

The French Revival

by Sydnie Stern

The Y2K apocalypse never happened... but the era's glamorous influence persists! The timeless french manicure receives a makeover in an unlimited palette of color, animal print, water marble, and decals

The experience of sitting in a salon and getting my nails done, a cathartic event I look forward to every three weeks, is as gratifying as opening a present on the holidays. In a little under an hour, the shimmering chrome or elaborate flower decals I've saved in my camera roll are replicated perfectly on my nails— eye candy in the most accessible place. If the appointment is taking longer than anticipated, there's always the option to entertain yourself by looking through the tempting nail art boards that open like a book, prematurely planning the next color scheme.

After a disappointing experiment with press-ons during quarantine, which is a common anecdote when the resources of nail salons vanished along with everything else, I've realized that some services are necessarily done in person. The hospitality that a beauty spa treats their guests with is the ultimate RnR. When I've already gotten my acrylic fix and feel temporarily satisfied, I'll scour Pinterest boards, Tumblr saves, and the hashtag

"nails" on Instagram, a pastime that has cemented itself as a habitual hour-killer. The Internet houses an infinite universe of nail matter. For those who schedule their day off work to get a refill from their favorite tech, you might've noticed that in magazines, music videos, and of course, Gen Z's moral fixation, Tik Tok, one staple trend in particular is undergoing a revival, though some may argue that it's always been in vogue.

The elegant French manicure has skyrocketed in mass market popularity over the last few years. To the regular beauty enthusiast who pays attention to painted nails, it's not unusual to spot someone wearing the conventional dual-tone stencil, or a variation of it. The desk girl that swiped my card this morning to enter my building was wearing a well-groomed, bright gel French. [Beauty trends generally reappear every two decades](#), an inevitability given the cyclical nature of our world that is marked in seasons. Naturally, there are exceptions to popular fashion's express input and output -- some are sworn to the versatile French look regardless of what's considered current. Despite finding its functionality in formal settings -- your aunt's first recommendation when you ask her what to wear to prom is probably French-- the overarching nail conversation transitioned to metallics and gradients as the 2000s rolled into the 2010s. The French manicure is recognizable to most everyone by some virtue of a wedding album or graduation photo, and contemporary women are encouraged to tailor the original design.

In February of this year, I saw one of my best girlfriends wearing French nails with a thematic twist -- a red tip with mini hearts, which could only have been mastered by an

equally small paintbrush. (I immediately made a mental note to search up "Valentine's inspired French" in time to get a reference photo for my next nail appointment!) During the summer, in one of Manhattan's most stylish sectors, I noticed that Soho retail associates were replacing the traditional crescent tip with double-lined negative space and varying geometric configurations, not unlike something you'd see in an art gallery.

Though the moniker alludes to international origin, [the "French" manicure was born in Hollywood](#). In 1976, Orly founder and creator Jeff Pink was working as a cosmetics supplier for a several film production studios, when he realized there was an urgent need for a solution. In a photo shoot, the nails must complement the outfit, not distract the viewer's eye. (Authentically Y2K kids who watched entertainment godsend, ["America's Next Top Model"](#) will have learned that from Mr. Jay!) Instead of performing a laborious polish change in between takes, Pink found that a versatile manicure would universally suit the costume changes. He called it the "Natural Nail Look", the original name of the prototypical "French manicure". Voila! The minimalist stencil, a light pink base crescent by an ivory tip, was heralded by studio producers, who graciously informed Pink that his invention had reduced their budget. The nail virtuoso then traveled to Paris for fashion week, where he continued working with chaotic outfit transitions backstage. He discovered that the "Natural Nail Look" was equally useful for a runway show's interchangeable wardrobe, and retitled it as the "French manicure". He had located new territory in nail culture, and the evolution ran its course from there!

The French manicure gradually gained exposure in mainstream entertainment over the next few decades, immersing itself into the standard household's body of nail knowledge. Cher and Barbara Streisand appeared separately on the widely loved Johnny Carson Show, which during the 80s was playing in most living rooms past 11:15 P.M. Pink noticed an uptick in popularity, which he recalls in an [interview with Salon Magazine](#), saying "It took six years for the French Manicure to become mainstream, but it was a big hit." (Salon Magazine, 1)

The glittery 2000s, colloquially referred to as "Y2K", saw it girl's Jennifer Lopez and Paris Hilton photographed on the red carpet wearing French extensions, elevating its status as a coveted design. Accompanied by a fuschia flip phone or mini bag, French nails materialized on the screen too. The glamorous queen of mean, Regina George, matches her tracksuits and statement tanks with a French square set in 2004's modern classic, Mean Girls.

The sharply witty soap opera that satirized American lifestyles, Desperate Housewives, distinguishes the gorgeous, stylin' Gaby Solis from her more prosaic neighbors by her glamor. The chic former model is filmed reading the paper in glimmering jewels, with her cleanly cut nails painted a simple French. Familiarity turned the lionized silhouette on its head... The overexposure diminished its initial appeal, producing an effect that said mainstream rather than elite go-to.

The resurgence of glitzy Y2K style, a term which refers to the mid 90s through mid-late 2000s, has [inspired runways to indulge in the diamante'd repository](#)— an assortment of embroidered low rise jeans, butterfly clips, and bustier corset tops. Versace, Tom Ford, and Stella McCartney debuted pieces echoing the less-fabric-is-more credo during the summer/spring 2022 season, like chainmail dresses and micro mini skirts. Nail-heads embraced the wave of nostalgia with equal zealotry, producing variations of the French manicure enhanced by color, tessellations, and diamond decals. On TikTok's populous nail community, the hashtag "[nailtok](#)" boasts over 3.5 billion views (a statistic that's more than guaranteed increased by the time you're reading this), and tend to reflect the current nail fanaticism. Brief tutorials, which give the illusion of "user friendliness" though I'm much more trusting of a nail technician than myself, demonstrate how to achieve a Yin-Yang inspired French design using a dotting tool or create a gradient with a makeup sponge. The results look like the inside of a Lisa Frank sticker book, embellished with hearts, cherries, candy swirls, and flaming neon colors.

With Y2K inaugurated as the mood-board for the '20s fashion aesthetic, some of the most visually dynamic television shows are integrating it to their wardrobe. Surreal teen drama *Euphoria*, which released its second season at the beginning of this year, was most buzzworthy for its evocative storyline and homage to 2000s and 90s style. More than a handful of the characters are eligible for East Highland's *Best Dressed* superlative. The sequined halter tops, bold chunks of colored liner, and cropped two-piece sets, many of which were their standard look for school, activated [a style movement](#), which TikTok

users during the summer of COVID will remember from their hyper-saturated “For You” page. The show’s resident nail guru, Natalie Minerva, created an inventory of [original looks that mimic the conventional French manicure with new wave touches](#). Cult favorite character Kat debuts an impressionistic marbled french coffin, balancing her correspondingly blue-green grungy dress. Despite completely demolishing her own likeability in season two, Cassie’s pearl-ornamented nails are candy perfection, a delicate touch to her pastel outfit.

Scrolling through Instagram on the most unremarkable Tuesday will reveal that agents of style evolution are partaking in this rotation of the French manicure frontlining nail culture. In 2018’s nostalgic [“thank u, next” music video](#), still circulating on my Explore page (no complaints!) , Ariana Grande embodied four iconic Y2K characters wearing a rounded almond French. Maybe the artist’s utility of the manicure marked the inception of the French Revival, considering her influence spans a multi-million follower platform. Ariana revisited the manicure for her fairytale [wedding in 2020](#), reinforcing the smile line into a V. Supermodel Gigi Hadid celebrated her 26th birthday last year wearing a striking [neon base and tip](#), a la Madonna’s era of explosive color schemes. Passionately nail-minded since she first appeared on social media, Kylie Jenner posted a November reveal of her [pearled French manicure](#), something you’d envision Marie Antoinette wearing to — if nail salons existed during her 18th century regime.

The novelty of a French manicure— effecting a timelessness comparable to a pair of pearl earrings, a little black dress, or a bottle of Chanel No.5 perfume— is restored to its highest potential. Frequent salon goers will notice on the price menus that French Tips are listed as a separate service from the customary, “gel pedicure” or “powder refill”. So how long until a “decal french” or a “water marble french” has its own niche category in formal nail speak? The 90s to late 2000s have influenced our current celebrity obsessions’ street style, and made a comeback in popular television, materializing from music videos and into beauty trends. A full on French Revival has emerged in the early 2020’s nail culture... what variations will you attempt next?