

Fashion in the Victorian Era

Victorian style and fashion is closely identified with the reign of England's Queen Victoria, who ascended to the throne as young girl in 1837 and remained sovereign until her death in 1901. Before Victoria's reign, men were the focus of fashion, but with a queen in power, women's fashions moved to the forefront and their clothing styles changed dramatically over the 19th century.

In the pre-hoop era, from the 1840s to the mid 1850s, full skirts were supported by a vast array of petticoats. The waist dropped on some bodices to slightly below the natural waistline. Sleeves started out as plain and tight, but the wrist began to open and by the end of the decade, had expanded into the pagoda



sleeve, a style that in one form or another, would endure until the early 1870s. There were both day and evening bodices for women, Daytime necklines could be more open than those of later years, but evening bodices were made with short tight sleeves and a very low décolletage, boldly defying the demureness practiced during the day. Shawls were very fashionable outerwear but the jacket bodice was quickly developing into a more stylish alternative.

Skirts expanded as more and more petticoats were worn. While the emergence of the crinoline in the mid-1850s, provided freedom from all those layers, skirts which had previously reached maximum width could to expand even farther. Flounces, rows and rows of them, were added to the skirts, but the hardships of the Civil War caused a decline in the amount of fabrics and trimmings used in dressmaking. The excessive flounces became fewer and fewer and finally disappeared.

During the 1860s, the skirt widths began to diminish at the hips and the silhouette began to change to a smoother, far more back-weighted design, so much so that it often had a train, even for day wear. The



skirts were often looped up for walking, revealing a pretty petticoat. The 1860s also saw a change to the bodice, as the waistline began to rise above natural level. Before the decade was over, the 'back' became the new focus of attention, with overskirts, drapery and apron-like tunics adding to the volume, creating the elaborate and slightly uncomfortable-looking silhouette. By 1869, the hoop is replaced with the bustle.

The early bustle era of the 1870s saw the short and high waisted ordinary dress bodice soon descend to its natural level, with the bottom of the bodice extending beyond the waist. These figure-hugging bodices, created by the heavily boned corsets of the day, started the new emphasis on the hour-glass figure. By 1873, Bodices became longer and longer, and by 1873, the 'polonaise', a bodice and overskirt in one garment, emerged.

Skirts were trained both for day and evening wear and layers of petticoats were worn to keep the dress from trailing through the dirt. Dust ruffles were often added to the added to the inside of the train to help as



well. While the bustle began to dwindle in size, the excess fabric remained. A more vertical line started to appear and the silhouette began to change subtly to a more natural form. After the walking length skirt was re-introduced in 1878.

In the late 1870s, a tall, slim figure was considered fashionable and each year, the skirts become narrower and the bodices longer. Almost every dress is trained, including walking dresses. Necklines for day wear become more conservative at the end of the decade either open in a small 'V' or high with a collar.

By 1880, skirts are very slim and the train begins to disappear. Theatre exerts an increasingly dominant influence on fashion. Skirt draperies became more bouffant, especially behind, and a new shelf-like bustle returns with a vengeance, and persisted until the end of the 1880s. The bustle speedily went out of favor in 1889 and almost overnight, a very slim, perpendicular silhouette emerged in 1890.

Late Victorian women embraced the sharper tailored jacket fashion, giving them a different posture and



more confident air. Skirts in 1890 were cut in three to five gored panels, narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, or in the alternative, one-piece circular 'umbrella' style. The bustle had disappeared, this time for good. The waist remained as tight as ever as bodices continued to be heavily boned. As the skirts became plainer, the focus switched to the bodice, which began to explode with layers and frills. By 1896, sleeves had reached their widest limit. Hats were very fashionable and their popularity in the 1890s reached great heights.

Towards the end of the decade, sleeves had slimmed considerably and the corset shape had changed to the "S" curve, a healthier alternative to the hour-glass silhouette. The bodice became looser in front and pouched very slightly over the belt, showing beginnings of the full breasted, pigeon look of the Edwardian period. Skirts lost most of their stiffening and some of their width. Dresses evolved into suits and the 'skirt and blouse' look was born. The brash, gay nineties began to give way to something softer and more luxurious as the Victorian age transformed into the Edwardian style in the last years of the century.

Some interesting fashion links:

- [The Antique Corset Gallery](#)
- [Bissonette on Costume](#)
- [The Ladies Treasury of Costume and Fashion](#)
- [Hairstyle Gallery](#)
- [Vintage Fashion Guild](#)
- [Univeristy of Washington Fashion Plate Collection](#)