



*Women's Suits:
Transformations in Form and Fabric, 1890-1990*

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The **Historic Costume and Textiles Collection** of the Gustafson Gallery is a research collection of approximately 10,000 artifacts including a chain mail shirt of the 15th century, an 18th century frockcoat, and fashionable dress of the 19th and 20th centuries. Flat textiles include 18th century hand woven linen sheets, quilts and coverlets, and paisley shawls. Recent donations by designers Calvin Klein and Arnold Scassi have been added to a substantial collection of apparel by the infamous Mr. Blackwell. A growing collection of non-Western dress has been expanded to include donations of African textiles and Japanese kimono. The Collection is actively used by faculty, students, and independent scholars who examine historic and contemporary textiles and clothing as material culture to answer questions about the society that created them.

Women's Suits: Transformations in Form and Fabric, 1890-1990

Introduction

A suit is, by definition, a set of clothes which are worn together; a coat/jacket, trouser (or skirt), and often a vest, usually all of the same material. Yet, this has not always been the case. For the decades 1890-1990, the focus of this exhibition, American women's suits were used as evidence to reveal changes in form and fabric as well as in definition. The suits also served as a means to answering questions beyond the artifact—inquiries concerning the influences of men's tailoring, women's ready-to-wear, and fabric and fiber technology on suit evolution.

Men's suiting first appeared at the end of the Middle Ages when clothing between the sexes made a distinctive break - women remaining in long, flowing gowns while men wore pourpoints and doublets (later to evolve into vests and jackets) and tights and breeches. By the middle of the 19th century, the tailored suit for men as we know it today, had become the standard. These suits were made by male tailors whose skills included the intricate shaping and padding necessary to construct a well-tailored suit.

Suits have been part of women's wardrobes for only the last 300 years. Women appeared in "suits" in the 18th century when fashion came to recognize the more relaxed country estate life of the English lady. The first "suits" for women were riding habits which were constructed by male tailors. Riding habits consisted of tailored jackets cut in the style and fabric of a gentleman's coat and worn with voluminous skirts. Riding, one of the activities in which the gentry participated, made appropriate dress for the occasion necessary. Women's other fashionable apparel, although quite complex, remained the work of seamstresses and dressmakers, whose skills were not thought to be adequate for tailoring.

During the 20th century the suit has become a standard for women. Aided by changing lifestyles and roles, greater disposable income, leisure time, and technology, the suit has become the enduring fashion statement for women during the 20th century. **Women's Suits: Transformations in Form and Fabric, 1890-1990**, examines how changes in technology at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th centuries impacted the suit from selection of fiber and fabric to ready-to-wear manufacturing.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the direction and scope of the exhibit research.

- Which had a greater impact on the construction of women's day suits: dressmaking or tailoring techniques?
- How did simplification in ready-to-wear influence women's suits?
- Were fabric availability and new fiber technology reflected in women's suits?
- Did suit form follow the prevailing fashionable silhouette of the time?

Methodology

Garments for this research and exhibition were selected from the Historic Costume and Textiles Collection in the Department of Design, Merchandising, and Consumer Sciences at Colorado State University. Suits within each decade were examined. Common features were noted and specific suits were selected as representative of the particular decade. Selections were verified as typical of a period by comparing each to visual images in contemporary fashion periodicals.

Using the New Brunswick model developed by Elliott for studying material culture¹, research followed a four step approach. The first three steps included: 1) observation, which focused on the artifacts themselves, 2) comparison, which looked at the appearance and construction of men's versus women's suits and women's fashionable silhouettes, and 3) supplemental, which included examining primary sources such as *Le Bon Ton* (1900), *The Delineator* (1910), *The "National"* (1917), *Fashionable Dress* (1925), and *Vogue* (1971, 1975, 1978). The fourth step, interpretation, placed the artifact in its original historical context and allowed researchers to develop conclusions based on the collected evidence.

¹ Elliott, R. Towards a Material History Methodology, *Material History Bulletin*, 22 (1985): 31-40.

Tailoring and Dressmaking Techniques

Suits in the collection and exhibit revealed that both tailoring and dressmaking techniques were found in women's suits. In fact, women had the option of selecting either suit style during most decades of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Considering the jacket the most distinguishing component of a suit, this study concentrated on jacket features to distinguish whether suits were constructed following tailoring or dressmaking techniques. Features in tailored suit jackets included notched collars, set-in two-piece sleeves, full linings, shoulder pads, welt or patch pockets, and princess darts or seams. Traditionally, men's suits were constructed following well-established tailoring techniques. Ladies' apparel was made by a seamstress or dressmaker who was often unfamiliar with the tailoring techniques involved in molding fabric and fitting, stitching, padding, and pressing suits.

The terms "dress" and "suit" were used interchangeably in the literature of the 1890s. Both garments were composed of two pieces, a jacket and skirt of matching fabric, intended to be worn at the same time. Two types of suits were found in women's wardrobes; severely tailored (tailor-made/*tailleur*) suits coexisted with suits of soft fabrics embellished with trim, ribbon, or lace. Turn of the century (1890-1910) walking dresses/suits in the exhibition exemplified the use of soft fabrics, decorative trim, non-functional buttons, hook and eye closures, and embroidered vest inserts (Figure 1). Tailor-made suits were distinguished by the use of heavy fabrics and by features associated with the construction of men's suits, particularly the collar.

In 1910, women's suits revealed the beginnings of men's tailoring in jacket features, particularly above the waist. Jackets had many characteristics of tailoring: notched collars, undercollar of different fabric, buttonholes on collars, two-piece eased sleeves, and shoulder padding. At the same time, dressmaking features of decorative buttons, button loops, and trim were part of the matching coat and skirt ensemble. A common feature was gathering or pleating at the jacket waist, accompanied by a belt.

By the 1920s women's fashion magazines reported that the "tailored trend in suits was influenced regularly by dressmaker styles and vice versa. There was a general softening in the tailoring effect, too, due to the omission of canvas in the tailoring of soft, light-weight woolens."¹



Figure 1: Walking suit of silk faille and mourning suit, 1890's. Gifts of Vicki Slaton and K. Mitchell.

During the 1930s, women's suit jackets and skirts were fitted to the body and imitated the flow of a dress. Jacket tailoring features included notched collars, princess seams, welt pockets, shoulder pads, and two-piece eased sleeves. Suits were belted at the waistline. By the end of the decade, suits with broader shoulders and boxy jackets appeared. An increase in tailoring features in suits occurred in the 1940s, reflecting the military influence brought on by Allied involvement in WWII. For suits in the exhibition and collection, tailoring techniques had a greater impact on suit construction than did dressmaking. Tailored suit jackets with notched collars, welt pockets, keyhole buttonholes, two-piece sleeves, and shoulder pads were heavily promoted in women's magazines in the 1940s, with captions stating, "good tailoring and good lines are shown here."² Tailoring features were present in women's suits of the 1950s, including notched collars, machine topstitching, functional buttons, eased two-piece sleeves, vented sleeves, shoulder pads, and full lining. Suits were precisely tailored with padding and stiffening added to jackets to achieve the rounded-hip silhouette. Dressmaker suits were also found in women's wardrobes. These suits had the same undercollar fabric, curved novelty stitching, and decorative tabs and buttons.

The trend for both tailored and dressmaker suits to coexist continued in the 1960s. The sixties also extended the definition of a suit to include the mixing of fabrics. Matching suits were passé, and pantsuits for daytime wear became popular. As suits became the uniform of the working women in the 1970s, more tailored features reappeared, including notched collars, double-breasted jackets and two-piece eased sleeves, an indication that tailoring had greater impact on suit styling and construction during this decade. Vests became an integral part of the matching skirted or pant suit. John Molloy, America's professional wardrobe advisor during the 1970s, admonished women to wear masculine suit styles in the workplace.³ Women followed his recommendation, but feminized their suits with soft bow ties. At the same time, the tailored suit was rejected by a generation of women who preferred to mix, match, and layer separates.

The "power suit," defined as a jacket of some type combined with a skirt or long trousers and cut along the hard-edged lines of men's clothing, emerged in the 1980s. The jacket was the important piece and featured strong, square, well-defined shoulders. Concurrently, the introduction of the unstructured jacket from Europe achieved success in America by offering women a softened, yet modern tailored look without the broad shoulders. By the beginning of 1990s, women's power suits began to deconstruct when hard-edged eighties' suits lost favor with American women. Professional dressing became less tailored and formal, offering a variety of choices for women. Calvin Klein suits in the exhibit illustrate an assortment of styles with sleek, slim lines (Figure 2). At present, suits remain a standard in fashion, as *Vogue* magazine revealed in August 1997, "Suits are making a triumphant return . . ." in both the tailored skinny and slouch forms.

Ready-to-Wear

Simplicity in form, elimination of decorative details, and the requirement for less garment fitting were important changes which enabled women's suits to be made available as ready-to-wear (r-t-w). Women's r-t-w first became accessible in unfitted items such as cloaks, capes, wrappers, and underclothing in the 1890s. Output was small in comparison with men's r-t-w, due to the intricate fitting that women's clothing required, the complexity of construction in women's garments, and the frequency of style changes. By 1900, the r-t-w market was growing, as the demand for shirtwaists, skirts, and suits increased. As suits became a necessary item in a woman's wardrobe, r-t-w suits were advertised in catalogs and could be



Figure 2: Calvin Klein Collection suits, 1990's. Gift of Calvin Klein.

purchased at a cost lower than custom-made. By 1910, r-t-w suits were often made by men's clothing manufacturers, with machine-made top stitching and buttonholes. The beginnings of simplification in style of women's wear in 1910 was visible in the r-t-w suit on exhibit (Figure 3). The involved fitting and complicated construction of suits in previous decades had given way to straight lines and simple shapes which continued into the twenties.

By 1940, r-t-w was the construction technique used for women's suits, as reflected through both standardization of appearance and tailoring techniques. R-t-w mass-produced garments continued in popularity and availability during the 1950s and 1960s, with a variety of designers and manufacturers in both Europe and the United States catering to the idea of mass production. In the 1970s r-t-w suits revealed features which were simplified for mass production: machine top-stitching and buttonholes, patch pockets, false sleeve vents, and partial linings. Two of the three suits on exhibit were manufactured entirely using r-t-w techniques; the other contained couture construction techniques, including hand sewn pockets. With increased capacity of output in fabric mills and the apparel industry's willingness to serve a diverse public, apparel production was directed at specific markets. Ready-to-wear suit lines in the 1980s and 1990s increased dramatically in their availability to the consuming public.



Figure 3: Navy blue wool flannel suit, 1910's. Gift of Lucille Anderson.

Fabrics and Fibers

Suits in the exhibit revealed that although new fabrics and fibers were available for use in garments, this did not necessarily mean that suits reflected these technological advances immediately. Not all innovative fabrics and textile fibers found their way into women's suits. By 1890, more fabrics for women's suits were manufactured than in previous decades. Women benefited from this variety of both inexpensive and expensive fabrics made from natural silk and wool fibers in broadcloth, taffeta, and faille constructions. Manufactured fiber production was at the early stages of development in Europe, with no fibers manufactured for commercial use. The continued use of natural fibers in women's suit fabrics was evident in 1910 suits; silk velvet and faille for dressmaker suits coexisted with men's wear fabrics of wool tweed and serge.

By the early 1920s, manufactured fibers—viscose rayon and acetate—were available for use in apparel. (These fibers, however, were not found in the suit featured in the exhibit). Silk crepe in a variety of weights and textures, silk and wool knits, and wool broadcloth and velour were fabrics of choice. The 1930s suit fabrics of silk, wool and rayon crepe, and wool jersey and tweed were darker in color and heavier in weight than in the previous decade.

The forties' war years brought about critical fiber and fabric shortages. Wool was scarce due to use in uniforms. Nylon which had been introduced in 1939 was withdrawn from the apparel market for military use. In 1942, legislative bills such as L-85 established standards for garment construction and limited skirt length, fullness of trouser legs, circumferences of skirt hems, and extent of detailing.⁵ Fabrics during this decade were generally characterized as inferior in quality. This resulted in an increased use of novelty prints and buttons to add interest. The postwar years from 1950-53 were busy years for manufactured fiber companies, with the introduction of "miracle fibers" of nylon, acrylic, polyester, and blends with natural fibers. However, luxurious fabrics of silk, wool, and linen were used in matching jackets and skirts. For women's suits in the exhibition, wool in twill, rib, and tweed fabrics predominated (Figure 4).

Fabric and garment manufacturers continued to exploit the unique properties of manufactured fabrics during the sixties—stretch, permanent pleating, and easy care. Few of these innovations were observed in women's suits, the exception being the polyester double-knit pantsuit. Instead, firm fabrics which stood away from the body and double faced wools were used in women's suits. Synthetic fibers finally emerged on the market in the 1970s, with American designers more likely to use manufactured fibers in higher priced clothing lines than their European counterparts. Suits in the exhibit revealed the popularity of wool and polyester double knit, with the blue pinstripe fabric reflecting the borrowing of men's wear fabrics in the seventies. Natural fibers returned as fabrics of choice for women's suits in the 1980s, with wool crepe and gabardine, linen, and silk used in exhibition suits. Viscose rayon, no longer popular due to the increase in use of polyester in previous decades, made a sudden return and found its way into suits during the 1980s. Suits in the early nineties reflected the continued use of natural fabrics. In 1995, designers looked back to suit forms and fabrics from the 1970s and reintroduced manufactured fibers of polyester, nylon, and natural fabrics blends with stretch fibers into women's suit lines.

Prevailing Silhouette

Suits in the exhibition, up until the 1960s, followed the prevailing fashionable silhouette of the time. Suit forms were consistent with the hour-glass silhouette from 1890-1910. In the early part of

1910s, suits were narrow at the shoulder and at the skirt hem. Later, the silhouette changed to a boxy look with narrow shoulders and a full skirt. Suit jackets in the 1920s offered a variety of styles, all remaining within the limits of the fashionable tubular silhouette. The strong horizontal line at the shoulders present in both suits and fashionable dress during the 1930s became the dominant daytime silhouette for the next 15 years. By 1940, the tailored lines of women's suits had a stronger impact on form and silhouette than did fashionable dress. Suits in the 1950s followed either the "New Look" silhouette which drew attention to the waist, hips, and bust with tailoring that emphasized the curves of the female body or were styled with feminine detailing.



Figure 4: Wool suits in novelty weave or gabardine, 1940's. Gifts of Norma Keaton, Mary Klinger and Inez Harrill.

Sixties' suits broke with tradition by not following a specific silhouette. Unfitted styles and experimentation with mini-, midi-, and maxi-skirts replaced the traditional boxy suit form. The emphasis on youth during this decade created generational differences which lead to distinct styles for specific age groups within the American population. Sixties' suits in the exhibition reflected shorter skirt lengths and revealed experimental jacket styles, such as kimono sleeves.

The silhouette of women's suits in the 1970s followed the fashionable form; suits and dresses began with narrow shoulders and gradually became fuller toward the hem. Seventies' style trends continued into the 1980s, with shoulder width expanding. However, no longer was there a predominant silhouette; fashion in the 1980s and 1990s was more segmented, and women selected from among a variety of alternatives in dress and suit styles.

Summary

Women's Suits: Transformations in Form and Fabric, 1890-1990 offers insights as to why suits evolved as they did, based on technological advances that took place in apparel and textile production during the past 100 years. For suits in the exhibit and collection, making connections with technology allowed for changes in form, fabric, and definition to emerge. The form of women's suits evolved through the decades, facilitated by the use of either tailoring or dressmaking techniques to construct suit jackets. Both techniques coexisted during most decades, with the 1940s and 1970s being the decades when tailoring dominated. The introduction of r-t-w also changed suit form by simplifying styles for mass production. This was most evident in the transformation of the suit form from 1890 to 1910. Innovative fabrics and new fibers did not always find their way into women's suits immediately. Usage often occurred decades later, as observed in synthetic fabric suits of the 1970s. Suit definitions also evolved; with women's early suits (1890) consisting of a jacket and skirt and later adding pants and vests in a variety of styles and fabrics.

¹ *Fashion Service: Women's Institute Magazine* (March 1929): 9.

² *Modes Royale: Every Woman's Fashion Magazine* (Spring and Summer 1948): 402.

³ John Molloy, *The Woman's Dress for Success Book* (NY: Warner Books, 1977).

⁴ *Vogue* (August 1997): 177.

⁵ General Limitations Order for L-85, Restrictions on Feminine Apparel for Outerwear and Certain Other Garments, *Women's Wear Daily* (April 8, 1942): 6.

Additional Reading

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Glossary

couture	individually created rather than mass-produced women's clothing
definition	statement of meaning of a word, phrase, etc.
dressmaker	woman's suit that is made with soft, rounded lines and intricate detailing
fabric	material or cloth
form	suit shape and structure
ready-to-wear	ready-made clothing; readily available
silhouette	outline of a figure or garment
style	shape or design
tailored	woman's suit made similar to a man's business suit with sharply defined straight lines and finished handwork

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GUSTAFSON GALLERY

Women's Suits: Transformation in Form & Fabric, 1889-1990

Curators: Brenda Brandt, Ph.D.

Linda Carlson, M.S.

Exhibit designer: Jack Curfman

1890s

- Taupe silk faille with tape lace trim and gathers. The fullness at the top of the sleeve is called a modified leg-o-mutton. Donor: Vicki Johnson Slaton (88.26.5)
- Mourning suit of wool gabardine with false lapels, leg-o-mutton sleeves, and peplum ruffle at the waist. The early stages of mourning specified dull black without trimmings. Donor: Mrs. Keith Mitchell (81.12.1)

1900s

- Tailored suit of black wool with a vest front of silk, embroidered with grapes, vines, and leaves. The label reads Schmidt Bros., Chicago. Donor: Anonymous (77.22.123)
- Traveling suit of blue silk faille. Purchased in London, this suit features a forward stance, monobosom, and tightly corseted waist. Donor: Dorothy Pughe Klingler (80.8.9)

1910s

- Wool gabardine tailored suit. The fabric is typical of the hard finished fabrics used for men's suits. Donor: Sue Pabst (87.8.1)
- Navy blue silk velvet suit with wide buckled belt. Unlike the "typical" suit, the collar wraps closely around the neck. Donor: Caroline Ostertag (73.3.18)
- Navy blue wool flannel suit. The shape is looser, less complex, and reflects the new modern tailored suit. Donor: Lucille Anderson (81.4.2)

1920s/1930s

- Cinnamon brown silk crepe soft jacket and skirt reflects the straight, tubular *garçonne* silhouette, lacking bosom, waist, and hips. Donor: Mildred Thornton (90.4.12)
- Natural color linen suit featuring a collar with extensions that loop together to form a short tie. The slim fit of this belted suit is typical of the 1930s. Linen fabric is also seen in men's summer, Palm Beach suits. Donor: Colorado Historical Society (92.6)
- Blue wool suit featuring many of the characteristics of men's tailoring - notched lapels, welt pockets, shoulder pads, and eased set-in sleeves. Donor: Anonymous (67.24.1)

1940s

- Forstmann® novelty stripe wool suit from McGuire's, Omaha, Nebraska. Donor: Inez Harrill (87.13.2)
- Green wool gabardine suit. Worn by Leona Barkema at her marriage to Albert Kuklers, October, 1949. Label: Carmel Original, Damon's, Mason City, Iowa. Donor: Norma Keaton (93.22)
- Gray, pin-stripe gabardine suit from the Charles A. Stephens Co. of Chicago. Although this suit features the long style skirt of the late 1940s' New Look, the jacket is typical of the tailored, military influence of World War II. Donor: Mary Klinger (92.144)

1950s

- Wool tweed suit, winner of the National Make It With Wool contest in 1958. Donor: Merry Jo Dallas (88.4.1)
- Late 1950s wool houndstooth suit in purple and orchid by Christian Dior. Donor: Helen Prout (90.21.4)
- Brown worsted wool suit purchased at Julian's, Fort Collins. Worsted wool is used for suits because its hard finish sheds soil and wears well. Donor: Dagmar Gustafson (78.32.66)

1960s

- Beige linen suit by Jean-Louis for Montaldo's, Denver. This suit features the elegantly detailed construction of the 1960s with kimono sleeves, underarm gussets, and a concealed button placket. Donor: Avis Woolrich (971.284)
- Red wool double breasted suit, without pockets or sleeve vents that are typical of men's suits. This suit features a small feminine flat collar. Donor: LaVon Blaesi (961.37)
- Blue novelty weave wool suit "hand tailored" by Jack Clarke of Dublin, Ireland for G. Fox & Co. Typical of the fashionable silhouette in the early 1960s, the jacket has $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves. Donor: Brooklyn Museum (961.37)

1970s

- Orange check, double breasted suit by Lanz, typical of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The belt which blouses the jacket distinguishes this suit from similar 1960s suits. Donor: Carol Timmerhause (82.22.4)
- Navy stripe, polyester double-knit pants suit by Coleman of California, includes a tailored matching vest. Donor: Beth Uhl (89.11.4)
- Gray double-knit wool suit by Bill Blass, includes numerous tailoring techniques: lapels, lapel buttonhole, keyhole buttonholes, sleeve buttons, and patch pockets (hand applied on this suit). Donor: Kathryn Greenwood (92.145)

1980s

- Tweed jacket and plaid skirt by Oscar de la Renta. The standing collar band of this jacket was seen in men's wear in the 1970s as an alternative to the tailored suit although never firmly accepted. Donor: Gary Haxton
- Red wool gabardine suit by Jones New York is a combination of tailored and dressmaker techniques. The notable soft features include a shirt front, collar, and gathered sleeve caps. Donor: Jean Raney (93.97)
- Black wool flannel by Evan-Picone. This suit, despite the soft flannel, is highly tailored. It includes sleeve vents and a welt pocket in the lining. Donor: Jean Raney (93.96)

1990s

In 1997 Calvin Klein donated 31 ensembles to the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at Colorado State. This gift was part of an ongoing archive project that will continue to donate to a select number of institutions around the world. Colorado State is one of only a few receiving donations. Other recipients include the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Kyoto Museum in Japan, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Los Angeles County Museum.