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Flapper Style: 1920s Fashion

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Flapper Style
1920s Fashion
Vesper, Robes du soir de Worth
Illustration by George Barbier
Gazette du Bon Ton, no. 8, 1922, planche 60
FLAPPER STYLE
1920s FASHION

SARA HUME

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This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibition *Flapper Style: 1920s Fashions* held at the Kent State University Museum from September 25, 2015 to September 4, 2016.

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Blue and gold beaded evening dress, French, ca. 1926, Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Emil Danenburg, 1960. KSUM 1995.17.1765

Silk chiffon evening dress, American, ca. 1925, Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.228

Green silk chiffon evening dress, Paul Poiret, French, ca. 1925, Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.346
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All of our volunteers provide invaluable service particularly Marilyn Lown, Millie Chrin, Jan Butler, Jean Giulitto, Laurie Howell, Susan Laubach, Judy Jerkich, and Ruth Krause.

Printed day dress, American, ca. 1927, Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Lucille Allen, 1954. KSUM 1995.17.76

Gold beaded cloche, American, ca. late 1920s, Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.1658

Orange and gold brocade dress, American, ca. 1926-27, Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.347ab
Ingenious flappers managed to get around the limitations imposed by Prohibition. Here Mlle. Rhea, demonstrates that garters can do more than just hold up stockings.

The uncertainties of 1919 were over – America was going on the greatest gaudiest spree in history.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

The flapper is widely seen as the epitome of 1920s glamor and decadence. The term refers to the generation of young women who came to age just as World War I ended and shocked the older generation with their short hair and short skirts, their drinking and smoking and swearing. Flappers faced a world strikingly different from the one their mothers knew and their clothing reflected this dramatic break with the past.

In many ways the decade saw the introduction of modern conveniences for the average American. The widespread adoption of electricity during the period paved the way for electric light bulbs, irons, and vacuum cleaners. The automobile not only provided unprecedented mobility, but also a new place of privacy. From make-up to permanent waves to perfume, women’s beauty rituals were enhanced as a result of both social and technological changes.

Changes in men’s fashions were much subtler than those for women, but there was a simplification of men’s suits as well as a rise in casual clothing. Sportswear was important for men and women alike. Colleges were the sites of innovation in fashion as the relaxed styles contributed to greater comfort and freedom. Standards of beauty in the 1920s shifted to celebrate youth with a fashionable silhouette that was slim and boyish.

The “Roaring Twenties” is renowned for its exuberant parties and jazz music, which were reflected in the glittering fringed fashion that women wore. However, this exhibition looks beyond the quintessential beaded dress to explore the range of influences on fashion from sportswear and college life to artistic movements such as Bauhaus and Art Deco.
Silent movie stars including Colleen Moore (above), Louise Brooks and Clara Bow provided inspiration for young women who copied their short bobbed hair and heavy eye makeup. In her autobiography Moore described her brother’s college friends as her own inspiration for the flapper persona she created on screen:

They were smart and sophisticated, with an air of independence about them, and so casual about their looks and clothes and manners as to be almost slapdash.²

Advertisement for ‘Why Be Good?’ starring Colleen Moore

Black beaded cloche
American, ca. 1920s
Net ground, black beads and sequins
*Silverman/Rodgers Collection*, KSUM 1983.1.1659
The ‘Flapper’

This Flapper has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; it is impossible to shock her.3
‘The Flapper’ in The Smart Set, 1915

The term ‘flapper’ derives from British slang and actually came into familiar usage in America during the 1910s, as evidenced in the above quote from 1915. At first, the term was used to describe girls in the awkward years of adolescence. At its most innocuous it could be used in fashion magazines to describe clothing styles for “tweens” although from its earliest usage it usually hinted at looser morals. As these young girls grew up in the 1920s, the term followed them into young adulthood and referred to young women who were taking full advantage of their growing independence.

Satin fringed evening dress
American, late 1920s
Cream silk satin with rhinestones and pearls
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.2488

Satin beaded evening dress
American, ca. 1925-28
Silk satin, crystal and silver bugle beads, inset chiffon panels
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.341
The simplification in the cut of clothing was mirrored by a reduction in the structure of women’s foundation garments. While certainly many women continued to wear supportive girdles with elastic panels to achieve the sleek lines demanded by fashion, the youthful flapper would have worn a brassiere that was little more than a strip of fabric with a couple of darts and straps over the shoulders.

- **Brassiere**, American, ca. 1920s, Lace bra, flat band of lace with satin straps, Gift of Nancy Brehm in memory of Dolores Gorny, KSUM 1999.72.3
- **Brassiere**, French, ca. 1920s, Ecru Chantilly lace bra, Gift of Nancy Brehm in memory of Dolores Gorny, KSUM 1999.72.5
- **Brassiere**, American, ca. 1920-1930, Off-white twill weave satin bra, Gift in memory of Maryon Carpenter Church, KSUM 1992.1.13
- **Brassiere**, American, ca. 1930, Egyptian style bra, pink cotton, satin brocade, lace trim, Gift of Warnaco, Inc., KSUM 1983.3.64
Changing Silhouette

The short, tubular silhouette of the 1920s is instantly recognizable, yet the period did see a gradual evolution in the style. Through the early 1920s, the skirts reached almost to the ankles. Hemlines rose until they reached the shortest point by 1926-27. Then the final few years of the 1920s saw the skirts lengthen again.

A subtle shift in dress construction occurred along with the rising and falling hemlines. By the middle of the decade the cut of the dresses had simplified so most dresses slipped over the head without any fasteners. For most of the decade, dresses were nearly tubular, but by the end of the decade women’s dresses were increasingly cut on the bias rather than on the straight of grain so they clung more tightly along a woman’s curves.

Fashion plates from left to right: 1921, 1925, 1927 and 1929. From the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Album Maciet.
This sequence of four dresses show the rise and fall of the hemlines. The skirt length at the beginning of the decade (above) and at the end (far right) were similar. The entire decade did maintain a continued popularity for sheer material. Each of these dresses demands an opaque underslip to go under the sheer lace or silk georgette of the outer garment.

**Black chiffon and lace dress**
American, ca. 1921
Black chiffon, lace cuffs, black bugle beads
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.316

**Black silk fringed chiffon dress**
French export, ca. 1926-27
Black silk chiffon and fringe
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.343
Black chiffon evening dress with starburst
Kate Belinson
American, ca. 1927-29
Black chiffon, silver beads, lace trim
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.361

Black lace dress with pink slip
French, late 1920s
Black machine-made Chantilly lace, pink silk
Gift of Zita Davisson, KSUM 1992.55.1
Through the 1920s, Kent State Normal College (later University) offered students, including women, the chance to compete in a number of sports. The gym suit included in the exhibition belonged to Alice Elgin who was a physical education major at Kent State from 1925 through 1929. The photo at right shows Lucille Hendricks, the 1928-29 horseshoe champion wearing the gym suit with a white blouse and black stockings.

**Wool gym uniform from the Kent State Normal College**

American, 1925-29

Black wool twill one piece

Gift of Alice Elgin Fenn, KSUM 1985.24.1

**Lucille Hendricks, Horseshoe Champion, 1929**

Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives.
SPORTY AND CASUAL

The development of a distinctive style of dress for the younger generation was closely tied to the casual life on college campuses. The ideal female body in the 1920s was boyish and slim – a physical type that demanded fitness. The fashionable clothing in turn showcased the resulting physiques. Campus life fostered the development of a casual style that extended the relaxed styles of sportswear into clothing that was worn day-to-day.

Colleges became central to organized sports over the course of the 1920s. While men’s sports received the lion’s share of attention at the time, women also participated in a wide range of sports on college campuses. This photograph shows the 1929 women’s intramural basketball team from Kent State Normal College. In addition to the black wool gym suit worn with a white blouse, these women wore early versions of sneakers, the rubber soled shoes that were just becoming popular at the time.

Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives.
The new exposure of women’s bodies opened them up to the scrutiny of the public and to the effects of the sun. The novelty of this situation is captured by the John Held, Jr. illustration above. The young man and woman are dressed in nearly identical suits, but the man is evenly tanned while the young woman’s pale skin burns.

The cartoon on the right shows the conflict that women felt as they decided whether to adopt the racier styles.

The Girl Who Gave Him the Cold Shoulder
John Held, Jr.
American, ca. 1923
Gouache
Cabinet of American illustration (Library of Congress)

Miss Smith feels that what she needs at once is a one-piece bathing suit.
W.T. Schwartz
Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers (Library of Congress)
Bathing suits for men and women were quite similar with an upper section that extends into straps over the shoulder and a skirt that concealed the tops of the thighs. During this period, most bathing suits were made of wool knit. While perhaps a little itchy, wool had the benefit of drying quickly and wicking moisture away from the body.

**Woman’s blue striped bathing suit**

Probably American, 1920s
Wool knit
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.550

**Men’s bathing suit**

Probably American, ca. 1930
Wool knit
Gift of Mrs. George Williams IV, KSUM 1988.32.2
This dress, composed of net embroidered with silk and metallic threads, uses circles not only as a design motif but as the basis for the dress pattern. The overlapping circles wrap all the way around the body without breaking for a side seam.

Cream net dress
American, late 1920s
Cream net, gold embroidered trim, appliquéd cream and gold circle designs, petal skirt
Gift of Evangeline Davey Smith (Mrs. Alexander M. Smith) in memory of Mrs. Martin L. Davey, Sr. (Berneice Chrisman Davey), KSUM 1991.11.110
GEOMETRY AND ABSTRACTION

Starting with Cubism in the first decades of the 1900s, artists throughout Europe and the United States increasingly moved away from representational art and instead began breaking down visual shapes into their most basic geometric forms. These artistic innovations trickled down to fashion design. Rather than draping the fabric around the body and following its natural shape with seams and darts, fashion designers used simple rectangles and other basic shapes to surround and conceal the form. The fashionable silhouette became a series of cylinders rather than a sinuous hourglass.

Navy wool day dress
American, ca. 1925-26
Navy wool, black machine stitching
KSU Theatre Department, gift of School of Theatre & Dance, KSUM 1985.3.33

Orange and gold brocade dress
American, ca. 1926-27
Orange silk, gold brocade, pleated lamé
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.347 ab
The early 1920s was a golden age for fashion illustration. The *Gazette du Bon Ton*, which was published in Paris between 1912 and 1925 produced exceptionally high quality pochoir fashion prints. These images in many ways broke with the conventions of the genre - particularly in the level of abstraction. Comparing the two images above highlights the de-emphasis on the body in favor of greater attention to the pattern and drape of the fabric.

**Effet de glace. Manteau de soir, de Paul Poiret.**

Illustration by Alexandre Iacovleff

*Gazette du Bon Ton*, no. 10, 1920, planche 78

**Cape**

American, ca. 1920s

Pink and lamé brocade

Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.322
This deep orange silk crepe dress with black yarn embroidery shows the rectangular basis of the pattern. The skirt extends at each side into panels that would be worn tied at the sides.

**Dark orange silk crepe dress**

American, ca. 1925-29

Silk crepe with black trim, black and gold machine embroidered stitching

Gift in memory of Berenice H. Kent, KSUM 1990.42.91
Shawl of patterned lamé
English, 1920s
Patterned lamé
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1990.11.33

Printed day dress
American, ca. 1927
Orange, red, blue and green print on ivory ground
Transferred from the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, Gift of Lucille Allen, 1954. KSUM 1995.17.76

Metallic evening dress
Probably American, ca. 1925
Ivory silk, woven gold pattern, silk floss embroidery, gold and silver beads
Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Albert A. Augustus, KSUM 2004.28.11

Navy and white printed silk day dress
American, ca. 1928-1932
Navy and white printed silk, navy tie collar
Anonymous gift, KSUM 1984.31.6
Just as the artistic movement toward abstraction affected the construction of women’s clothing, it also had a profound affect on textile patterns. The style known as “Art Deco” after the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs of 1925 held in Paris, was characterized by bold colors, geometric shapes, abstraction, and a focus on modern materials such as aluminum, stainless steel and chrome. The use of metallic threads as well as heavy beading heightened the sense of modernity and luxury in many of these garments. The simplified silhouette of the 1920s served as a perfect complement to the ornamentation and boldness of the textile designs.

Coat
American, ca. 1924-1926
Black silk faille with metallic gold brocade, gray squirrel shawl collar, button closure
Gift of the Helen O.Borowitz Collection, KSUM 1997.71.5
Shoes
American, ca. 1925-35
Black, copper and silver brocade
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.148ab

Shoes
American, ca. 1920s
Floral brocade fabric, gold leather
Gift of Mrs. Hugh W. Riddle, in memory of Mrs. H. Warner Riddle-Mary Fitzgerald Riddle, KSUM 1997.49.5ab
Hat
American, ca. 1925
Red velvet cloche, silver braid, gros-grain ribbon flowers
Gift of Eloise Schill, KSUM 1997.30.1

Hat
American, ca. 1927
Cloche hat, black satin with gold braids and black and gold beads
Gift of B. Winters and M.J. Englund in memory of Jane Maloney Winters, KSUM 1998.70.1

Hat
American, ca. 1925-35
Brown velvet, ruched satin brim, embroidered velvet leaves
Gift of Jack & Beverlie Mayer IMO Mildred Pietschman McCrystal, KSUM 1991.49.13
The discovery of the nearly intact tomb of King Tutankhamen in Egypt by British archaeologists Howard Carter and George Herbert launched an intense wave of Egyptomania across the West. The fashion plate above right shows the ways that French fashion designers and illustrators took inspiration from Egyptian dress. The pleated loincloths that appeared in Egyptian art was reinterpreted into a long skirt. The dress above evokes the pleating by using beading in rhinestones and pearls.

**Emerald green chiffon evening dress**

American, mid 1920s
Silk chiffon, lace, beaded silk satin, pearl and diamond embroidery
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.342

**Les robes-pagnes**

Illustration by André Marty
*Gazette du Bon Ton*, no. 6, 1922, page 169
EXOTICISM

The 1920s in North America and Europe saw a continued fascination with the Middle and Far East. Popular culture in the 1920s was saturated with imagined images of these “mysterious” and “far away places.” For example, an incredibly popular romantic film starring Rudolph Valentino and Agnes Ayres called *The Sheik* was released in 1921. Likewise, fashion of the Jazz Age did not escape the lure of exoticism: expensive textiles like silk would never be unpopular and Asian inspired motifs were all-the-rage.

*L’oiseau d’argent*
Illustration by L’Hom
*Gazette du Bon Ton*, no. 5, 1921, planche 33

*Purple chiffon beaded evening dress*
American, ca. 1925-1926
Purple and pink silk chiffon, silver beading
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.328

Often the exotic motifs in 1920s garments are vague, with only a hint of supposed Middle Eastern flavor or otherwise non-Western ethnicity imagined through pattern, fabric, and shape.
This robe de style of pink silk crepe and lace clearly shows the 18th-century inspiration for the style. Along with the fashion plate from the Gazette du Bon Ton this dress attests to the popularity of soft pastel colors and silk roses trimmed with ribbons.

**Pink silk crepe and lace robe de style**
American, ca. 1924-28
Pink silk crepe and cream net, embroidered lace
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.377

**La mode et le bon ton**
Gazette du Bon Ton, no. 10, 1921, croquis XIV
Apart from the glittering flapper dresses, a softer more romantic style was also in vogue during the 1920s. Silk and chiffon flowers were especially popular decorations for dresses on the hips, shoulders, and skirts. Pale pastel colors like light green, peachy-pink, and cream were all the rage. Another popular trend throughout the 1920s was the robe de style popularized by Jeanne Lanvin. This dress featured a very full skirt coming from the hips, unlike the boxy, boyish cut of most dresses in the 1920s. These robes de style were inspired by late 18th-century French garments and often included small hoops at the hips to create fullness.

The glittering metallic beading in this two piece ensemble by the French couturier Jean Patou is softened by the pastel pink rose design and by the flowing drape of the wide sleeves and gathered hips.

**Ivory, gold and pink beaded ensemble**

Jean Patou  
French, 1926-27  
White cotton gauze with gold, white and pink beading  
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.393 ab
NOTES


Ivory silk wedding dress
American, ca. 1928
Ivory silk, silk piping, embroidered leaf and flowers, metallic sash
Gift of Mrs. Darrell Goodson, KSUM 1989.59.1 a-c

Gold beaded cloche
American, ca. late 1920s
Net ground, iridescent sequins, gold beads
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, KSUM 1983.1.1658

Silk chiffon evening dress (far right and back cover)
American, ca. 1925
Silk chiffon, gold beads, pearls, rhinestones, metallic thread, layered handkerchief hem
Gift of the Martha McCaskey Selhorst Collection, KSUM 1996.58.228
FURTHER READING


“The Flapper.” *The Smart Set,* 1915.

