

1940s Fashion

How to Dress in the American 1940's Fashion



Fashion from the 1940s is such a classic look that it never really goes out of style. You'll find that almost anywhere you go wearing 1940s fashions, you will get a lot of positive attention. This article explains the look of the times and aims to help you convert clothing from current times to carry a more 1940s flair, as well as giving some key tips on hairstyles, accessories, shoes and other relevant items.

Steps

1. **Start with your own research.** In addition to this article, it will assist you if you have pictures of the styles of the 1940s for you to follow. Do your own general search online and in the library; read magazines and newspapers from the time in a library archive. In addition, there are sources listed below which may help.
 - It is very helpful to search through old magazines for style tips. Dressing 1940s is a very involved process that couldn't easily be broken down into steps. The best way to learn is to get a feel for the era and what was important to women of that time. By reading magazines and watching movies from the 1940s you will get a good idea of what it was like to dress this way.
 - Looking at the makeup and of a pin up from any given year will give you a greater understanding of what makeup style was fashionable at the time. Movies and pin-ups are always great sources of what was considered most high fashion. Though the average gal may have been nowhere near that sort of fashion, it is a good resource in replicating it for one's own glamorous wardrobe.
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Know the principal designers of the era. Such names as Oleg Cassini, Edith Head, Madelaine Vionnet, Dior, Chanel, and other designers and stylists were popular in this era.

Check online auctions for books and even clothing items. If you can get an original outfit, you can use this to build on. Also, vintage sewing patterns are frequently for sale online.

Visit thrift stores or estate sales and rummage. You may find either vintage fashions or clothing that you can tailor to look like '40s fashion with help from this article and your movie and photo knowledge.

Rent DVDs. Choose movies from the 1940s and be immersed in the fashion by noting the fashion of the characters. Fashion heads at Paramount and Universal were Edith Head and Oleg Cassini.

Consider the fabrics. Get tweeds, wools, silk, linen, cotton, or blends of these. Keep in mind that some synthetic materials, such as nylon and rayon, had already been invented. Rayon was quite popular in women's fashions, as a substitute for silk, which the military was using for parachutes. All the same, many fabrics we have now were not in existence then but you may be able to get away with it.



Recognize the special features of the '40s dress that make it special in the history of fashion. The '40s dress is:

- flattering to the female figure
- classic in style
- emphasizes the waist, producing an "hourglass" silhouette

Select fake fur or vintage fur. If you want to add fur to jazz up an outfit, reuse the fur that you find in thrift stores or add fake fur.

Select a good fragrance to finish it off well. Most classic perfumes such as Shalimar, Chanel no 5, and l'Air du Temps were already in use, and may give you more of the authentic feel.

Become familiar with some of the factors that influenced '40s fashions. If you are wishing to replicate the style of the '40s, you will need to be aware that there are three distinct fashion periods of '40s - the early period, the mid-period and late '40s. Each one has a distinct flair and you should select the one that interests you the most. Each is described below.

Early 1940s Fashion



1.

 The evening look was one of sheer elegance

Discover the style of the early '40s fashions. The influence of the 1930s fashion was still dominant at this time, with the hemlines still sitting longer, at mid-calve, although ankle-length had been mostly phased out. Other things of note:

- Casual fashions were beginning to be popular, with a hemline just below the knee.
- House dresses commonly had a very tailored look, with special attention to collars, sleeve details, and style lines of the blouses in general. The 1930s saw a dramatic increase in the popularity of homemade dresses, on account of the thrifty homemaker trying to stretch her budget, so style lines gave a less “homemade” look in 1940s dresses. The 1930s had moved away from the straight silhouette of the “flapper” look, which was designed to deemphasize the female form, and '40s became more feminine again.

- The dropped waist line went back to the natural waist line.
- Blouses became more full and boxy, with close-fitting skirts.

Understand what drove the change in fashion. Once the Great Depression loosened its grip on the American wife's pocketbook, she began to become free to buy patterns that used more fabric, with such style elements as gathers, double-breasted blouses and suits, more complicated collars, decorative pockets, skirts with more flair, and in general a more “draped” natural look. This may have also contributed in popularity of more stripes, plaids, and other types of patterns that would require more material based on the lay out of the pattern pieces.

Look for early '40s accessories that were popular. These were generally understated.

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- Small hats were popular, also with netting that would hang over the face. A high-fashion woman may have worn large hats. These would often have little or no brim in the back and a high oval rim in front, which may have been any angle above the face. A woman's hat similar to a fedora began to **be popular**.
 - Shoes were still reminiscent of the 1930s style, where they were close-toed, moderately high heels, and often with laces, buckles, or buttons. The high heels that we often think of as 1940s style were just becoming popular.
 - Bakelite was popular, so there were many Bakelite bangles, Bakelite earrings, and Bakelite pins being worn, even though they had been in fashion since the 1920s.
 - Especially popular were purses with Bakelite or Lucite elements, even entire purses made of Lucite.

Style on a Budget

Find today's runway looks without the couture prices!

- Take notes on what aspects of 1940s fashion you really like. Keep your eyes open at all times for items matching those descriptions.
- The exaggeration of femininity was still present, but so was feminism, and remnants of wartime fashions. In mid decade war began again, as did rations and more females working. Try to understand the mix of events and emotions present which created the style, and you will be able to create it much easier.

Warnings

- You may have difficulty locating items from the '40s since it was many decades ago now. Try locating a company that bases its designs on styles of that era or

become clever at recreation through sewing, pinning and cutting - as suggested by this article.

- Remember that just because it's 1940s doesn't mean it is appropriate for you to wear on any occasion. Zoot suits, for example, weren't associated with military men but were considered the pinnacle of fashion for those in the know. Further, Zoot suits are currently the rage in Southern California as proms and other formal wear events. Women's formal wear wouldn't be acceptable for day wear or casual wear by any means. For this look to be well-executed, these things must be considered. However, current fashion times do allow us to get away with many choices, so be your own arbiter of fashion.
- Remember also that this is a guide, and that sometimes what you may be required to buy are either impractical or overly expensive. By all means, make your own clothing, or modify or simulate from existing clothing that you own.

Things You'll Need

- Seamed stockings will complete any '40s look perfectly.
 - Simple high heels in a matt-finish leather or suede are best for the era.
 - A smart flower hair ornament or a snood was popular then and is just as darling today!
 - A Zoot Suit, with a wide brim hat and a pocket chain of exaggerated length.
 - You will need slips or petticoats for some '40s style dresses. Most 1940s fashions were designed to be worn with foundation garments (e.g., girdles).
 - A '40s hat is usually one of the best things you can buy to make your look most complete, and matching purse and gloves would be the best thing you could do for your outfit, especially if it is a simple one.
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Mid-1940s Fashion



📍 1946 San Diego

Shift to the mid-'40s. Fashion was affected by WWII greatly. America's involvement by 1941 started changing the fashion scene. In 1942, car production ceased, and silk and the newly popular nylon, made by Dr Wallace Carothers, wasn't as readily available because it was needed for the war, mostly for parachutes. In fact, many stockings were donated for this purpose. As a result, leg makeup began to be made available as a replacement for stockings, and ladies were lucky if they had a friend who could draw a nice straight faux seam for them in eyeliner. Indeed, magazines of the time gave instructions on how to draw a faux stocking seam in make up! This was messy and not as popular or practical as the alternative of short white socks.

Consider the effect of rationing on your clothing choices. The fabric began to be rationed and any patriotic Mrs. at home wouldn't dare use excessive material. Most material during this time was used for the War effort, and fashions became creative about using less material. Since the men were off at war, women began turning hubby's suits into women's suits of their own! Even old curtains and such were put to good use to make dresses without imposing on the nation's needs. Many fashion magazines of the time emphasized keeping one's wardrobe to a colour scheme, so that the '40s women could mix and match her outfits and accessories in such a way as to get a great deal of use out of each piece.

Compensate with color. These were very vivid, almost as if using color to enhance style, rather than excessive use of fabrics. Colors of the 1940s were deep, rich, saturated hues. Popular color combinations were actually contrasted all the way across the color wheel. For example, greens and turquoise would often be matched with maroons and rust-orange colors. Many colors were creatively used together, and the color was always worn in a stately way.

Choose outfits with the more gentle silhouette of the mid-1940s fashion. It became more natural to the female figure, not only because this look is so inherently flattering, but also because less available material encouraged such a look. The top-heavy

emphasis on collars and wide-shoulders gradually became more of a natural-looking emphasis on shoulders and bust, small waists, and skirts tailored to enhance the look of womanly hips. Bathing suits, play suits, or sun suits became more revealing and charming. Some creative bathing suits were invented and popularized by a television restriction on showing the navel. For high-waisted bottoms it was a cinch, but for more high-fashion swim suits, creative ties and straps crossed the front to cover the navel.

Look for shoes that were in style during the mid-'40s. Wooden wedge heels were a nice addition to a summer outfit, and were actually common because wood wasn't rationed, though leather was, so wooden wedges were a smart choice for the woman who supported the war effort. Shoes were also becoming more of what we call a "pump." Heels of 2 inches were common, and the shoes began to show off more of the foot with slip-on styles and peep-toes. These, however, may be much more common to find in the movies than real-life gals.

Work patriotism into your mid-'40s fashion. **Since this was the time jazz became hot and swing was the scene, fashion was sure to respond to this new fad quickly. Enlisted men who were going out dancing in their uniforms were tearing their seams, and since it was costly to replace these, uniforms began to be made with pleats in the back. The United Service Organization was in its prime, with more celebrity support than ever. Performers such as Al Jolson, Bob Hope and the Andrews Sisters helped spread encouraging and patriotic tunes all over America and outfits in red, white, and blue were very popular and stylish. Many wore support pins and ribbons. Women would wear their hair "above the collar" in support of the war effort, as was required of service women. This was especially done with women factory workers, who would wear their hair up in handkerchiefs and scarves, popularized by "Rosie the Riveter." Many women would cut their hair to show support for the war, also. For those who didn't, there were many clever hairstyles named after military expressions. Tips & Warnings**

- This style came into fashion during a time when money was scarce, everything was rationed and being thrifty was a way to support the cause!
- As clothing became more difficult to buy or make, and laws were put into effect limiting decorations such as buttons and lace, ladies had to find some way to stand out! Hair styles became more extravagant but done on the cheap!
- GI's coming home from the south pacific fell in love with the look of the Hawaiian honeys they left behind, so tropical prints, flowers, and anything Tiki can move this look into the late 40's.
- Many bombers and other aircraft had these lucky ladies painted on the side for luck and a little slice of home.

- Even 60 years later, the "Pin Up" look is sexy to most American and European men.
 - Don't be afraid to wear this style with just jeans and a tee shirt, add a bit of class to your every day!
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Minimize mid-'40s accessories. Accessories were more minimal during this time. These were smartly matched according to color. Modest jewelry and small hats were common. On the other hand, evening wear and formal events saw fantastic accessories, most particularly of extravagant hats. Any movie around this time



Late 1940s Fashion

Become familiar with the late '40s fashion. Upon the ending of WWII, in 1945, fashion saw a gradual explosion of unrestricted creativity. Skirts became much fuller, tops began to be more form fitting with less drape. Blouses quickly lost their "enlisted" look, and took on a more feminine look with shorter sleeves, and more emphasis was placed on the bust. The broad shoulders quickly lost their status. In 1947, Dior's "New Look" changed the face of fashion forever. Skirts

became full enough for petticoats and blouses had a sleek, tailored, and very form fitting look. Blouses no longer had drape to them and gathers were few and far between.

Consider the gloves. Gloves were still popular, as they had been in years past, but had taken on a more casual look.

Note that Bakelite was increasingly popular.

Increase the heel height. High heels became higher and wedges were less popular.

Increase the volume. Women were wearing dresses with lots of fabric and now the materials began to become more extravagant. Sheer fabrics were becoming more popular and weren't as formal as they had once been. Much of the new high fashion looks of this time were what we would later consider a 1950s style.

Add glasses. Horn rimmed glasses came out in 1947 and have been stylish ever since. Eyeglasses became more “cat's eye” shaped for the ladies.

Choose Hawaiian themes. The boys were back home and they came with souvenirs. This led to a popularity in island themed fashions and home décor. Hawaiian themed parties were popular by the movie stars during the war and now the rest of the nation was catching up. Tropical prints were all the rage. Hawaiian shirts were the backyard BBQ favorite of the fellas.





