



DRESSES THROUGH *The Decades*

Be inspired by the dresses of the mid-twentieth century for your next sewing project

Written by Michelle Rowley

From bias-cut elegance to bold, structured silhouettes, the mid-twentieth century was a very transformative era for dress design as fashion responded to social change, new technologies, and shifting ideas of femininity. Let's deep dive and look at how the iconic dresses from the 1940s to the 1960s provide timeless inspiration for today's makers.

The popularity of the tea dance in the 1940s saw the rise of the now iconic tea dress. With its drapery, bias-cut midi skirt and softly shaped bodice, the tea dress was comfortable, flattering, and perfect for twirling around a crowded dance floor. Most designs featured a waist yoke, with the skirt and bodice gently gathered or shirred into it, creating a relaxed but elegant silhouette that suited everyday wear just as well as dancing.

The challenges of World War Two led to austerity and rationing, sparking a wave of creativity that changed the way people dressed. Although clothing was rationed, sewing thread and elastic were not, which meant home sewing skills became invaluable and "make do and mend" was more than a slogan. Dresses were made from whatever could be found. Rayon, promoted through the government's Utility Clothing Scheme, was widely available, but when other fabrics were scarce, resourceful dressmakers turned to furnishing fabrics, blackout material, and even men's clothing.

The fabric shortage heavily influenced dress design. Patterns were designed to use as little

THE FRUGAL FORTIES

fabric as possible. Sleeves were short and narrow, hems were modest, and belts, collars, and pleats were strictly limited by regulations. Using plain fabrics, often brown, grey or navy, or fabrics with a small ditzzy print was a good way to avoid wasteful pattern matching. When fabric ran short, collars were made from

War challenges sparked creativity and changed the way people dressed

a contrasting material. Decoration was usually kept to a minimum. Embroidery, fur, leather trims, and excessive buttons were banned. With zips also restricted, dresses were fastened with press studs or hooks and eyes.

The tea dress had a surprising revival with a rebellious edge in the 1990s when celebrities like Kate Moss, Gwen Stefani, and Courtney

Love paired short, button-front tea dresses with chunky boots and bold red lipstick. What a world away from the gloves, hats, and handbags of the original look! More recently, who hasn't seen a gorgeous version of True Bias Shelby Dress sewing pattern on their Instagram feed? Released in 2016, during the mid-2010s resurgence of 1940s- and 1950s-inspired silhouettes within the indie sewing community, it remains a popular dress pattern. What further proof is needed that the tea dress offers a simple, stylish canvas for every generation to



SEW A 40S TEA DRESS



New Look 6594 is an elegant dress option, with a fitted bust and midriff, optional collar and skirt in three lengths. Choose drapey fabric for a forties dream.



The No. 5 Aarhus Dress and Top from How to Do Fashion is a dress and blouse pattern featuring a pretty pleat placed in the centre front seam for a bust dart.

The Bella Tea Dress from Liberty Fabrics has two neckline options and a view with gathered pockets. Choose an iconic Liberty ditzzy floral print for a gorgeous tea dress to treasure.



Image ©Liberty



Recreate the 1990s take on the tea dress with **the Shelby Dress** and Romper sewing pattern from True Bias featuring princess seams, a front button opening and back waist ties.

The 1940s-inspired **Evelyn Dress** sewing pattern was published as a printed pattern in issue 45 of Simply Sewing magazine and is now available as a digital PDF pattern at gatheredshop.com. It's a tea-party dress with two collar styles, two lengths and a swishy fit-and-flare silhouette.



FABULOUS

FIFTIES

The early 1950s were all about celebrating life after the war. With rationing over and the Utility Clothing Scheme winding down, fashion could finally indulge in glamour again. The fabric industry was booming. With a wide range of new machine-manufactured materials, such as nylon and synthetic silk, now available, clothes could be brighter and shinier than ever before.

Christian Dior's game-changing "New Look" of 1947, featuring dresses with exaggerated busts, tiny waists, and full hips, were a complete contrast to the highly frugal styles of the war years. With dresses requiring various layers of fabric, built-in structure, and occasionally up to 90 yards of fabric they were screaming extravagance, and the New Look became a blueprint for the iconic fit-and-flare silhouette that still inspires dresses today.

Skirts, whether pencil-thin or wide and full, always hit the calves. The silver screen was full of style icons, such as Grace Kelly, Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn, so it's little

wonder that this decade became synonymous with elegance and sophistication.

For everyday wear, practicality met femininity in charming ways. Gingham wrap-dresses, softly pleated dirndls and mix-and-match separates offered comfort without sacrificing style. These pieces allowed busy housewives to

Dresses featured exaggerated busts, tiny waists and full hips

juggle chores, children, and social life while still looking polished and elegant.

The post-war dance craze also influenced fashion. By the early 1950s, Latin dances like the cha-cha were lighting up dance halls, inspiring

off-the-shoulder dresses, bold prints, and vibrant colours, adding a touch of holiday to everyday life. Then came rock 'n' roll in 1955, and the full-skirted petticoat dresses really took the spotlight. Skirts swung under layers of nylon petticoats, cinched with tight belts, and often featured playful patterns like checks, polka dots, or poodles!

Whether it was the high drama of Dior's couture or the everyday charm of gingham dresses, the 1950s were a golden era for feminine, joyful fashion. The decade left an enduring legacy of style that's still loved today, evident by the wide range of available sewing patterns that take inspiration from this decadent decade.



SWINGING

SIXTIES

The early 1960s began with one foot still firmly planted in the past. Dior's New Look still influenced fashion, and couture-inspired dresses made by local dressmakers were considered the gold standard. Except for the teenagers born in the post-war baby boom, who didn't want to dress like their parents. With new freedom, spending money, and a hunger for change, young people were about to completely reshape the fashion landscape.

Everything shifted when Mary Quant opened her boutique, Bazaar, in Chelsea in 1958. With music from The Beatles and The Rolling Stones blasting, the rails were packed with short, simple shift dresses that felt fresh and rebellious. These styles were a stark contrast from the fitted suits and polished looks of the 1950s. Soon came Quant's even shorter "tent" dresses, hanging loosely from the shoulders and skimming over the body to create the iconic baby-doll silhouette made famous by Twiggy. When Quant teamed up with Butterick

in 1964 to release sewing patterns, trendy sewists could recreate her look at home.

As street style took over, luxury fabrics fell out of favour. Designers and dressmakers

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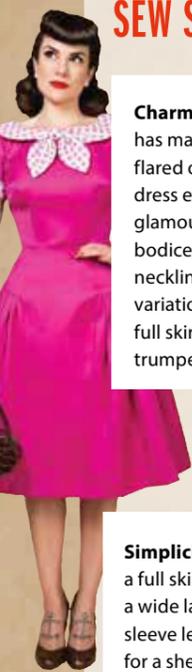
experimented with whatever caught the eye: vinyl, PVC, patent leather, metal, and even paper. The space race fuelled this futuristic mood. Pierre Cardin played with cut-outs and synthetic fabrics, while André Courrèges reimagined classic A-line dresses using sharp geometry and glossy white materials, giving dresses a sleek, space-age edge.

By the mid-60s, dress styles swung to extremes. You could choose a micro-mini or a long, floaty hippie dress. Prints were big, bold, and playful, such as Op Art, psychedelic swirls, oversized florals, or striking monochrome designs. The dresses of the 1960s became fearless, experimental, and fun, and this spirit of freedom still shapes modern dress fashion today.



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SEW SOME 50S GLAMOUR



Charm Patterns Night and Day Dress has many options to make either a fully flared or sleek fitted skirt dress evoking the glamour of the era. The bodice has multiple neckline, sleeve, and skirt variations, including a full skirt and a trumpet skirt.

Simplicity 1459 is great for a full skirt style. It features a wide lapel collar, three sleeve lengths and options for a sheer overlay, ribbon or cummerbund belt.



Simplicity 9105 is another great option for a dress with a full skirt, cinched waist and fabulous dramatic collar!



Butterick 6870 can be sewn with a full skirt or pencil skirt and is another pattern with a great collar – this time a detachable cutaway cape collar.



Butterick 4790 is the iconic 'walk away' dress popularised by its appearance on The Great British Sewing Bee. Cut from just three pieces it's an easy intro to a 1950s dress.



SEWING THE 60S

Simplicity 9104, another reproduction pattern from the archives, offers a wealth of dress possibilities if you decide on a scooter style Revival look. Shorten it further for a baby doll look or keep the length for the sophistication of Jackie.

Fibre Mood's Petula Dress is a fun modern play on the baby-doll silhouette. How short you make it is up to you!



The Moscow Dress from Sew Different is a 60s inspired shift dress with striking two-tone style lines and pulls on over the head.

Simplicity 9594 is an easy-to-sew A-line direct from the Simplicity archives. It can be customised with daisy medallions, rhinestones or beaded trims. With just two main pattern pieces its a great beginner pattern.



Simplicity 3084 features an elegant roll collar and includes an optional cape, that has made a comeback in recent times (thank you Claudia Winkleman!)

