

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF



## 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](#)



M7086



# *A Brief History of* **SEWING IN THE SIXTIES**

*Michelle Rowley explores what drove the iconic 1960s styles we continue to love*



The passing of the much-loved fashion designer Mary Quant has, for many people, evoked memories of living through an exciting time of social change and therefore changing dress style. For others, the name Mary Quant and its association with the 'swinging sixties' is a mystical time in fashion and music which we did not get to experience. Whether you lived through this ground-breaking decade or not, the cultural changes of the 1960s and their resulting effects on fashion have played a key part in shaping the fashion industry and your wardrobe today.

With the early sixties still taking much inspiration from Dior's 1947 New Look collection, haute couture-inspired garments sewn by your local dressmaker were viewed as the height of fashion, unless you were a teenager wanting to dress differently to your parents. The resulting teenagers of the post-war 'baby boom' were to lead the way in steering fashion in a new and exciting direction in the sixties. Now the youth, with their desire for change and a disposable income, were to become a leading force

in creating a decade of dress with almost no limits on imagination and fun.

### THE WANT FOR QUANT

When Mary Quant launched her own label in her shop Bazaar in Chelsea in 1958, it was an innovation in both style and shopping. Young people had a bright, fun place to shop and socialise with music from The Rolling Stones, The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix playing. The trendy store, whilst acting as a prototype for further fashionable boutiques such as Biba, provided instant access to a range of youthful shift dresses which fashion historian Lucy Adlington describes in her book *Stitches in Time* as "a complete contrast to the formal suits of the 1950s, which had made teenagers into clones of their mothers". The short-length dresses were to pave the way for Quant's shorter 'tent' dress in 1960. Hanging from the neck, the unstructured style hid the bust, waist and hips to create the iconic baby doll silhouette now synonymous with sixties model sensation. Twiggy.

According to Jenny Lister, curator of Mary Quant at the V&A, "Mary Quant

Michelle wearing a sixties-inspired dress



## SEWING THE SIXTIES

Recreate the iconic styles of the swinging sixties with our top pattern picks

✂ Direct from the Simplicity archives, Simplicity 9694 is an easy-to-sew A-line dress which can be customised with daisy medallions, rhinestones or beaded trims. It's a great beginner pattern with just two main pattern pieces.

✂ If you'd like a little more coverage, Simplicity 9466 is a sophisticated pull-on double-breasted dress with collar and front button closure which also offers further skills and practise for a more advanced sewist.

✂ Simplicity 9449 and McCall's 7086 are perfect examples of how 1950s styles were still popular in the 1960s and offer both a full and straight skirt option to sew dresses and skirts covering the knees.

✂ Whip up a simplified Jackie Onassis jacket with the Simple Sew 'Jackie O' Jacket, which is a great first jacket pattern for beginner sewists.



liberated fashion in the late 1950s and early 60s. Known for establishing high street fashion, inventing hot pants and popularising the miniskirt, she freed women from rules and regulations". When Quant's miniskirts hit London in 1963, it marked a pivotal year in British fashion history. "In nylons, neons, block patterns and plastic, the miniskirt perfectly captured the zeitgeist of new, modern and young", explains Lucy Adlington.

Requiring minimal fabric and not much time to sew, a miniskirt was a quick and affordable garment to create not only for upcoming fashion designers, but also for young girls wanting to turn a metre of fabric into a quick disco outfit. Recognising the demand by home sewists to create her signature look, Quant collaborated with Butterick patterns to launch a range of sewing patterns in 1964. Now highly valued, you'll be incredibly lucky if you can get your hands on one.

### INNOVATIONS IN FABRIC AND SPACE

With street style now very much alive, the need for luxury fabrics was being replaced with the need for cheaper and more accessible fabrics. This resulted in a time of great experimentation with materials; vinyl, metal, patent leather, PVC and even paper were now being used for creating garments or footwear which grabbed everyone's attention.

The backdrop of the space race taking place had a huge influence on designers and thus sixties fashion. Pierre Cardin's 'space look' comprised of synthetic fibre dresses with holes in the waistline, while André Courrèges made white the colour of the future with wet-look leather trousers, dresses and jackets with geometrically constructed cuts. By using futuristic-looking materials, he turned classic A-line dresses into something new and modern. Whilst Quant had her famous daisy logo, Courrèges' legendary stamp was his appliquéd circle with a

long band which provided a simple but striking futuristic feature.

### JACKIE AND HER JACKETS

Running parallel to the need for innovation by the youth culture was the desire by older women to still present themselves as grown up, but still fashionable. They were fortunate to have Jackie Onassis on the world stage to lead the way in dressing with elegance and style. As wife to the then US president, she was often seen on TV screens and in magazines wearing a practical, classical and stylish ensemble of a matching jacket and sheath dress.

Her sheath dresses, which hit just below the knee, were simple sleeveless statements of sophistication. Her boxy jackets were influenced by the fifties cult tailor Balenciaga, who had led the way for Pierre Cardin and Paco Rabanne. These two garments, designed to stand a few centimetres off the body, created a silhouette that was powerful and concealing. It's little wonder it was emulated by women who wanted to shop, party and work in comfort whilst remaining on trend.

### COUNTERCULTURE

In stark contrast to the severe androgynous looks of the early sixties, the emergence of the hippie movement from the mid-1960s led to the free-flowing feminine chiffon dresses of hippie chic. Those looking to express their love for peace and nature used soft romantic clothing to do so and used dressing down as a way to disassociate themselves from the establishment.

Designer Ossie Clark's lightweight psychedelic designs were perfect for dancing and dreaming in, making his designs popular with style icons The Beatles and Marianne Faithfull. By the end of the decade, the hippie antifashion would ironically become the new fashion trend to shape the style of the seventies.



*Make the Jackie O' Jacket in Love Sewing issue 118*

