

Fashion Design – A Brief History

Unit

1

Unit 1

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Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this Unit the learner will be able to:

- Analyse and have awareness about the stages of fashion development in history
- Analyse how the historical, cultural, environmental and economic influences affected the fashion industry in the past
- Introduce and discuss the different aspects of fashion

For centuries individuals or societies have used clothes and other body adornment as a form of non verbal communication to indicate occupation, rank, gender, sexual availability, locality, class, and wealth and group affiliation. Fashion is a form of free speech. It not only embraces clothing, but also accessories, jewellery, hairstyles, beauty and body art. What we wear and how and when we wear it, provides others with shorthand to subtly read the surface of a social situation.

Fashion is a discipline that has existed since time immemorial as an ever-present element in civilized society. The truth is that fashion can be traced back to the days of Egyptian civilization, when fabrics and jewellery were used to adorn the bodies of the pharaohs, and useful garments were created to protect the skin of peasants who worked from dawn until dusk.

The 18th Century

Although fashion had already been in existence for several centuries, the starting point for fashion as we understand it today originated with the great Marie Antoinette and her court. During the reign of her husband Louis XVI, French fashion enjoyed one of the greatest successes of all time. The clothing of the period was quite beautiful but impractical: the dresses could weigh up to several kilos, the elaborate hairstyles and ornamentation could be up to a meter tall, and corsets cinched the waist in such a way that during the summer months women were apt to faint. The men, meanwhile, wore stockings, high-heeled shoes and wigs with cascading ringlets, which gave them a rather flamboyant look. It could be said that Marie Antoinette was a trendsetter; however, the splendour of her reign and her clothes did not last long.

The 19th Century: Charles Frederic Worth and Haute Couture

In 1857, the world of fashion changed dramatically and began to develop into the world as we know it today. Up until this time, the couturiers travelled to their clients' homes in order to make custom garments, but Worth decided to change things around by making his clientele come to his maison to view the collections that he created annually. He was the

first to organize a show at his fashion house, the first to sew on a label with his name, and the first to understand fashion as an important social element.

So the first fashion designer who was not merely a dressmaker was Charles Frederick Worth (1826–1895). A fashion house (maison de couture) was set up in Paris. It was during this period that many design houses began to hire artists to sketch or paint designs for garments. The images alone could be presented to clients much more cheaply than by producing an actual sample garment in the workroom. If the client liked the design, they ordered it and the resulting garment made money for the house. Thus, the tradition of designers sketching out garment designs instead of presenting completed garments on models to customers began as an economy.

Early Twentieth Century

Throughout the early 20th century, practically all high fashion originated in Paris and to a lesser extent in London. Fashion magazines from other countries sent editors to the Paris fashion shows. Department stores sent buyers to the Paris shows, where they purchased garments to copy (and openly stole the style lines and trim details of others). Both made-to-measure salons and ready-to-wear departments featured the latest Paris trends, adapted to the stores' assumptions about the lifestyles and pocket books of their targeted customers.

Around the start of the 20th century fashion style magazines began to include photographs and became even more influential than in the future. Throughout the world these magazines were greatly sought-after and had a profound effect on public taste. Talented illustrators- among them Paul Iribe, Georges Lepape, Erté, and George Barbier - drew exquisite fashion plates for these publications, which covered the most recent developments in fashion and beauty. Perhaps the most famous of these magazines was La Gazette du bon ton which was founded in 1912 by Lucien Vogel and regularly published until 1925 (with the exception of the war years).

Fashion in 1900's

By the end of the 19th-century, the horizons of the fashion industry had generally broadened, partly due to the more stable and independent lifestyle many well-off women were beginning to adopt and the practical clothes they demanded. The constant need for radical change, which is now essential for the survival of fashion within the present system, was still literally unthinkable. The use of different trimmings was all that distinguished one season from the other. The curvaceous S-Bend silhouette dominated fashion up until around 1908.

Women were considered objects, and they had to endure the hardship and inconvenience of impractical clothing. In 1906 a significant change came about in the fashion world. In this period, a movement for the liberation of the female body began, led by Paul Poiret, a designer of the time who was in favour of abandoning the use of the corset; however, his idea never fully caught on after society was rocked by the outbreak of World War I. Toward the end of the decade the fashionable silhouette gradually became somewhat more straight and slim, partly due to Paul Poiret's high-waisted, shorter-skirted line of clothes.

The Maison Redfern was the first fashion house to offer women a tailored suit based directly on its male counterpart and the extremely practical and soberly elegant garment soon became an indispensable part of the wardrobe of any well-dressed woman. Another indispensable part of the outfit of the well-dressed woman was the designer hat. Fashionable hats at the time were either tiny little confections that perched on top of the head, or large and wide brimmed, trimmed with ribbons, flowers, and even feathers. Caroline Reboux, Legroux, and E. Lewis were the most sought-after names of the time.

Fashion in 1910s

During the early years of the 1910s the fashionable silhouette became much more flexible than in the 20th century. Paul Poiret also devised the first outfit which women could put on without the help of a maid. The Art Deco movement began to emerge at this time and its influence was evident in the designs of many couturiers of the time. Simple felt hats, turbans, and clouds of tulle replaced the styles of headgear popular in the 20th century. It is also notable that the first real fashion shows were organised during this period in time, by the first female couturier, Jeanne, who was also the first Parisian couturier to open foreign branches in London, Buenos, and Madrid.

Two of the most influential fashion designers of the time were Jacques Doucet and Mariano Fortuny. Each garment was made of a single piece of the finest silk, its unique colour acquired by repeated immersions in dyes whose shades were suggestive of moonlight or of the watery reflections of the Venetian lagoon.

Changes in dress during World War I were dictated more by necessity than fashion. Women had to enter the workforce while men served on the warfront, so they adopted men's clothing for its comfort. They wore straight dresses that completely hid their feminine features to achieve, in a way, the position of men in society. Social events had to be postponed in favour of more pressing engagements and the need to mourn the increasing numbers of dead, visits to the wounded, and the general gravity of the time meant that darker colours became the norm. By 1915 fashionable skirts had risen above the ankle and then later to mid-calf.

Between the wars

The period between the two World Wars, often considered to be the Golden Age of French fashion, was one of great change and reformation. Carriages were replaced by cars, princes and princesses lost their crowns, and haute couture found new clients in the ranks of film actresses, American heiresses, and the wives and daughters of wealthy industrialists.

Fashion in 1920s

Soon after the First World War, a radical change came about in fashion. Bouffant coiffures gave way to short bobs, dresses with long trains gave way to above-the-knee pinafores. Women borrowed their clothes from the male wardrobe and chose to dress like boys. The flapper style (known to the French as the 'garçonne' look) became very popular among young women. The cloche hat was widely-worn and sportswear became popular with both men and women during the decade, with designers like Jean Patou and Coco Chanel popularising the sporty and athletic look.

The great couturière Coco Chanel was a major figure in fashion at the time, who with her particular worldview, went on to revolutionize women's clothing preserving, above all, comfort and elegance as hallmarks of style. Two other prominent French designers of the 1920s were Jeanne Lanvin and Jean Patou.

Lanvin's name appears in the fashion yearbook from about 1901 onwards. However, it was in the 1920s that she reached the peak of her popularity and success. The Lanvin style embraced the look of the time, with its skilful use of complex trimmings, dazzling embroideries, and beaded decorations in light, clear, floral colours that eventually became a Lanvin trademark. By 1925 Lanvin produced many different products, including sportswear, furs, lingerie, men's fashion, and interior designs.

Short suit jackets replaced the old long jackets of the past which were now only worn for formal occasions. Men had a variety of sport clothes available to them, including sweaters and short pants, commonly known as knickers. For evening wear a short tuxedo was more fashionable than the tail-coat, which was now seen as somewhat old-fashioned. The London cut, with its slim lines, loose-fitting sleeves, and padded shoulders, perfected by the English tailor Scholte, was very popular.

Fashion in 1930s

In the 1930s, as the public began to feel the effects of the Great Depression, many designers found that crises are not the time for experimentation. Overall, 1930s clothing was sombre and modest, reflecting the difficult social and economic situation of the decade. Women's fashions moved away from the brash, daring style of the 1920s towards a more romantic, feminine silhouette. The waist was restored to its proper position, hemlines dropped, and

backless evening gowns and soft, slim-fitting day dresses became popular. The fashion for outdoor activities stimulated couturiers to manufacture what would nowadays be called sportswear. The term 'ready-to-wear' was not yet widely used, but the boutiques already described such clothes as being 'for sport'.

Two of the most prominent and influential fashion designers of the 1930s were Elsa Schiaparelli and Madeleine Vionnet.

Mainbocher, the first American designer to live and work in Paris, was also influential, with his plain yet supremely elegant designs, often employing the bias cut pioneered by Vionnet. The luxury goods manufacturer Hermès started selling handmade printed silk square scarves in early 1930s, and also popularized the zip and many other practical innovations. Toward the end of the decade, women's fashions took on a somewhat more imposing and broad-shouldered silhouette, possibly influenced by Elsa Schiaparelli. Men's fashions continued the informal, practical trend that had dominated since the end of the First World War.

Fashion in Mid Twentieth Century

The Second World War created many radical changes in the fashion industry. After the War, Paris's reputation as the global centre of fashion began to collapse and mass-manufactured fashions became increasingly popular. A new youth style emerged in the 1950s, changing the focus of fashion forever. As the installation of central heating became more widespread the age of minimum-care garments began and lighter textiles and, eventually, synthetics, were introduced.

Fashion in 1940s

Many fashion houses closed during occupation of Paris during World War II, including the Maison Vionnet and the Maison Chanel. Several designers, including Mainbocher, permanently relocated to New York.

Germany, meanwhile, was taking possession of over half of what France produced, including high fashion, and was also considering relocating French haute couture to the cities of Berlin and Vienna, neither of which had any significant tradition of fashion. Due to the difficult times, the number of models in shows was limited to seventy-five, evening wear was shortened and day wear was much skimpier, made using substitute materials whenever possible. From 1940 onward, no more than four meters (thirteen feet) of cloth was permitted to be used for a coat and a little over one meter (three feet) was all that allowed for a blouse. No belt could be over 3 centimetres (one and a half inches) wide. In spite of the fact that so many fashion houses closed down or moved away during the war, several new houses remained open, including Jacques Fath, Maggy Rouff, Marcel Rochas, Jeanne Lafaurie, Nina Ricci, and Madeleine Vramant. In this period, hats were often made of scraps of material that would have otherwise been thrown away, sometimes incorporating bits of paper, and wood shavings.

Paris's isolated situation in the 1940s enabled the Americans to exploit the ingenuity and creativity of their own designers. During the Second World War, Vera Maxwell presented co-ordinates in plain, simply cut outfits and also introduced innovations to men's work clothes.

The couturier Christian Dior created a tidal wave with his first collection in February 1947. The collection contained dresses with tiny waists, majestic busts, and full skirts swelling out beneath small bodices, in a manner very similar to the style of the Belle Époque. The Dior woman was born, one who always puts on a brave face. However, given the world's unstable situation at the time, many criticized this new aesthetic. One of Dior's biggest detractors was Coco Chanel. She had retired prior to the war, but with the success of Dior, the French grand dame rose from the ashes. This set up a struggle – albeit a respectful one – between the designs of Dior and Chanel.

Coco was not opposed to Dior for political reasons; rather she simply believed that women had been subjected to the rigors of fashion for too long. According to Chanel, Dior bound women with his fashions; therefore, she felt it necessary to establish a new code in the female wardrobe: femininity and elegance without the need to balance in stiletto heels. Chanel became an icon that represented classic, elegant and comfortable fashion, while Dior was the champion of sensual, elegant fashion that was more difficult to wear.

Fashion in 1950s

The designers of Hollywood created a particular type of glamour for the stars of American film, and outfits worn by the likes of Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall, or Grace Kelly were widely copied. Quantitatively speaking, a costume worn by an actress in a Hollywood movie would have a much bigger audience than the photograph of a dress designed by a couturier illustrated in a magazine read by no more than a few thousand people.

Using apparently luxurious materials, such as sequins, chiffon, and fur, the clothes were very simply cut, often including some memorable detail, such as a low-cut back to a dress which was only revealed when the actress turned her back from the camera or some particularly stunning accessory. The most influential and respected designers of Hollywood from the 1930s to the 1950s were Edith Head, Orry-Kelly, William Travilla, Jean Louis, Travis Banton, and Gilbert Adrian.

Fashion in 1960s

From the 1960s onward, there would never be just one single, prevailing trend or fashion but a great plethora of possibilities, indivisibly linked to all the various influences in other areas of people's lives. Fashion equality disappeared; separate fashions developed for adults and youth.

In stark contrast to their mature, ultra-feminine mothers, the women of the 1960s adopted a girlish, childlike style, with short skirts and straightened curves, reminiscent of the look of the 1920s. At the start of the decade skirts were knee-length, but steadily became shorter and shorter until the mini-skirt emerged in 1965. By the end of the decade they had shot well above the stocking top, making the transition to tights inevitable.

Many of the radical changes in fashion developed in the streets of London, with such gifted designers as Mary Quant (known for launching the mini skirt) and Barbara Hulanicki (the founder of the legendary boutique Biba). Paris also had its share of new and revolutionary designers, including Pierre Cardin (known for his visionary and skilfully-cut designs), André Courrèges (known for his futuristic outfits and for launching the mini skirt along with Mary Quant), Yves Saint Laurent (YSL), and Emanuel Ungaro (known for his imaginative use of colour and bold baroque contrasts). In the United States, Rudi Gernreich (known for his avant-garde and futuristic designs) and James Galanos (known for his luxurious ready-to-wear) were also reaching a young audience.

The main outlets for these new young fashion designers were small boutiques, selling outfits that were not exactly 'one-offs', but were made in small quantities in a limited range of sizes and colours.

The basic shape and style of the time was simple, neat, clean cut, and young. Synthetic fabrics were very widely-used during the 1960s. They took dyes easily and well, giving rise to colours that were both clear and bright, very much mirroring the mood of the period.

Hats suffered a great decline and by the end of the decade they were relegated to special occasions only. Flat boots also became popular with very short dresses in 1965 and eventually they rose up the leg and reached the knee. Two notable and influential designers in the 1960s were Emilio Pucci and Paco Rabanne.

Fashion in 1970s

During the 1970s brands greatly increased their share of the international market. Hems began dropping in 1974 to below the knee, until finally reaching the lower mid calf in 1977 and shoulder lines were dropped.

In 1974, Sonia Rykiel designed her first pullovers with reversed seams. However, more than that, she created a whole range of clothes that were extremely individual and yet could be worn almost anywhere. The Rykiel style, dominated by fluid knitted garments, dark blacks, rhinestones, long boa-like scarves, and little crocheted hats, conquered the American market, and even to this day Rykiel is considered by many Americans as the true successor of Chanel.

Because of punk, London retained a considerable degree of influence over fashion. Another popular British style was the resolutely un modern, feminine, countrified style of clothing popularised by Laura Ashley, which consisted of long flounced skirts and high-necked blouses in traditional floral prints, worn with crocheted shawls. Laura Ashley started out running a small business in Wales in the mid-1960s and the company continued to expand until the accidental death of its owner in 1985.

Bill Blass, who launched his own range in 1962, developed the habit of travelling all over the United States in order to hear for him what his customers desired. One of the most popular designers of the time, he was almost too successful in fulfilling his customers wishes. His disciplined style and workmanship was particularly favoured by businesswomen and the wives of senior executives.

Also significant are the developments in Italian fashion that happened during the period. In the course of the 1970s, as a result of its ready-to-wear industry, Milan confirmed its status as second only to Paris as a center of international fashion. The two most influential Italian fashion designers of the time were probably Giorgio Armani and Nino Cerruti.

Fashion in Late Twentieth Century

During the late 20th century, fashion began to criss-cross international boundaries with rapidity. Popular Western styles were adopted all over the world, and many designers from outside of the West had a profound impact on fashion. Synthetic materials such as Lycra, Spandex, and viscose became widely-used, and fashion, after two decades of looking to the future, once again turned to the past for inspiration.

Fashion shows were transfigured into media-saturated spectacles and frequently televised, taking high priority in the social calendar.

Fashion in 1980s

Fashion took yet another turn. It ceased to be a political tool, and it became instead an aesthetic element. In the 80s men and women took care of their bodies and their appearance. It was the era of yuppies, shoulder pads and “the working woman,” during which women demanded even higher stilettos. Everyone wanted to be a “10” to squeeze into those Calvin Klein jeans and to look as fantastic as Brooke Shields in the ads. It was the supermodel era. Claudia, Naomi, Cindy, Christie and Amber were Versace’s muses, an icon of fashion understood as beauty.

A number of promising newcomers entered the fashion scene in the 1980s. Angelo Tarlazzi, an extraordinary technician who once worked for Patou, bewitched both the press and his customers with his 'handkerchief' dresses.

Guy Paulin was one of the first designers to promote a severe, plain, and uncluttered look. His garments were classical in their proportions and made for comfort and simplicity, with their harmonious lines reinforced by a subtle palette of colours and fine materials.

Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto offered a look which marked a total break with the prevailing fashion image of the time. Flat shoes, no make-up, reserve, modesty, and secrecy were the hallmarks of this modern look.

In American fashion the seductive, clinging style of Donna Karan and the casual sophistication of Ralph Lauren were very influential.

Fashion in 1990s

In 1990's Clothes by ready-to-wear retailers such as The Gap, Banana Republic, and Eddie Bauer came to the forefront of fashion, managing to tap into the needs of women who simply wanted comfortable, wearable clothes.

The famous Italian fashion house, Gucci was created in 1921, by Guccio Gucci and was originally a firm that sold luxury leather goods. Under Guccio Gucci's children, by the end of the 1960s the label had expanded to include a plethora of products with a distinctly Latin glamor.

In the 1990s the designer label Prada became a true creative force in the fashion industry. In America three of the most influential fashion designers of the time were Michael Kors, Marc Jacobs, and Calvin Klein.

One of the first fashion designers to anticipate the globalisation of world markets, the already well-known designer Calvin Klein started to market his fashions, perfumes, and accessories not only right across the US, but also in Europe and Asia, achieving an unequalled success. A brilliant artistic director, Klein used carefully constructed advertisements containing images tinted with eroticism to promote his sophisticatedly functional mass-produced designs, which won massive popularity among the urban youth of the 1990s.

In Italy, Gianni Versace, with his brilliant, sexy, and colourful designs, and Dolce & Gabbana, with their super feminine and fantastical style, broke away from the serious and sober-minded fashions that dominated during much of the 1990s.

The sports label Nike had great popularity and materials such as Lycra and Spandex were increasingly used for sportswear. Increasing eco-awareness and animal rights made even top couture houses such as Chanel introduce fake fur and natural fibres into their collections.

Fashion in 2000s

In the 2000s, as the future began to seem increasingly bleak, fashion, and indeed the Arts in general, looked to the past for inspiration, arguably more so than in previous decades. Vintage clothing, especially from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s became extremely popular

and fashion designers. The early 2000s saw a continuation of the minimalist look of the 1990s in high fashion. Later on, designers began to adopt a more colourful, feminine, excessive, and 'anti-modern' look. Name brands became of particular importance among young people and many celebrities launched their own lines of clothing. Tighter fit clothing and longer hair became mainstream for many men and women.

Karl Lagerfeld (Chanel), Marc Jacobs (Louis Vuitton), John Galiano (Dior), Nicolas Ghesquière (Balenciaga), Stefano Pilatti (Yves Saint Laurent) and Alber Elbaz (Lanvin) are just some of the geniuses who hold the position of creative director at these renowned houses of style. Our era is the era of luxury, led by a group of young talent that knows the trends better than anyone, has a social circle filled with celebrities and understands what influences our world: exclusivity and astronomical prices.

For many of the own-label designers who emerged in the early years of the 21st century, financial factors became increasingly critical. Many new young talents found they now depended on investors.

Designers like Rodrick Gilchrist and Berny Martin of Catou struck out on their own to places like the midwest. By 2011 Martin had devised a simple blueprint for other cities to follow. His own line spread across the U.S. and abroad. He borrowed from the previous eras and created a line of custom clothing that he called 'business forward'.

The Evolution of Fashion

Fashion has been and continues to be a reflection of society and current events. Fashion trends are influenced by popular figures in culture like celebrities, musicians and other high-profile individuals. Current fashion trends are often cyclical, taking cues from decades past and reworking them to fit within modern tastes. Clothing styles that were snubbed a decade ago are now enjoying resurgence in popularity.

Just like disco fashion inspired the punk movement, mainstream trends continue to co-exist with underground fashion trends. And trend forecasting is now a profession; high-profile designers, writers and photographers rely on these tastemakers to predict the next popular style, but this is no exact science. Even these trend forecasters, however, rely on some degree of instinct. And modern fashion trends are less widespread and universal than they were in decades past. Today, individuality has come into vogue.

Suggested Further Readings

- Understanding Fashion History (By Valerie)
- Fashion: A Very Short Introduction (By Rebecca Arnold)
- Introduction to Fashion Design (By Patrick John)