

WORLD WAR FASHION

The Impact of War on 1940's Fashion.



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How were the styles of women's fashion in the United States influenced by World War II during the 1940s?

Visual Arts

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Abstract

How were the styles of women's fashion in the United States influenced by World War II during the 1940s? Investigative research consisted of primary and secondary sources. Firstly, research took place on the internet in order to find more about the war and how they affected women's fashion in the United States. As a significant primary source, my grandmother Jackie Nelson who lived through the war and experienced the changes that occurred was interviewed. Lastly, books borrowed from the local library contained very useful information on this topic.

The influence of World War II is evident through the photographs and information that depict the variation in the styles and trends of women's fashion throughout the decade. Not only does this include a change in fashion when the United States first became involved in the war, but also during the postwar years when signs of people's desire for luxury and fashionable items caused by the restraints of the war became noticeable. Therefore, the argument arises as to whether the influences and changes had a positive or a negative impact on fashion. People in the United States may have recognized it as a negative short term impact due to the many strict limitations and sacrifices that had to be made. Even though the wait was long and often times challenging, in the long run it seems to have made a positive impact on women's fashion as new styles and trends resulted from the cause of the war.

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Introduction

“If you don’t need it. DON’T BUY IT” – a rather “foreign concept in today’s society” (Sexton), but a well-known one among all Americans during the 1940s as it was seen on every single ration booklet. This slogan had a great impact on the mindset of the people back then, as it forced them to conserve rather than splurge during this crucial time when the USA became involved in World War II. This initiated a drastic change in the country which reflected itself through fashion in particular because materials and factories used for clothing all became associated with military purposes, thereby forcing the overall look of fashion. In addition, the end of the war did not stop the styles from changing but actually introduced a new look for the upcoming years. Hence, the focus question of this essay is: **How were the styles of women’s fashion in the United States influenced by World War II during the 1940s?** The reason for choosing to investigate this particular topic is because of my interest in fashion as well as my interest in learning more about the history of my home country.

The war had a major impact on the United States since it lasted nearly half of the decade from 1941 to 1945. It has also proven to be significant as it had an effect on fashion after the war ended as “Feminine luxury and elegance became the symbol of post-war prosperity and defined the silhouette for the coming decade” (Walford). Even though it was an unsteady time period for the United States’ garment industry, it has proven to have been a positive influence towards sparking a new fashion era accredited to Christian Dior’s ‘New

Look'. Furthermore, it has shown that regardless of limitations, new styles were still able to be produced during the wartime.

World War II Influence

The United States went through a major time of change due to their involvement in the Second World War from 1941 until 1945. In the fashion industry, "The United States had the best access to labor and supplies. However, American fashion relied on Paris for its lead and had never attempted to be an oracle of style [as] mass production was its staple." (Walford). There was hardly any time or money to be spared for the makings of fashionable items as production lines quickly changed to produce only war materials. This made it very difficult for "Fledgling American designers [who] were forced to play safe within the parameters of established fashion [as] originality was not encouraged. This generally bypassed the issue of critics comparing American to Parisian designs, as had been the case with the post-occupation collections of 1940 and 1941." (Walford). Due to the lack of new fashion, the "American government propaganda and advertisers constantly reinforced the ideals of beauty and feminine responsibility to keep up morale." (Walford). This was an important aspect during this time as the war effort not only affected the men who fought, but also the women who were at home being homemakers and taking care of responsibilities bigger than they would have imagined. Therefore, the propaganda produced by the government was helpful in that it encouraged the women to keep making those sacrifices by letting them know that "every yard of fabric saved might mean a quicker route to victory." (Walford).

Silhouette and Style Changes

The spring of 1942 was when the War Production Board and the Civilian Production Administration “issued a series of rules for the garment industry that were identified by a number preceded by the letter L, for Limitation Order. Women were able to adjust to it by utilizing fewer amounts of fabric and different colored dyes. The reduction in fabric amount changed the overall silhouette so that clothing would become more practical as women needed more versatility with their wardrobe. There were very strict guidelines on the fashion such as “a woman’s skirt could be no wider than 198cm around. Sleeves could measure no more than 36cm around. Belts had to be less than 5cm wide. Ruffles, pleats, and extra pockets were banned. For women, trim, knee-length skirts replaced long gowns.” (Lindop). Furthermore, “A reduction in the number of fashion colors, especially for wool, was required to conserve chemicals needed for wartime use.” (Walford). As a result, dyes were so scarce that blacks, browns, and white replaced the brightly colored attire. However, “The Textile Color Association of the United States released a palette for fall of 1942 that included a number of shades with patriotic names such as ‘Victory Gold’, ‘Gallant Blue’, and ‘Patriot Green’.” (Walford). These restrictions caused new styles to emerge such as the military look which “included short jackets, narrow skirts, wide shoulders, pantsuits, low-heeled shoes, berets, and peaked caps.” (Lindop). This style was primarily worn by women who served in the war as nurses and other military services. Another style that appeared was called utility clothing which was the more standard look for women. It included “squared shoulders, narrow hips, and skirts that ended just below the knee.



Example of a tailored suit
(Walford)

Tailored suits were the dominant form of utility fashion.” (The University of Vermont). For the women working in the factories, there was a dress code for them but that will be explained in further detail later on. An additional note to add to the style change was that pants became more popular during this time. Many still wore skirts or dresses but pants had become an article of clothing that had a sense of practicality.

Rationing and the Black Market

A whole new aspect that was very important during World War II for the United States was rationing. During the spring of 1942 was when “the government introduced rationing and price controls.” (Walford), which was within months of the United States’ entry into the conflict. Nearly everything had to be rationed which is the reason why “everyone had their own rations book” (Nelson,), according to a woman who lived in the United States during the war. However, “leather footwear was the only article of clothing rationed” (Walford) and only “two pairs per person per year.” (Lindop) were given out. Therefore, this meant that styles were very limited and the only important issue to worry about was how to keep the shoes to last until the next ration. In the short term, it was difficult as it meant that everyone had to sacrifice, but in the long run it was beneficial as the government tried to “control supply and demand [and also] prevent shortages.” (Sexton) in the country. According to *Time* magazine, “The U.S. public has not yet learned that the best way to avoid rationing is to avoid overbuying in the first place.” (Walford). This was written in the beginning of the rationing period when the Americans were trying to adjust to this new system. For the most part, rationing was having a positive effect on the country except that it had begun the illicit trade of the Black Market. This counterpart to the rationing system was the same as it is today; an illegal market selling overpriced

valuable goods. In this case, these markets flourished as rationed items were of course hard to come by. As a result, “rationing and price controls enforced in many countries during World War II encouraged widespread black market activity.” (“Black Market”).

Women’s Dress Code

When the men started going off to war, the women at home had to live a different lifestyle. Fashion was a large aspect of their lifestyle that had to be changed. They eventually learned to make do with what they had and to only buy what was necessary rather than wanted. Even though “fashion wasn’t important during this time” (Nelson) since attention was focused on the war, people still generally dressed formally “both before and after the war” (Lindop). Their typical attire included articles of clothing such as “hats, dresses, gloves, and stockings, while casual trousers, sweaters, and jackets were strictly” (Lindop) worn



Typical women’s shoe style in the 1940s(“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Code in the War Years.”, Glamour Daze)

around the house. Also, their shoes tended to be simple and sturdy and came in the styles of “Oxfords, pumps and sandals” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Code in the War Years.”, Glamour Daze).As a part of the Limitation Order, “Women’s clothing was covered by L-85.” (Walford). This order altered the dress code for women by restricting and limiting certain fabrics, dyes, shoes, styles, and other fashion items. It is true that these were huge sacrifices for the women whereas in previous times, they had always felt the need to maintain a good appearance with their beauty and what they wore. However, one of the ways that the government tried to keep up their morale was to “not limit wedding dress materials,

although excessively full skirts and long trains were rare and silk was not available – only rayon satins, crepes, and taffetas.” (Walford). The war transformed fashion styles into a much simpler way to merge with the new lifestyle.

In the early forties, “a model named Miss Chemistry introduced nylon stockings.” (Lindop) which “were a hit with female shoppers.” (Lindop) because they were much cheaper and easier to care for than silk stockings which were worn before nylons. Furthermore, silk stockings were “very valuable and important” (Nelson) at this time and it was very rare for women to obtain these particular ones as silk was used for war materials.



How to make a woman's suit from a man's from the Make and Mend booklet(Walford)

Due to L-85, clothes had to be made of fabrics that were simplified and easier to come by so they were made of either “Wool, cotton, linen, or easy-care synthetics” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Code in the War Years.”, Glamour Daze.

Unfortunately, most of these materials as well as nylon, silk, and leather were needed for the soldier’s clothing and equipment so American women had to make do without having new clothes.

This of course changed the dress code as they had to find alternative methods to getting new clothes. This is where the booklet called *Make and Mend* became useful because it “gave helpful hints on cleaning and maintaining clothing and linens, avoiding moths, recycling woolen sweaters, and patching and making over older, worn clothes.” (Walford). In addition, “Home sewing was becoming increasingly popular” (Walford) which went hand-in-hand with the booklet. Women became very clever with making do with what they had. For instance, to solve the lack of owning stockings, some women would draw “lines up the back of their legs to look like

stocking seams” (Lindop) with a makeup pencil or even paint on a film of specialized paint makeup to make it appear like stockings. They also “mended and patched old clothes, wore hand-me-downs and stitched together old pieces of fabric to make new outfits.” (Lindop). People these days may find it puzzling as to why women were so desperate to go to such measures as making it look like they were wearing stockings. People nowadays are unaware of the circumstances of that time and that “It was against social convention to go bare-legged other than at home or the seaside, and so the problem was greater for women of the 1940s than can be understood from a modern perspective.” (Walford). It was not too long for most of the people on the home front to accept their roles in the war and the sacrifices that they needed to make, but it was only the “very tall and the portly.” (Walford) who found the major reductions to clothing a big issue.

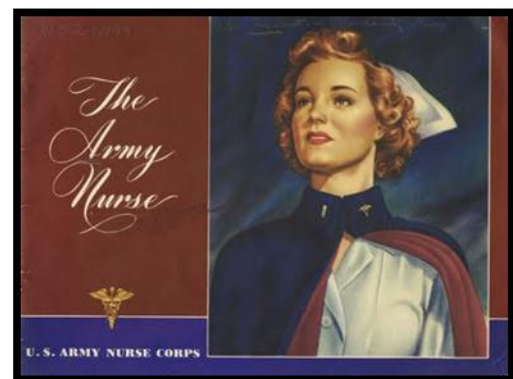


Advertisement for 'Velva Leg Film' – replacement for stockings (Walford)

Women's Role during the War

Serving in the War

There were two main roles that women could be in the military service. They were the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and the Women Accepted for Voluntary Service (WAVES). In 1942, Mrs. James Forrestal who was the civilian uniform advisor to



Uniform of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps ("1940's Fashion – Women Serving in the War.", Glamour Daze)

the Navy and the editor for American *Vogue* had “asked American-born Paris designer Mainbocher to design uniforms for the WAVES [and] not surprisingly, the WAVES were considered the best-dressed American women at war.” (Walford). The importance of the stylish uniform was that it “attracted recruits, who also recognized how easily the suit might be altered to post-service use by simply removing the insignia.” (Walford). This shows that the style of the uniform was already similar to that of everyday women’s fashion during this time, but also that perhaps the military look had developed from these uniforms.



Uniform of the WAC
*("1940's Fashion –Women
 Serving in the War.",
 Glamour Daze)*

Women at Work

Soon after the United States became involved in the war, “employment ranks swelled by great numbers of women in blue overalls and hair bandannas working in place of the young men.” (Jennings). During this time, the “women began to gain more respect and men realized that women actually could work outside of the home.” (“World War Glamour...”, Glamour Daze). This was a huge change to the workforce as women “began to take over ‘male’ jobs and gained confidence in themselves.” (“World War Glamour...”, Glamour Daze). It was asked of women to “play active roles in the industrial workforce, while maintaining morale by keeping up a feminine appearance.” (Walford). This was quite difficult as “Women in factories often wore shapeless jumpsuits and kept their hair pinned up under a scarf tied



Women’s work clothes
(Walford)

about their head into a turban.” (Walford) as well as work boots or sometimes trousers rather than the jumpsuits. These types of clothes were seen very unfeminine at the time because they had once been worn by only men and the thought of this lowered the morale of the women. As a motivator, “‘Rosie the Riveter’ was the icon of Working Ordnance Women (WOW), and her turban-wearing image became a symbol of patriotism used to encourage women to take on wartime jobs.” (Walford). This icon was also known by her ‘We Can Do It!’ slogan which further uplifted the spirits of women. It was definitely a form of propaganda to boost the morale of American women. In relation to the fashion industry, “cosmetics were [actually] recommended, especially face creams, to protect their skin from toxic chemicals.” (Walford). Industries changed to become factories focused on making equipment for the war. For instance, “a corset company became a grenade belt manufacturer.” (Jennings). Because of the war, it made changes to the industries in the United States from the gender of the people who worked in them and what they wore to what types of things were manufactured.

Post-WWII Influence

Even though the war finally ended in 1945, everything did not immediately return back to normal in the United States so “Patience was important in the post-war world, [as it] still looked very much like the wartime world.” (Walford). As a result, “Wartime debt and post-war inflation were of great concern. The largest problem was convincing civilians to accept rationing for several more years.” (Walford). In the meantime “While the full effects of the freeing of materials would not be seen until spring 1948, American fashions could now be designed as full and frilly as women wanted.” (Walford). Thus in 1947 when

the “clothing restrictions ended” (Lindop), many fashionable traits made a comeback. Once again, the nylon stockings became very trendy and sales “skyrocketed” (Lindop). “There wasn’t a fashionable woman alive who couldn’t wait to jump into the latest pair.” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). Also, color came back into fashion so drab colors were replaced with “shocking feminine primary colors” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). More fabrics were utilized that used to be scarce such as “linen, cotton, wool, silk.” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). and rayon were popular choices. As for shoes, women still wore wedge heels “but now with shallower wedges.” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). New styles appeared that consisted of “more delicate, high-heeled court shoes, or shoes finely strapped round the ankles” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). With many more other fashionable items soon to be on their way, there was a positive increase in the recovery and advancement of the fashion industry in the United States.

In the long run, “the war actually stimulated the economy” (Nelson) after all those years of saving up and rationing. People had begun to realize that they had no restrictions as to what they could do and it was a time of celebration once the war ended. Once again, the silhouette changed from the masculine outline during the military time back to having a more feminine look. In addition, some of the styles of women’s fashion also became more lavish and



Style of Dior’s ‘New Look’
(Walford)

feminine. The “rounded shoulders, long spreading skirts, V-necks, narrow waistlines, flouncy hats, high heels, and bright colors.” (Lindop) all became the main characteristics of the womanly figure of the silhouette. Some of the skirt hemlines “hung just below the calves.” (The University of Vermont) which is an alteration to the hemline that appeared during the war. This essentially became known as the designer Christian Dior’s *New Look* which began in February 1947. It was said that “the clothes had ‘such a new look’” (Walford) and this phrase was repeated so much that everyone knew his style by this name. What was so different about Dior’s look was “in its abundance – the excessive use of luxurious fabrics and time-intensive labor. The overly female form that he presented was created through the use of padded hips and bust lines.” (Walford). One of his collections called ‘Corolla’ was “based on the figure eight [and became] the epitome of what the fashion media would dub the ‘New Look’. In reality, Dior’s silhouette was far from new. The style was heavily influenced by fashions of the mid-1910s and before.” (Walford). Although the look did get a lot of positive reactions from the public, there were also negative ones such as “There were objections to the cost, and to the extravagant use of materials, which would render existing knee-length wardrobes unfashionable within months.” (Walford). Also, “initial buyers found the style cumbersome for daily use. In the United States, many women craved post-war luxury but still required clothing suitable for life at home and work.” (Walford). The *New Look* was definitely the major change in the late 1940s that occurred in women’s fashion as it changed from a simple, unfeminine, utilitarian look to a “soft, feminine and decidedly romantic image.” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). Another big change was in the underwear as “corsets had been finally replaced by the all-in-one girdle and the increasingly popular two-piece – bra

and the girdle.” (“1940’s Fashion – Womens Dress Style after the War.”, Glamour Daze). A few more changes that occurred were that “Women started to get permanent waves done by heat and they wore more makeup” (Nelson) now. All of these changes showed that the economy in the United States was picking up quickly after the war and people felt liberated from the war.

An aspect that remained the same was “the trend in home sewing. The length of *New Look*-inspired clothing required women to find clever ways to alter existing garments to meet the new hemline, which by 1948 was hovering just above the ankle.” (Walford). Now the “American clothing industry was larger and more independent than it had been before the war” (Walford). The state of California had “found its success through recapturing the sportswear industry and promoting it as casual wear.” (Walford), but “Although California led the way for the post-war recovery of the American garment industry, labor costs became prohibitive for some times of clothing manufacture.” (Walford). During this time, it was an important transitional period in the fashion world between the end of the war and the beginning of a new decade.

Conclusion

Essentially, this entire decade was impacted through ways in which “The war constrained fashion from its usual path of progression, but necessity was almost literally the mother of invention.” (Walford). Women’s clothing in this decade went through so many alterations in a somewhat short amount of time. During the war, “Synthetic materials were used to make the minimal clothing styles that liberal wartime mores considered appropriate dress. Fashion had never before used so little fabric; short sleeves and knee-

length skirts in close-fitting styles accentuated the female silhouette.” (Walford). Then after the war, the fashion industry sought after new styles, or in Dior’s case, renewing old styles in the *New Look*. The changes in the post-war time set the look for the next decade. Once again, referring back to the research question: **How were the styles of women’s fashion in the United States influenced by World War II during the 1940s?** This can be answered by stating that “War was the dominant influence on fashion in the early 1940s [but] the elegance and excess of the late 1940s were a reaction to the spare, liberating styles that it inspired.” (Walford). Furthermore, the influences on women’s fashion were positive in that they allowed new styles to emerge and evolve throughout the period of the war and postwar, as well as become an influence towards the following decade.

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