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Sewing Sacrifice: American Women’s Fashions and Clothing in World War II

Perhaps because fashion seems to be a more frivolous topic, most research or works on the topic are descriptive, rather than analytical, and focus on symbolism above all else. Fashion historian Annemarie Strassel argues that the subject is approached with too much caution about the significance, or lack of, surrounding the evolution of style. “Taken as a whole,” she notes, “the feminist potential of fashion has been limited to its visual or symbolic power, distinct from any kind of meaningful material transformation of women's lived experience.”¹ Scholars also tend to place most of their attention on specific designers, rather than women themselves, as a group, influencing culture. For, without the historically feminine tradition and knowledge of clothing-making, fashion itself would not be the strong industry it is today, and it certainly would not carry the same cultural context that is used to interpret the times from which it comes.

The study of historical fashion can reveal a wealth of information about the social structures, economics, technology, values, and so much more from a particular time or place. While symbolic power is indeed important, one should also acknowledge the lasting effects of transformation in dress, and the potential changes in meaning of a particular style. As one follows the evolution of clothing between decades, it becomes evident that World War II was a significant influence on the world of not only high fashion, but also ready-to-wear clothing, which tends to imitate couture as best as it can. Not only did the conflict affect fashion, fashion

itself played an important role during the war because it simultaneously reflected and stimulated the values of sacrifice and patriotism that were so emphasized in that time and created an environment that allowed women to step into new roles.

The clothing produced during the late 1930’s and early 1940’s was very much intended to make people, especially women, feel that they were playing an important part in the war, whether that meant advocating for American goods, going beyond what ration guidelines required, or joining the military and proudly wearing the uniform that embodied all that the U.S. stood for. The end of the war brought about another change for women in America that was also reflected in and reinforced by fashion. With the return of the soldiers, women were expected to abandon the sort of independence and liberation from traditional roles that they had enjoyed during the war and return to being little more than housewives and mothers. Many returning men anticipated life to be more or less the same as before the war, if not more enjoyable. In accordance with this desire, the fashion world turned, and began to revolve around “reclaiming femininity”. All in all, the 1940’s are a prime example of how fashion can be such a big influence on people, no matter the conditions or ideals of society. The development of style reflected and reinforced the changing concerns and ideals of society when it came to the roles and expectations for women during those times. Finding ways for style to accommodate rations, as well as uniforms and military-inspired clothing, allowed people to feel a sense of contribution to their country while also giving off the idea that progress was happening. Although one might think that a seemingly trivial thing such as fashion would struggle to remain relevant during a conflict such as World War II, the 1940’s proved clothing to be more than an expression of taste, a demonstration of wealth, or a symbol of a movement.
The 1930’s: Transitioning from Depression to War

For many, the 1930’s was a time of devastation, while for the American elite it seemed to be the age of French fashion and glamour. The Great Depression had resulted in fabric being much cheaper than ready-made clothing, and many victims of the market crash had little choice but to make their own. In the early thirties, women’s fashion tended to be a little more ornate and loose-fitting, with fuller skirts and unique designs. Formal and semi-formal wear was floor length, while casual clothing went to just below the knee. The typical woman might wear a dress that reached the middle of her calf, and had a neckline no lower than her clavicle. From there, any variation depended upon financial class and personal style. Girls and women from lower income households often wore clothing that was handed down and altered, or even completely homemade, although the former was much easier and less time consuming. Color was not particularly important, although it was probably considered depending on the weather, as lighter colors would keep one cool in the summer while dark colors retained heat in the colder months.

Middle class women could afford to have more ornamentation and embellishment. Clothing often featured floral patterns, belts, and pleats or ruffles. Rounded collars were quite popular, as were short sleeved sweaters and blouses. Working women might have had a variety of tops and skirts they could rotate through. Cotton was the most widely used fabric, as it came in a range of weights and prices. Another favorite was crepe fabric, which was flowy and draped well while still being sturdy and thick enough to not be seen through, a common issue with cheaper fabrics. It could be made with cotton, silk, rayon, or any combination of the three. Yet,

no matter the fabric or print or cut, Americans could still take a certain amount of pride and material dignity in their clothing. Fashion history author and curator JoAnne Olian notes, “the high-quality and spirited style of America’s clothing, at every price level, is one of the hallmarks of our society.” Mass produced, ready-to-wear clothing had already become quite popular, particularly in rural areas with limited access to retail stores. Companies such as Sears and Macy’s delivered enormous catalogues for the entire family to peruse, with each new line of clothing attempting to mimic French design and ignore the hardships brought on by the Depression. Mass production promised a sense of eliteness and creative “style” at a fraction of the cost. The ability to purchase new clothing, although not the most expensive, itself was a luxury and an indication that one had not been beaten by misfortune.

On the other end of the spectrum, high society turned a blind eye to the woes of the lower classes. At age seventeen, Brenda Frazier was arguably the one of the most famed women in America in 1938. She spent her days dining at trendy new restaurants, modeling for soap advertisements, and dancing until the early morning with other recognizable socialites and celebrities. She was the Glamor Girl of the year, known simply for her carefree and extravagant lifestyle, the staple of what was called the “Café Society.” The Café Society was a small circle comprised of actors, old money, new money, photographers, dancers, models, foreign royalty, and anyone who had survived the Depression with their wealth relatively intact. The frequented former speakeasies, debut balls, and dance clubs, all the while garnering as much publicity as possible. They were the greatest consumers of French couture fashion, custom made clothing

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dreamt up by designers, constructed by their workers from a drawing, hand sewed and beaded, and shipped across the Atlantic, only to be worn a few times at most. This system, while only catering to a few, influenced all levels of fashion across the world, and maintained that image of prestige and opulence into the war, until forced to change.

The typical design process is extremely long and arduous, especially in **haute couture**, the highest level of fashion designated by the French government, and has not changed much since even before the 1930s. It begins with the designers creating a collection of looks to be shown on the runway, sketching silhouettes and planning color palettes. Often, the sketch is given to the workshop, called the **atelier**, where the workers are charged with bringing the designer’s sketch to life. Sketches can be as unspecific as those pictured below, some are more abstract and disproportionate, but it is usually the job of the atelier to know how to achieve the look that the designer wants. They use a method called draping, which involves pinning fabric to a model and constructing a prototype of the garment three-dimensionally. Once it appears to match the designer’s vision, the fabric is trimmed to shape and taken down from the model to be a flat pattern, which serves as a guide for cutting the actual garment. Then they can begin working on the piece that will be shown on the runway. The fabric is chosen, sometimes needing to be sent out to be dyed, pleated, embroidered, or any other special modifications that cannot be done in the designer’s **atelier**. Then the workers put together the garment, sewing on embellishments like beads or ribbon by hand. The amount of work that goes into a single piece is astounding, even the most simple pieces can take around seventy hours of work before appearing on the runway. A more decorated garment could take over two hundred hours.\(^5\) The “finished” piece is shown

amongst the rest of the designer’s collection in a fashion show, which occurs twice a year. In the audience sit the wealthy and influential, viewing the pieces with the intent to review or to purchase. After a garment is debuted on the runway and purchased, the client themselves goes through numerous fittings to ensure that the piece is comfortable and complementary, with the tiniest of features adjusted each time. Ginette Spanier, who was the director of the House of Balmain from 1947 to 1976, likens fashion to fine art. “The finished the garment, impeccable in every detail, is the only, the ultimate, aim.”6 She describes how when a design is in process, things such as cost of material and the hours of work are irrelevant and can be quantified later. All that matters is the creation of a truly beautiful and unique work.

7 Richard E. Myers, "The Latest Fashions Via the Air: The Sketches on this Page were Sent to Us by Radio--Cables and Telephone Bring Us the News", Ladies’ Home Journal, Vol. 48, Iss. 11, (Nov 1931), 32.
American designer Elizabeth Hawes was a harsh and vocal critic of French designers, not only because of their exclusivity, but also because of their departure from true ability and knowledge. In 1938, she published *Fashion is Spinach*, arguing against both French couture and American mass production, which she claimed to not have the true interests or shape of women in mind. She writes, “I’ve become convinced that ninety five percent of the business of fashion is a useless waste of time and energy as far as the public is concerned… The only useful purpose that changes in fashion can possibly have is to give a little additional gaiety to life.”

Even amongst lower-level couture designers, the system of creating new styles each season had far too much influence over the rest of the clothing industry and society in general. As mass produced, ready-to-wear fashions mimicked the trends set by couture, the clothing that was available in stores and shown in catalogs also changed very frequently, and women’s and fashion magazines emphasized the supposed importance of staying up to date while creating a sort of social stigma against not doing so. Hawes complains, “Fashion is that horrid little man with an evil eye who tells you that your last winter's coat may be in perfect physical condition, but you can’t wear it. You can’t wear it because it has a belt and this year ‘we are not showing belts.’”

Criticizing the uselessness of the very concept of fashion, Hawes depicted it as simply another tool of enforcing social boundaries and division between classes. Fashion had for long time been an indicator of status and wealth, but the ability to mass produce and distribute clothing, as well as the growing influence of French design, transformed it into a social expectation that would about to be reconstructed by World War II. The conditions of the home front brought on by the war would somewhat lessen that divide, and unite American women through the sacrifices they made.

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Around the same time Hawes was shaming French couture and the elitist nature of fashion, there began a push towards American-made goods and alternatives. When the United States joined the war, fabrics such as wool and cotton were requisitioned by the military, and while they were still available for civilian consumption, usage was highly regulated and restricted. Civilian clothing adapted to make up for what it could not always access. Rayon was quite popular, as it had the look and feel of a more expensive fabric like silk, which was declining in usage due to ceased imports from Japan. Nylon was developed in response to the absence of silk, inspiring further development of synthetic materials. Women’s clothing was rather plain and simple, with distinct lines and a smaller silhouette that used less fabric than was standard in the 1930’s. There was little detail and little variation between garments, due to federal restrictions that sought to direct as much focus and resources on winning the war as possible. Unlike the United Kingdom, the U.S. did not issue ration coupons for clothing, instead wanting to deal with the manufacturers themselves. As the war went on, however, fashion began to evolve to show support not only for America, but for the soldiers. Military inspired clothing, with neutral colors, padded shoulders, and practical shapes began to gain popularity amongst women, especially after the establishment of various female military volunteer programs. Sacrifice was no longer an action or a change of habits but a trend, a show of pride in one’s country and the contributions of the American people to the war.

**Eliminating Silk**

Even before the United States joined the war, there began a campaign to boycott any usage of Japanese silk, which had been in high demand in both the fashion world and the military, which drastically affected not only American fashion and textile industries, but
American workers as well. Silk was used in all sorts of clothing, especially haute couture, as well as in common items like stockings, linings of jackets and coats, gloves, and other accessories. Parachutes were also made of silk, and the halted trade with Japan that occurred even before the attack on Pearl Harbor made the need to find a replacement material urgent. Until the war broke out, the United States had depended on Japan for about ninety percent of its silk imports.  

Nylon, the first completely synthetic apparel material, was developed in 1939 in place of the popular but unavailable silk, and was favorable due to its high tensile strength despite being quite a lightweight and sheer fabric. However, nylon too was only on the market for two years before the manufacturing company, DuPont, turned over all material to the WPB for military use, leaving women with the option of either cotton or rayon stockings, which were notoriously stuffy and uncomfortable. Instead of bearing with the discomfort, women turned to other ideas in order to stay appropriate, as bare legs were unconventional at the time. Many women attempted to mimic the look of wearing stockings by dying the skin on their legs with iodine, tea, shoe polish, and even gravy juice. Some additionally used eyebrow pencils to draw a line up the backs of their legs, giving the appearance, from further away, at least, of stocking seams. The trend caught on, and cosmetic companies quickly filled magazines with advertisements for leg paints, a bottle of which cost about the same amount as an actual pair of stocking, and lasted for a similar number of uses.  

Silk was no longer necessary to be a fashionable woman.  

With the future of synthetic fabrics looking bright, and other materials still available for apparel, the League of Women Shoppers (LWS), an organization of middle and upper class women dedicated to being allies of feminism and of female laborers, sponsored a 1938 pageant

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in Washington, D.C., entitled *Life Without Silk: From Morning to Midnight in Cotton and Rayon*, that attracted a lot of attention from the media. The event supported and advocated the boycott on Japanese goods, and the boycotters had chosen silk to be the face of what they opposed. They argued that to buy products made from that particular material was unethical, immoral, and a betrayal of American values. American studies historian Lawrence Glickman describes how the LWS honed in on the moral and ethical implications of choosing that particular material.

For boycott supporters, to wear silk was to contribute to Japanese atrocities and unwittingly to become what the Committee for a Boycott Against Japanese Aggression called "an innocent partner in Japanese aggression." By making transparent the connection between the consumption of silk and Japanese militarism, the boycotters aimed to make such innocent ignorance impossible.  

The LWS sought to make silk a symbol of the enemy, and the boycott was less about doing damage to the Japanese economy, which it did, but rather a rejection of foreign and opposing influence. Similar movements to promote “American” goods appeared in other areas of the industry as well. The Textile Colour Association of the United States released a palette for the autumn of 1942 that included colors such as ‘Patriot Green’, ‘Gallant Blue’, and ‘Valor Red’.

By promoting American-made goods, and renouncing that which was associated with the enemy, both producers and consumers could feel a sense of patriotism and unity, showing their support of the country and the values associated with it.

However, there were some who saw the boycott as unpatriotic and a threat to their livelihood. Outside the doors of the *Life Without Silk* show, protestors from Reading,

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13 Walford, *Forties Fashion*, 68.
Pennsylvania gathered to voice their displeasure with the boycott. Around three hundred women, representing the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW), had traveled from the center of the hosiery manufacturing industry to challenge what they considered to be a short sighted and ignorant campaign. They argued that, although silk did indeed come from Japan, it was actually American factory workers who would suffer the most from a boycott on the material, and the industry as a whole. That one who sought to dress ethically and support American values should continue to buy silk, rather than reject it. They marched outside the venue, carrying signs that said, “Why Make Us the Victims of Foreign War?”, or “Wear Silk and Save our Jobs!” It required a great amount of privilege to be able to boycott such a commonplace item, and the women who produced it could not enjoy that same luxury. Glickman argues that despite the difference in opinion between the two groups, they advanced the image of fashion as a political statement, as “both groups rejected a defining characteristic of most previous forms of American consumer activism: the degradation of pleasure and fashion and the valorization of sacrifice.”

The LWS and the AFHW took opposing sides on the same grounds – beauty and ethics did not have to contradict each other, that in fact they complemented quite well to make a statement, and that it was women who were central to this reconciliation and the power it held. In this case, either the rejection or the continued purchase of silk goods reflected the sacrifice a woman was making for her country. Soon, not only would a change in materials be enough, as use and quantity soon became limited and regulated.

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14 Glickman, “Make Lisle the Style”, 577.
Soon after the United States’ entry into the war, price restrictions and rationing were established. In early 1942, the War Production Board (WPB), a federal agency created by the Roosevelt administration to supervise the production of civilian consumer goods, began looking at how to curb clothing and fabric consumption. By that spring, the WPB issued Limitation Order 85, or L-85, which dictated a series of regulations for the garment industry and the products they were allowed to sell. Stanley Marcus, of the famous luxury department store Neiman-Marcus, was put in charge of the women’s and children’s apparel division of the agency, and tasked with creating conceivable guidelines for manufacturers to adhere to. Wanting to avoid further coupon rationing, restraints on apparel were put on manufacturers and designers. In theory, this would allow for easier enforcement and higher fines – monitoring companies and identifying products that defied Marcus’ requirements before they could be sold meant that the WPB had less to investigate and that there could be bigger consequences for mass produced clothing, instead of prosecuting individuals case by case.\textsuperscript{15} According to L-85, women’s dresses at their largest were allowed no more than 56 inches at the hip and 30 inch sleeves. Cuffs could not have over two buttons and buttonholes per side, and any ruffles on sleeves could not exceed 3 inches. Dresses could only have two pockets, and any folds or pleats could not exceed ten percent of the total amount of material used in the part of the dress, either the top or the skirt.\textsuperscript{16} Rules such as these were created for every type of clothing – evening dresses, maternity clothing, blouses, coats and jackets, skirts, suits, pants, neckwear, and even embellishments such as trims and collars. In his memoir, Marcus recalled that he was told to write regulations that would

\textsuperscript{15} Walford, \textit{Forties Fashion}, 67.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 71-73
“freeze fashion as it was in 1942.”\textsuperscript{17} Developing new looks and creative designs was the least of anybody’s worries, and the economy could not afford to keep up with constantly changing styles as an industry. Therefore, fashion as it was had to last through the war with little variation or advancement.

The limitations of L-85 were outlined and promoted in numerous magazines, including major publications such as \textit{Vogue}, \textit{Glamour}, and \textit{Harper’s Bazaar} [Figures 4 & 5]. Although the order was directed at manufacturers, everybody knew what clothing was supposed to look like, which was an additional way of identifying noncomplying brands. In stark contrast to the glamorous styles that had been popular amongst Café Society circles five years prior, it became quite popular amongst haute-couture designers to use as little fabric as possible in order to keep some semblance of creativity and individuality that they were accustomed to. Although it was understood that new and cutting-edge styles were an impossible achievement during the war, designers chose to establish themselves through ingenious conservation rather than showy creations. This in turn was taken as a declaration of a new trend and inspired similar silhouettes throughout the entire clothing industry. Hemlines became higher – most skirts or dresses fell to just below the knee, and were much more form fitting to use less fabric. This change was also beneficial to the manufacturers themselves, as using less fabric for each garment maximized profits. The same 100-yard bolt of fabric could now make up to thirty dresses where it had previously yielded only twenty. In terms of mass production, the surplus added up quickly, and companies could buy less material to produce the same amount. Although the government had intended for the order to decrease interest or concern over clothing and the adoption of a ‘make

do and mend’ mentality, many advertisers turned it around, marketing L-85 as the new fashionable look. In 1943, Butterick Pattern Company, which sold clothing patterns for sewing at home, came out with a simple design that followed the required dimensions. Magazines published articles on how to alter older fashions or men’s clothing to mimic the slimmer fit and straight lines of the L-85 inspired trend. Styles that adhered to L-85 carried the connotation that the wearer was sacrificing taste or luxury for the war and for their country, creating a look that was not only fashionable and long lasting, but patriotic.

While the efforts of designers and manufacturers to advertise themselves and L-85 approved clothing as patriotic is quite evident, perhaps the ideal was not as widely publicized as

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18 Olian, *Everyday Fashions of the Forties*, ii.
they believed it to be, or not as universally significant as it was made out to be across social classes. In 2013, Jennifer Mower and Elaine Pederson, fashion historians from Oregon State University, conducted a study hoping to examine the influence of L-85 on the lives of ordinary women and wartime consumer behavior. They interviewed thirty women, all of whom had been above the age of thirteen in 1941, and old enough to remember and have participated in the styles popular at that time. What they found was that, for the vast majority of women in the study, L-85 had so little effect on their lives, they did not remember it at all. Most of the women interviewed had been middle or upper-middle class, and even they had still been recovering from the Great Depression when the war began. They reported that they had continued to wear the same clothes as before, paying little attention to what the fashion magazines were trying to tell them. Mower and Pederson concluded that, “these women made do and mended, but not because federal propaganda urged them to; they did it out of economic necessity…”22 A few of the more affluent participants had noticed that apparel was less elaborate and detailed during the war, but even they had no recollection of specific restrictions. Mower and Pederson determined that either the orders themselves were not that limiting, or that enough brands violated L-85 for a distinct change to be apparent to consumers. Concerns over fashion during the war was a luxury reserved for the wealthy and influential, not the average woman. Sacrifice through clothing and style was not achievable for these women, and so was entirely forgettable. However, there were other means of showing involvement in the war on the home front.

**Women in Uniform**

As the war continued with America fighting in both Europe and the Pacific, the demand for more troops grew exponentially, and the government turned to women to fill the roles that would allow for more troops to be sent overseas. Although women had been allowed to enlist in the Navy during World War I, it was only for the position of Yeoman (F), a job that dealt mostly with clerical and administrative work and did not require service members to go through military training. They lived at home and reported for work each day, and were never intended to be sent out on combat ships. In contrast, the female reserves during World War II did go through the same training as any male service member would. Women enlisted in various branches of the military. The Coast Guard established a Women’s Reserve known as SPARs in 1941. In 1942 the Army created the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which would later be converted to the Women’s Army Corps, while the Navy formed their reserves, known as the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). These groups were created to replace military reserves for the duration of WWII, and although intended as a purely utilitarian action, the higher involvement of women in the military was a major step towards gender equality in America. The volunteers, although they had various reasons for joining, became associated with hard work, dedication, and sacrifice that was symbolized by the uniforms they wore.

One WAAC recruit, Violet Kochendoerfer, published her own experience of the war in a compilation of journal entries, news articles, and letters. She writes, “I didn’t join the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps to help my country’s war effort. I did it in selfish rebellion when my rise

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in the business world was thwarted because I was a woman.”

Like many other middle and lower class women of the time, Kochendoerfer was expected to work as a secretary or assistant until married. Her goals of a college education and career were near impossible to achieve. The war provided her a way off that path, and the uniform was the symbol of that newfound independence. From the beginning of the recruitment campaigns, wearing a uniform was highly emphasized in recruitment advertisements and brochures, and for many, it increased the appeal of enlisting and raised morale. Recalling the day she received her uniform, Kochendoerfer wrote, “…what an experience! It only took about an hour to get a full wardrobe – a barracks bag full of stuff, including the best looking kid dress gloves, wool gloves, hankies, galoshes, shoes, slips, pants. I look nifty in my uniform.”

Receiving a uniform meant that they were a part of something more important and worthwhile than anything they could have done before, and the clothing they wore represented a new age of self-sufficiency and seriousness. The change in style helped give birth to a new feeling of confidence, value, and importance that most women likely had not felt before. It gave them an image of authority and credibility that in turn inspired others to look the same, resulting in a fad for military-inspired clothing that promoted patriotism and support of the troops. Uniforms gave a sense of freedom and accomplishment, and the privilege of wearing them gave women a new kind of strength and determination. This transformation was particularly apparent in the uniforms of the Navy’s WAVES.

In March of 1942 the first group of WAVES departed for training. Known as the “Arkansas Travelers”, they were pioneers in a new form of gender equality. However, the initial public reaction to the program was generally quite negative. Before World War II, many people

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25 Ibid, 12
both in the military and civilian population considered a woman’s place to be in the home, and that joining the armed forces would erase her femininity.²⁶ Frances Prindle Taft was one of the very first officers within the WAVES, and she has shared her experience in the navy with multiple scholars and authors, discussing what it was like in the early days of the program. She recalls that her commanding officer, Captain Herbert Underwood, had at first been somewhat mocked and made fun of for taking this command. His friends would send him advertisements and clippings from women’s magazines, she says. However, that drove him and the rest of the group to strive for success and prove themselves.

Taft had heard about the WAVES at school, as officers were being recruited out of college. Before enlisting, she had written to the school administration, wondering if it was going to be a serious service or simply a stunt to boost morale. She had hoped it would be the former, stating, “I didn’t want to join something where you just got a hat and you went around sleuthing. I wanted to be in the real navy.”²⁷ By the time of the establishment of the WAVES, the United Service Organizations (USO) had been founded to provide live entertainment to troops and boost morale. This entertainment involved everything from performances of local dance troupes and singers to visits from comedians and celebrities like Bob Hope, Anne Sheridan, and Marilyn Monroe.²⁸ On the home front, touring performers did shows to encourage support for the war, dressing up in patriotic and vaudeville-esque costumes. Taft likely worried that the WAVES would simply be another show, a new way to boost morale and encourage support. And although

they did get a hat, the WAVES also able to do a great deal more than many thought they could.

Over time, they became known for their hard work, dedication, and image. Associated with class, grace, intelligence, and confidence, the look of the WAVES was highly desirable, and at the center of this was the uniform.

We really were a motley looking crew because when we arrived, we weren't in uniform. And when you see a mob of women, all different sizes and shapes and all different kinds of clothes and tastes, that's not very impressive at first. On the other hand, when you take that same group of people and put them in a Mainbocher uniform with a Lily Dache hat, then you've got something. 29

Designed by Mainbocher, a famous French designer, the uniform was a part of an attempt to attract more volunteers to the WAVES, and it worked quite well. Main Rousseau Bocher had been a Chicago-born intelligence officer during World War I. Deciding to remain in Paris after the end of the war, he went on to be an illustrator for Harper’s Bazaar then an editor for Vogue before deciding to become a designer himself. Naming his fashion house “Mainbocher Couture”, he gained recognition for his simple yet sophisticated and refined designs. As the beginning of World War II in Europe had made couture designers’ work much less relevant, Mainbocher left Paris for New York, where he continued to operate as he had before, opening a salon to showcase his collections, and was later hired to design the uniform for the WAVES. 30

Mainbocher’s design proved to be a highly effective recruiting strategy. Thousands of women enlisted in the Navy, and once accepted, went to a salon to be fitted for a uniform that would be specifically tailored to them. For most of the volunteers, it was the only designer clothing they had ever owned, and it gave them a feeling of pride and status. In 2014, filmmaker

and media studies professor Kathleen M. Ryan, conducted several interviews with women who had served as WAVES, wanting to understand more about their experiences in the military. One thing they all agreed upon was the importance of the uniform. “‘A famous designer designed them for us and they fit beautifully,’ said WAVE Virginia Gillmore. ‘You felt so comfortable. It was probably the most expensive thing any of us had ever had. Well made. Beautiful material.’”\(^{31}\) Many women joked that they chose the Navy because they “looked better in blue”, but Ryan argues that the motivation went much deeper than that. Having a designer uniform set them above other female branches of the military, making them more refined and feminine. The clean cut lines, navy blue color, and insignia allowed them the same feeling of liberation and defiance as other women in uniform, yet still enforced some semblance of traditionally desired feminine characteristics. It was the perfect look to showcase the prestige of the job while making the women occupying it desirable and relatable.


It was clear that the uniform, had been one of the most important selling points for the program, and they put quite a lot of consideration into it. Not only was a famous designer associated with the WAVES, but the overall quality of the uniforms, from the fabric to the fit, was made to last. Ryan notes that when looking at the parts of their ensemble the women had saved, daily wear and over sixty-five years of age had done little to diminish the appearance of the clothing.\textsuperscript{33} It would have been easy to use cheaper fabrics, but the fact that these uniforms were made of the same materials the other branches of the military wore validated the relevance and perceived equality of the women in these programs. Having proved themselves, the WAVES were now praised by the public for doing their part in the war, and more women were strongly encouraged to join. One newspaper from Park Ridge, Illinois took great pride in the WAVES and made sure to recognize local volunteers once they were sworn in.\textsuperscript{34} The father of WAVES recruit Charlotte Schuck wrote to her, reminding her that, “You know you you’re young only once and you might as well make the best of it.”\textsuperscript{35} By 1945, more than 84,000 women had joined the Navy, for a multitude of reasons. Some felt called to the job by a sense of patriotism, other women respected the rules and discipline of military life. Some like Taft felt it was the best use of their skills and intelligence. For many sacrifice was not the most important part, but demonstrating that volunteers the ability to be in the position to do that was more impactful, particularly in recruiting.

The recruitment campaign for the WAVES was carefully thought out, and enlistment

\textsuperscript{33} Kathleen M. Ryan, “Uniform Matters.”
\textsuperscript{34} Elizabeth Karethen Enlists As Waves, Park Ridge Times Herald, (Park Ridge, IL, 1943).
Miss Helena Grant Enlists in Waves, Park Ridge Times Herald, (Park Ridge, IL, 1943).
Sworn into the WAVES, Park Ridge Times Herald, (Park Ridge, IL., 1943).
\textsuperscript{35} [Letter to Charlotte Schuck from father, 1943], (1943).
advertisements took many different routes to draw women into the program. Some appealed to feminist ideals and notions of equality, saying things like, “We’re on the same team,”[36] and “It’s a woman’s war too!”[37] Some posters framed it as a responsibility to the country and the war effort. “Every Wave enlisted makes another man available for sea duty!”[38] Others emphasized the prestige of the Mainbocher uniform, inviting them to “wear the gallant navy blue.”[39] One recruitment booklet tells the reader to, “Picture yourself in these smart Navy Uniforms.”[40] Regardless of their reason for joining, the WAVES threw themselves into their new duties, gaining much more than military pay and a good memory. Frances Taft felt her time in the WAVES taught her one of the most important lessons of her life. “I think it gave me a lot of confidence that I had had enough education to go and learn something new and be able to do it.”[41] She recalls that her shipmates had been so enthusiastic about the opportunity, they felt guilty for not needing to do as much work as they were used to in college, but relished the opportunity to do something different and useful.

Captain Joy Bright Hancock, who served first as a Yeoman (F) in World War I before being commissioned as a lieutenant with the WAVES, states in her autobiography that the women in the Navy, and other branches of the military, “created a new evaluation of the worth of

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36 Bureau of Naval Personnel, Navy Recruiting Bureau, We want the world to know we're on the same team. [1943], Navy Recruiting Bureau, (Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1943).
37 Bureau of Naval Personnel, Navy Recruiting Bureau, It's a woman's war too! join the WAVES [circa 1942], (Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1942).
39 Wear the gallant navy blue : enlist in the WAVES. (1942).
40 Walford, Forties Fashion, 94.
Taft later went on to get a master’s degree in art history at Yale University and teach at the Cleveland Institute of Art. She speaks about her experience in the WAVES in her autobiography, Sketches from Life: A Memoir.
womanpower.”42 Military service allowed women to step into a role which they have never been allowed before, and for many that was liberating, an opportunity to more fully utilize their skills, intelligence, and work ethic on something they felt to be truly important and impactful. Since the establishment of the WAVES, the uniform for women in the Naval service has changed very little from Mainbocher’s original design, and is a testament to the values of hard work and dedication the WAVES were known for.

**Christian Dior’s New Look**

In 1947, a relatively new and unknown Christian Dior introduced his first design collection, which was later dubbed the “New Look”. With sloped shoulders, emphasized busts, narrow waists, and longer and fuller skirts, the style focused on “reclaiming” the femininity that had been lost during the war.43 The New Look required a lot of material, and was a far cry from the sparing and military-like clothing of the early 1940’s. The style was the epitome of abundance and affluence, greatly accentuating the female figure through the use of corsets and padded busts and hips, and one observer of the original showing of the collection described the models as “positively voluptuous.”44 It was rather shocking, considering that many countries were still suffering from shortages even after the end of the war, but those who could afford it adopted the style, and set Dior on the path to becoming one of the most famous couture designers in the world. The end of the war had meant the return of male soldiers from overseas, who wanted jobs and families, and expected things to be as they had been before. The social boundaries and limitations that had dropped during the war were starting to be built back up

42 Hancock, *Lady in the Navy*, 266.
again and there was drive for “softness, tenderness and beauty”. The independence, freedom, and equality women had enjoyed was retracted, and many remembered that had always been intended as a temporary thing. As America was moving away from the makeshift and war-centered ideals, so too was clothing, giving way to the glamour and daintiness of the New Look.

![Image of woman in a fitted dress](image1)

*The New Look, Vogue 1947-1948*

However, not everyone could afford to move on. It required a certain amount of wealth and dedication to high fashion to achieve the New Look. Couture itself was expensive already, but for mid-range and mass produced fashions, even imitating the silhouette of the New Look required significantly more material than the clothing of the 1940’s. Citizens still trying to recover from the war would have never been able to get or make clothes like this, and when Dior came to America to tour and present his second collection, he was met with female protestors.

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telling him to “go home” and holding signs saying “Burn Mr. Dior.” Dior had created a style
that was extraordinarily influential, yet also highly unattainable, setting an almost impossible
standard for women and for beauty that directly contrasted what had been in place just a couple
years earlier. The strength, class, and feminism found in the WAVEs uniforms, factory coveralls,
and L-85 authorized clothing was being drowned out by flouncy skirts and corseted waists.
Fashion was no longer an embodiment sacrifice or support for the war, it was about reaping the
rewards of victory.

Conclusion

Fashion is a reflection of the conditions and values of any given time or place. What
people choose to wear, or not wear, reveals much about them as an individual and as a member
of a group. Clothing can bring people together and it can set people apart. When one looks back
at the clothing of the past, it is often with nostalgia for the values that it is associated with.
Fashion changed a lot during the 1940’s, and each new development carried a new attitude and a
new meaning for Americans. Haute couture was a symbol of wealth and eliteness in a post-
Depression era, and contrasted with the hand-me-downs and old dresses worn by most during
that time. The ease and convenience of ready to wear clothing gave more women a chance to
access something akin to the exclusiveness that had formerly been unachievable.

World War II-era clothing is a testimony to the innovation, sacrifice, hard work, and
progress achieved because of the war. At the heart of the home front effort was the notion of
sacrifice. Not only were women sacrificing their family lives sending husbands, brothers, sons,

47 Thelma Seetinburgh, “Dior”, Couture; an Illustrated History of the Great Paris Designers and
and fathers across the ocean, but they had to give up some of their belongings as well. In order to meet the demand for raw materials needed for defense, the people of the United States went on what Time-Life calls “the greatest scavenger hunt in its history.”\textsuperscript{48} When the U.S. joined the war, anything from old baby carriages to empty tin cans was useful. People searched for any materials that could be repurposed for military supplies. It was the responsibility of the home front to support the troops however they could, whether that be through contributing materials, buying war bonds, working in factories, or adopting conservative and patriotic clothing. U.S. politics historian Mark H. Leff discusses the success and shortcomings of this ideal so heavily promoted by the government, arguing that, “the mystique of unconditional sacrifice, forged in the war itself and celebrated in collective memory, has not fared well as an interpretive guide to wartime politics and mobilization.”\textsuperscript{49} While the image of great sacrifice was lauded in newspapers and war propaganda, it is indeed difficult to find evidence of the influence this had over people’s lives. While some, such as the LWS and fashion designers, were happy to subscribe to the notion that they were doing their part in the war, others like the AFHW and the participants of the L-85 study had little interest in how the things they did supported the war. They bought clothes because they needed to wear clothes, and they worked in factories because that was how they could afford to take care of themselves and their families. It is impossible to say whether this model of unconditional sacrifice had a significant ideological influence on women of middle and lower classes because in most cases they simply did not have the means or interest to join in. The military provided an alternate path, though that too was highly associated with clothing and the connotation of the uniforms. From the silk boycotters, to the fashion designers, to the women in

\textsuperscript{48} Time-Life, \textit{This Fabulous Century: 1940-1950}, 163.
uniform proudly serving their country, clothing echoed the values of American women during that time of conflict. Despite the later opinion that such clothing was “unfeminine”, and the attempts to erase that image with the New Look, the fashions of the 1940’s will remain in memory for a long time, as the represent of the sacrifice, patriotism, and hard work of women during the war.
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**Secondary**


