countries-where-same-sex-marriage-is-officially-legal/39514623/>.

Krentcil, F. (2019, December 19). The 2010s: Defining a Decade in Style. Harper's BAZAAR.

<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/trends/a30270087/2010s-decade-fashion-style/>.

# Women's Suits

## Present day



Figure 19. Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images



Figure 20. Photos: Instagram / @lalalalisa\_m

The vintage of 80s and 90s suits trends have returned in 2021 such as leather suits, skirt suits, and vest suits. There's a suit slightly different from the previous eras which is the cropped suit. The designs of the cropped suit are above the waistline and can be button up or laced up tied from the back. The materials used in 2021 suits have various choices such as tweed, wool, and silk blend fabrics, cotton, leather, linen, and others. The most popular materials used are tweed, silk blend, wool blend, and leather. Today's suits look is more minimalist and clean compare to 80s and 90s suits trends. Most of them were in basic colors although there were print in modern days suits usually are checked, plaids and lines. For example, the style of the minimalist suit was dressed by a Korean artist who is house ambassador of Chanel, Jenny Kim, she wore a pastel blue tweed suit set with a white tee. Another example for printed cropped suits from the ambassador of Celine, Lisa, an image posted from her Instagram, she was wearing a navy blue cropped lines suit with a white tee. The way she carries the style is boyish streetwear style, the concept is similar to the "Power suit" in the 80s. Both artists were wearing high-waisted pants, which are highly purchased by consumers these days because high-waisted pants make people look slimmer and taller.

Bengel, C. (2021, January 20). 5 Suiting Trends That Are About To Be Everywhere (And How To Wear Them). Nylon. <https://www.nylon.com/fashion/suiting-trends-to-try-in-2021-from-cropped-blazers-to-skirt-suits>.  
Lam, T. (2020, October 16). *The 5 Wardrobe Essentials of BLACKPINK's Jennie*. HYPEBAE. <https://hypebae.com/2020/10/blackpink-jennie-kim-style-wardrobe-essentials-how-to-dress-like-k-pop-celebrity-singer>.  
Sutton, S. (2020, March 11). *Lisa from BLACKPINK's Best Outfits*. InStyle. <https://www.instyle.com/fashion/blackpink-lisa-outfits-lalisa-manoban-style>.