The 1950s: American Fashion at Midcentury

What do you think is 50s fashion? I am here to let you know what exactly American midcentury fashion is and how to identify it. There are three levels of fashion, the lowest being the common people’s fashion, the next is ideal fashion, and the last is glorified fashion.

Common people’s fashion, which made up the majority of what people were wearing at the time, can be found today in America published newspaper articles, magazine articles, and educational videos. Although these sources can be staged editors wanted the photographs to be as real and as relatable as possible. Articles were meant to portray real live events, facts, and people therefore their photographs reflected the same. Common people’s fashion is the lowest level of fashion because it is the most diluted form of designer fashion and the opposite of glamour. It was what the people could afford and therefore is what you see the most.

Newspaper and magazine articles are for the most part unstaged and raw images of common people, therefore you can get a real look at what people were wearing. Examples of American newspapers and magazines that were popular at the time are Life magazine, Time magazine, the New York Times, and Dallas Morning News. Articles that usually had unstaged photos in both newspapers and magazines was coverage of life events at the time. For example people who showed up for a movie debut by the masses, desegregation, amusement parks, state fairs, and presidential elections. An interesting newspaper article I found was in the Dallas Morning News with coverage on the Texas State fair showing real texans in the 50s. Which is truly fascinating to see and know what people were wearing here in Dallas still reflected the mainstream fashions in spite of our cowboy culture.
Although social education videos were staged and rehearsed producers wanted the actors to be relatable therefore they also reflected what the common people were wearing. The easiest way to find these educational videos is to do a search on YouTube. Examples of American made educational videos that I found are titled “Are You Ready For Marriage?” | 1950 Social Guidance Film by Quotes Yes and “The Good Loser” a Social Guideline on Gender Roles by Charlie Dean Archives. I had found these video on accident one day after researching authentic hair and makeup videos which had lead into these types of videos. These videos cover a variety of topics for both men and women. For example relationship videos are usually made for both genders, marriage videos are usually for the women, and military produced educational videos are for men. The target audience for these videos were usually young adults and teenagers. These videos not only show the fashions of the time but also the morals and what society valued at the time.

Another great way to see real people are to look at photos of major events such as families going to disneyland or concerts. Disneyland opened in 1955 and attracted many families and people from around the nation. Pictures from people going when it first opened are readily available online and show not only men and women’s fashions but also childrens. Many concerts had photographs from official sources such as the performers crew and venue and unofficial sources such as paparazzi and miscellaneous photos from fans. Now I really and truly wish I had been a teenager when Elvis Presley opened for Johnny Cash because that would have been the coolest concert to see. Elvis Presley is the king of rock and roll and Johnny Cash is a famous country singer. Other great jazz performers of the time were Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Louis Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald. These array of artists in different genres were all popular in
America in the 50s as well as around the globe. If you want to see the masses and what they were wearing just look at the great artists of the times and the concerts they performed.

Ideal fashion is what the designers produce as casual wear and what their imitators try to recreate. It is the middle level of fashion because it is what the common people strived for and imitated and a step below what movie stars and royalty showed off. While photos were strictly prohibited in foreign designer fashion exhibitions, selective photos and sketches were released one month after their debut. These photos and sketches were to shown to potential buyers who would then recreate the designs in the designers name. This is where magazines play a large role with advertisements that show designers work. Foreign designers were the innovators of the ideal look of the midcentury and many Americans tried to imitate them.

Magazines like *Time* and *Life* were filled with designer advertisements. Advertisements were made up of both live models and art depicting the product. Both were manicured to a tee. Advertisements were the ideal fashions because nothing was out of place, companies were careful and specific with the models they chose and how the end products were presented. Drawn advertisements were the ideal image. Most women were shown with hair artfully done, rosy cheeks, bright painted lips, manicured hands, thin waists, large hips, and all in heels. Men were usually advertising outdoors products, beer, and cigarettes. They too were drawn smiling, with perfectly combed hair and usually with an obedient woman by his side. Artists molded their creations to look happy and usually fulfilling the stereotypical gender role.

Great examples of drawn ideal images of women in midcentury were sewing patterns. To sell their product they depicted what was most desirable, small waists, large hips, and a overall
A doll-like figure. Artists could create whatever they wanted, so they reflected what society desired. Examples of American sewing companies that recreated designer creations were McCall, Butterick, and Simplicity. These companies simply imitated what designers came up with and in their own way created their own fashions. An example of designer fashions was Vogue, who owned the rights and had permission to create designer fashions.

Glorified fashions were the evening wear that designers created and what were shown in the movies. This is the highest level of fashion because designers had free range to create whatever their client wanted without the pressure for the need of it to sell off the racks. For both men and women wearing evening wear was normally over the top and inaccessible by anyone but the wealthy. Another great place to find this kind of fashion is in movies as worn by American movie stars. Here are a few examples of American movies and what their leading roles wore.

Rear Window 1954 starring Grace Kelly and James Stewart is an Alfred Hitchcock film. In one scene Grace Kelly is incredibly done up with glittering jewelry, red lips, and a dress with a black bodice and white full bodied skirt. The white and black contrast further accentuates her small waist. Her perfect hair and makeup were completely staged and shows the highest form of the midcentury ideal.

Vertigo 1958 starring Kim Novak and James Stewart is another Alfred Hitchcock film. Kim Novak has a secret identity as a high class mystery woman while she is actually a normal woman who is your typical girl next door nobody. In one scene from the film in her secret identity Novak is in a stunning midnight and green evening dress with a sash and train. In the
film she was among high society and in reality it is only high society who could afford things of that nature.

Some Like it Hot 1959 starring Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis, and Jack Lemmon. In a Famous scene from the film Marilyn Monroe is in a sequined short black dress showing a lot of skin. Here is the best example of a dress that a normal person could not get ahold of this was a fashion that only a movie star could wear. Her co stars were dressed in drag most of the film.

Rebel Without a Cause 1955 starring James Dean and Natalie Wood. James Dean in this movie is a wonderful example of the sub fashion of “Bad Boy” and “Greaser”. Dressed in a leather jacket and simple white shirt for the majority of the film. Natalie Wood as the image of girl next door for most of her wardrobe. While this movie does not depict the highest level of fashion it is a great example of a subculture fashion.

Why a new fashion rose; across the atlantic many countries were still using rations to purchase clothing while America was emerging into an economic boom. After the war Americans were the only ones who had a disposable income and designers took notice. After Christian Dior released his designs the fashion industry was once again revived to please eager American buyers. Here are a few designers and descriptions of their designs and how they fit into the midcentury look.

Designer fashion needed a revival after the war and Christian Dior was the one to do it. The midcentury “look” started from Christian Dior’s 1947 collection called “The New Look” released on February 12th. Where it was him that had cast away boxy draped dresses to the ones we have come to know. In his work you can see the extremely small waists and large circle
skirts. His looks were not completed without gloves and stiletto heels. In the summer of 1947 Neiman Marcus awarded Dior with an Oscar in Dallas for his New Look designs.

Cristobal Balenciaga career took off in the 50s. Balenciaga has his own version of a suit than that of Christian Dior. One I had found had dramatic structured bell sleeves and a mermaid like skirt which accentuates the posterior and flares out ending at the knee as opposed to Dior’s suits which were simpler. Other designs he had were mermaid dresses such as a black dress strapless dress scalloped edge bottom and white tulle underneath flaring out in a dramatic full bodied mermaid. Another is a black dress with tons of flare with a high low aspect exposing the legs with a pop of colored ruffles that curl up to the hip. Mermaid dresses became popular evening wear in the 50s and Americans loved to try out this new trend.

Jacques Fath reemerged after the war. It was he who made large bows, gathers and ruffles iconic for the age. An example of his version of the suit was a dress with dramatic layering ruffles emerging at the hip and shoulder, with a belt at the waist and a plain pencil skirt. Examples of his evening gowns was an iconic strapless full bodied dress with his own twist as a hem that ends above the ankle and lead into the floor with a small train. Another is his own version of a mermaid dress that had gathers down the center and a gathered draped skirt. Mermaid dresses hugged every part of the body except the feet which usually flared or draped outward. Last example is a dress with geometric gathers pinching inward mid thigh and ending just below the knee. His career ended with his death from leukemia in 1954.

Pierre Balmain collection was released between 1952-1957 named “Jolie Madame” or Pretty Woman. This was the next designer collection that had gained popularity at the time.
Balmain sold his designs to Magnin in California and Neiman Marcus in Dallas where his designs were produced and sold. He dressed many celebrities such as Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh, and Sophia Loren.

Gabrielle Chanel never followed anyone's rules and after closing for the war she came back in 1954. Her designs remained simple and structured although became slightly more slender to accentuate the body in her iconic suits. One of her 50s designs is a black dress, which she had made famous in the 20s, that has a small waist and a layered bottom.

Charles James was mostly a designer for the wealthy for evening wear. He was a master at draping and patterns. Every dress was structured very specifically inside and out with a level of mastery that seems to be unparalleled. He is who would make the clothing for the third and highest level of midcentury fashion. While it was unattainable by the common people he had free range to stun the masses with the dresses he designed for high society.

Although most of these designers are foreign they all had American clientele and their creations were icons and staples in American fashion and demand. They were the ones who dressed American movie stars and the extremely wealthy and therefore they had a lasting impact on American fashion.

Sewing pattern companies usually imitated designers or were designer patterns themselves. McCall, Butterick, and Simplicity were not a designer sewing pattern companies. They imitated designers and in their own ways made their own fashions and designs. Vogue was a designer company. They were the company who bought the rights to designs and created them with pride under the designers name.
While people were still making their own clothes it was becoming less popular and ready to wear clothing became more desirable because of american consumers. Designers wanted to keep up with the trends and rather than have exclusive clientele some designers opened their own ready to wear stores, others sold selected designs to ready to wear companies or sewing pattern companies to produce. Two of ready to wear companies in were Henri Bendel in New York and Marshall Field and Company in Chicago. These companies watched designers closely to decide what to produce and what to try to buy rights to. It was companies like these that would send spies to designer fashion shows with sometimes photographic memory to try to get the latest fashions. With great effort designers tried their to protect their designs although the espionage was tremendous.

Sub-Fashions were created as a rebellion to mainstream fashion the same as subcultures. Which is why I wanted to study the other “unpopular” fashions of the time. Beatnik was a simple comfortable style of dress. Usually in black. Men wore comfortable button ups or plain tee shirts with jeans or unpleated trousers. Women wore flats, pants that ended mid calf and simple tee shirts. This was the most comfortable of the fashions in midcentury. Audrey Hepburn went on to make this style famous. Although Teddy Boys were british I felt that they were important to include because of their hair, which made its way to the states. Their hairstyle called a Duckbill and consisted of the hair coming up at the sides and rolled into a barrel than conjoined into one at the forehead. They had the most unique sense of style of all the sub fashions and it was incredibly high maintenance. The style was made up of first a button down with a vest and on top a normally tailed coat with a bolero necktie. Next are what people think of as midcentury
fashion, greasers. Made up entirely of cotton tee shirts, leather jackets, and denim. Also optional was a cigarette, motorcycle and switch blade knife. I think this style has become well known among my generation just because of the book and movie The Outsiders. The movie from the 50s that really gave voice to this fashion was A Rebel Without a cause starring James Dean. The girl next door was also the most well known of the fashions. The most conservative of the bunch. It was less of a sub-fashion because it made was just a variation of mainstream fashion. Like with any fashions that come and go there is a socially accepted conservative version. The girl next door was what drawn advertisers wanted to portray. Last of the sub-fashions were your sex symbols. While these were strictly reserved to adult magazines they still had their own fashions and popularity. What they wore is what was desired behind closed doors. Two beauties that were the epitome of sultry and portrayed this sub-fashion perfectly were Marylin Monroe and Bettie Page. Bettie Page was famous in the burlesque world and showed off many different bikinis that were risque at the time.

Hair played an important role in fashion in midcentury because it was undesirable to have straight unstyled hair. In order to be accepted your hair needed to be done in some way. Even a simple ponytail was sufficient. The hairstyles then were achieved by one of three ways, getting it done by a beautician with the use of heat, or at home yourself by either pin curls or rollers. Depending on which direction you rolled your hair you could create thousands of different hairstyles. Hair of every length was curled in this way. The most popular hair lengths were right at the shoulder or short like a pixie cut. Even women with pixie cuts would try to curl their hair with tiny rollers. The success of your curl also depended on where you started your layers. For
most women the layers started at the base of the head and were layered from there. The layers are what most successfully created a curl because without them your curl falls and becomes undefined. My favorite hairstyle of the time is the Poodle updo which is a group of curls that sits at the top of the head and comes down on the forehead.

The lowest level of fashion is the most relevant because it is what still exists today and what I look for to buy and wear. The second level is the most well documented americana if you know what to search for and the most interesting because it reflected what society desired. Finally the third level is the most enjoyable to research because it is made up of movie stars, evening wear, and glamour. While the latter is the most unobtainable in midcentury and in the present it is the most beautiful. The levels of fashion interest me because I collect and wear midcentury fashion and to know what entirely it was made up of is enriching and fascinating.

American midcentury fashion is important because it reflected the morals and society of the time, it is another way of studying american history. There are plenty of people who think that the 1950s was the greatest decade in american history and when talking about wanting to go back to a “simpler time” they usually mean the 50s. Midcentury is the most fascinating to me and therefore I have educated myself on what it was made up of so I can begin to understand a “simpler time”.
Bibliography


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Pierre Balmain 1952-1957 “Jolie Madame”

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Butterick © 2017

McCall © 2017

Vogue © 2017

Henri Bendel New York © 1950

Marshall Field and Company Chicago © 1950