

DRESSES AND SKIRTS

From Frocks and Smocks to Full Regalia



As recent as 80 years ago, women

wore a dress or skirt every day. Can you imagine? Of course, our foremothers didn't have much choice:

At that point, a woman's right to vote in the United States had not yet been recognized, much less the kind of gender-bending chic modeled by silver screen icon Marlene Dietrich. But with more freedom and physical activity came other types of garments, and the onetime bound-by-corset uniform is now a feminine power tool, worn when a girl wants to show off her silhouette and ladylike ways.

Consider the shifts Jackie Kennedy wore on the campaign trail; the backless, second-skin gown Marilyn Monroe slinked in while scandalously singing to JFK; or the shocking Versace bondage dress that Liz Hurley flaunted at the premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

Even the most basic dress and skirt styles continue to prove timeless. Just check out the vintage gowns that A-list stars wear to big events—like the black-and-white Valentino Julia Roberts wore when she won her Academy Award. And since its introduction, the flirty *miniskirt* is yet to waver in popularity. Even the *ball gown*, which might seem dated at first glance (when was the last time you donned a crinoline under a floor-length gown?), has its very relevant and modern incarnation: the prom dress.

Many of life's milestones—quinceañeras, sweet sixteens, confirmations, Bar and Bat Mitvahs, weddings, and even graduations—are marked by the ritualistic wearing of a special gown. Gliding across the room in that perfect dress or skirt can make us feel like the star of the party—which is, after all, the point.

CHAPTER GLOSSARY

bias cut ● fabrics cut on the bias are cut diagonally across the grain of the fabric. **Slip dresses** are often cut on the bias. This cut is particularly flattering because it allows the fabric to hang smoothly rather than bunch or ride up on the body.

bodice ● section of a dress between the shoulders and the waistline.

cinch waist ● a waistline that is pulled in, generally with a belt.

dart ● a V-shaped taper sewn in a garment to make it fit closer to the body; in dresses, darts are often sewn into the bodice near the armpit.

décolleté ● a low-cut neckline.

dropped waist ● a waistline that falls below the natural waist.

empire waist ● a raised waistline that starts under the bust.

smocking ● a line of closely pinched fabric.

tapered ● becomes narrower at one end.

DRESS FABRICS GLOSSARY

brocade ● heavy silk fabric with patterns woven in silver- or gold-colored thread.

chiffon ● sheer, light fabric that's woven from silk, rayon, or wool.

cotton ● fabric woven from the natural fibers of the cotton plant.

duchesse satin ● unlike the slippery satin used in bed sheets and formal gowns, this satin is firm and holds a shape. Like taffeta, it's made from silk.

georgette ● sheer polyester and silk blend fabric with a crepe (crinkled) surface.

jersey ● knit fabric with elastic properties made from wool, silk, cotton, or rayon. Originally made on the Isle of Jersey off the English coast, where it was used to make clothing for fishermen. This fabric is notorious for its wrinkle-resistant properties. It wears and travels well.

Lycra ● DuPont's trademarked name for its spandex fiber.

microfiber ● lightweight, silky fabric made from a superfine polyester filament yarn.

organza ● sheer, rib-free fabric made from silk, nylon, rayon, or polyester similar to chiffon, but heavier and crisp.

rayon ● soft artificial silk made from cellulose. Rayon was first used in "silk" stockings, which debuted in 1912.

silk ● soft fabric made from threads produced by insect larvae.

spandex ● lightweight, strong, elastic synthetic fiber made from polyurethane.

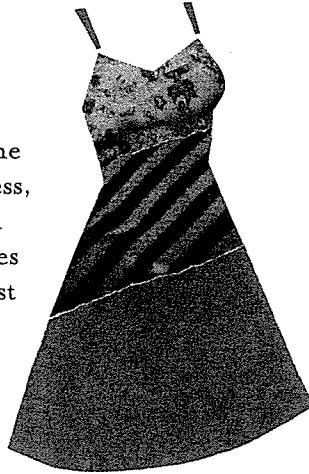
taffeta ● smooth, shiny fabric made from silk. Its color, texture, and shine are the same on both sides. It has a fine weave like that of chiffon but holds shape. Often used in **pouf dresses**.

DRESSES

A-LINE DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

"A-line" simply refers to the triangular shape of this dress, which is usually made from one piece of cloth that flares out from just below the bust to the bottom hem. The A can begin just under the bust (an empire waistline) or at the hips (a dropped waistline).



A-Line Dress

WHO MADE IT: Christian Dior first showed it to the public in his spring 1955 line.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Dancing go-go girls and mod squaders in swinging London made a short version of the A-line one of the most sought-after styles of the 1960s.

HOW TO ROCK IT: The A-line shape looks great on lots of body types and with lots of different shoe styles. Wear it with **slipper flats**, **strappy sandals**, or **platforms**, depending on the style and fabric of the dress.

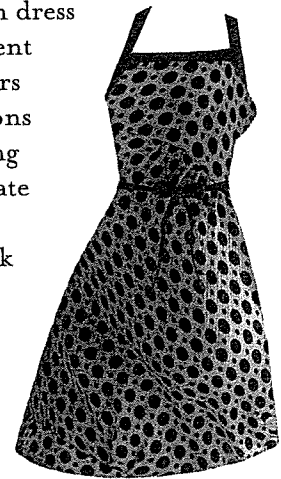
The A-Z on the A-Line

A-line dresses reached their height of popularity in the 1960s, but Dior's dress-by-letters inspiration didn't stop there. He also created the H-line (a more boxy cut) and the Y-line (a more tapered cut), both of which resemble the shapes of those letters. The most extreme A-line dress? The **trapeze dress**. Introduced by Yves Saint Laurent (who was designing for Dior), it has enough yardage to smack a twirling girl in the face.

APRON DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: Most apron dresses feature a wrap style and thick straps, and some are even open in the back, like a kitchen apron.

WHO MADE IT: The apron dress can be traced back to ancient times, when Egyptian rulers wore jewel-encrusted aprons not for cooking or cleaning but as part of their elaborate everyday ensembles. One could tell the wearer's rank of power based on the shape and placement of the apron's sparkling embellishments. Thousands of years later, in the 1920s, one of the first modern-day apron dresses was made; it was a full apron that covered the whole body and hung loosely like a smock.



Apron Dress

WHO MADE IT HOT: Minnie Mouse, Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, and the robo-hostesses from the 1975 and 2004 films *The Stepford Wives* all sported this whimsical take on homemaker fashion. The apron dress resurged in popularity with the new-school hippies of the '90s, who made a backless version out of patchwork corduroy and paired it with baggy jeans.

HOW TO ROCK IT: If you're daring, wear the backless version alone as a playful summer dress. If you don't want to show *that* much skin (or acquire funky tan lines), try layering it over a peasant skirt and cotton **camisole**.

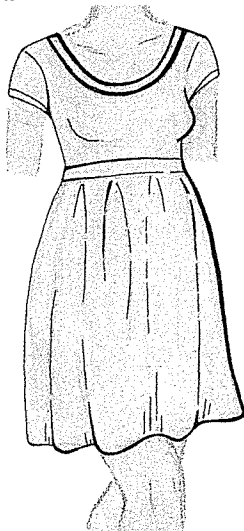
WHO MADE IT HOT: Courtney Lové and designers Anna Sui and Marc Jacobs helped make this style a wardrobe essential in the grunge-fueled 1990s. Their versions were often paired with rugged **combat boots**, like Doc Martens.

HOW TO ROCK IT: Toughen up the baby doll by wearing it with **leggings**, bodysuits, and combat boots. For a sweeter look, pair it with **ballerina flats** or **Mary Janes**.

BABY-DOLL DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: A nod to the nighties of the 1950s, the baby-doll dress is generally an empire-waisted frock with a low, scooped neckline, short sleeves, a loose fit, and a hemline that hits above the knee. Other variations include longer hemlines, dropped waists, long sleeves, and/or floppy collars. Because the full skirt allows the dress to move in a playful swing, soft and sheer fabrics like chiffon, rayon, and georgette are commonly used. Floral prints, stretch velvet, stretch lace, and sticky-sweet pastels are popular for this style, too.

WHO MADE IT: Mary Quant and other streetwear designers catering to the '60s teens of the youthquake (see right) brought baby dolls to the masses.



Baby-Doll Dress

The Shake of Youthquake

The 1960s were all about revolution — the birth of the women's liberation movement, the fight for civil rights, and the protests against the Vietnam War. It makes sense then that fashion also underwent a revolution during this time. Up until the '60s, girls pretty much wore whatever was handed down to them. But trends began moving the other way — bubbling up on the street and flowing into the French fashion houses. Gone were the refined hat-glove-dress ensembles and with them the stuffy authority of their makers. Instead, small-time, youth-run boutiques in London, and then in New York and San Francisco, served as launching pads for fresh, hip looks like **go-go boots**, loud prints, and, of course, the **miniskirt**. Even miniskirt maker Mary Quant knew there was a limit to what she could take credit for. "It wasn't me or Courrèges who invented the miniskirt," she said, "it was the girls in the street."

BALL GOWN

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: This long gown's signature attributes are a full skirt, a fitted bodice, and a low neckline.

Layers of tulle are often built in under the skirt, and the hemline is usually floor-length to give the illusion that the woman is gliding or floating across the floor when she dances. This gown is always made of fabrics that hold shape, like taffeta and organza.



Ball Gown

WHO MADE IT: The ball gown dates back to the Middle Ages, when society's upper echelons attended formal dances. The 1850s saw a resurgence in this practice, which brought with it the resurgence of the gown. Today's equivalent, the prom or quinceañera dress, is most famously produced by Jessica McClintock.

WHO MADE IT HOT: The most famous ball gown of them all? Cinderella's of course.

HOW TO ROCK IT: Because most ball gowns have a low décolleté, upswept hair helps elongate and draw more attention to the neck.



BUBBLE DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: Any dress that features a tapered hemline can be considered a bubble. This technique causes a billowing, ballooning look instead of a hard edge.

WHO MADE IT: Pierre Cardin created the bubble dress and skirt in 1957. The style's lineage continued with Zandra Rhodes' elasticized bubble hemlines in the '70s and the ubiquitous **pouf dress** of the next decade. The more modern bubble dress provides similar volume, but is more low-key and takes up much less space.

WHO MADE IT HOT:

The bubble look—in dress, skirt, and shirt form—has been seen in the past few years on nearly every Hollywood starlet, from Jessica Alba to Kate Beckinsale.

HOW TO ROCK IT:

The bubble dress looks best when made from material that holds shape, like microfiber instead of limp cotton. Pair a bubble dress with a cashmere **cardigan** and flats for a modern-day princess effect that's more Lauren Conrad than Sleeping Beauty.



Bubble Dress

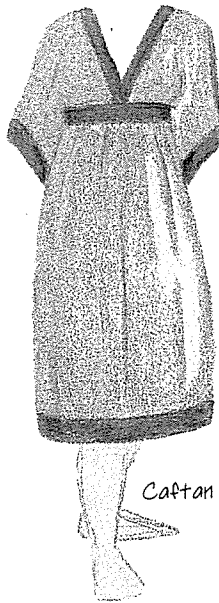
How the Belle of the Ball Kept It Clean

Ever wonder why traditional ball gowns have so much volume from the waist down? The original reason, established back in the mid-1800s, was to keep single guys at a respectable distance from sought-after ladies dancing at formal balls. It took more than a century for the mountains of layers to disappear from formal dress, and for attire more suitable for dirty dancing to surface.

CAFTAN

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

Traditionally, this is an ankle-length tunic gown with wide sleeves and an open neckline. Modern versions often have higher hemlines, empire waists, and/or narrower sleeves. Caftans are usually made of lightweight and somewhat stiff fabrics like muslin, cotton, or linen, though sometimes they're also cut from silk.



Caftan

WHO MADE IT: This roomy, straight-cut garment is based on the traditional garb of North African and Eastern Mediterranean men. In the 1950s, Christian Dior first sent caftans down the runway. Halston and Yves Saint Laurent followed a few years later.

WHO MADE IT HOT: This style was famously worn by 1960s jet-setters like former *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland, socialite Babe Paley, and heiress Barbara Hutton. Barbra Streisand and Elizabeth Taylor also helped the caftan go from traditional dress for men to chic clothing for women.

HOW TO ROCK IT: If the caftan had an address, it would be Leisureland USA; it's always been a resort wear staple and favorite beach cover-up. To get the look of relaxation, pair it with flat-soled sandals or go totally barefoot.

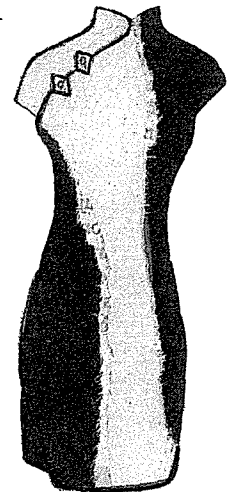
CHEONGSAM (AKA QUIPAOS)

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: A traditional Chinese gown (pronounced "chong-som") made of embroidered brocade fabric, the cheongsam has a stand-up collar with a button closure on the right side of the neck and a body-skimming fit like the sheath dress.

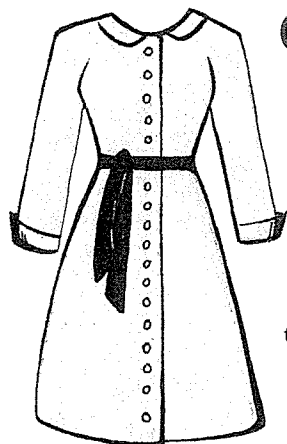
WHO MADE IT: Chinese men first wore the loose-fitting cheongsam about 500 years ago, but the cheongsam look was eventually adopted by Westerners who altered the style for women. By the 1950s, the new, Western-influenced cheongsam was more shiftlike, with a daring slit up the side.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Calendar girls of the 1930s first introduced the cheongsam to the Western masses. This dress took center stage in the 1960 movie *The World of Suzie Wong*.

HOW TO ROCK IT: The cheongsam begs for up-swept hair to show off the dress's unique collar.



Cheongsam
(AKA Quipaos)



Coatdress

COATDRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

This dress is tailored a lot like an overcoat, with a collar, button-front closure, cuffs, and sometimes a sash at the waist. But it's more fitted to the body than a coat and is frequently made of heavy cotton with a hemline near the knees.

WHO MADE IT: The long coatdress was invented during WWI, but it wasn't until the '60s that it became a popular look for hipster women.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Though the Mary Poppins-type coatdress is possibly the most iconic, trench-style coatdresses have also been made popular by designers like Rachel Roy and Isaac Mizrahi. Princess Diana, a timeless style queen, is known to have been buried in a long, black Catherine Walker coatdress.

HOW TO ROCK IT: Wear an above-the-knee coatdress with superhigh heels and undo a couple of buttons at the top, like Cameron Diaz did at the 2007 *Vanity Fair* Oscar party.

COCKTAIL DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: Almost any simply styled formal dress can be dubbed a cocktail dress, but the typical cocktail is a short, often tight-fitting dress made of luxury fabrics like velvet, silk, satin, and silk jersey.



Cocktail Dress

WHO MADE IT: Cocktail culture emerged in the 1920s, when people began to host pre-dinner parties and needed something to wear to such events. As a result, designers created this streamlined yet saucy dress. Though he was not the first to create a cocktail dress, Christian Dior gave this easy and sophisticated frock its name.

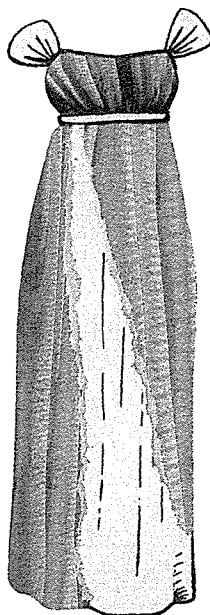
WHO MADE IT HOT: Julia Roberts famously went searching for proper attire to wear on a night out in *Pretty Woman*. "I got a dress," she proudly told Richard Gere. "A cocktail one."

HOW TO ROCK IT: Though once worn with gloves and a hat, the modern-day cocktail dress works best with a nice pair of heels.

EMPIRE DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: The empire is a floor-length gown with a waistline just under the bust and a slim, column-style skirt that fits close to the body.

WHO MADE IT: This dress is named for the historical period in which it first became popular—the 1800s, during France's First Empire. The style has endured throughout the centuries, with popular revivals in the 1930s and '70s. Oftentimes the empire dress is adorned with Greek symbolism, like the classic Greek key pattern.



Empire Dress

WHO MADE IT HOT: Rumor has it that Joséphine Bonaparte (who married Napoléon to become the first empress of the French) invented the style to disguise her pregnant belly. Whether or not that's true, she did become one of the style's first famed icons. Gwyneth Paltrow put a fresh face on the empire dress in her Oscar-winning role as Viola in 1998's *Shakespeare in Love*.

HOW TO ROCK IT: The straight columnar lines of this dress work best with simple shoes and accessories. To get the Spartan look of Queen Gorgo in *300*, pair it with dressy sandals, pulled-back hair, and dangling earrings.

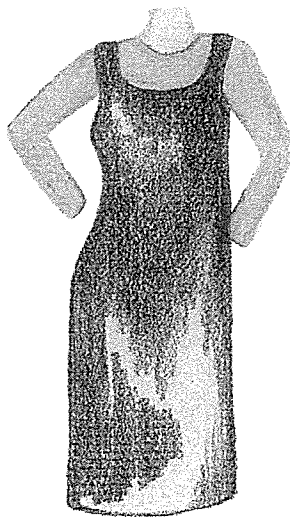
JUMPER DRESS (AKA PINAFORE)

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

The jumper is a sleeveless, loose-fitting dress worn over a boatneck long-sleeved shirt—like an old-school Brownie uniform.

WHO MADE IT: Its origins are hard to trace, but it appears that the jumper came onto the American radar through the works of early 20th-century designers like Coco Chanel and Paul Poiret, who made women's sportswear that consisted of two-piece outfits and closely resembled the modern-day jumper.

WHO MADE IT HOT: The traditional jumper brings to mind soccer moms and schoolmarms,



Jumper Dress
(AKA Pinafore)

but the fabulously flirty dresses that Twiggy wore—the A-line minidress, the **trapeze dress**, and the **smock dress**—all draw from the jumper's loose-fitting structure.

HOW TO ROCK IT: Since jumpers tend to have gaping armholes and a loose fit, they go best with some kind of shirt underneath. Whether you make it racy in lace or wholesome in cotton pique is up to you.

KIMONO

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE:

Like a T-shirt, a kimono is formed in a T shape. It's cut from a single piece of cloth and wraps across the body with a sash, like a robe. Its sleeves are long and ultrawide.

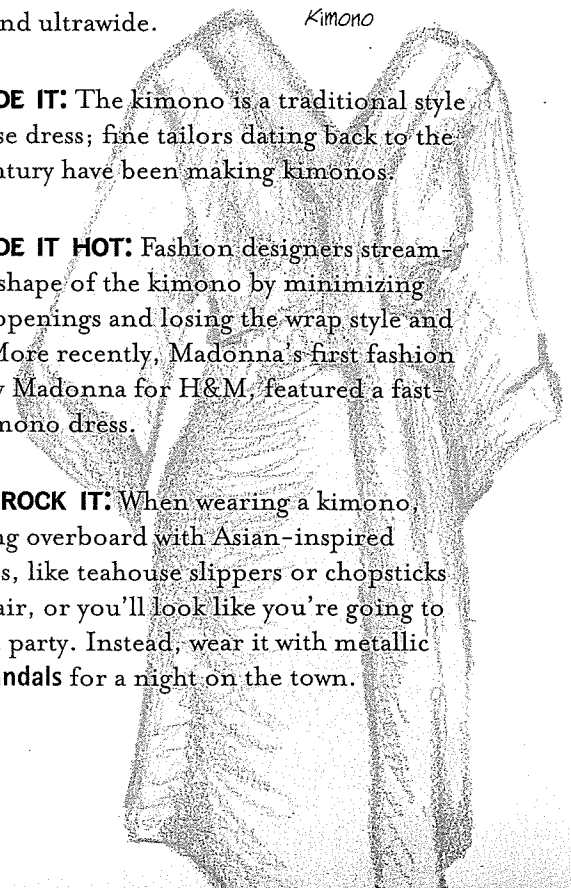


Kimono

WHO MADE IT: The kimono is a traditional style of Japanese dress; fine tailors dating back to the eighth century have been making kimonos.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Fashion designers streamlined the shape of the kimono by minimizing its sleeve openings and losing the wrap style and sash tie. More recently, Madonna's first fashion line, M by Madonna for H&M, featured a fast-selling kimono dress.

HOW TO ROCK IT: When wearing a kimono, resist going overboard with Asian-inspired accessories, like teahouse slippers or chopsticks in your hair, or you'll look like you're going to a costume party. Instead, wear it with metallic strappy sandals for a night on the town.



LITTLE BLACK DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: The quintessential LBD is simple with clean lines designed to flatter one's best assets. The chesty lady might choose a sweetheart neckline, and a supermodel-tall type may go for a shorter hemline.



Little Black Dress

WHO MADE IT: Coco Chanel coined the term *little black dress* in 1926 when she debuted her LBD—a long-sleeved, knee-length number with a high neckline. *Vogue* editors may have compared the dress to Ford's Model T (they were both black, sleek, and attainable), but the style far outlasted the 1908 automobile. Though the color choice caused an uproar—black at that point was reserved for those in mourning—the style proved a perfect solution for what to wear to cocktail hour, as it allowed women to sip in style, then easily throw on a wrap or additional layers for dinner on the town. Women today still apply this streamlined dressing philosophy, enabling them to go from work to cocktails to dinner without having to stop home for a change of clothes.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Cartoon character Betty Boop was an early adopter of the LBD ethos. The most famous LBD is the one Holly Golightly wore in 1961's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Nowadays, nightlife impresario Amy Sacco (owner of NYC hot spot Bungalow 8) is rarely seen without her LBD.

HOW TO ROCK IT: The genius of the little black dress is that it can be worn for nearly any occasion. It can be gussied up with heels and

dramatic jewelry for a trip to the theater or made more casual with a **cardigan** and **slipper flats** for dinner with Grandma. If you can only afford one LBD in your closet, forego glitzy lace or a too-tight-for-church fit; instead, make it simple and versatile enough to work for nearly any occasion.

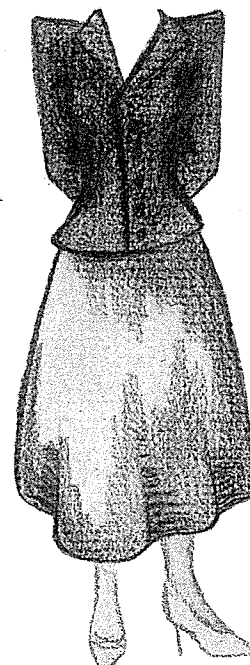
NEW LOOK STYLE

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: This isn't a single dress, but rather a whole style of dressing. Imagine a skirt-top combo that features exaggerated shoulders, a gathered and cinched waistline, and a full skirt to create the ultimate hourglass shape. This style dictated dress shape for a decade after its debut.

WHO MADE IT: Christian Dior first showed this style, dubbed "the New Look" collection, in 1947.

WHO MADE IT HOT: This ultrafeminine silhouetted style came to define the postwar era, thanks to silver screen leading ladies like Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, and Elizabeth Taylor in the late 1940s and '50s.

HOW TO ROCK IT: Anyone who wears this absolutely exudes old-fashioned glamour. Do like Dita Von Teese and wear the cinched, hourglass look with **stockings**, **pumps**, and **crimson-painted lips**.



New Look Style

Getting Dressed in the Depression

When the New Look was introduced, Americans were still in the throes of an economic depression and appalled at the yardage it took to create its incredibly full, long skirt. Fabric had been rationed in Paris and the US during WWII, and initially most people couldn't afford it. Thus, it took the New Look a whole decade to actually hit the mainstream.

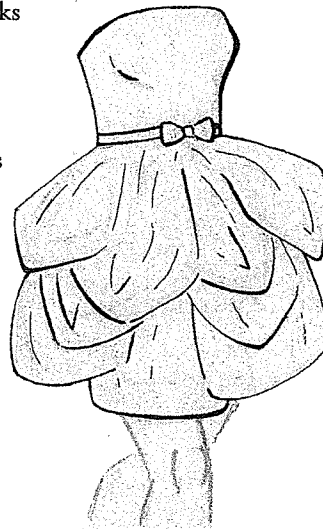
POUF DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: This bouffant cocktail dress features a fitted bodice and voluminous layers of silk taffeta that form a wide and puffy short skirt.

WHO MADE IT: In 1986, designer Christian Lacroix introduced this flamboyant creation, which was made from wildly colored and patterned fabrics, like fuschias and rose prints.

WHO MADE IT HOT: Promgoers of the 1980s used and abused the pouf, which they mainly wore strapless. Check out some classic '80s high school flicks like *Sixteen Candles* to see the extravagant pouf in action.

HOW TO ROCK IT: There's no going incognito here. The dress's sheer volume and traditionally loud palatte scream, "Look at me!" If you want to wear the pouf, avoid '80s overkill by choosing simple hair, makeup, and accessories.



Pouf Dress

PRAIRIE DRESS

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: Imagine neck-to-toe coverage, dainty floral or calico print, and a ruffled skirt and puffed sleeves. That is the true prairie dress. If that feels too constricting, you'll be happy to know some designers have modified the style, offering more skin-revealing cuts.

WHO MADE IT: This wholesome look dates back to the colonial fashions of the 18th century.

WHO MADE IT HOT:

Little House on the Prairie's Laura Ingalls helped bring the prairie dress back in the 1970s and '80s. Ralph Lauren sent his style of Americana down the runway with a slightly sexier take on the colonial prairie dress. Fashion renegade Chloë Sevigny has also worn prairie dresses to high-profile events. The look didn't become a huge trend—still, her puritan choices in fashion couldn't have hurt her shot at landing the role of a prairie dress-wearing wife on HBO's *Big Love*.



Prairie Dress

HOW TO ROCK IT: The bad news: Ankle-length cotton dresses don't exactly say "glamour." The good news: They can make a great foundation for DIY reconstruction. Grab a prairie dress from a thrift store and some scissors, and give the dress an updated shape—like a plunging neckline or midi hemline—by cutting away some fabric. Then, wear it with something unexpected, like fishnets or a studded hoodie.