

*Calligraphy*

where  
fashion

*found*  
it's  
*shape*

Women throughout history have challenged societal norms, reshaping expectations around power, identity, and dress. Fashion has always been entangled with these struggles, with tailoring standing out as a key arena where femininity and masculinity intersect.

Traditionally constructed on a rigid binary between menswear and womenswear, modern fashion history reflects strict codes of appropriateness for each gender. Yet women's adoption of tailoring repeatedly disrupted these boundaries, redefining roles and aesthetics.

Throughout the 20th century and from early press coverage of reimagined suits in Vogue 1920s to the global media attention for fashion campaigns in the late 1960s, fashion journalism has also shaped these shifts, at times framing tailoring as rebellion or scandal.

In the 21st century, platforms such as Instagram, Dazed, and i-D Magazine have continued to mediate these narratives, presenting androgynous tailoring as a symbol of empowerment and fluid self-expression.

This section traces the evolution of women's tailoring across these periods, situating it within wider cultural, social, and political contexts, and highlighting its central role in the emergence of androgynous fashion.

The rise of the "New Woman" in the 1910s and 1920s coincided with women's growing presence in the workforce, political activism, and demands for greater freedoms particularly in urban centres such as London, Paris, and New York.

Figures such as Vita Sackville-West, Gwen Lally, and Radclyffe Hall adopted masculine dress in ways that were exploratory and subversive (Oram, 2007). Their motivations varied; some wore suits to signal professionalism and independence, while others used them as playful experiments with identity.

Importantly, these styles did not always equate to lesbian or transgender identities but reflected a broader challenge to gender codes (Oram, 2007).

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figure 1. Vita Sackville-West

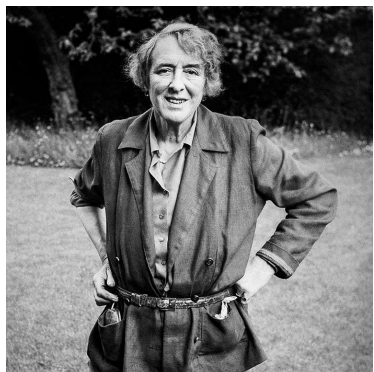


figure 2. Vita Sackville-West

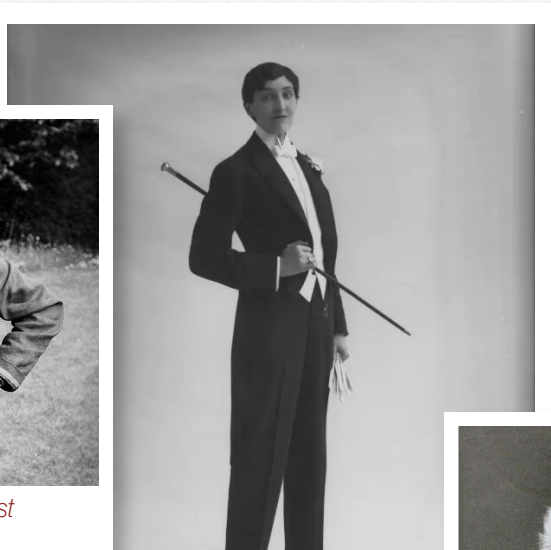


figure 3. Gwen Lally



figure 4. Gwen Lally



figure 5. Radclyffe Hall



figure 6. Radclyffe Hall



figure 7. Radclyffe Hall

The suffragettes, meanwhile, strategically dressed in ultra-feminine clothing for marches to avoid accusations of unfemininity, yet many of them embraced tailored styles in everyday life. World War I accelerated these changes; women in uniformed services wore tunics and tailored jackets, garments that popularised masculine clothing as both practical and authoritative.

These uniforms were often made from durable wool serge or khaki twill, chosen for their practicality, warmth, and resistance to wear; all qualities that contrasted sharply with the delicate silks and corseted silhouettes of pre-war fashion.

These experiences introduced thousands of women to tailoring and cemented it as a marker of modernity and social progress.



figure 8. Suffragettes



figure 9. Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm - British Nurses and Ambulance Drivers



figure 10. Suffragettes



figure 11. Suffragettes



figure 12. Suffragettes

The 1920s also introduced the flapper, whose style rejected restrictive femininity. With short "Eton crop" hair, tailored jackets, and masculinised accessories, flappers embodied a severely modern, androgynous aesthetic. They openly defied Victorian ideals of modesty by smoking, drinking, and embracing dating freedom.

While trousers remained largely reserved for sports, flappers normalised a playful hybridity between feminine silhouettes and masculine accents, setting a precedent for the blending of gender codes in mainstream style (Oram, 2007).

For the first time, androgyny became fashionable rather than marginal, signalling tailoring's ability to express cultural rebellion.



figure 13. Flappers



figure 14. Flappers



figure 15. Flappers



figure 16. Flappers



figure 17. Flappers



figure 18. Gabrielle Coco Chanel

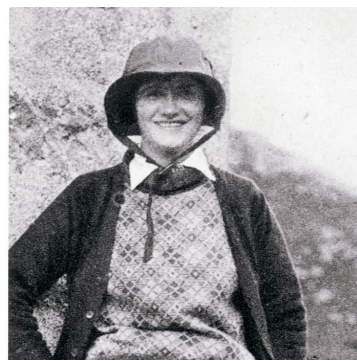


figure 19. Coco Chanel in the Scottish Highlands.



figure 20. Chanel tweed suit



figure 21. Gabrielle Coco Chanel



figure 22. Chanel tweed suit



figure 23. Chanel with models for comeback collection



figure 24. Gabrielle Coco Chanel

Coco Chanel further advanced this shift by introducing the Chanel suit in the 1920s: a slim skirt paired with a collarless tweed jacket inspired by menswear and sportswear. Rejecting corsets and restrictive clothing, Chanel prioritised movement, comfort, and elegance. Her tailoring blended masculine structure with feminine styling, redefining modern femininity.

Chanel famously stated,  
***'Nothing is more beautiful than freedom of the body.'***

A principle visible in her fluid silhouettes and democratic designs such as the little black dress. While trousers had entered women's wardrobes during World War I, Chanel popularised them as fashionable garments, transforming them from necessity into style.

Her work positioned tailoring as both a tool of self-expression and a form of emancipation, underscoring fashion's role in negotiating gender boundaries.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood amplified tailoring's cultural visibility. As film historian Mary Ann Doane (1982) notes, classical Hollywood cinema often positioned women in costume as a site of negotiation between femininity and power.

Katharine Hepburn became a pioneering figure by wearing tailored trousers and blazers both on and off screen. At a time when women were expected to conform to strict dress codes, Hepburn's choices symbolised independence and cultural defiance.

Stella Bruzzi (1997) suggested, Hepburn's use of tailoring:

***'reclaimed masculine dress as an expression of female autonomy rather than imitation.'***

Her visibility in film and media helped normalise tailoring for women, reinforcing its association with gender equality, versatility, and freedom. Hollywood thus played a powerful role in shifting public perceptions of women in masculine clothing, positioning tailoring as not only acceptable but aspirational.



figure 25. Katharine Hepburn



figure 26. Katharine Hepburn



figure 27. Katharine Hepburn



figure 28. Katharine Hepburn



figure 29. Katharine Hepburn



figure 30. Katharine Hepburn



figure 31. Katharine Hepburn



figure 32. Marlene Dietrich



figure 33. Marlene Dietrich



figure 36. Marlene Dietrich



figure 37. Marlene Dietrich



figure 34. Marlene Dietrich



figure 35. Marlene Dietrich



figure 38. Marlene Dietrich

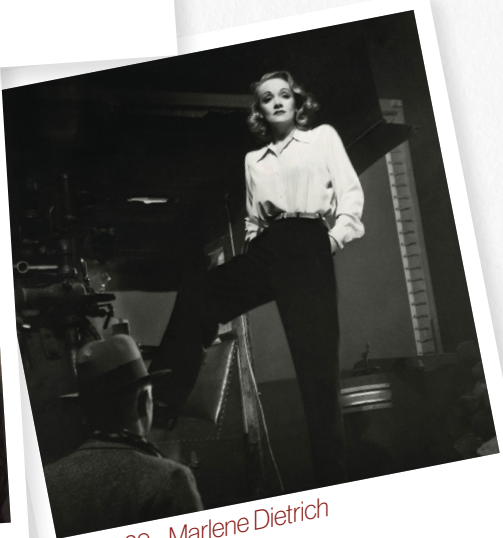
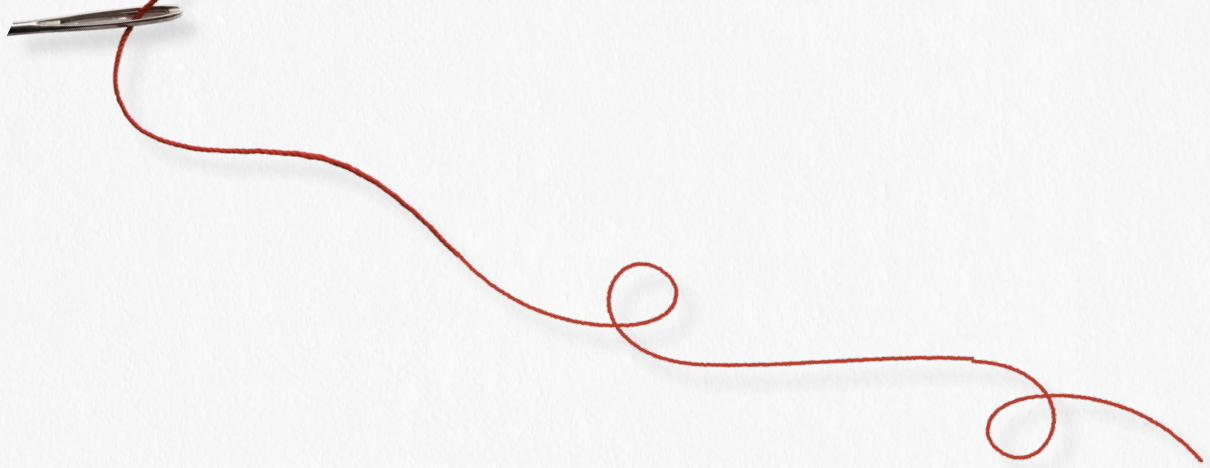


figure 39. Marlene Dietrich

Marlene Dietrich became one of the most enduring icons of androgyny in the 20th century, using tailoring as a powerful tool of self-expression. Her choice to wear tuxedos, trousers, and sharply structured suits challenged the restrictive gender norms of her time and reframed menswear as a space women could inhabit with confidence and authority. Dietrich's image blended elegance with rebellion, showing how clothing could move beyond convention and instead become a statement of identity, control, and artistic freedom. Her legacy continues to shape modern androgynous fashion, influencing designers who use tailoring to explore gender fluidity and redefine who clothing is "for."



The 1960s marked one of the most significant milestones in tailoring's history with Yves Saint Laurent's introduction of Le Smoking, the first tuxedo designed specifically for women. Presented in the 1966 Autumn-Winter collection, the tuxedo translated men's eveningwear into women's wardrobes.

Media responses were polarised: fashion magazines applauded its elegance, while mainstream newspapers and conservative social venues banned women wearing trousers from entry, underscoring its disruptive cultural impact (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, 2025).

Magazines simultaneously portrayed Le Smoking as scandalous and chic, ensuring its status as an icon of female empowerment. Crucially, this moment highlighted fashion's duality: tailoring could subvert gender expectations, but its representation often reinforced glamourised or sexualised archetypes.

Le Smoking remains a pivotal example of tailoring's power to challenge gender norms while also being commodified by the fashion system.

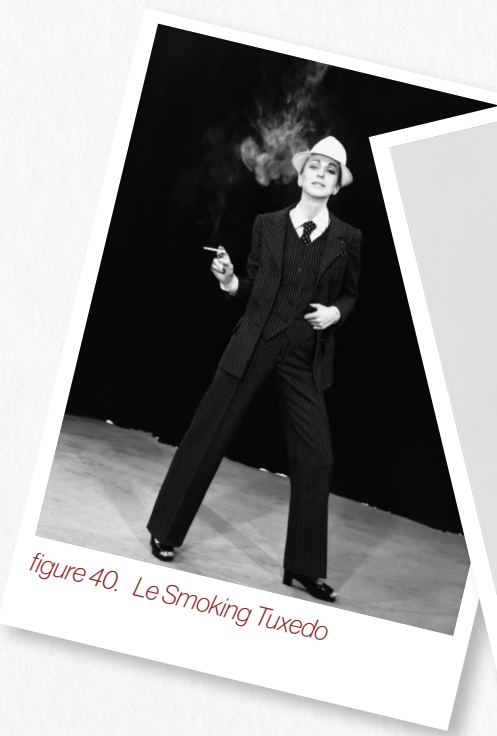


figure 40. Le Smoking Tuxedo



figure 41. Le Smoking Tuxedo

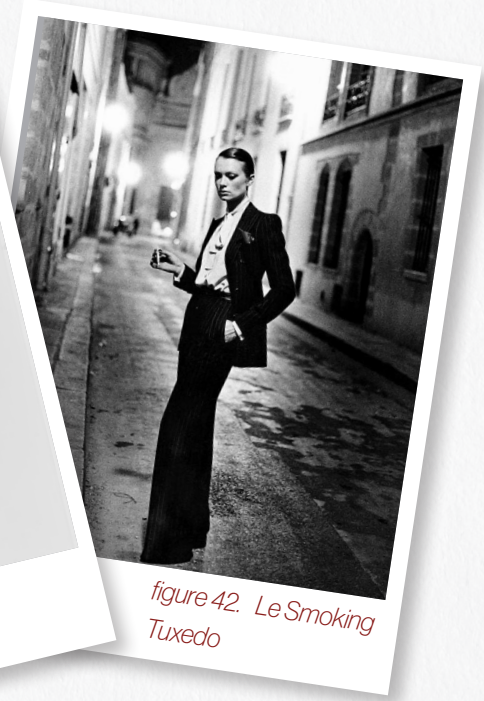


figure 42. Le Smoking Tuxedo



By the 1980s, tailoring had evolved into “power dressing.” Designers such as Claude Montana, Thierry Mugler, Jean Paul Gaultier, and Yves Saint Laurent created suits with exaggerated shoulders and sharply structured silhouettes, marketed as uniforms of the ambitious career woman (Ramzi, 2024).

Magazines celebrated these designs as symbols of authority, yet the suits also revealed a paradox: empowerment was often framed through adopting masculine-coded aesthetics, reinforcing the idea that power itself was masculine.

This tension underscored the complexity of tailoring as both a liberating and limiting force within women’s fashion. Nevertheless, the visibility of the power suit ensured tailoring’s ongoing association with authority and ambition, strengthening its role as a cultural signifier.



figure 43. Emanuel Ungaro Runway



figure 44. Paulina Porzikova in Alaïa



figure 45. Melanie Griffith from the film Working Girl



figure 46. Joan Collins in Nolan Miller



figure 47. Yuppie Look - Ralph Lauren Spring 1988 campaign



figure 48. Roger Sakoun

The history of women's tailoring demonstrates its central role in negotiating femininity and masculinity. Tailoring has consistently blurred boundaries while being mediated through cultural narratives of rebellion, empowerment, or conformity.

Importantly, these legacies provide the foundation for contemporary debates around androgynous fashion. They also highlight why tailoring is vital to communicate to younger audiences today: not just as clothing, but as a living history of identity, defiance, and creative possibility.



figure 49. Princess Diana in suit



figure 50. Princess Diana in suit



figure 54. Princess Diana in suit



figure 55. Princess Diana in suit



figure 56. Princess Diana in suit



figure 51. Princess Diana in suit



figure 52. Princess Diana in suit



figure 57. Princess Diana in suit



figure 58. Princess Diana in suit



figure 59. Princess Diana in suit



figure 53. Princess Diana in suit



figure 60. Princess Diana in suit



figure 61. Princess Diana in suit



figure 62. Princess Diana in suit



figure 63. Princess Diana in suit