Functional Feminine Fashion:

World War II’s Effect on Women’s Clothing

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Abstract

Due in no small part to women’s shift in employment and the clothing restrictions enforced by the government, women’s fashion took a dramatic swing from the long, feminine dresses of previous centuries to a highly unornamented and functional—while still distinctly feminine—style to suit their redefined roles. Unsurprisingly, the start of WWII brought about major changes to the common perceptions of women and their ability to do “a man’s job” in the workplace. Greatly affecting women’s fashion, the rationing system drastically shifted clothing trends from the ample fabric allowances of floor-length gowns to knee-length, narrow dresses and workplace pants. Utility and practicality were particularly emphasized in women’s fashion throughout the war. Despite the frugality and austerity instated by WWII, feminine expressions of fashion did not disappear altogether, but rather took on a new flair which ultimately set precedents for women’s clothing styles in the decades to come.
World War II’s Effect on Women’s Clothing

World War II considerably affected women’s clothing design and perception of style—as it altered many other aspects of life—both in the UK and USA. While the world’s male population was at the frontlines of the war, wives, mothers, and sisters began the difficult shift from their traditional supporting roles to taking over the factory and manufacturing positions of the absent fighting men. Contrary to popular opinion at that time, the women who left their homes to replace soldiers in the workplace often excelled at their jobs, and many enjoyed the change in occupation along with the sense of freedom that their respective jobs provided. Due in no small part to women’s shift in employment and the clothing restrictions enforced by the government, women’s fashion took a dramatic swing from the long, feminine dresses of previous centuries to a highly unornamented and functional—while still distinctly feminine—style to suit their redefined roles.

Perception of women and their role in the workforce changed drastically at the onset of WWII, and with this change came that of feminine fashion. Women “were necessary, and they were capable. A woman could work and still be feminine” (Gourley, 2008, p. 131). Although going against the ingrained tradition that women’s work should be centered around the home, the need for female workers to fill the absence of working men proved to the world that women were quite capable to carry the industrial workload. The eventual outcome of the war rested upon their shoulders as much as it did those of the frontline soldiers (Gourley, 2008, p. 102). Due to the long-held belief that females were not as physically capable as their male counterparts, governments had a difficult time convincing the general public that a woman could and should aid her country in the war effort (Gourley, 2008, p. 102). In America, a cleverly-imagined
recruiting image, “Rosie,” soon became the ideal prototype of what a patriotic female should aspire to—both in action and in dress. As Gourley (2008) stated in her book, *Rosie and Mrs. America: Perceptions of Women in the 1930s and 1940s*, “Rosie’s first public appearance was on a poster created by the OWI (Office of War Information) in the months following the attack on Pearl Harbor. It showed woman wearing a polka-dot bandanna wrapped around her hair and a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She is flexing her right arm, showing muscle. The text reads, ‘We can do it’” (Gourley, 2008, pp. 108-109). The ideal, selfless figure of Rosie was not the only face to inspire women into action. Numerous posters advertised the “glory” of being an Army Nurse—showing women that a “feminine touch” was both needed and wanted on the frontlines of the war as well as behind the scenes (Gourley, 2008, p. 105, 126).

Because of governmental focus on supplying soldiers overseas with much-needed resources, civilians back on the home front experienced many small shortages of their own—once again contributing to the adaptation of women’s fashion. Fabrics previously imported from enemy countries were banned, while others used in bulk by the army, such as wool, were rationed to ordinary citizens (Clouting & Mason, 2016). Sprouting from the clothing industry’s need for a versatile fabric that was not needed by the military, rayon (a fabric made from regenerated cellulose fibers) soon became a fashion staple (Monet, 2016). “‘If you don’t need it, don’t buy it’” was a slogan which confronted many Americans “as it was seen on every single ration booklet” (Craig, 2012, p. 5). In addition to fabric rations, color options quickly narrowed as many chemicals used in creating synthetic dyes were essential to the production of weaponry (Craig, 2012, p. 7). Craig (2012) clearly analyzed in her book *World War Two Fashion: The Impact of War on 1940’s Fashion in the USA*, that “there was hardly any time or money to be spared for the making 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’” (p. 6). Although the rationing system worked rather well overall, there were a few who found it difficult to adjust their lifestyles to the frugality of wartime, ultimately turning to the Black Market for luxury items which were normally inaccessible (Craig, 2012, p. 8). “Despite the restrictions, the war and civilian austerity did not put an end to creative design, commercial opportunism or fashionable trends” (Clouting & Mason, 2016). Cleverly working within the restrictions on fabric, color, and quantity, many women contrived new ways to make reused clothing both practical and stylish (Craig, 2012, p. 7).

Stressing the importance of functionality and versatility in wartime clothing fashions, governments—beginning with Great Britain—introduced a new line of clothing, the “Utility scheme” (Clouting & Mason, 2016). Deploying a few select “quality controlled fabrics,” the Utility scheme not only provided civilians with superior-quality clothing, but more or less set the standard for wartime fashions (Clouting & Mason, 2016). Interestingly, the blackouts enforced across Europe gave rise to numerous, illuminated clothing accessories—such as buttons and handbags—which fashionably improved civilian visibility (Clouting & Mason, 2016). As Monet (2016) mentioned in her article, “many women owned Utility Jumpsuits which one could put on quickly when the sirens blew. The jumpsuit, a new innovation, was warm and comfortable and featured pockets for papers and valuables”. Although many women still preferred to wear the traditional skirts or dresses which have long marked femininity, the practicality of pants had a particular appeal to manual laborers, such as the “Rosies” in factories (Craig, 2012, p. 8). As many women during the 1940s had already experienced the hardships of the Great Depression
and the frugality it demanded, sewing or altering one’s own clothing to make ends meet during WWII was not a difficult prospect to get used to (Gourley, 2008, p. 59).

Undeniably, WWII played an enormous role in women’s clothing design—as fashion is typically influenced by both social trends and world economy (Monet, 2016). With civilians’ overall focus on the war and how to better support those on the frontlines, fashion was certainly not the first and foremost thought on women’s minds—even though styles were considerably affected by the war (Craig, 2012, p. 9). Practicality deluged women’s fashion (Clouting & Mason, 2016). As Rall (2014) noted in her book, “the sharp, ‘hard chic,’ and rather masculine fitted look of padded shoulders, nipped-in waist and narrow hips” was one fairly direct result of WWII on feminine style (p.78). One example of female frugality is the way in which women would “paint” stockings on their legs with makeup in order to compensate for the shortage of silk tights (Craig, 2012, pp. 10-11). Probably one of the most difficult changes women faced was transitioning from the social perception that women must cover everything from necks to ankles to the government-instituted “war-wise” styles that left hemlines at the knee and cut fabric volume nearly in half (Monet, 2016). “Oddly enough, sequins, unnecessary for the war effort, popped up in sweaters to add a note of glitz…shoulder pads became popular to highlight the masculine, military look. They also added an interest to the shape of a slim silhouette” (Monet, 2016). Although the all-consuming topic of the day was how to survive—and hopefully win—WWII, women did not lose their sense of fashion; in fact, the war served to usher in a new and distinct style of clothing that would impact the fashion industry for the years to come.

Overall, World War II had a fairly positive effect on women’s fashion design in both the United Kingdom and United States. While many modern observers have, reasonably, regarded women’s shift from homemaker to industrial worker as a “step in the right direction” for
achieving female social equality, it might be noted that the general perception of homemaking women as weak and reliant individuals is an ill-founded assumption—the world operates best with both male and female personalities! The somewhat sudden role-shift caused by WWII helped to liberate women from the constraints of clothing trends which had previously inhibited movement and personal style. Also, as women had been rather underappreciated in their former roles, the opportunity to prove themselves capable workers in the public realm served to encourage and strengthen women by helping them feel needed and wanted. Because of women’s occupational shift and the required wartime thrift, women’s fashion took on a new sense of the definition “feminine” as well as incorporating both utility and simplicity.
References


