

Fabulous Fifties **FASHION**

*Michelle Rowley explores
what shaped the styles of her
favourite fashion decade*

When you think of 1950s fashion, what do you see? Whether it's teenagers jiving in fabulous full skirts, Marilyn Monroe in pedal pushers or a housewife in a twin-set and pearls, you can be sure of one thing – it's an image of glamour. From an era rich in style icons, such as Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn, we take a look at how this decade of great cultural change created some of the most loved fashion styles that are still popular today.

The fashion of the early 1950s was shaped by the aftereffects of war. World War II had ended in 1945, rationing was over and the government Utility Clothing Scheme was coming to an end. It was a time of new prosperity, great excitement and an opportunity for fashion to move away from years of making do.

NEW LOOK

The name Dior has become synonymous with fifties fashion and haute couture. Christian Dior presented what would go on to be known as his New Look collection in February 1947. The collection, his first for his own fashion house, was officially called La Ligne Corolle. This botanical term referred to a circlet of flower petals, a form Dior wished to capture in his designs. When Carmel Snow, Editor-in-Chief of Harper's Bazaar, cried out: "It's such a new look!" the term for the now iconic collection was born.

Dior's designs took shape to the extreme. By emphasising the bust, waist and hips, his heavily constructed garments were the embodiment of female sexuality. In stark contrast to the fabric-saving

B4790





SEW SOME 50s GLAMOUR

Recreate your favourite look of the era with our pick of fabulous fifties patterns

∞ Looking to recreate a statement 1950s dress with a full skirt, cinched waist and fabulous collar? Both Simplicity 1459 & Simplicity 9105 have all these statement features and are beautiful button-fronted dresses. Likewise, Butterick 6870 has all these features, as well as the option for a pencil skirt.

∞ Fancy doing the chores (or better yet, to head out and enjoy the sunshine!) in a wraparound dress? Simplicity 8085 is a pretty wrap dress with three tie closures and optional large patch pockets, whilst Butterick 4790 is the iconic 'walk away' dress popularised by its appearance on season 3 of *The Great British Sewing Bee*.

∞ Just wanting a gentle nod to the era? The Simple Sew Ruby dress is a fun fit-and-flare dress with a more contemporary look that's both easy to sew and wear.

designs of the war years, his gowns were elaborately cut and required interior support to hold up many layers of material. His skirts could be constructed from up to 25 yards of fabric, whilst some evening dresses were known to take up to 90 yards. It's little wonder that after years of austerity, such extravagant opulence received a mixed reception.

However, it wasn't long before a more accessible version of the feminine silhouette of a full skirt, tight waist and sloping shoulders found its way to mainstream fashion. "The New Look was one of the most significant fashion events of the twentieth century," explains fashion historian Lucy Adlington in her insightful book *Stitches in Time*. "It remained popular until the early 1960s and has been regularly reincarnated". Indeed, the continued popularity of a fit and flare dress today is a testament to the lasting impact of Dior's New Look.

THE MODEL WIFE

With a booming post-war economy, new technologies such as washing machines and fridges were becoming more

accessible to the middle classes. At a time when the majority of women were homemakers expected to keep their home, children and themselves tidy, these new consumer goods were thought to free up more time for women to spend on their appearance. Busy housewives trying to do it all, and in style, opted for comfortable but still feminine garments such as gingham wraparound dresses, softly pleated dirndl skirts and pastel twin-sets. In contrast to Dior's New Look, the mixing of coloured separates enabled women to create a range of comfortable outfits for everyday wear.

DANCE HALL DREAMS

In a new era of prosperity and in which there was a strong desire to escape the memories of war, dancing was big. Latin America, untouched by the war, brought the cha-cha to the dance hall by the early 1950s. The Latin influence was reflected in the clothes, with off-the-shoulder dresses and vibrant colours providing a holiday feel and form of escapism.

S9284





*Fifties fashion
is making
a comeback!*

1459

Simplicity

1950s
Vintage

B4790 **Butterick**
FAST & EASY

Retro
BUTTERICK
52

59105

Vintage
1950s

SIMPLICITY



With the arrival of rock 'n' roll in 1955 came the clothes to show off on the dance floor. Layer upon layer of nylon petticoats were worn under full knee-length skirts cinched in with tight elastic belts. The skirts were made from attention-grabbing colourful fabrics, often sporting bold checks, polka dots or a fun appliqué, such as the famous poodle. The look was completed with a short sleeve blouse, neck scarf and swinging ponytail!

The southern rock 'n' roll style of Elvis Presley, known as rockabilly, saw the emergence of a fashion trend which embraced the two fashion styles of the hipsters and the bikers. Whilst a rockabilly chick could be wearing a sharp suit one day, she might be in jeans and a T-shirt the next, much like Elvis himself. In 1956 with the release of the film *Jailhouse Rock*, Levi launched black 'Elvis Presley Jeans'. Although already becoming popular, the banning of the jeans in schools, unsurprisingly, only led them to become further coveted, and music and youth style would go on to be forever closely linked.

TEENAGE KICKS

There was no shortage of youth in the mid to late 1950s, thanks to the babies of the post-war baby boom who were now growing up. Teenagers, as an age group distinct from adults or children, with their own culture and fashion, was a new concept for the era and was reflected in the popularity of the word 'teenager' in many Hollywood films of the time. Even more films included a restless adolescent as a lead character. The silver-screen rebels, such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, rejected suits and wore tough labourer's clothes that could withstand time spent tearing around on a motorbike. When Marilyn Monroe was seen on screen in jeans, it cemented their status as womenswear with sex appeal. These Hollywood heartthrobs helped to move T-shirts and jeans beyond US soldiers and workmen, and in doing so changed the face of fashion forever.

THE BEATNICKS

Arguably the coolest teenagers of the 1950s were those adopting the style of the beatniks of Paris. These jazz- and poetry-loving youngsters rejected the



full skirts and stiff corsetry and instead opted for capri pants with ballet pumps and sweaters. Their bohemian dressing, which favoured dressing down and a preference for black, was a bold and modern contrast to the dressing up and use of colour and print in mainstream fashion. These young women would also dress in a more androgynous style by wearing oversized men's shirts with pedal pushers or, more daringly, with men's shoes and trousers.

The look had reached the silver screen by the end of the 1950s, where Katherine Hepburn could be seen in wide-leg trousers and loose men's shirts. When *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, starring Audrey Hepburn, was released in 1961, it left a lasting impression of the Beatnik style still much admired today.



ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a Content Writer & Dressmaking Tutor at The Sew-Cial Gathering. Follow her on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#) and at www.michellerowley.journoportfolio.com



A NEW ERA

People across the globe are reclaiming old garments, embracing the modern freedom to wear whatever they choose, without the restrictions previously held. Nowadays, we are able to hear

the true stories and influences of non-Western, gender-diverse people with a love for vintage fashion. To get involved, follow the hashtag over on Instagram [vintagetylenotvintagevalues](#)