

Archival Resources on the Web

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Fashionable: Women's Historical Experiences through Their Clothes

By Laura Farley, Wisconsin Historical Society

The study of fashion is far from vapid and materialistic, and what we wear and why offers insight into our social, political, and economic ideologies. Clothes are a declaration of who we are and sometimes an unwilling reflection of our background and socioeconomic standing. This article explores six online resources created by archives, libraries, and special collections showcasing primarily Western women's fashion collections in many forms: sketches, plates, advertisements, patterns, and finished garments.

Casey Fashion Plate Collection: 1790s–1880s

The Joseph E. Casey Fashion Plate Collection (lapl.org/collections-resources/visual-collections/casey-fashion-plates), part of the Los Angeles Public Library Visual Collections, includes over 6,000 hand-colored plates that appeared in British and American magazines between the 1790s and 1880s. The collection captures the move from flamboyant late-1700s garments like those worn by Marie Antoinette to simple garments favored in the early 1800s, and back to the voluminous and restricting garments of the late 1800s. Dresses in the 1810s, such as those worn by Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, became streamlined in circumference and sleeve; however, by the 1830s, enormous sleeves and skirts requiring considerable petticoats were favored. By the 1850s, very full skirts requiring hoops were universally worn, except by women working in fields or in domestic labor. By the 1880s, garments were highly structured and draped, easily weighing 15 pounds. Corsets were tightly laced, and a bustle completed the artificial shape.¹

The Casey Collection colorfully captures these changes in style, which appear in chronological order. The “Find It” bar works well for narrowing decade range. Many of the plates depict women and girls in groups, walking, sitting in gardens, or gathered in drawing rooms. Other plates depict women alone, reading or writing at desks. Some plates are in English while others are in French. The plates' metadata include title, date, and notes.

Chronicling America: 1836–1922

Chronicling America (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) is a historical newspaper collection produced by the National Digital Newspaper Program, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library

of Congress. To date, 40 states have been awarded grants to digitize newspapers published between 1836 and 1922, with over 10 million full-text-searchable pages added to the site. This incredible resource offers a look at fashion through advertisements and articles. The period between 1836 and 1922 saw a radical shift in clothing. By the late nineteenth century, tight corseting and form-fitting sleeves severely restricted women, creating the iconic S-curve Gibson Girl look. By the 1910s, corsets loosened and hemlines rose to the ankle, both changes allowing greater mobility. World War I ushered in an era of practicality in dress. Hemlines rose above the ankle, and wool and linen were favored for their function. The close of World War I brought flapper fashion, a rejection of structured garments and an embrace of relaxed silhouettes and raised hemlines, much to the chagrin of some.²

The advertisements and articles available on Chronicling America are a fantastic way to track changes in fashion while also offering historical context. Additionally, unlike many of the other online resources, Chronicling America offers greater insight into what middle-income women and men wore. Using the search bar for terms like “blouse” returns thousands of sources that may be ordered chronologically, by contributing state, by newspaper title, or by relevance. Alternatively, Chronicling America offers suggested topics (loc.gov/rr/news/topics/topicsAlpha.html), including bicycle fashion with an essay providing context and links to sources within the collection (loc.gov/rr/news/topics/bicyclefashion.html).

André Studios: 1930–1941

The André Studios collection is a partnership between the New York Public Library and the Fashion Institute of Technology, featuring drawings produced by the New York firm André Fashion Studios (andrestudios.nypl.org). The collection's drawings were created by designers working with the studio, including Coco Chanel, Cristobal Balenciaga, Elsa Schiaparelli, Lucien Lelong, and Jean Patou. With the close of the raucous 1920s and the economic crash, the excess of the era faded. Dresses and skirts became more structured and longer in length. Rayon and nylon became favorite materials for day wear due to their durability, and Chanel's faux pearl strands

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1961 red full-length evening dress. Ground Floor Collection 1961–1963 (VSGF053) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186694&sos=0).



1961 skirt suit with bolero jacket and gently flared skirt. Sketch Book of 1962 & 1963 (VS160) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186419&sos=24).



1962 lilac flower print short cocktail dress with draped bodice, scoop neck, sleeveless, deeply bloused or jumper top, and A-line skirt. Ground Floor Collection 1961–1963 (VSGF075) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186705&sos=0).

popularized costume jewelry. Glamour didn't completely disappear; for the first time Hollywood had an influence on what women wore, like Jean Harlow's bias-cut satin dresses, and costume designers began creating clothing lines for department stores. Rationing during World War II demanded thrifty fashion, and large numbers of women entered the workforce. Slacks became popular, although controversial, and silhouettes became wide shouldered, slim waisted, and narrow hipped, echoing men's military uniforms.³

Sketches and drawings in the André Studios collection can be sorted by contributing institution or subject (coat, hats, gloves, etc.). The drawings appear on brown paper, the clothes in shades of gray, white, and tan with pops of color on hats or jewelry. The image metadata use linked tags, including names of contributing designers and related items. The ability to save, e-mail, or share images on social media makes this site stand out. Of note is a design titled "Air raid shelter pajama of dark red woolen," reflecting the anxiety and necessity of the time period. See it at andrestudios.nypl.org/catalog/uuid:9f043890-9b34-9ef4-e040-e00a18061059.

Victor Stiebel Archive: 1960–1963

The Victor Stiebel Archive (vads.ac.uk/collections/LCFVS.html) located at the London College of Fashion and available through VADS (the online resource for visual arts), includes three sketchbooks from Stiebel's couture house in London. The colorful sketches are in watercolor, pen, and pencil. The images are full-length views of the garments, including smaller back and detail views. The 1950s saw the rise of ultra-femininity with the return of very structured undergarments. Women dressed for the role of wife; wearing practical yet attractive garments during the day and glamorous cocktail gowns at night, emulating television stars such as Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*. Ready-to-wear designer collection lines were introduced to department stores. The 1960s saw a rejection of the ultra-feminine, and sheath silhouettes with short hemlines dominated fashion as social views on women's roles began to change, characterized by Twiggy and IT girls.⁴

The Victor Stiebel Archive captures a subtle shift away from 1950s designs. The images are arranged by collection,

and each image's metadata includes title, collection, date, and description. The drawings are filled with charming details like jewelry and umbrellas, and the descriptions are detailed. The crossover from the 1950s hourglass into the 1960s sheath is visible in all three of the collections, where elements of both silhouettes appear.

Commercial Pattern Archive: 1868–2000

The Commercial Pattern Archive (CoPA) (copa.apps.uri.edu/project.php) is part of the University of Rhode Island Special Collections. This database includes patterns from three collections searchable through a series of fields. Before the popularity of ready-to-wear garments, households produced their own or hired tailors. Many households continued producing their own clothes and accessories well into the twentieth century, with hobbyists and artists continuing to do so today. Commercial patterns became available in the United States around 1854, as special supplements in fashion magazines or by mail order. These full-scale tissue paper patterns were meant

to be disposable and pose preservation and accessibility difficulties for archives.⁵

The CoPA database is a marvel, although slightly daunting. This collection offers an enormous range of search fields and includes designs for men and boys. The search fields include date, garment (skirt, pants, etc.), occasion, gender, and pattern company among others. The image metadata are functional but not very descriptive. The real asset of this site is the ability to find and print patterns from a 132-year time span.

Kyoto Costume Institute Digital Archives: 1750s–1990s

The Kyoto Costume Institute (KCI) Digital Archives (kci.or.jp/archives/digital_archives/index_e.html) consists of 200 digital images of garment and accessory holdings at KCI. The meticulously styled digital images are a delight to browse and offer vital background on the images. Second Wave feminism ushered in an era of expanded possibilities for women, and their clothes followed. As women



1963 flower print full-length evening dress with sleeveless bolero top with scoop neck and high waist trimmed with a tie and bow center front and a gathered skirt; slim line at the front but fuller toward the back. Ground Floor Collection 1961–1963 (VSGF127A) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186779&sos=6).



1962 black-and-white print short cocktail dress with asymmetric neckline, short sleeves, and slim line skirt cinched in with a wide, black patent-leather belt. Ground Floor Collection 1961–1963 (VSGF069) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186703&sos=0).



1963 white moire silk full-length wedding dress with elbow-length sleeves, self-fabric bow on a high-waisted half belt. Sketch Book of 1962 & 1963 (VS315) from Victor Stiebel Sketchbook Archive held by University of the Arts London: London College of Fashion Archives (vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=186617&sos=17).

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Eric Willey, Assistant Editor

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increasingly entered the workforce, garments became more masculine and tailored, like Diane Keaton's classic look in *Annie Hall*. Slacks and jeans became permissible outside the home. With the advent of punk and grunge, fashion became an even greater reflection of ideology and identification, with fashion- and art-centric movements like Riot Grrrl.

Each garment or accessory in the digital archives is beautifully photographed and accompanied by metadata including title, date, province, material, designer, and a paragraph explaining the garment's function, which is key to the larger historical context. While individual images are not easily searchable, the decade time line spanning the top of each page is intuitive and the collection small enough to make browsing manageable.

Fashion in Historical Context

These six online resources offer more than aesthetic appreciation; they offer the opportunity to filter fashion through

the lens of social, political, and economic ideologies that have influenced women's clothes and have therefore shaped women's experiences. A review of the over 200 years of fashion documented in these resources offers insight into the role and value of women in Western society, from primarily domestic realms to increased personal choice inside and out of the home.

Notes

1. "Fashion Timeline," Vintage Fashion Guild, accessed March 9, 2016, vintagefashionguild.org/fashion-timeline.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. "Home," Commercial Pattern Archive, accessed March 9, 2016, copa.apps.uri.edu/index.php.
6. "Fashion Timeline."



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