

DÉJÀ VU

FASHION REVIVALS FROM THE LATE 18TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT DAY An Ulster Museum Exhibition

INTRODUCTION

Why do Styles come Back?

Fashionable beauty

When a full bust and hips and narrow waist are admired, full skirts and fitted bodices are seen. When a youthful, slim figure is fashionable, outfits have a slender outline without emphasis on the waist.

Extremes and cycles

Fashion's tendency is to take elements to excess. Fashion by its nature constantly changes and, given relatively few options for change, cycles of styles must occur.

Inspiration

The best designers look to past styles as a springboard for their own creativity. They appreciate and understand historic styles, but use them to create something fresh and modern.

Nostalgia

Especially in times of uncertainty, the virtues of the past are admired and designers recreate its picturesque elements.

Lack of new ideas

In the worst sort of fashion revival, styles of the past are imitated without being retranslated.

Seasons

Directional new ideas in fashion are mostly seen in the Autumn/Winter collections. Spring /Summer collections tend to revive looks - safari, nautical, etc.

Aesthetics

Certain elements of design need to go together to look good, such as a full skirt with a natural waist, or a narrow dress with a high or low waist.

The feeling of the times

For example, strong shoulder lines on business suits turned up in the 1930s and 1980s, both in times of financial uncertainty

Colours and patterns

These come in and out of fashion, and bring their own recurrent mood to garments.

THE EXHIBITION

The display of fashionable dress dating from the late eighteenth century to the present highlights the many fashion revivals seen over these years, and suggests some reasons why fashion seems to keep repeating itself. The groups of exhibits described below appear from left to right in the display cases.

The Bustle

Striped satin robe, c 1785

This beautiful dress is in remarkably good, unaltered condition. Sadly, it is likely that the original owner died, and the dress was kept for sentimental reasons - usually costly cloth like this would be re-used. Stripes were extremely popular in the 1780s, and often employed striking colour combinations.

Corded wool/silk dinner outfit, c 1885

The outfit was part of the trousseau of a Donegal woman. The skirt has in-built hoops which give a bustle shape, and a separate wire bustle, tied on at the waist, would also have been worn. The skirt has two matching bodices, one a dinner bodice, seen here, with elbow length sleeves and low square neck, the other a day bodice with long sleeves and high neck, and there is also a hook-on train, which can make the outfit more formal. The outfit is therefore very versatile, and presents an economical use of expensive cloth.

Both these styles evolved from a full skirt which became concentrated more and more to the back. For much of the eighteenth century, panniers and hoops had made skirts wide and round, or full at the sides. In the 1780s padded or cork 'false bums' or 'rumps' supported the new back fullness, which allowed the new lighter and softer dress silks to be seen to best advantage, as here, from the back and sides. Contemporary paintings began to include figures seen from behind for the same reason.

In the 1880s, the bustle reappeared in a more shelf-like form. From the 1860s the fullness of the huge crinoline-supported skirts had begun to move to the back, and by the 1870s a loose, draped bustle effect was seen. About 1880 the skirts became sheath-like, then the strongly shaped bustle, emerging at a much sharper angle at the waist, appeared.

High waists

Silk gauze evening dress, c. 1817

This dress shows the return to more definite form and colour after the period around 1800 when dresses were very plain and white, and of very soft fabric.

Peach satin and net dress, c. 1912

This design reflects the ideas of the Parisian couturier Paul Poiret, who designed theatrical, dramatic styles best worn by young, slim women, and who moved fashion from its Edwardian solidity towards the new ideas of the twentieth century.

Printed cotton mix dress, c. 1967

This is a good example of the simple, short 'dolly bird' styles which were cheap, fun, and hard for the older generation to wear with any success.

Peach beaded evening dress, Spring /Summer 2004

Jenny Packham

Jenny Packham is one of Ireland's successful new fashion designers. This dress, bought as the Ulster Museum Irish designer outfit of Spring/Summer 2004 shows the 'baby doll' style revived in the summer of 2003, made in the signature dark peach colour of that season.

This group of dresses illustrates the recurrent theme of high waists in fashion. These are particularly popular in times when the fashionable ideal is slim and youthful, often in the wake of a period whose values are seen as old fashioned and are rejected. A slim line outfit with a natural waist is not aesthetically satisfying, so a high waist, no waist or low waist are seen in these times, such as the early 19th century, the early 20th century, about 1910, the 1920s and the 1960s. When setting up these four dresses we realised the similarity of the colour range - perhaps coincidental, but perhaps also the pastel pink and peach tones reflect the youthful spirit of these dresses.

Big Sleeves

Pale yellow figured silk evening dress, c. 1830

Silk velvet dress by Kate Reily, c1895

Kate Reily was one of the best known 'court dressmakers', the equivalent of the Paris Couturiers in skill if not in reputation. She also had a business in New York.

During the 1820s and early 1830s, the sleeves grew enormous, balancing the widening skirts. The fashion was exuberant and positive, until the sleeves suddenly reduced in size in 1836, the year before Victoria came to the throne. The early Victorian fashions were much more self effacing. In the 1890s, the sleeves once more grew enormous, again balanced to some extent by gored skirts. In this age of the 'New Woman', beginning to look for more independence and less constraint, the styles had a harder, almost masculine edge. Both these garments are yellow, a flattering colour in candle light, used in the 1820s and 1830s, and in electric light, becoming more common in the 1890s. In the intervening years, yellow was seldom seen in the evening since gaslight, with its bluish tone made yellow an unflattering greenish tint.

Big skirts

Figured silk evening dress, c. 1840

The colours of the woven motifs in this dress are echoed in the seam piping which was standard feature of mid 19th century dresses.

Black silk cocktail dress, 1954-5

Christian Dior (1905-57)

Dior was one of the most influential twentieth century fashion designers. He worked briefly with Piquet and Lelong in the late 30s and mid 40s, but success, though late, was instant when in 1947, backed by the fabric millionaire Boussac, he launched his own label with what became known as the 'New Look'. This ultra feminine style, with long, full skirts, soft shoulder line, and emphasised waist was an instantly popular contrast with the broad-shouldered wartime and austerity fashions of the late thirties to mid forties.

When fashion emphasises femininity, and the fashionable beauty is womanly and mature, fashions which emphasise the bust and hips and diminish the waist are flattering. This style suits most women, so when flattery rather than the latest fashion is important, for example for a wedding dress, this is a permanently popular dress shape. The full skirts alone make the waist look smaller, but both these dresses, had artificial help to make the waist smaller again. The dress of 1840 would have been worn with a corset, and the Dior dress has an in-built boned corset. The skirts of the figured silk 1840s dress would have been supported by numerous petticoats whose bulk was quite restrictive - the crinoline cage which held the skirts out from the body, making movement relatively free, had not yet developed. The Dior dress again has in-built net and hoop petticoats.

Summer dresses

Black and pink cheesecloth cotton day dress, c 1924

Black and pink cotton day dress, early 1980s
Miss Selfridge

Mostly it is not difficult to date garments even if they have a strong resemblance to styles of another period. Sometimes, however, they are so remarkably similar in cut, fabric and colour, as here, that on first glance they are hard to distinguish.

Sequins

Sequinned evening dress, 1909
Charlotte Duclos, Paris

Worn by Mary Joy Newland (1883-1960, AN American railroad heiress of Irish origin, who married the Dutch Count van Limburg Stirum et du Saint Empire (1877-1954), of one of the oldest noble families of Europe, in 1908. From 1908-12 the couple lived in Berlin where the count served in Kaiser Wilhelm's elite 'The Garde Waren' regiment. One of his forebears, Count Willem 111 married Elizabeth Richards of Rathaspeck, Co Wexford in 1802. She left a fascinating diary of her first hand experiences of the 1798 rebellion and of her life as a wife and mother . The sequins of the dress are of an early form of plastic. The unusually simple, fitted, shape would have shown off both the shimmer of the sequins and the very slim figure of Mary Joy.

Sequinned evening dress, c1925
The fashion house of Beer, Paris

In the mid twenties, dresses had simplified and shortened into fashions which best suited the young and slim. The three layers of this dress - slip with visible hem, short dress and overtunic are each covered with sequins of slightly different shape and sheen. Their full effect would have been best seen in the frantic fashionable dances of the time such as the Charleston. Beer was the first couturier to open on the Place Vendome in Paris, in 1905, and although now forgotten, his name was very well known in the early twentieth century, especially to foreign visitors to Paris.

Sequinned evening dress, 1966
Yves Saint Laurent, (1936-)

In the 1960s Yves Saint Laurent managed to combine haute couture methods with contemporary youthful designs more successfully than his peers, who could not compete

with the hugely popular, cheap fashions coming from 'Swinging London'. He took over the house of Dior at the age of 21, and founded his own house in 1961. By the time of his retirement in 2002 he and his partner Pierre Bergé had built up a huge fashion, cosmetics and perfume empire, founded on Saint Laurent's superb and constantly innovative design skills

Sometimes a fashionable revival relates to the material rather than to the cut. Sequins are a dramatic and effective evening dress embellishment, and when they are used overall they make a very strong statement. We only know the provenance of the 1909 dress, but can be reasonably sure that the wearers of all of them wanted to be noticed.

Big shoulders

Black suit, 'British Samek' fabric c. 1939

Adrian (1903-59)

Gilbert Adrian had huge fashion influence through his MGM film designs for stars such as Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo, in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. His broad shouldered suits were widely copied. In 1942 he opened his own fashion house, which was successful despite wartime restrictions. The suit fabric is not thick but has a hard feel which seems at least partly manmade -the label specifies 'British Samek' cloth.

Black wool suit, c. 1988

Thierry Mugler (1948-)

Thierry Mugler began designing under his own label in 1973. His heyday was in the late 1980s when his superbly cut and strongly shaped tailoring and extravagant eveningwear fulfilled the requirements of 1980s power dressing.

The 1930s and 1980s had much in common. They began in a time of economic uncertainty, when women were making their way more and more into the workplace. The power dressing of the mid to late 1980s had its reflection in the strong shouldered business suits of the 1930s. Both were eras in which women exercised and dieted, often obsessively, in order to gain figures which looked good in sharp, tightly cut tailoring.

Sixties Style

Dress and jacket, mid 1960s

André Courrèges (1923-)

Courrèges studied civil engineering before fashion design, and when he set up his own label, his spare, square shapes had an architectural feel. His mini-skirted 'space-age' fashions worn with white boots and white helmet-like hats were hugely influential and copied world-wide.

Dress and jacket, Autumn / Winter 2003

Marc Jacobs (1960-)

Marc Jacobs, born in New York is one of the US designers who have brought their distinctively modern, sharp American look to international fashion. He has his own label, and has also revived the clothing and accessory ranges of the old-established Louis Vuitton luggage firm. This outfit is the Ulster |Museum International Designer outfit of Autumn/Winter 2003

In his 2003 designs Marc Jacobs clearly copied the colour combinations, cut and type of 1960s outfits, down to design details and fastenings. The clearest difference between the two outfits is in the shoulder line, armhole and the fabric. In the 1960s, the shoulders were cut narrow and the armholes tight, and the fabric was thick and inflexible. We would now find this intolerable, since we have become used to a much looser cut and more fluid fabric.

Thirties style satin

Pale blue satin bias cut evening dress, c. 1936

This beautifully cut dress does not have the couture label it deserves. It is an excellent example of the clinging, bias cut 1930s evening dress.

Gold satin evening dress and jacket, c. 1936

The strong shoulders of the jacket contrast with the slim, clinging lines of the dress.

Stone satin evening dress with net overdress, Spring/Summer 1993

John Galliano (1960-)

John Galliano is one of the most inventive fashion designers of the present. A consistent and striking characteristic of his designs is his use of historic fashion as inspiration. Like Vivienne Westwood, he does not merely copy but uses past styles as a springboard for his creativity. Styles of the 1780s, 1900s, 1930s (seen here) and 1940s have all featured in his work since his first collection in 1983. The net overdress gives a 1990s feel to his classic thirties dress, which is the Ulster Museum International Designer Outfit of Spring/Summer 1993.

Green satin evening dress, Autumn/Winter 2004

Alberta Ferretti (1950-)

Alberta Ferretti set up her label Aeffe with her brother in 1980, and in 1984 began her Philosophy di Alberta Ferretti label, one of the most successful diffusion ranges. She is now one of Italy's foremost designers. The dress displayed here is the Ulster Museum International Designer outfit for Autumn/Winter 2004. It is very similar to the one worn by Scarlett Johansson to the last Oscars. The strong green was a signature colour of Winter 2004/5, and much of Ferretti's work in this season used raw edged strips of fine fabrics, as seen here.

The satin bias cut evening dress is a statement of red carpet glamour which revives every time fashionable evening wear requires the perfect, toned figure. As with the high-waisted dresses, this group of dresses shares a palette, in this case strong but subtle colours.