

History of 1960s fashion and textiles

The 1960s was a decade of sweeping change throughout the fashion world generating ideas and images which still appear modern today. Whereas fashion had previously been aimed at a wealthy, mature elite, the tastes and preferences of young people now became important. At the beginning of the decade, the market was dominated by Parisian designers of expensive haute couture garments. Yet the shape of clothes was soon transformed by new ideas emerging from the London pop scene.

In Britain, musical taste and styles of dress were closely linked and it was the mod look which first popularised the simple geometric shapes typical of the 1960s. Slim fitting, brightly coloured garments were sold cheaply in boutiques all over 'Swinging London' and had tremendous influence throughout Europe and the US.

Later in the decade the hippy look, which originated on the West Coast of America, crossed the Atlantic. This was a time when designers of dress and textiles experimented with colours, patterns and textures borrowed from non-Western cultures.

Couture

The clothes of French designers like Balenciaga and Dior represented sophisticated elegance and were worn by women in high society. Public figures like Jackie Kennedy began to favour less formal items such as shorter skirts. Fewer people now wore accessories like hats and gloves.

Another important Continental influence was Italian design, which from the mid-1950s had inspired a smart, sleek look particularly in menswear. Mods in Britain insisted on tailor-made attire, choosing materials and cut for maximum impact. As this younger generation began to develop a distinct style of dress, demand grew for less traditional, more affordable outfits. The exclusive attitude of the couture houses seemed dated. Eventually, haute couture was forced to imitate popular clothing in a reversal of the usual 'top downwards' movement of fashion. Courrèges, Cardin and Yves Saint Laurent were among those who adapted brilliantly to these new circumstances. Most well-known designers started to sell their own off-the-peg ranges through department stores.

Street Style

Young people's income was at its highest since the end of the Second World War, creating the desire for a wardrobe which did more than simply copy adult dress. The clothes aimed specifically at young people which Mary Quant had been designing since the late 1950s became popular. Boutiques, like Quant's 'Bazaar' and Barbara Hulanicki's 'Biba' provided inexpensively made clothing suited to a busy, urban lifestyle. Instead of buying outfits designed for specific occasions or times of the day, people preferred separates which they could combine in different ways.

The miniskirt was the most eye-catching garment of the decade, designed for an ideally skinny female form. Women wore pale foundation and emphasised their eyes with kohl, mascara and false eyelashes. Hair was long and straight or worn in a shaped bob or wedge, as invented by the hairdresser Vidal Sassoon.

Designers of clothes and textiles celebrated modernity. Space-age silver was mixed with primary coloured prints taken from Pop and Op Art. Novel fashion materials were introduced, including shiny, wet-look PVC, easy-care acrylics and polyesters.

The Peacock Revolution

Perhaps the most remarkable development in 1960s dress was the dramatic change in menswear. For the past 150 years, clothing for men had been tailor-made and plain and dark in appearance. Now, following trends which first appeared in gay fashions, colourful

elements were introduced, such as the collarless jacket, worn with slim-fitting trousers and boots. During the mid-1960s frills and cravats came back in, together with vividly printed shirts. Finally, lapels and trousers took on exaggeratedly wide dimensions. Clothing became increasingly unisex as men and women shopped at the same boutiques for similar items.

Textiles

Heal's, Hull Traders and Conran Fabrics all bought patterns from young freelance designers who took their inspiration from contemporary art and graphics like Andy Warhol's Pop images and the dazzling Op art paintings of Bridget Riley. Brightly coloured large-scale geometric repeats were favourites for both dress and furnishing fabrics. Later in the decade, floral patterns were seen everywhere. Victorian decor was rediscovered and motifs borrowed from Art Nouveau and Art Deco were given a new lease of life by the addition of psychedelic colours.

Counter culture

During the late 1960s, there was a reaction against the mass production of mod clothing and pop products which had brought bright new styles into European and American homes and wardrobes. Some people became disillusioned by this materialistic mood and turned to Eastern cultures and mythologies which appeared more in tune with the 'natural' world.

North American influences dominated during the later part of the decade. Journalist Tom Wolfe's 'The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test' and the film 'Easy Rider' examined a counter culture which had its roots in the West Coast of America. A cosmopolitan view was reflected in fashion by Ossie Clark, Jean Muir, Thea Porter and Zandra Rhodes, all of whom experimented with non-traditional tailoring and colourful prints, showing an interest in ethnic garments. Secondhand attire was sought after and even items like military dress were worn for their decorative qualities.

Shopping

Shops played an important part in popularising new fashions. Whole areas of London like the King's Road and Carnaby Street were transformed as boutiques took over. Boutiques sold an inexpensive range of rapidly changing outfits and offered an informal atmosphere and self-service, unlike traditional clothes shops. At the same time, quirky interior decorations and pop music lent the boutique an individuality which was lacking in the newly built chain stores which were taking over the high street.

John Stephen was one of the first to open a boutique selling menswear on Carnaby Street. Demand was such that he ended up owning eight more shops in the same location. Meanwhile, Michael Fish established 'Mr. Fish', selling psychedelic-inspired outfits provocatively close to Savile Row. Exotically named outlets opening their doors on the King's Road included 'Bazaar' and Michael Rainey's 'Hung On You'. Other Chelsea shops were Nigel Waymouth's 'Granny Takes A Trip', where fashionable hippies shopped for antique clothing, and 'Quorum' run by Ossie Clark and Alice Pollock. 'Biba's' first premises were an old chemist's shop in Kensington, but the business eventually expanded to take over a huge 1930s-built department store on Kensington High Street, where Barbara Hulanicki held parties in the roof garden.

Another new approach was taken by Terence Conran in his shop 'Habitat'. Inspired by furniture shops he had seen in Scandinavia, he displayed goods in a minimal pine interior, stacked in piles as though they were in a warehouse. Conran was successful in marketing well-designed domestic goods, including home furnishings, at relatively low prices.

Media and Society

Marshall McLuhan's 1964 book 'Understanding Media' charted the rise of new technologies like television which had the potential, he claimed, to transform the world into a 'global village'. It was now possible for media images of the US Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War to be transmitted worldwide within hours, leading to greater political awareness.

Attitudes towards class and sex were also affected by greater coverage in the media. At the beginning of the decade, the programme 'That Was The Week That Was' with David Frost and Jonathan Miller and the magazine 'Private Eye' edited by Peter Cooke, satirised British politics and society. They highlighted the class divisions in Britain, underlining the fact that power was in the hands of a small circle of wealthy families.

British working class life was portrayed in films like 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning', 'A Taste of Honey' and 'Alfie'. The main character of Antonioni's 'Blow Up' was said to be based on the photographer David Bailey, immortalising the legend of Swinging London. London was portrayed as a city in which talented young people could succeed, regardless of their background.

Pioneers like Mary Quant and Barbara Hulanicki showed that women could be professionally successful. The 1960s is often remembered as an era of sexual freedom. The pill provided women with a reliable method of contraception while abortion was legalised and homosexuality was decriminalised.

TV provided fashion role models like Cathy McGowan, famous for her mod outfits, who presented the weekly chart hit show 'Ready Steady Go'. 'The Avengers' was notable for the sexy clothing worn by Diana Rigg's character Emma Peel. 'Nova', 'Honey' and 'Petticoat' magazines were created to appeal to teenage girls interested in clothes, while the 'Sunday Times' published the first weekend colour supplement with articles on lifestyle and interior decoration.

Music

The 1950s music scene had been dominated by US rock 'n roll, but from the start of the 1960s, bands like the Beatles and the Stones, the Kinks and The Who revitalised British pop. Musicians often pioneered alternative ways of dressing, as can be seen from photographs of these bands as they began their careers attired in mod outfits, complete with straight-combed hairstyles. By the latter part of the decade most had swapped these for psychedelic gear, facial hair and a growing interest in music from other continents like India.

Important American musical contributions came from Bob Dylan and West Coast groups associated with the folk and hippy movements like the Mamas and the Papas, Peter, Paul and Mary and the Jefferson Airplane. The decade ended with the free festival 'Woodstock' held in a rural part of New York state and headlined by progressive rock musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead.

Celebrities

This was an era when those who wore and photographed clothing for a living could become famous overnight. Lesley Hornby, known as 'Twiggy', was a sensation at fifteen years of age when her large eyes, and rake-thin, under-developed figure were hailed as the most extreme version of the mod look.

David Bailey and Jean Shrimpton transformed the fashion pages of women's magazines as Bailey snapped Shrimpton in informal poses. Others who photographed top models included John French, Terence Donovan, Brian Duffy and Ron Traeger. They filled the pages of 'Vogue' and 'Elle' with images of Celia Hammond, Penelope Tree, Verushka

and Marisa Berenson (the granddaughter of Elsa Schiaparelli). Ideals of beauty became more inclusive as black models like the Americans Donyale Luna and Naomi Sims starred in fashion shoots.