

Sixties Fashion

From 'Less is More' to Youthquake



Jonathan Walford

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With 306 illustrations, 176 in colour

Jonathan Walford



For Chris

Page 2: One of six 'Union Jill' models attending a British export promotion at the International Motor Show in Geneva, March 1967.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2013
by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

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‘The 1960s saw the death of fashion and the rise of style.’

For three centuries, women’s fashions had been almost exclusively the invention of Parisian couturiers, but by 1962 the haute couture tradition was in jeopardy and Paris’s domain over fashion was dwindling. New sources of style were on the rise from around the globe: London, New York, Florence, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Madrid, Rome...

Internationalism, originally a political movement that sought the input of many nations to work towards a common goal, became a model for modern fashion design. Architecture’s interpretation of Internationalism resulted in a global style of Modernism, best illustrated by the glass-box office towers of North American cities. Internationalism in fashion meant that design was global. Eastern Bloc designers isolated from Western culture, such as Slava Zaitsev in the Soviet Union, Heinz Bormann in East Germany or Klara Rotschild in Hungary, used the same design principles as Pierre Cardin, Yves Saint Laurent and André Courrèges in Paris.

‘Less is more’ was the mantra of international Modernism. In fashion, this meant spare ornament and pure line, typical of the streamlined silhouettes of suits and shifts in the early 1960s. Ultimately, ‘less is more’ was best illustrated by the miniskirt, simply because less fabric showed more leg. It didn’t mean plain and boring. The art scene was at a peak of creativity in the mid-1960s, as Minimalist and Abstract art styles were augmented by the Pop, Op and Psychedelic movements that found their way into fashion prints during the decade.

The world seemed to be living in a state of constant anxiety in the 1960s. However, despite a growing divorce rate, widening generation gap, soaring violent crime statistics, racial tension, wars, assassinations, riots and the threat of nuclear annihilation, there was optimism for the future, at least until the very end of the decade. This was evident in the excitement generated for the space program in the United States and the blockbuster attendance at World Expositions with hope-filled

themes: Seattle's 'Space, Science and the Future' in 1962, New York's 'Peace Through Understanding' in 1964–65 and Montreal's 'Man and His World' in 1967. People believed in a future of world peace, lunar cities and one-piece jumpsuits that glowed in the dark and never needed ironing – polyester, paper, metal and mylar were the materials of the future.

The 1960s were all about change, largely caused by the shift in demographics that began with the first wave of post-war baby boom children coming of age early in the decade. As this generation grew in size, young people began to realize that they had the power to reinvent, rather than conform to, the world around them. This was especially evident in fashion. Young women wanted comfortable, affordable, informal but stylish clothes, not fitted, expensive, formal gowns. The rules of fashion started to break down. Diana Vreeland, editor-in-chief of US *Vogue*, saw the coming onslaught and called it a 'youthquake'.

London became the centre of a boutique revolution created by the young independent shopkeeper-designers who 'geared-up' their generation: the men in slim-cut suits and the women in girlish frocks. Many called themselves mods, short for Modernists, and London was at the heart of this scene. At the centre of the city a network of designers, musicians, models and photographers thrived on one another's energy. In a collective burst they created 'Swinging London' in the middle of the decade, captured in black and white by photographers Brian Duffy, David Bailey and Terence Donovan, and heard in the music of the Beatles, Rolling Stones and The Who. Fashions blossomed from the mod boutiques of London and followed the 'British invasion' of music as it swept across the US and around the world.

By the mid-1960s in the US, the younger generation was becoming restless. The hippie movement grew with the use of LSD and the escalation of American involvement in the war in Vietnam. True hippies believed in subversion through love and protest, and they made themselves identifiable by their anti-establishment and anti-materialistic appearance.

They embraced the natural over the artificial and the plebeian over the elite; their individuality became a uniform of non-conformity.

The trend for protest and self-identity spread to black Americans who, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, rediscovered and proclaimed their African heritage by wearing Moroccan dashikis and Afro hairstyles. The meaning of Internationalism was turned upside down at the end of the decade as the patterns and colours of different cultures were used to enrich mainstream fashion, which previously had relied on pure design. Tribalism in a globally connected world was a theme that would go on to flourish in future years, as would nostalgia. Fashion began referencing historical styles in the late 1960s as vintage clothing progressed from boutique novelty to prestigious fashion commodity, much as the past would become a dominant inspiration in later decades.

It could be said that the 1960s saw the death of fashion and the rise of style. By 1970, everything had changed from the way things had been just ten years before – the styles, markets, materials, demographics, inspirations and definitions of fashion were all new. 'Take it from me,' said designer Betsey Johnson in an interview with *New York* magazine in spring 2003. 'There will never be another chunk of time of such pure genius, from the invention of pantyhose to landing on the moon.... And it was the first and last time that fashion really, really changed.'



**FOUNDATIONS:
HIGH FASHION IN
THE EARLY 1960s**

‘American women spent 1961 aping everything she wore, from her hair to her under-fitted suits and pillbox hats – the understated “Jackie look” was in.’

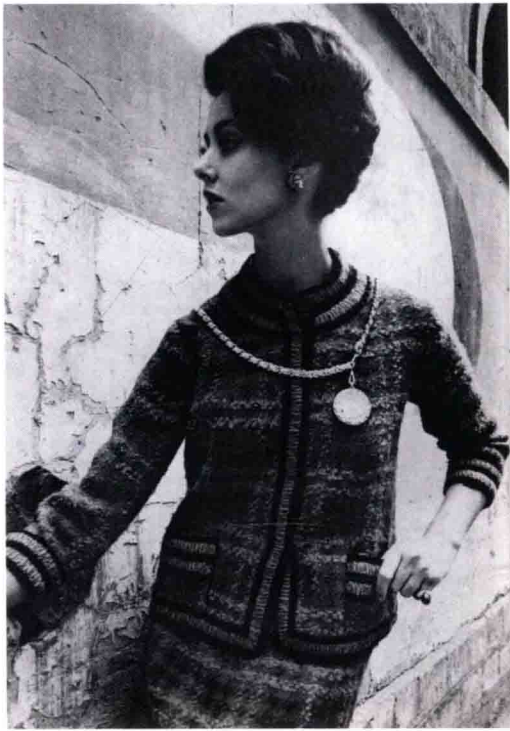
The first hint of what 1960s fashions would look like emerged in 1957, when the streamlined ‘rocket ship’ silhouette was introduced in the form of the sack dress. The shapeless sack made its wearers look like sleeved almonds, but the negated figure brought attention to the extremities of the body: the head and legs, the featured appendages of the 1960s. Women’s hair began to take on the bouffant in 1957 – inflated, airy hairstyles brushed full and tossed like a salad atop the head, drawing the eye upwards from the figureless dress. At the other end, legs appeared longer and slimmer in towering stiletto-heeled shoes that made calves shapelier in hemlines hovering just below the knee.

Most clothes were a little more fitted in 1958, although at Dior, head designer Yves Saint Laurent’s ‘Trapeze’ collection of tent-shaped dresses and coats for spring, and high waists for autumn, did not abandon an aerodynamic silhouette that anticipated the path fashion would take in the coming decade. Saint Laurent was looking for new ways to define the female

form by shifting emphasis away from the exaggerated hour-glass figure that Christian Dior himself had established as the ideal silhouette in 1947.

Coco Chanel had also set a standard by 1958 with her casually tailored suits with open jackets, contoured in tweed, hinting at the feminine form without relying upon the figure to give the suit its shape; older women looked more youthful and younger women more sophisticated in Chanel. By 1960 the Chanel suit was a mainstay of fashion and had been copied for every budget, in tweed for daytime and satin for cocktails.

Although Paris still dominated high fashion in 1960, competition was building. Norman Norell and James Galanos, for example, were respected as leaders of American dress design. However, many American women still thought there was something just a little extra-special about a Paris-designed dress or suit. *Life* reported on 14 March 1960 on the business of Ohrbach’s, a New York clothier, copying Paris originals:



Above: Grey-and-pink tweed suit by CHANEL as pictured in *US Vogue*, 15 October 1961.

Page 8: Jacqueline Kennedy at her Georgetown home, August 1960.

Right: A copy of a CHANEL suit by New York manufacturer DAVIDOW using a different grey tweed but the same trim. DAVIDOW was known for its copies of CHANEL that often included the same fabrics and findings as the originals.





Above left: Beaded cocktail dress, made in Hong Kong, sold and worn in Montreal, c. 1964.

Above right: Blue silk dress by MARC BOHAN for CHRISTIAN DIOR, Paris, autumn 1962.

Left: Green silk quilted cocktail coat and ivory damask silk dress by DYNASTY, Hong Kong, early 1960s.

'Ohrbach's does [a] fast job making new Paris copies.... The clothes being so frantically unpacked were first shown at the Paris collections last month. This week they will be available to US customers in defy-the-eye copies at one tenth of their original cost.... [Ohrbach's] is the biggest line-for-line copyist of Paris clothes.... This season, expecting its biggest sales, Ohrbach's broke all its previous records by copying fifty Paris outfits.... Sometimes Ohrbach's sells nearly a thousand copies of a single outfit and the copies often rub elbows at social gatherings with the Paris originals. One reason for this popularity with high-style ladies as well as those on a budget is that Ohrbach's buys with an eye on what will copy well.... If the fabric cannot be duplicated here it may use the original and will often use original buttons and braid.'

As the decade progressed, Paris would lose its status as the sole delineator of high fashion. Italy had grown into a formidable player, and London was about to burst forth with fashions for the young. Fashion became an international aspiration for nations seeking the Western model of Modernism. Although the Far East had been a source of textiles and style inspiration for centuries, Asia was now becoming a part of the modern world, adopting new design and manufacturing methods while simultaneously infusing modern fashion.

It started in Hong Kong. Shanghai had originally been the centre of the Chinese fashion industry, but after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, most of that city's tailors, seamstresses and embroiderers migrated to Taiwan or the British colony of Hong Kong. By 1960 there were over a thousand tailors working in the island's Causeway Bay and Wan Chai districts, making custom suits and shirts for denizens, British representatives and visitors to the city.

A form-fitting dress that blended Western and Chinese styling called *cheungsam* (Cantonese for 'long shirt'), or *qi-pao* (Mandarin for Manchu 'banner robe') had developed for modern Chinese women in the 1920s and 1930s. Beautifully hand-finished and embroidered silk *cheungsams* as well as

silk pyjama sets were popular Hong Kong exports in the early 1950s. Recognizing a potential market for finely finished silk garments at affordable prices, New York manufacturer Bud Berman established the Dynasty label in 1953. Dynasty's stylist Dora Sanders merged high-fashion ideas with the *cheungsam*, adjusted proportions for the ideal hourglass-shaped Western figure, and created a variety of cocktail and evening-gown styles as well as late day suits. Top-end American retailers Neiman Marcus, I. Magnin and Lord & Taylor acquired exclusive rights to the new designs for six months before they were available through other retailers in the US and abroad, including in Hong Kong.

The *New York Times* reported on 8 September 1959 that 'clothes with the Dynasty label are sold in 595 stores throughout the United States...and on military bases all over the world.... Dynasty has become the leading fashion exporter in Asia.' Everything except the seaming was handmade in a Kowloon factory that employed 2,500 workers. 'More than 300 men control the orchestra of sewing machines. The women excel at hand-sewing and embroidery...the "frog girl"...sits for eight hours a day, skillfully looping, folding, and stitching tiny, brilliantly colored frog closings. She is paid by the piece – her average is forty a day.' This was the first time an American fashion house had manufactured its clothes in Hong Kong, and the results were highly profitable.

Dynasty was peaking in popularity in 1960 when *The World of Suzie Wong* was released. This film depicted Hong Kong as a romantic locale and fuelled interest in the Chinese-style fashions worn by its beautiful leading actress, Nancy Kwan. Around the same time, other manufacturers, such as New York-based Victoria Royal Ltd, set up business to compete with Dynasty. Hong Kong companies also manufactured for foreign markets, but companies not headquartered in the importing nation were hindered by quota limits. Nathan and Strong, a New York clothing company, imported hand-knitted and bead-embroidered evening dresses from a Hong Kong-based manufacturer that