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# The Evolution of the Skirt, its Alternatives and their Meaning in the Modern Era

By Thea Hwang

## Author Biography

Thea Hwang is a senior at Columbia Grammar & Preparatory School in New York, New York. She is interested in anthropology, sociology, and other social science subjects. In 2022, she launched a website, <https://www.newsilkroadproject.com>, to examine fashion through an environmental, ethical, and socio-cultural lens.

## Abstract

This article depicts the skirt as it morphs from a full-length, heavily petticoated Victorian silhouette to the mini and its trousered alternative from mid-19th century bloomers to the various pant styles worn by women today. Alongside these evolutions of women's dress, the larger socio-historical context in the United States and the women's movement as a whole are noted, in particular the continual cycle of developments in fashion adapting women's wardrobes to accommodate their changing role and place in society, which in turn feed further refinements in the design and function of womenswear. Despite the social progress in the U.S. from the 1850s to the 2020s, it would appear that an individual may dress exclusively to reflect their personal choice and identity only to the extent of any pre-existing privilege they enjoy. For women and girls, even with feminist movement in its fourth wave, recent litigation over school dress codes indicate that pants remain a gendered issue. And with gender increasingly understood as a complex rather than a binary identity and expression, the skirt returns to the conversation over social norms, this time for men and people read as men who may elect to wear the occasional skirt.

*Keywords: women's fashion, skirt, pants, dress reform, school dress codes, gendered clothing, gender bending dress*

## Introduction

American newspaper editor and women's rights advocate Amelia Bloomer did not mean to start a fashion revolution, but she kickstarted the re-entrance of pants into western women's wardrobes in the 1850s. With the emergence of bloomers, a nascent form of pants and alternative to skirts, women's fashion could signify social liberation and change, a progression which in turn is shaped by the design and use of clothes. The Dress Reformation movement (1850-1914), by innovating the design of pants for women, takes both the feminist movement and the feminine wardrobe to a critical turning point. During World War II, fashion again reflected societal change with women en masse putting on pants and jumpsuits to work in factories to support the war effort. Progress on the social and sartorial fronts seemingly marched forward in the ensuing decades.

Yet, an assumption that by the 21st century women are no longer constrained between skirts and pants in their day-to-day wardrobe choices would be premature, as recent litigation over school dress codes requiring girls to wear skirts indicate that pants on female bodies are still considered a gendered dress form. At the same time, another tipping point may be at hand with some men in major metropolitan areas like New York and Los Angeles choosing to wear skirts. The skirt is once again at the forefront of challenging gender norms in fashion and beyond. This paper traces the evolution of the skirt and its alternative, pants, in women's dress in the West over the past 150 years, while noting concurrent developments in the socio-historical context and women's status, and on reaching the 2020s, finds that even as contemporary conceptions of gender identity blur previously bright lines, becoming more fluid and less binary, much of today's considerations in dress remains rooted in gender, and in some cases an anachronistic interpretation thereof.

## Pre-Modern Western Sartorial History: A Summary

Pants and gendered clothing did not spontaneously emerge in western fashion. According to Adrienne Mayor, a classics scholar at Stanford University, the Scythians (a name the ancient Greeks

used for several nomadic horse-riding tribes from the Eurasian steppes) most likely invented pants for horseback riding. As tailored garments that required multiple pieces of fabric to be assembled together, pants were differentiated from, and more complicated than, the simple rectangular pieces of fabric that the Greeks pinned and draped to use as clothing. The pants worn by the Scythians, for which the oldest archeological fragments date back to 3,000 years ago, were non-gendered. Ancient Greek writings, and some depictions on painted vases, refer to Scythian women wearing pants (Bain, 2019).

The ancient Greeks never adopted pants and their draped tunic and cloak influenced Western dress for the next millennium. Up until the 14th and 15th centuries in the West, both men and women essentially wore long robes, or what might be termed a dress (Brucculieri, 2019). Around this time, men's robes began to shorten, revealing more of their undergarment or hose, which then evolved into outer garments or pants. Women continued wearing long skirts and a clearly defined line between men's and women's clothing developed (Brucculieri, 2019). With gendered clothing emerging, societal norms and, in some cases, laws arose to enforce this division. In 1431, a church tribunal relied on a biblical passage, Deuteronomy 22:5 ("A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a women's garment, for all who do are an abomination to the Lord your God"), to charge Joan of Arc, who wore armor which required the masculine attire of leggings and a form-fitting tunic underneath, with heresy and to burn her at the stake (Ford, 2021, p. 68). Notably, the quoted Bible verse does not actually require that pants be exclusively men's clothing and skirts, women's garments (Bain, 2019).

## 1850s: Dress Reform

In the April 1851 issue of *The Lily*, the first women's newspaper, editor Amelia Bloomer told readers about and printed patterns for "Turkish" pantaloons worn with a knee-length skirt, which became known as "bloomers" (Bain, 2019). This was Bloomer's accidental seeding of the Dress Reformation, a fashion revolution for women to wear pants. The Bloomerites, however, did not call for gender equality through pants. Instead, bloomers were portrayed as a safe, practical choice that would not,

unlike long skirts, hinder women in their performance of housekeeping and domestic chores (Bain, 2019). Despite this non-political bent, wearing pantaloons still challenged the harsh lines of gendered dress. Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw dress reform as part of the battle for women’s rights, saying she felt “like a captive set free from his ball and chain” in the pantaloons (Boissoneault, 2019).



*A cartoon of the bloomer costume. National Park Service / Library of Congress*

The Dress Reformation and bloomers only lasted a few years, partly because women did not find bloomers all that flattering (Bain, 2019). Women returned to full-length skirts, which had become more palatable with the new invention of crinoline, a light wire under the skirt that created the bell effect that was possible before only with many layers of petticoats. According to Bloomer, women left behind the Dress Reformation because “[w]e all felt that the dress was drawing attention from what we thought of far greater importance—the question of woman’s right to better

education, to a wider field of employment, to better remuneration for her labor, and to the ballot for the protection of her rights” (Boissoneault, 2019).

This view of the Dress Reformation as a distraction from the fight for women’s rights was shared by other prominent feminists. In a letter, Susan B. Anthony lamented that attention was paid to her clothes rather than to her advocacy (Bain, 2019). The above quotation from Bloomer not only explains why the Dress Reformation ended, but also hints at the role fashion can play in the feminist movement. In the late 1800s, as women were fighting for the vote, better education, and access to the job market, the ability to wear pants distracted from issues more central to women’s rights and women’s position in society. Yet, even as first wave feminists conceded to the political practicalities of the time, the fact that arguments for “a radical sartorial reworking of clothing in form and function based on a desire for bodily liberation, utility, and sexual equality” (Strassel, 2012, p. 40) by women had been brought forth. The “transformation of [women’s] embodied experience as a worthy goal” (Strassel, 2012, p. 39) and the fit and function of fashion had been introduced as a political issue and it would persist.

## **1920s-1940s: Jazz Age to World War II**

Ironically, “the phrase dress reform disappeared in the 1920s precisely at the moment when the goals of rationalized dress became naturalized—when they moved from the realm of marginal social movements and instead were adopted by the mainstream

fashion industry itself” (Strassel, 2012, p. 40). This was the age of the flapper, a figure synonymous with *The Great Gatsby*, Prohibition era jazz clubs, and roaring ‘20s’ excesses, but also a look that upended conventional gender norms. The flapper’s “[s]heath dresses were form-fitting in the way the men’s suit was form-fitting: for the first time, women’s clothing skimmed the body. The flapper look was angular, athletic, and boyish.

In this sense, the flapper-like androgynous dressers since Joan of Arc—claimed masculine prerogative by adopting masculine sartorial symbolism. This suggested sexual liberation” (Ford, 2012, p. 144). Provocatively, flappers’ sleeveless sheaths exposed their arms and, yet more scandalously, their legs with the unprecedented rise of hemlines, first to women’s mid-calves, then their knees. While the flapper look may have kept the form of the skirt, the changes brought about in silhouette and length were revolutionary on a scale akin to the introduction of pants into womenswear—the fact that women had two legs was no longer obscured and women’s legs in flapper’s stockings were even less covered in fabric as compared to pants. The flapper was a highly visible symbol of the times. Behind this image were social, economic, and political changes affecting women’s place in U.S. society, and by extension attire. The growing popularity of sports starting in the late 1800s, especially cycling (one magazine editor referred to women’s cycling as an “almost compulsory activity in the modern women’s movement” (Muellner, 2006, p. 167)), helped encourage less cumbersome clothing for women. Socioeconomic changes included women entering the workforce in large numbers as

men were sent to the warfront of World War I.



In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment extended the vote to American women, removing that legal barrier to full citizenship. These new freedoms in physical, economic, and political activity underpinned the flapper style, which both fed on and drove further changes for women. For instance, flappers signaled their distaste for the gender norms of the times and their limitations on women by “shedding their corsets, chopping their hair” in addition to adopting the shorter sheath dress (Rosenstock, 2023).

Flapper fashions, being lightweight and body-skimming, allowed for ease of movement and communicated a rational

sensibility. This represented a dramatic break from the ornamentation, heavy draping, and cumbersome padding of preceding dress conventions. “This shift, from clothing that symbolized femininity while obscuring most of the actual female body to clothing that expressed the feminine form by suggesting its actual contours, was a visual manifesto for gender equality, an implicit statement that women’s bodies were fit for public view and physically capable too” (Ford, 2021, p. 150). The flapper was a visual statement for gender equality. Before the flapper, femininity was symbolized with clothing that covered most of a woman’s body. By contrast, the flapper’s dress revealed the contours of a feminine body and, in doing so, asserted that women’s bodies need not be hidden and could be seen. This celebration of the female body was an application of the ideals of modernism—embracing form and rejecting ornamentation. In this sense, the flapper claimed some of male privilege.



*Hellen Hulick appearing in court wearing pants on Nov. 14, 1938. Andrew Arnott / Los Angeles Times Archive / UCLA*

While the flapper was the dominant female image of the 1920s, pants continued to infiltrate womenswear. Through the second half of the 1920s, French designer Coco Chanel helped bring menswear staples such as tailored jackets and trousers into women’s wardrobes (Bain, 2019). Chanel herself “was often photographed. . .wearing loose, sailor-style trousers, known as ‘yachting pants’. The most fashionable young women started to wear trousers for leisure pursuits” (Mendes, 1999, p. 72). Then and into the 1930s, Hollywood actresses like Marlene Dietrich began wearing pants on a more regular basis, shocking audiences by appearing in tuxedos and double-breasted suits in the films *Morocco* (1930), *Blonde Venus* (1932), and *Seven Sinners* (1940) (Michael Andrews Bespoke).

For regular women however, pants were not acceptable wear. In 1938, teacher Helen Hulick arrived in pants at a Los Angeles courtroom to testify as a trial witness, but was sent home and told to return in a dress; when she showed up again in pants, she was held in contempt (although the citation was later overturned) and given a five-day jail sentence (Downey, 2017). Dietrich herself was refused entry into a famed Los Angeles restaurant in 1933 for turning up in pants; The Los Angeles Times reported it would be several decades before that restaurant lifted its ban on female patrons wearing pants (Bain, 2019).

With World War II, unprecedented numbers of women worked in factories to support the national economy and wore pants as their mandated uniform. Although wearing pants was not necessarily their choice, just the fact that more women were wearing pants helped normalize and popularize pants as womenswear. “Though donning overalls and jeans, clothes associated with rough masculinity, initially seemed ‘very odd,’ even embarrassing, some war workers only reluctantly returned to dresses after leaving the factory for office, retail, or other spaces of women’s labor. For slacks—along with having ‘your hair tied up’ and wearing ‘a welder’s helmet’—brought. . . ‘liberation.’ Pants, associated with hegemonic masculinity, could signify power and freedom” (Boris, 2006, p. 123).

### **1960s-1990s: Counterculture to the Power Suit**

1960s America roiled with change, from the civil rights movement and anti-war protests to counterculture influences and second wave feminism. The iteration of the skirt during this era of change was the mini. The rise of the mini skirt is often credited to British designer Mary Quant, although she herself attributed the mini skirt to the young women on the street (Calahan & Zachary, 2019). The ever-increasing numbers of women entering higher education and the workforce, the spreading ideals and calls for democracy and equality, and the introduction of the birth control pill all formed a tapestry of change in the 1960s that included a youth-led whole cloth change in who was making and consuming fashion (Calahan & Zachary, 2019). One expression of change in the “youthquake” fashion revolution was

embodied by the mini skirt, with young women no longer wanting to dress like their mothers. The mini skirt could perhaps be said to represent the end point of the skirt’s evolution, as the counterpoint to the full, heavy, floor-length skirts of the mid-1850s. Following the mini’s arrival, hemlines would rise or fall and skirt shapes adapt to trends, but any of these iterations would fall within the spectrum anchored on one end by the Victorian silhouette and on the other by the mini.

The 1960s also saw the increasing normalization of pants as womenswear. This is perhaps best exemplified by American actress Mary Tyler Moore in her role as the lead character’s spouse on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, the iconic television situation comedy that ran from 1961-1966. Over the objections of the show’s sponsors, Moore sneaked pants into her character’s wardrobe more and more until fitted capri pants became her signature look (Bain, 2019). Moore would have an even greater influence in women’s fashion and second wave feminism when she became the lead in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which ran from 1970-1977 and was a first in American television for having a single working woman as its central character. Despite this groundbreaking premise, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not unequivocally feminist. While Mary embodied many of the advancements sought by first wave feminism, having the right to work, vote, and handle her own business transactions, all this fell short of second wave feminists’ demands for equality (Fuselier, 2016, pp. 5-6). The “moderate, subtle nature of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*” showed a “relatable side of feminism” (Fuselier, 2016, p. 6), whereas second wave feminism, as a

radical movement, ran into opposition on many fronts in the United States.

As foreshadowed by The Mary Tyler Moore Show and inspired by the women's movement, many American women wore their pantsuits and miniskirts into workplaces and schools, and these styles became accepted womenswear at many of these venues by the 1970s (Hillman, 2013, p. 156). Yet, as feminists who promoted the freedom of choice in dress pushed American society to accept changing fashions such as pantsuits and miniskirts for women, gender-bending dress, like women wearing pants, in challenging broader societal conceptions of sex roles and femininity was connected to a politics of gender (Hillman, 2013, p. 156). Questions that divided second wave feminists were “[d]id nontraditional, androgynous, or ‘masculine’ self-presentations help to create a new feminist version of womanhood, free from socially constructed gender roles? Or did rejecting traditional feminine gender presentation signal that feminists sought to abandon their heterosexual female identities?” (Hillman, 2013, p. 157)

Ultimately, a woman's self-presentation was a question of “what it meant to be a woman in an era of woman's liberation” (Hillman, 2013, p. 157). The era's iteration of the skirt, the mini, and its more widespread use of pants by women signaled that more options in terms of hemlines and tailored wear versus drapery were available to women of the 1960s and 1970s. Importantly, the feminized miniskirt and the more masculine pants were not mutually exclusive options for women. It should also be noted that the “nontraditional, androgynous, or ‘masculine’ presentation option, in moving

further away from traditional, socially constructed gender roles, helped open up possibilities for people who may be gender queer, though transgender was still far from being commonly accepted as an identity.

By the 1980s, the power suit had arrived for women, who adopted the traditional business suit into their wardrobes. The 1980s' power suit, however, generally paired a jacket with a skirt. For another decade or so, pantsuits remained less common and were generally deemed inappropriate attire for women in corporate boardrooms or as members of the bar arguing before the courts. For instance, until 1993 there was an unofficial rule that women in the U.S. Senate could not wear pants (Bain, 2019). In the halls of power, it would seem that pantsuits, due to their gendered association, took longer to gain acceptance than skirt suits. Ironically, these were the very spaces that second wave feminists fought hard for entry into and, once having gotten their feet in the door, competed to succeed on the same metrics as their male counterparts. Perhaps as some women started to break down the gender barriers in government, law, and business, the patriarchy sensed the threat to their previously, exclusively-gendered chokehold on power and sought to hold back women's professional progress in less explicit ways, such as attire. Such a move would not be dissimilar to the challenge faced by first wave feminists and the dress reform movement when bloomers first appeared over a century earlier.

## The New Millenium

Today in the U.S., women’s right to wear pants persists as a question rooted in gender. For most, pants have become a wardrobe staple that can be worn in formal or informal, public or private spaces. Yet, two recent incidents underscore that pants remain a gendered, and potentially controversial, clothing item for women and girls. In March 2019, senior Hannah Kozak was surprised to learn that female students at her Pennsylvania high school were barred from wearing pants under their cap and gown at graduation. Kozak had to take numerous steps just to be able to wear pants: she spoke to the teacher who was her senior class advisor; she contacted the school principal; she presented her argument in front of the school board; she then received special permission to wear pants, but deeming an individual dispensation insufficient, called her local television news station. It was only after the media interviewed Kozak and reached out to the school for comment that the district reversed the rule, allowing all students to wear professional business attire, including pants, to their commencement ceremony (Mettler, 2019).

The second instance started in 2016 and needed litigation to resolve in June 2023. A North Carolina K-8 charter school had a dress code requiring girls to wear skirts, and not pants or shorts, as part of its “traditional values.” The girls found skirts less comfortable on a daily basis and less warm in winter than pants; wearing skirts forced them to pay constant attention to the positioning of their legs during class and led them to avoid certain activities, such as climbing or playing sports during recess, for fear of exposing

their undergarments and being reprimanded by teachers or teased by boys; they argued that the skirts rule sent a message that girls’ comfort and freedom to engage in physical activity were less important than those of boys. Students and their parents challenged the school’s skirts requirement as sex discrimination under the U.S. Constitution’s Equal Protection Clause. In 2019, the trial judge agreed that “[t]he skirts requirements causes the girls to suffer a burden the boys do not, simply because they are female” (Mervosh, 2019). In 2022, the full U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit agreed that the skirts requirement violated the girls’ rights, observing it was “difficult to imagine a clearer example of a rationale based on impermissible gender stereotypes” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023). The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the case in June 2023, leaving the appellate decision as final.

Over 100 years after pants had developed into an alternative to skirts for women’s attire, it would seem that pants have not fully shed their gendered connotations when worn by a female body. “[M]ost gendered clothing doesn’t refer to human biology; instead it reflects a social convention. ‘Women’s clothing’ isn’t clothing that is especially suited to female bodies—it is simply any clothing that women typically wear. This means that every transgression of gender norms is also a potential revision of those norms: if enough women wear pants, then pants will become women’s clothing” (Ford, 2021, p. 263). While many might find this statement self-evident, it also does not reflect the reality of 2024. Even as women’s position in society has advanced and many

stultifying gender norms have receded, the gender pay gap has stayed much the same for the past 20 years. According to the Pew Research Center, “in 2022, American women typically earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men” (Kochhar, 2023). The continued hetero-normative domination of the power structures of society and the media and the persistence and weight of “traditional values,” as exemplified by the school dress code cases, signal that today’s world remains gendered and hence the visual cues of dress will be interpreted on gendered lines.

In the United States today, as fashion is a highly visible form of expression, perhaps women should dress for impact and with voice. Women can continue to wear pants in everyday life as a matter of course as well as embrace and fight for wearing pants as a statement of power and personality. Hillary Clinton, well-known for her pantsuit uniform, used this sartorial choice to both fit in with her male counterparts but also stand apart from them, a visual reminder that as a woman running for President she was different from the male candidates but also familiar (King & Allen, 2020). Fashion historian Cassidy Zachary noted that despite women having by now worn pants for decades, pants “maintain this idea of power, of independence, control” over the body and is still “viewed as a very feminist statement, to this day” (Bruculieri, 2019). As such, the female actors and musical artists who have chosen pants for highly publicized red carpet events over the traditional formal gowns make a statement and actively shape the fashion conversation. Famously, Lady Gaga wore an oversized suit for the 2018 Women in Hollywood celebration as an act of self-empowerment: “As a sexual assault survivor

by someone in the entertainment industry, as a woman who is still not brave enough to say his name, as a woman who lives with chronic pain, as a woman who was conditioned at a very young age to listen to what men told me to do, I decided today I wanted to take the power back. Today I wear the pants” (Bruculieri, 2019).

If pants remain a transgressive form of dress for women, at least in some contemporary settings, then for men or people read as men to wear skirts would be taboo. In 2016, actor Jaden Smith wore a Louis Vuitton skirt for the designer’s womenswear advertising campaign. The New York Times’ fashion critic described Smith’s modeling of the skirt as not gender neutral or gender bending or gender free, but in fact, entirely gendered, because the modeled “clothes and their conceptual allegiance have not changed at all” since Smith is “not a man in transition. . . or a man wearing clothing that looks as if it could be worn by either gender. . . . He is a man who happens to be wearing obviously female clothes.” (Friedman, 2016). Actor and singer Billy Porter similarly crossed gender dress lines on numerous occasions, including in a fusion of tuxedo jacket and ultra-puffy gown at the 2019 Academy Awards. Musician Harry Styles marked a milestone as the first male to have a solo cover on the iconic fashion magazine *Vogue* and did so in a Gucci gown to challenge gender-based clothing stereotypes. These instances of men wearing skirts cross gender lines, but have not brought widespread change in standard masculine attire, even as some men today in major metropolitan areas in the U.S. don the occasional skirt. As gender has started being viewed as less binary and more of a fluid identity, more options for gender-neutral

or bending dressing have also materialized, leading to the question as to where the skirt and pants fall on this identity spectrum. As individuals aspire to an era of wear-what-you-want, dress as a visual medium exists within the larger society and may never escape the eyes and judgment of the beholder.

## Conclusion

This article traced the evolution of the skirt from the Victorian era to the mini and its alternative from bloomers to the various styles of pants worn by women today. Even in 2024, with the seeming freedom to wear-what-you-want, the conflict between individual choice and social norms persists. Increasingly, gender has come to be understood in the United States as complex and multi-faceted, more of a fluid rather than binary identity, leading to expectations that traditional gendered dress codes would fall away as outdated social constructs are discarded. This may be true to a certain extent and perhaps as a gradual and not always linear progression, but will an individual's dress ever be purely a reflection of their identity? Or will it remain a function of privilege—that an individual will have unfettered freedom to express themselves in dress only to the extent they possess pre-existing privilege and apparent social standing? In the case of women, whose position has clearly advanced in the roughly 150 years covered in this brief history of the skirt and its alternative, but yet school dress codes imposing the skirt on girls at the expense of individual choice persist well into the 21st century. As some men and genderfluid or transgender people today choose to wear skirts, will that choice be accepted and held up for the privileged

and opposed and denied when the wearer lacks status? Gendered dress may evolve as social norms shift, sometimes ahead of and other times behind the prevailing values, but as a highly visible medium dress will always shape a person's relationship to their physical self as a body covering, to their social self as a sartorial language read and received by the larger world, and to their inner self through the expression of identity.

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