

Suit Yourself

Designers are breathing new life into that fashion staple, the pantsuit. **By MARYANN LoRUSSO**

Menswear-inspired fashion made a somewhat expected comeback this season, with runways showing everything from wide-legged trousers and bowtie blouses to lady loafers and shoulder pads. But the real surprise was how designers took a sharp turn toward androgynous and corporate couture, breathing new life into a wardrobe staple that seemed to have gone the way of the petticoat: the women's pantsuit.

Not since **Diane Keaton** influenced a generation of women to embrace masculine duds in the late 1970s, or **Hillary Clinton** packed the White House closet with a rainbow of power pantsuits, has this fashion workhorse been so prevalent—both in the boardroom and on the red carpet. Designers like Chloé, Versace, Sonia Rykiel, Saint Laurent, Louis

Vuitton, Bottega Veneta and **Ralph Lauren** sent fall

bered by the written or unwritten dress codes that once restricted their mothers and grandmothers, seem entirely comfortable crossing fashion's gender lines—or ignoring them entirely.

Until fairly recently, only the most courageous ladies dared to cross that line. Prior to the Roaring Twenties, women only wore pants for industrial or farm work. French designer Paul Poiret unveiled a corduroy pantsuit for women in 1925, but the look didn't catch on until the venerable Coco Chanel came along with her ahead-of-the-time philosophy that women should be able to dress as comfortably as men. In 1933, she designed her first menswear-inspired pantsuit, and trendsetting celebrities such as Marlene Dietrich and Katharine Hepburn were among the first women to embrace this rebellious trend.

In 1939, *Vogue* pictured women in trousers for the first time. During World War II, women working in factories demanded pants, and the look soon became *de rigueur* for gardening and leisure activities. But the real breakthrough came in the 1960s, as the feminist

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FROM LEFT: Recent runway offerings from Sonia Rykiel, Stella McCartney and Versace.



versions of these two- and three-piece wonders down the runways, prompting celebrities such as **Naomi Watts**, **Angelina Jolie**, **Anna Kendrick**, **Amy Poehler** and **Jennifer Aniston** to rock the look at award shows and after-parties. Now, fashionable ladies everywhere are ready to play around with pantsuits.

In many ways, the pantsuit feels like a good fit right now. For the past few seasons, fashion has been heavily influenced by the '70s, the decade that brought not only flared pants and deep-V necklines, but also *Ms.* magazine and a wave of pro-feminist legislation. Women gained more freedom and equality, and their looser, more androgynous clothing reflected that liberation.

Fast-forward to 2015: The nation stands braced for the possibility of its first female president (yes, the one who wore the pantsuits). And younger women, with more power and freedom than ever before, and unencum-

bered by the written or unwritten dress codes that once restricted their mothers and grandmothers, seem entirely comfortable crossing fashion's gender lines—or ignoring them entirely.

French designer **André Courrèges**, the creator of the minidress, introduced a safari-inspired trouser-and-jacket set in 1964, paving the way for the sporty pantsuit era. A couple of years later, Yves Saint Laurent's "Le Smoking" tuxedo suit was the first women's pantsuit designed as evening wear. By the 1970s, most of the important French and American designers were rolling out pantsuits.

The 1980s power suit, with its broad-shoulder, nipped-waist silhouette, signaled women's increasing influence in the business world. The elegant pantsuits of **Giorgio Armani** and **Calvin Klein** were popular in boardrooms until the 1990s, when designers like **Donna Karan** began trading the shoulder pads and boxy shapes for more tailored silhouettes and sensuous fabrics. The look still commanded attention and respect, but in a decidedly more feminine way.



Women were forbidden from wearing pantsuits on the Senate floor until **Carole Moseley Braun** of Illinois, the first African-American female elected to the U.S. Senate, showed up for work in 1993 wearing slacks. And throughout her husband's two presidential terms, First Lady Hillary Clinton continued to flaunt her two-piece ensembles, telling **David Letterman** several years later, "In my White House, we'll know who wears the pantsuits."

We all know who will be wearing the latest incarnations of this now-classic look: sophisticated ladies who value comfort and freedom as much as style. There's a pantsuit for everyone, from swanky 1970s renditions that pair high-waisted flares with broad-lapel jackets, to '80s-inspired versions incorporating shoulder pads and neckties, to elegant evening wear styles featuring skinny cropped pants, vests and suspenders. Hip materials like leather, suede and even lace are cropping up in this new generation of pantsuits. You've seen them on the catwalk, now don't be surprised if you spot them at your upcoming holiday fête. **NHG**

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CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Pantsuits from Ralph Lauren, Mulberry and Giorgio Armani; Jennifer Aniston rocks a burgundy Gucci pantsuit at this year's Critics' Choice Awards.

PIVOTAL PANTSUIT MOMENTS

1930

Marlene Dietrich shocks fans with her penchant for Coco Chanel pantsuits.



1942

Katharine Hepburn becomes an overnight fashion icon after donning a man's suit in *Woman of the Year*.

1965

André Courrèges, creator of the minidress, designs a series of sporty pantsuits for women.

1966

Yves Saint Laurent designs "Le Smoking" tuxedo suit, the first couture evening pantsuit for women.

1968

Barbra Streisand wears a semi-transparent **Arnold Scaasi** pantsuit to the Oscars.

1971

Jet-setting party girl Bianca Jagger glamorizes the women's pantsuit.



1976

A year before *Annie Hall*, **Diane Keaton** arrives at the Academy Awards dressed in her trademark menswear style.

1980

The pantsuit reaches new heights when designers like **Giorgio Armani**, **Ralph Lauren** and **Anne Klein** introduce the world to the women's power suit.

1990

Madonna wears **Jean Paul Gaultier's** pin-striped suit paired with a conical bustier for her *Blond Ambition* tour.

2008



2008 **Hillary Clinton**, the poster woman for the power suit, tells **David Letterman**, "In my White House, we'll know who wears the pantsuits."