

Collectible Fashions

of the Turbulent 1930s

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With Price Guide



A Schiffer Book for Designers and Collectors

Preface

The history of mankind has always influenced the trends in fashion. The predominant styles of the 20th century are a reflection of the events, wars, economy, new technology, morals, customs, prominent individuals, fashion designers, and the prevailing mood of the period. There is also a strong correlation between fashion and the decorative arts, architecture, and interior design of an era. Therefore, once you are able to "read" them, fashions from the past can give you clues to the social and cultural history of the period in which they were worn. Those studying the history of costume will find it more interesting and easier to understand and remember if they can relate the styles of a period to the events which influenced them. The objects pictured on the following pages chronicle the 1930s, a period of economic instability in our nation's history, and the many lighthearted diversions designed to relieve or temporarily escape the doldrums of the Depression.

This is a "cross-over" book which will appeal to a variety of readers. The comprehensive text and hundreds of color photographs will keep dealers and collectors of vintage clothing and accessories well informed. It will also prove a valuable resource for period costumers and a source of inspiration for contemporary fashion designers. Cultural historians will enjoy the interplay between fashion and history.

The format of this book was designed primarily to meet the needs of two types of readers. First, are those with a genuine interest in all facets of vintage fashion. These readers usually study the book cover to cover, absorbing all they can about clothing and accessories of the decade. Second, are those researching a particular garment or accessory. These readers will find that the text has been organized by chapter and further by heading and subheading, affording easy access to the desired information. The author hopes that everyone else with an interest in fashion will also find this book useful and entertaining.

Women's fashions were extremely diverse and subject to numerous style changes within the decade. To adequately discuss the many facets of women's wear, it was necessary to devote eleven chapters to the task. One chapter was devoted to men's wear and one to children's wear as these fashions were less diverse and changes in style were less frequent.

France has been the arbiter of fashion since the days of Louis XIV; therefore, many terms throughout this text are in the French language. The glossary, located at the back of the book, contains the definitions and phonetic pronunciations of French words, along with other terms specific to this discipline.

The values of objects pictured in this book have been placed in the captions for your convenience. Prices vary greatly according to the craftsmanship, overall design, size, color, condition, rarity, and the intrinsic value of the materials. Current fashion trends and the location of the market are also determining factors. The price ranges offered here reflect these variations and are merely a guide.



Chapter 1

Historical Overview

Fashion has always been a mirror of what transpired during any given period and the decade of the 1930s was no exception. The following events, technology, art movements, designers, and Hollywood films helped to shape the decade known as the thirties and influenced the fashions worn during this period.

The Economy

The 1920s had been a period of great prosperity and conspicuous spending. Just when many people were learning to enjoy their new found wealth, however, the good life came to an abrupt end. Millions of Americans had been buying shares of stock on credit, forcing stock prices well above their true value. When analysts issued warnings about the unstable financial conditions, people lost confidence in the economy and a state of panic developed. Investors hastily sold off millions of shares of stock and stormed the banks in an attempt to withdraw their savings. This led to the stock market crash on October 4, 1929, which sent the country reeling into a new decade with a very ominous future. Many people lost their lifes' savings overnight and twelve million workers were out of a job.

Fashion

The depression which followed the crash created a need to economize at all levels of society. The degree to which this economizing was necessary, however, was relative to the individual. For those fortunate members of the leisure class who survived the crash, it might simply mean canceling the order for that extravagant diamond bracelet or doing without a new fur coat. For them the effects of the depression were not as overwhelming and many could go on about their daily lives in their usual fashion. For some, the harsh effects of the depression began to subside towards the middle of the decade. For those on the lower end of the economic scale, however, life became a constant struggle to make ends meet. "Hand-me-downs" and mended clothing became the order of the day. Unfortunately, the depression widened the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Although the haves represented only a small minority of the population, their influence on fashion was considerable. This book will focus on the fashions worn by upper and middle class men, women, and children during the 1930s.

Since the depression effected the fashion industry on every level, cost became a primary concern from *haute couture* to

ready-to-wear. In order to survive, the *couture* houses of Paris responded to the faltering economy with a number of prudent measures. Designers abandoned the expensive bead work so popular during the 1920s. Instead, they focused their attention on sophisticated cut and fluid lines to create designs with a graceful, timeless elegance.

During the teens and twenties, American buyers attended Paris shows and returned to the U.S. with original *couture* fashions which they either resold or copied for the mass market at lower prices. After the crash, however, United States customs discouraged foreign imports by placing duties on original *couture* creations. This rendered Paris originals too expensive for many small retailers to import. To cut their losses French fashion houses produced inexpensive *toiles* (muslin or linen patterns of original designs) which they were permitted to sell duty free to American retailers. To increase their volume of sales, most *couture* houses developed their own *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear) lines and created boutiques in which to sell them. Some resourceful designers made use of inexpensive fabrics which, in the past, were considered too humble for *couture* creations. Chanel and Patou produced striking summer evening wear using economical cottons such as eyelet, organdy, piqué, and lace.

In an effort to cut costs and lower prices manufacturers like Berth Roberts, Fifth Avenue Modes, and Betty Wales Creations offered garments to "finish-at-home." The following excerpts from a 1935 Berth Roberts pamphlet explained this new concept: "...any model which you select, will be made exactly in accordance with your own individual measurements... expert tailors complete every bit of the difficult sewing for you; they make the collars, cuffs, belts, etc. and finish all the work on the intricate new necklines, shoulders, and sleeves and... your garment comes to you in a few completely-made parts...all that's left for you to sew are the seams and the hem."

In order to update their wardrobes with new longer dresses, many working-class women had no choice but to make their own clothing. Recognizing this trend, the yard goods section of the 1931 Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog used catch phrases such as "In the spirit of smart economy." Readers were encouraged to "Save by making your coat or suit." Thousands of women took up knitting and crocheting to create inexpensive yet stylish dresses, sweaters, hats, gloves, and even handbags.



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