

Josh Sims

# Icons *of* Women's Style





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**Above:** Mainbocher corset in Horst P. Horst's iconic photograph for *Vogue*, 1939.

**Opposite:** A blue velvet dress suit worn with pearls and yellow pumps in the 1940s.

# INTRODUCTION

‘Only the shallow don’t judge by appearance’. Oscar Wilde’s witticism is perhaps more true today than it has ever been – fashion is a global business enjoyed by more women than ever before. And, while trends come and go, there is more opportunity to dress with individuality, cherry-picking from a century or more of styles.

The choice is huge. While menswear tends to be based on a core canon of certain garments – changing in detail but remaining consistent in essence – womenswear is often founded on design innovation and the desire not so much for continuity as for the radically new.

Over the last 80 or so years in particular, thanks to the advent of truly global markets and communications, individual designers have been able to shape the wardrobes of millions of women in extreme ways (and certainly in ways of which menswear designers could only dream). The philosophy of the most pioneering womenswear designers has been less concerned with functionality than with, at its most basic, fun – the fun of dressing up, the fun of change for change’s sake. It is, as Wilde hinted, superficial – in a good way. The best designs have both lasted and become the foundations on which new ideas in fashion can be built.





Certainly some designs have proven more enduring and more influential than others but each one shown in this book can lay claim to being an icon. Some are more likely to take us on a nostalgia trip than others – these fashions from the past, having lived through their introduction, may have been considered by many to be best left in the past. Yet, time and again, they have proven themselves to be fresh and exciting for new generations that have rediscovered them, either as a result of a designer delving into a company's archives or as a result of some personality of that generation making their own personal voyage into fashion history, perhaps via the vintage-clothing market.

These designs have often had an impact far greater than might have been expected, at least when they were first shown – their seasonal moment in the sun. Since the story of women's fashion over the twentieth century is also that of the changing role of women in society, these icons have sometimes also reflected, and sometimes even shaped, changes in the way we think: about women in the workplace or about women's sexuality, for example.

From women in trousers to those in power suits, miniskirts or barely-there bikinis, to those toting certain bags – often more totems of status than something to carry stuff in – or certain attitudes, from the romantic to the radical, the androgynous to the sometimes strange, a single style of clothing has been seen over and over to do much more than merely provide a covering. Fun, it seems, can have meaning too.





**Opposite:** Twiggy and another model in 1960s mini dresses.  
**Above:** Audrey Hepburn in a little black dress, c. 1955.



1.

# OUTERWEAR

trench coat / riding jacket / leather jacket / cape