

Feminist Fashion in the 1960s and 1970s

An Anthology by Ellie Abbott



Wrap Dresses

(Komar, 2016)



Bikini

(Turner, 2006)



Menswear/Androgynous Clothes

(Webb, 2018)



Braless

(Lin, 2018)



Vintage

(George, 2018)



Miniskirt

(Bourne, 2015)



Bob/pageboy haircuts

(Idacavage, 2017)



Jeans

(George, 2018)



Antifeminist/traditional fashion

(Peimer, 2017)



Conservative fashion

(Dubitsky, 2018)

Essay

“Assess this statement. ‘The feminist fashion of the 1960s and 70s represented America’”

Feminist fashion represented the dramatic social change America was undergoing in the 60s and 70s because many women wore it as a political statement. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was the trend of going braless, which was followed by many celebrities including the model Jerry Hall, the singer Debbie Harry, and Bianca Jagger. The importance of bras as a symbol of the patriarchy is clear from the many protests and demonstrations that revolved around them, such as the “freedom trash cans” at the Miss America protest. Thus, choosing to go braless was a symbolic choice, a rejection of the restrictive beauty standards of the patriarchy. Because of the rise of hippie culture, which emphasized a more natural approach to life, the braless look was adopted by young women all over the country who chose to go braless in order to demonstrate their liberation. Furthermore, by refusing to cover their breasts in the traditional manner, they implicitly rebelled against the idea that female bodies are inherently shameful and sexual. Going without a bra in public (or around the house for that matter), would have been unthinkable less than a generation before. That so many young women felt confident enough to make this bold choice shows that a large societal shift was occurring. The trend of going braless was simply a manifestation of that change. Another statement-making fashion was the miniskirt. Ending several inches above the knee, this skirt allowed young women to celebrate and take ownership of their sexuality. During this time period, a series of landmark Supreme Court cases such as *Griswold v Connecticut*, *Eisenstadt v. Barnes*, *Roe v. Wade*, and *Casey v. Population Services International* expanded reproductive rights. This gave women more sexual freedom, allowing them to have sex outside of marriage without fear of life-altering consequences. Simultaneously, the rise of hippie culture spread the ideal of “free love” and promoted more widespread acceptance of premarital sex. By wearing miniskirts, young women were owning their sex appeal and making a statement: “I want sex sometimes. Women want sex sometimes. Deal with it”. Much of the feminist movement at this time revolved around sexual liberation – freeing women from the stigma that had surrounded sex for centuries, especially when it came to women as the desirers, rather than the objects of desire. By wearing a miniskirt, women were symbolically showing their support for this ideal, by making it clear that they saw themselves as sexual beings. Bikinis followed in the same vein – they too demonstrated that women were taking ownership of their sexuality in entirely new ways. When the bikini was first released in 1946, it was considered so revealing that a nude dancer was the only woman willing to model it. Two decades later, it was a common sight on the beaches of America. This dramatic change in social

acceptance was a result of the larger, deeper social change occurring, which promoted the view of women as sexually autonomous. Therefore, it is clear that bikinis and miniskirts were representative of America in the 60s and 70s because they were a result of the dramatic social change that characterized the period.

Feminist fashion in the 60s and 70s also represented the changing role of women in American society. By the end of the 1970s, more than 47% of American women were actively employed, and more women were entering professions than ever before. “Professional women” had never existed before as a coherent subset of the population, so there were few clothes that were tailored to fit their needs. Designer Diane Von Furstenberg fixed this with her invention of the wrap dress, a garment made of patterned jersey that tied at the waist with a sash. It was professional enough to wear to work, and yet it also had quite a bit of sex appeal. In fact, when asked why she had chosen to design a dress without any zippers or snaps (which most dresses at the time had), Von Furstenberg cheekily answered “Well, if you’re trying to slip out without waking a sleeping man, zips are a nightmare”. Wrap dresses had a double life of sorts – they were professional and polished at work, but could be quickly removed in a fling’s bedroom. The dresses represented women’s expanding roles on both fronts, as they gained more power in both the boardroom and the bedroom. Like the women themselves, wrap dresses were versatile and equally suited to either situation. Another trend that addressed the practical needs of professional women was the rise of vintage fashion. Because they were providing for themselves and controlling their own money, young professional women had incentive to save their money rather than spend it on relative frivolities such as new clothes. However, these women still wanted to look attractive trendy, so they turned to thrift shopping. Vintage fashions also allowed women to reclaim the old-fashioned ideas of femininity that the clothes represented – by wearing a dress originally intended for housework or a demure and proper courtship to their high-power jobs, these women were making a statement. They were celebrating and emphasizing their femininity as they succeeded, rather than attempting to mask it to pass in a male-dominated business – they were making the point that you can be a successful professional and be feminine at the same time, that being female is not a negative in the business world. The primary driver of this trend, however, was the money it could save young single women, who were supporting themselves for the first time in history. Rather than having an allotted amount of money doled out by their husbands to spend on frivolous things, these women needed to cover all their expenses from their paycheck alone, so they had to spend prudently. The rise of vintage fashion reflected women’s new roles as economic consumers in their own right.

However, while feminist fashion may have represented the changes America was undergoing, it did not represent America itself. While the most visible women of the 1960s and 70s were unabashed feminists, a significant portion of women remained more conservative in their views. These women, as well as many men, thought that revealing fashions such as the braless trend, miniskirts, and bikinis promoted sexual immorality and promiscuousness. Unlike the feminists, these people saw premarital sex as inherently sinful, and feared that the social shift towards its acceptance jeopardized the well-being of the country. Many women, especially those of the older generations, wouldn't be caught dead in any of those fashions. This same group of people – Nixon's Silent Majority – worried that the increase of women in the workforce would lead to the destruction of family life and traditional gender roles. Because of this, they did not take kindly to the idea of women adopting more masculine attire, such as jeans and short haircuts, which they saw as a sign of collapsing gender roles. The idea of women dressing in an androgynous manner was even more terrifying to them, hearkening back to old fears that women who studied and worked would actually turn into men. In this case, what they believed they faced was not a destruction just of gender norms, but of gender all together. Needless to say, these more radical styles were not accepted by the general population, and thus it's difficult to say that they truly represent America. Furthermore, some women consciously avoided these fashions as a political statement of their own. Phyllis Schlafly always dressed like a housewife from the 50s, to show that she was perfectly happy with life as it was back then, and she didn't see any need for changes in women's rights. In rejecting the clothes of the feminist movement, she rejected the movement itself. The women who followed her did the same, and the size of this group is proven by the success of their signature issue – preventing the passage of the ERA. Another point worth noting is that some of the most popular fashion trends of the time were more conservative than the feminist fashions that have been discussed. Jackie Kennedy was *the* style icon of the 60s, with her perfectly coiffed bouffant hairdo and pillbox hats. Her style was relatively conservative and markedly feminine compared to the feminist fashions – for example, her skirts always fell at or below her knees. As the most prominent fashion leader in the era, her clothing choices were accepted and replicated by millions of Americans, so it's fair to say that her style is the style of the 60s and 70s. Therefore, feminist fashions did not represent America in the 60s and 70s because they were far less conservative than what the general public wore.

Overall, feminist fashion did represent America in the 60s and 70s. While it may not have accurately described the popular fashion of the era, it mirrored the social change that was occurring at the time. And what are the 60s and 70s if not decades of change? By representing the dramatic change in the status of women, feminist fashion truly represented America in the time period.

References

Bourne, L. (2015). *A History of the Miniskirt: How Fashion's Most Daring Hemline Came To Be*. Retrieved from Style Caster: <https://stylecaster.com/history-of-the-miniskirt/>

This article covered the history of the miniskirt, from Roman times to the micro mini skirts of the early 2000s. It described the invention of the miniskirt by Mary Quant, as well as its entry into the mainstream. It focused the fact that the miniskirt reflected, rather than caused, the social changes of the 60s.

Dubitsky, M. (2018, October 15). How to Create an Authentic '60s Look. Retrieved from Central Casting: <https://www.centralcasting.com/how-create-authentic-60s-look/>

This article was intended to help people design outfits to match 60s style. Furthermore, since it's intended for background actors, the goal would be to look like the average person from the 60s, rather than a radical who would stand out in a crowd. Therefore, this source was ideal for finding information about the style followed by the majority of American women, rather than just the rebellious trendsetters.

George, K. (2018, March 22). *8 Current Fashion Trends That Belong To Feminists - Jeans*. Retrieved from Refinery 29: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/feminist-fashion-trends#slide-6>

This list emphasizes the longevity of many trends sparked by the feminists of the 60s and 70s. Nowhere is this more true than with jeans - what was once a daring and rebellious statement is now a vital and generally unremarkable part of every woman's wardrobe. It discusses the influence of hippie culture on the decision to adopt jeans, as well as the practical and political aspects.

George, K. (2018, March 22). *8 Current Fashion Trends That Belong To Feminists - Vintage Fashion*.

Retrieved from Refinery 29: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/feminist-fashion-trends#slide-8>

This list continues with vintage fashion, a trend that first began in the 70s. It shows how the growth of thrifting was tied to the rise of the new single woman lifestyle - young women had an incentive to save money, now that they were supporting themselves. By not buying new clothes, women were also intentionally snubbing the world of high fashion, where rich white men dictated the season's trends to maximize their own profits.

Idacavage, S. (2017, April 11). *Fashion History Lesson: The Bob Haircut, Feminism's Ultimate Style*

Statement. Retrieved from Fashionista: <https://fashionista.com/2017/04/bob-short-haircut-hairstyle-history>

This article traced the history of the bob hairstyle, from its origins in the early 1900s, to its widespread popularity in the 1920s, to its remission in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, and finally to its permanent reentrance into the mainstream in the 60s. The article thoroughly covered the controversy that the bob sparked, especially when first introduced.

Komar, M. (2016, November 17). *How Women Have Used Fashion As A Feminist Tool Throughout*

History. Retrieved from Bustle: <https://www.bustle.com/articles/191181-how-women-have-used-fashion-as-a-feminist-tool-throughout-history>

This article listed several feminist fashion statements throughout history. On the wrap dress in particular, it focused on its social significance to working women. It also included a quote from the designer as to why she had designed a dress with no zippers or snaps: "Well, if you're trying to slip out without waking a sleeping man, zips are a nightmare."

Lin, S. (2018, October 31). *The History of the No-Bra Movement*. Retrieved from CR Fashion Book:

<https://www.crfashionbook.com/fashion/g23601470/no-bra-movement-history/?slide=8>

This article, in honor of national No Bra day, traced the history of women choosing to go braless.

It included several examples from the time period of why women chose to go braless, including in protest and for the purpose of fashion and sex appeal (using the model Jerry Hall as an example). It also mentioned the most influential braless pop culture moments of the time, including Cybill Shepard's braless look under a wrap dress in the movie *Taxi Driver* and Blondie frontwoman Debbie Harry's signature look (pictured above).

Peimer, L. (2017, January 4). *Phyllis Schlafly: A Conservative Voice At The Schlesinger Library*. Retrieved from Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Harvard University:

<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/blog/phyllis-schlafly-conservative-voice-schlesinger-library>

This article was about Ms. Schlafly's participation in the conservative movement, rather than her fashion choices in particular. However, it discussed her attempts to present herself as the all-American housewife, which is clearly seen in her choice of dress for the protest pictured.

Therefore, it follows that the clothes she is pictured in would be quite common for the content housewives who followed her.

Turner, J. (2006). *A Brief History of the Bikini*. Retrieved from Slate: <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/07/history-of-the-bikini-how-it-came-to-america.html>

This article analyzes the history of the bikini, from its first appearances in Roman imagery to its widespread popularity today. It chronicles both the invention of the bikini and its slow journey to social acceptance. The image selected for the anthology, of a group of women running carefree down the beach in bikinis, was chosen in part because it stands in such stark contrast to

the initial reception of the swimsuit - a nude dancer was the only model willing to be photographed in a bikini for the initial publicity shoots.

Webb, A. (2018, August 27). *The Evolution of Feminist Style*. Retrieved from CR Fashion Book:

<https://www.crfashionbook.com/culture/a22736609/feminist-style-evolution-history/>

This article describes many feminist fashion trends, from the symbolic colors of the suffragettes to the "We Should All Be Feminists" tee shirts. A large portion of this article is devoted to the 60s and 70s, a testament to the immense social change of the time, as well as its reflection in fashion. On menswear in particular, the article discusses in detail its attraction to and influence on the everyday woman. It also mentions popularizers of the androgynous look, including Bianca Jagger (pictured), and Grace Jones.