



What She Wore Was Political

Women's Fashion, Religion, and Power
Over the Last Century



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1920s

In 1920, women in the United States gained the right to vote, marking a major milestone in women's rights. This wave of feminism (1st wave) led to a rise in more secular urban life pushing back on the more religious conservatism of the Victorian Era. This was also the time of the prohibition, and the Jazz Age, which created new spaces for cultural rebellion, as people sought outlets for expression and freedom. Speakeasies became a symbol of this and the "rebels" of society often met there.

Fashion in the 1920s reflected these cultural shifts. Flappers challenged traditional norms by wearing short skirts, applying noticeable makeup, and cutting their hair into stylish bobs. Looser clothing fits became popular, representing a rejection of the restrictive Victorian styles that had dominated previous generations. However, many religious and political leaders of the time saw these changes as a sign of moral decline.



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1930s & 40s

The Great Depression and World War II shaped the experiences of women during the 1930s and 1940s. As men went to war, women joined the workforce in large numbers to fill the labor shortage. During this time, religion played a strong role in encouraging both cultural and personal modesty, as religion often does during dark times.

Fashion in this era reflected these societal shifts. Women wore practical, more modest clothing suited for work and everyday life. Utility wear became common, leading to the widespread adoption of trousers and uniforms for women. After the war, fashion trends shifted again, with a return to longer skirts and structured suits that emphasized a more traditional, feminine silhouette.



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1950s

After World War II, many people returned to more conservative ways of thinking became more popular once again. This was the start of the Cold War, which led Americans to fear anything modern or radical as they thought this related to communism. This fear led Christian ideal shape what it meant to be a woman, which was reflected in the housewives (and young women of the time).

The fashion of this time was incredibly traditional, and even misogynistic, as it reflected the men of the era's perception of what womanhood should have been. Hourglass silhouettes, petticoats, modest hemlines became the norm as pants become taboo once again. Beauty at this time began reflecting the ideas of morality in Christianity.



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1960s

The 1960s was a period of radical political movements and change, as the Civil Rights movement, 2nd-wave feminism, and the push for sexual liberation became priorities for young people. This is also a major pivot for religious conservatives as the Vatican II liberalizes Catholic Church. This didn't come without pushback from conservative politicians and churches.

The fashion reflected these liberal ideas about sexual liberation: Mini skirts, pantsuits, bold makeup became the norm for women, clearly contrasting the fashion of the last decade. The fashion becomes more sexual, more political as women and marginalized communities used style as protest (ex: Black Panthers' leather jackets)





1970s

The passing of Roe v. Wade encouraged more women to join the workforce. The liberalism reflected that of the 1960s, and the Vietnam War was a further catalyst for change. Anti-war protests and the gay rights movement were in full swing, and more religious diversity was reflected in mainstream culture and media.

In fashion, bell bottoms, braless looks, Afrocentric fashion became more popular and added on to the movements of the 60s. Sustainable fashion also became more popular as DIY and thrift culture rose to popularity for people in cities. Fashion also became more individualized at this time, and was a symbol of personal and political identity





1980s

The 1980s clearly contrasted the liberalism of the 1970s, as Reagan era began, the war on drugs, and the rise of Evangelical politics became popular. Ideas of "Moral Majority" pushes conservative Christian values into politics once again, and xenophobia became heightened as the AIDS crisis was happening, causing backlash against LGBTQ+ fashion and identity.

Fashion became more conservative again, but also the shoulder pads, and power suits for women became popular, showing power and authority in the workplace. Madonna's "Like a Virgin" caused religious outrage while motivating youth and become popular, amid the return of modesty ideals in many Christian circles nationally



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1990s

The end of the Cold War led to mass globalization, and third-wave feminism to counteract the ideas of the 1980s. This was the rise of religious identity politics as we now know it. This was also a time of turmoil within the country as culture wars within the US caused controversy for young people (e.g., school dress codes)

Fashion became alternative in this time for most liberals. Grunge, low-rise jeans, and slip dresses became popular in the United States, but also modesty resurges in some circles (purity rings, True Love Waits). Hip hop & streetwear challenge norms and normalized other cultures other than white culture to mainstream media.



← 2000s & 2010s

- Post-9/11 Islamophobia, hijab bans in France
- Rise of social media & modest fashion influencers
- Intersectionality enters the mainstream

Fashion:

- Modest fashion as empowerment
- Hijabis on runways, Instagram, fashion blogs
- Religious symbols rebranded as stylish



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2020s

Context:

- BLM protests, Iran's "hair revolution," anti-trans legislation
- Social media = global fashion voice
- Gender and modesty redefined

Fashion:

- Protest fashion: pink hats, slogan tees
- De-gendered and modest fashion trends
- Clothing bans used politically (e.g., Iran, France)





Conclusion

Fashion **is** political and always has been. From flappers, to hijabis, to afros, to pantsuits and protest tees, fashion is a way that women show freedom, faith and resist.





RESOURCES

- <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/19th-amendment>
- <https://www.history.com/articles/flappers-roaring-20s-women-empowerment?utm>
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- <https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1930-1939/?>
- <https://www.heywoodwakefield.com/blogs/blog/how-world-war-ii-shaped-womens-clothing-in-the-1940s?utm>
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- <https://time.com/4978502/mod-fashion-1960s/?utm>
- <https://ayerhsmagazine.com/2024/12/08/the-impact-of-the-1970s-disco-fashion-movement/?utm>
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