

Women's Trouser Practice after 1930

"Everything in its time": Women's Trousers 1930-1949 – Trouser-Wearing Women of the Economic Miracle Years – Skirt Equal to Trousers? – Excursus: No Admission in Trousers



Trousers retained their firm place in the female clothing spectrum in the 1930s, although after 1930 fashion took its leave of the ideal of the girl and once again took the mature woman as its model. In a departure from the experiments of the 1920s, the new fashion line focused on buoyant femininity, skirts became longer and wider, cuts more body-hugging. "The time of a quick, hasty fitting is over," cheered Stephanie Kaul, editor of the German fashion magazine *Die Dame*, "It takes time again, a lot of time, to bring out all that intricacy in the cut of the dresses as is necessary to the delicious simplicity of the flowing fashion line." In retrospect, the loud, brash and booming appearance demanded by the sporty style of the previous decade was countered by discreet elegance, so-called "ladylikeness", at the beginning of the 1930s. Long, softly waved hair, body-shaping bodices, protruding peplums and flounces, trains and frou-frou for festive occasions experienced a revival.

In the beginning of the 1930s, there was still no consensus on the trouser question. The introduction of pyjamas into summer and domestic dress had, according to a 1931 note, "made even the simplest woman ... acquainted with the advantage of trousers." And the genteel lady, according to a 1934 note, "could make herself comfortable at home to a degree that would have been unthinkable to her mother." As part of everyday and formal dress, however, trousers continued to be undesirable for women, even though fashion magazines at home and abroad ventured every now and then to extend trouser suits into street dress and elegant trouser suits for festive occasions. When Marlene Dietrich swapped her everyday costume for a grey men's jacket suit in 1931, briefly creating a new, unorthodox street fashion, the majority found this "fashion nonsense" tasteless.

Nevertheless, Dietrich's annexation of the men's suit does not seem to have remained without consequences. In the July 1933 issue of English *Vogue*, various men-cut trouser suits, models by Lanvin and Knizé, were presented, the Sears department stores in New York offered long trousers in the "Marlene Dietrich look" in the same year, and in the *Wiener Mode* of 1933 there is a reference to the fact that the "fashion started by a Hollywood star [...] spread with lightning speed".

Neither in daily fashion nor in the use of women's trousers significant national divergences can be detected. The fashions of the 1930s and 1940s remained international, the growing presence of women's trousers in everyday clothing a general trend, and just as uniformly, in all Western countries there was polemic, sometimes fierce, against the increasing "masculinisation" of women through trouser adaptations. Even the strenuous efforts of the National Socialist regime to keep German women away from international clothing trends, explicitly trouser fashion, were not met with lasting success. In 1940/41, according to documents and reports, the public defamation of trouser-wearing women reached its peak in Germany, only to cease to be an issue after 1942.

As in 1914/18, women of all belligerent countries were called upon to 'stand their man' on the home front. Whereas women wearing trousers had caused a certain stir at the time of the First World War and most women found little to like about the idea of showing themselves in public in their work clothes, the acceptance of such forms of clothing was much broader among women and men during the Second World War. There were no attempts to conceal work trousers with skirts, nor were there any indications of so-called transformation models that used pulling devices to turn skirts into trousers and vice versa. Apparently, the trouser problem was solved to the extent that women could wear (men's) trousers in the war and post-war years whenever there was a functional reason for doing so.

After the end of the war, the longing for an ideal world was great. International women's fashion after 1947 until the early 1960s placed great emphasis on emphatically feminine forms of expression, but at the same time it endeavoured to meet the demands of everyday life. Women's elegant afternoon and evening dresses and easy-care costumes, jacket dresses and trouser suits showed the different facets of female life reality. The main thing was that the woman was well dressed and suitable for the occasion. In line with the international fashion trend, men's-style tight trousers were replaced by much shorter, light-weight legwear adapted to the female body.

Especially among younger women, trousers were quite popular as modern holiday and leisure wear since the end of the 1940s as a variant of the "American look". The older generation, however, found it difficult to come to terms with this form of clothing. But the hitherto obligatory vociferous protest failed to materialise. The gesture of male reclamation of a privilege for trousers had finally become anachronistic. Provided that the trouser object was a garment that could be clearly assigned to women by colour and shape, with a side zip, a body-hugging cut and ankle freedom. No one took offence when the mobile housewife in an easy-care trouser suit made of light blue gabardine swung herself onto the scooter to go shopping or did the

house cleaning in trousers. Advertising also liked to use vacuum cleaner-operating, washing machine-filling, scooter-driving, radio-listening, cheerful, nimble female life managers to draw attention to products for the "modern housewife". In the field of female evening and formal wear, the rare designs that featured trousers in the 1950s also avoided any parallelism with men's clothing. The cuts of the trouser suits were feminine-extravagant, the colour schemes daring and the fabrics exclusive.

The 1960s marked the end of the German reconstruction phase, during which the Federal Republic of (West-) Germany boasted with remarkably high growth rates, leading its citizens to be taken in by the ideology of the *economic miracle*. This contributed to the protest that brought the adolescents into opposition to the conformism and consumerism represented by their parents. Jeans - embroidered, painted, cut off - mini or maxi skirts and hot pants stood for youth, freedom and being different. Towards the end of the 1960s, it was no longer the renowned international fashion designers who set new trends, but the innovative outsider fashions - so-called anti-fashion or subcultures dresses - invented by young people, and a self-proclaimed avant-garde, which were then adapted, refined and made wearable for society ladies by the big couturiers.

Very quickly, "anti-fashions" became consumer items, offered in boutiques, the London trendy department stores Biba and flea markets. Shortly afterwards, they were part of the assortment of the newly established youth departments in department stores and had thus arrived in the mainstream. "Long live the hippie look!" enthused the German magazine *Stern* in 1968, "And with it everything that is velvet, silk and flowery, that jingles, jingles and jingles, not forgetting flowers and love!"

Since the mid-1970s, women have been able to choose between diverse clothing concepts: youthful anti- or fun fashion (street fashion), fashion for all that is promoted as fashion (everyday wear) and classic timeless designer clothing (dress for success). In addition, the clothing market offers a wide range of leisure and sports fashions. Basically, every modern woman who is willing to experiment and has an adequate income is now free to move between the concepts. "How many skins can you slip into?", the German *Vogue* asked its readers in 1984, encouraging them to play with fashion. "These days, no one has to be locked into one type." Anything goes - what pleases is allowed.

The "triumph of the trouser", which the press had been registering since the beginning of 1968 and had been stating again and again, reached a temporary culmination at the beginning of the 1970s, and after 1975 the trouser became what it is today: a common part of the female clothing repertoire.

Excursus: No entry in trousers

The process of social acceptance of women's trousers was by no means as conflict-free as the portrayals in fashion magazines suggest. The enthusiastic presentations of daring trouser models were opposed in women's everyday lives by dress codes that were only gradually relaxed. The tough finale of the struggle for a female right to trousers began in the 1950s and has still

not been finally concluded. Although women's trousers have definitely been established as "over-all-and-all" since the 1970s, there are still occasions when women in trousers are out of place or undesirable.

This compilation is based on the evaluation of newspaper articles and interviews with contemporary witnesses.

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