

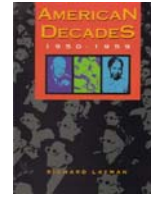
American Decades: 1950-1959

Chapter Five: Fashion

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Overview

Fond Memories. Nostalgia for the 1950s began while memories of the decade were still fresh. Tail-finned cars, hula hoops, poodle skirts, Elvis Presley, mothers in aprons, and "Leave It To Beaver" conjure up images of a genial time that seems better, softer, simpler. Indeed, the years from 1950 to 1959 were a time of optimism, domesticity, security through compliance with the system, and apparent simplicity.

Simplicity. In the realm of fashion (clothing, architecture, furniture, interior design, and autos), simplicity was certainly the key in all areas except, conspicuously, the chrome-laden cars with their huge tail fins that looked as if they were suited to a vehicle about to blast off into the stratosphere.

"New Look." In terms of clothing, women's "New Look" fashions, which had been introduced in 1947, were *not* simple as far as construction went. Hips were padded, skirts were full, and tailoring was complicated. But clothing for women *was* simple as far as the motivation went: women were supposed to be women again after years of wartime deprivations, and that meant sensuous designs. These sexy outfits were especially popular in evening wear, with sequined gowns and narrow, clinging sheaths.

"American Look." Men's clothing was self-consciously conformist and somber: it was the man in the gray flannel suit. Fashion could not get much more simple than that. But women's fashions were adventuresome. The 1950s was the decade when a group of young American designers offered the simple and comfortable sportswear that became known as the American Look and took the fashion world by storm.

Imaginative Structures. Architecture in the 1950s was generally stark, with unadorned glass-and-steel skyscrapers mushrooming across corporate America. Frank Lloyd Wright, considered the greatest architect of the twentieth century, fought against this trend with his imaginative structures that hugged the earth and reflected the natural surroundings. But he was in the minority.

Levitt. The mass-produced houses that sprang up in suburbia were also simple in the extreme - and conformist as well. Built on concrete slabs with no basements, these so-called Levittown houses were nearly identical in floor plan. Lots were of uniform size, with trees planted every twenty-eight feet. Many of these boxlike houses survived forty years of constant use, serving as ample bases for remodeling and structural additions prompted by changing lifestyles.

Furniture. Furniture in the 1950s was likewise the epitome of simplicity. It was called American Modern; it was austere, functional, mass-produced, and often made of synthetic materials such as molded plastic and plywood laminate. This style was perfect for the smaller rooms of low-ceiling homes of suburban homes, where couples moved in droves.

Space. As for interior design, what could be simpler than lots of space? "Open" plans of the era called for flowing space in both homes and offices. There were fewer walls, making for less demarcated rooms, so the function of the room could change according to the occasion.

The Guise of Simplicity. But the irony of all this is that the decade of the 1950s was not really a simple time after all. The "simplicity" and naive optimism of the 1950s, in fact, were failed attempts to insulate people from postwar and Cold War fears. The so-called simplicity was actually a refuge from the cauldron of complex issues simmering during 1950s America.

Blind Optimism. The upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s - characterized by the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, and the rebirth of social individualism - sprang with a vengeance from the bourgeois cocoon of the 1950s. By refusing to focus on these problems and spending time instead on conspicuous consumption, people magnified the consequences. Americans' blind optimism in the 1950s guaranteed that the decades to follow would be anything but simple.

Topics in the News

Women's Fashion: Femininity Is the Key

Back Home. By 1950 women were long gone from the factory jobs of World War II and were back home (usually in the kitchen and wearing aprons, to judge from advertisements of that era). Domesticity and femininity were the watchwords, and women wore wasp waists, voluminous skirts, and pearls by day and clingy, sequined gowns by night.

The "New Look." Christian Dior's "New Look" took the fashion world by storm in 1947. Emphasizing the natural curves of the female figure, the shape of Dior's fashions resembled an hourglass. The bosom was emphasized by skintight tailoring; hips were padded; the skirt was mid-calf in length, full, and "extravagant in its use of fabric"; the waist was slender, or wasp. By 1950 the sensuous Dior designs and the hourglass figure reigned supreme in the postwar United States, where, as sociologists have noted, sexuality and maternity were the way to restore the population.

Women by Day. Career women in the 1950s (and there were not many of them) wore wool suits with slim sheath skirts and straight, short jackets over silk blouses. The ideal silhouette was long-legged and shapely. Dresses hung at mid-calf. Gloves were a must: a woman dressed in a suit always wore them. Hats, too, were essential, although less so than they had been in the 1940s. According to a 1959 survey the average American woman owned four chapeaus. Some were large, although most were small pillboxes or berets. Handbags in brightly colored lizard skin were favored. Shoes, usually with impossibly high stiletto heels, matched the outfit. All of this would be encased in a clutch coat, often of mohair or textured cloth that had no buttons — hence the name *clutch*.

Sidebar: Hair Imitates Art

Claiming to have been inspired by the work of artist Alexander Calder, leading New York hair-stylist Victor Vito began cutting women's hair so that it would "move and dance like a mobile" with the toss of a head. Models sporting the short hair appeared in a 1954 issue of *McCall's* shaking their heads to prove Vito's point. Although none of his models especially evoked Calder's work, Vito insisted that the spirit of the mobile was captured in the 'young and carefree' haircut that needed

"little upkeep." (Source' *McCall's*, 21 June 1954: 14.)

Work Clothes. Less formal working women donned "separates" (originally designed by American designer Claire McCardell), consisting of skirts and tops that could be interchanged at will, giving women a variety of outfits at a lower cost. Pop-it necklaces, which could be lengthened from choker to waist-length by snapping on extra beads, were a favorite with this group (and with teenagers, too).

The Sack and Other Fashion Ideas. The chemise, also known as the "sack" dress, made the biggest fashion splash in women's day wear in the 1950s. This type of dress, which looked like a bag, was not popular for long, since the hips and bust were completely hidden. After a year, says author Richard Horn, "the sack was sacked." The hooded dress made of a single tube-shaped length of hip-clinging knit also caught on in the 1950s. Housewives in the 1950s wore shirtwaist dresses (often with pearls), housedresses, slacks, and dungarees. The theme was comfort.

Women by Night. Women wore essentially simple clothing in the daytime; nights were different. Evening dresses in the 1950s were either full-skirted, ethereal, and romantic - in exotic hues and materials such as silk and taffeta - or they were narrow, clinging sheaths, often slathered with the shimmering sequins popularized by Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell.

Sidebar: Dior and the Full-Figured Gal — Bosom Buddies No More

Christian Dior, father of the New Look, nearly instigated a fashion riot during a 1954 Paris exhibition showcasing his latest style, the "H" look. Dior's boyish models looked like flappers of the 1920s as they strutted among the buyers and fashion critics in straight, flat dresses that de-emphasized the breasts and lowered the waistline to the hips. The word was soon out that Dior had "abolished bosoms," and outraged U.S. fashion editors accustomed to shapeliness in Dior design cried foul. Hollywood slaves to fashion also seemed on the verge of revolt: "I am not built for any kind of boy's fashions," curvy Marilyn Monroe flatly claimed, "so why should I wear them?" Television's busty Dagmar added, "Frankly, honey, the instrument hasn't been made that can flatten me out." When asked to comment on Dior's lowering of the waistline, tough guy Marlon Brando insensitively shot from the hip, "Emphasizing women's hips is like putting falsies on a cow." By the fall, 1955 Dior had yielded to American critics and introduced the "Y" look--dresses, shaped like upside-down Coke bottles, that flattered the bosom.

Sources: *Time* (9 August 1954): 29; *Time* (5 September 1955): 68-69.

Colors. Colors varied, with black and white particularly favored for fall and winter. Synthetics, which are viewed as somewhat tacky today, were not thought so then. Rayon and rayon blends were particularly popular in evening frocks.

Accentuating Curves. All evening styles emphasized women's bodies (the "ideal" woman in the 1950s was curvier and considerably less angular than today's ultra-thin, waiflike models). Most dresses were tightly fitted, sleeveless, and strapless. They also sported plunging necklines and back lines yet concealed elaborate foundations that enhanced a woman's figure.

Accessories and Cosmetics. Fur stoles and capes were popular. Handbags and satin pumps matched the dress. Gloves were always worn. Hair was short and swept back off one's face, and really adventurous women colored their hair so that it matched their evening clothes. Arched eyebrows and dark lips completed the look.

Don't Forget the Makeup. Makeup was an essential part of a woman's appearance in the 1950s. There was an excessive emphasis on painted lips and eyes, and those lips were usually colored fire-engine red. Charles Revson, president of Revlon, said in the 1950s that "most women lead lives of quiet desperation. Cosmetics are a wonderful escape from it — if you play it right."

Source: Richard Horn, *Fifties Style, Then and Now* (New York: Beech Tree, 1985), pp. 142-145, 150-153.