

Gilded Age Fashion

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OVERVIEW

The Gilded Age began in 1870 and ended between 1900–1915, depending on the historian. It's also described as the “Late Victorian Era,” after the UK's queen who died in 1901. The Gilded Age was funded by the second phase of the Industrial Revolution, which introduced new manufacturing, transcontinental railroads, standardized time zones, new types of working and middle classes, new labor movements, and household electricity. Finally, an increasing number of women began work in factories and the service sector, and the women's suffrage movement took on new steam.

Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, wealth and leisure time (generally) increased. Vaudeville, sports teams, and consumerism proliferated.

And new millionaires like the Vanderbilts, Astors, Carnegies, and Rockefellers built summer mansions for lavish parties.

Victorian America: Transformations in Every Day Life (1876-1915) by Thomas J. Schlereth
The Industrial Revolution in World History (4th Edition) by Peter N. Stearns
[Newport Mansions](#), The Preservation Society of Newport County



The Breakers, Newport, Rhode Island

SIMPLE

conspicuous waste of goods is effective and gratifying as far as it goes; it is good prima facie evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently prima facie evidence of social worth. But dress has subtler and more far-reaching possibilities than this crude, first-hand evidence of wasteful consumption only. If, in addition to showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that she or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood, the evidence of social worth is enhanced in a very considerable degree. Our dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also **make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labor.**”

– Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)



WERE VICTORIANS ALL SKINNY?

Firstly, Victorian photographers frequently retouched their photos to paint a waist smaller or cover blemishes, and women used necklines and 1890s gigot sleeves combined with ruffles, petticoats, and bustles to create a pronounced hourglass shape. Paintings and photos have already been edited for us.

We can measure garments to determine size. Costumer Jennifer Rosbrugh notes that corsets were worn with a 2–4" lacing gap/reduction, so a 22" corset fit a 24–25" waist, a modern size 0. Plus-size fashion historian KennaSews has listed 900+ garments with 25–50" waists, up to a modern 26W or 28W. While some women tightlaced, it was frowned upon and not the norm.

Finally, museums limited by what was stored for generations. Fabric was expensive, so garments were often altered for new trends or to fit another family member. **Plus size is historical.**

"Extant Garments Waist Measurement Resource (25"/64cm+) (900+ garments!)," KennaSews

"Victorian Photoshop: How Altering Waist Sizes Affects Modern Perception of Body Diversity," Lancaster History

"Dispelling the Myth of the Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Waist," Historical Sewing, Jennifer Rosbrugh

"Size Guide," Adrianna Papell



Photo of First Lady Julia Dent Grant (1876)

Credit: Brady-Handy photograph collection, [Library of Congress](#)

MENSWEAR

Menswear has changed less quickly than women's, but the Gilded Age was the beginning of Black Tie and White Tie.

Generally, men's fashion was "marked by sobriety and understated." Men cropped and parted their hair, and most men sported a muttonchop or trim mustache. In the evening, men wore a black double-breasted tailcoat with matching double-breasted waistcoat and a white bowtie. In the 1880s, a single-breasted dinner jacket with black tie was introduced as a less formal option; this was later known as the tuxedo.

The difference? The black tailcoat was close-fitting, and the tuxedo was a "sack coat" that hung straight from the shoulders. Both were worn with a waistcoat.

Note that trousers, which usually had a stripe on the outer seam, were worn high-rise at the natural waist until the 1960s.



American fashion (August 1899),
Credit: The Jno. J. Mitchell Co., [The Library of Congress](#)

"1870-1879," "1880-1889," and "1890-1899," The Fashion History Timeline, Fashion Institute of Technology
"Victorian Men's Tuxedo, Tailcoats, Formalwear Guide," Vintage Dancer
"Victorian Men's Fashion History and Clothing Guide," Vintage Dancer

ACCESSORIES

Here are some accessories that might help you travel to the Gilded Age.

- Top hat
- Monocle or pince nez, framed in gold
- Formal white tie or (slightly less formal) black tie
- Signet or wedding ring
- Stick pin (small, simple, and elegant)
- Boutonnière
- Handkerchief, sometimes monogrammed
- Leather or silk wallet kept in the inside jacket or coat pocket
- Pocket watch
- White gloves, removed while eating
- Oak or ebony cane
- Spats
- Waistcoat



Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Black: Portrait of Theodore Duret (1883), by James McNeill Whistler, [Met Museum](#)

"Accessories Make the (Victorian) Man," Greater Bay Area Costumers Guild
"[Victorian Men's Fashion History and Clothing Guide](#)," Vintage Dancer

WOMENSWEAR

Wealthy women in the Victorian/Gilded Age did not work, so they had different clothes for each social requirement.

“There were different dresses for different parts of the day and different activities. The option to buy cheaper clothes made this vast variety possible, although only to women of a certain income level. There was the the dressing gown, the morning dress, the day dress to receive visitors, the visiting dress to go visit, the afternoon dress, the walking costume, the carriage dress (ensemble for drives in open carriages, riding habits, dinner & evening toilette, ball gowns and the Full-Dress toilette for very formal occasions at court.”

This era introduces the Tea Gown, a looser house dress worn by a married woman to entertain her friends at afternoon tea, and new sportswear for sports like tennis or bicycling. Note that, as in any era, some women broke the “fashion rules.”



*The Young Ladies Journal Triple Paris Fashion Plate (Feb 1887),
The Victoria and Albert Museum*

“Victorian Era (1837 - 1901),” Epochs of Fashion

“Victorian Dressing Gowns & Tea Gowns: A Brief Overview,” Historical Sewing

“If Clothes Could Talk: The Social History of the Tea Gown,” Maryland Center for History and Culture

ACCESSORIES

Here are some accessories that might help you travel to the Gilded Age.

- Handkerchief, sometimes monogrammed
- Long leather or silk gloves (white, gray, cream, tan, black or matching)
- Small reticule/purse (silk, net, beaded, or metal mesh)
- Gold or silver bouquet holder
- Chatelaine/chatelaine bag fastened at the waist
- Hand fan (silk, lace, feathers, or wood)
- Jewelry sets: bracelets, brooches, earrings, locket
- Cameos
- Diamond or brilliant collier necklace
- Watch attached to a brooch
- Decorative comb or hair pins, set with pearls

Consider: How might your outfit sparkle in the light of your host's brand new electric lamps?



Harriet Lane Johnston (circa 1898), unknown photographer, Smithsonian American Art Museum

"Accessories and Jewelry in Victorian Fashion, 1850-1900," Victorian Web

"Victorian Fashion History," Vintage Dancer

BUSTLE ERA

During the end of the 1860s, the large circular hoop skirt shifted to one that was flat in the front and had all its volume in the back, supported by ruffled petticoats or a crinoline. The daytime high neckline began to open into a V-neck (evening necklines were already open). The 1870s had a bustle skirt combined with a basque waist that lengthened the waistline. 1880s had both minimal bustles and ridiculously large bustles. Some bustles required a steel crinoline support, while others used a thin fabric pad. Petticoats smoothed any weird lines.

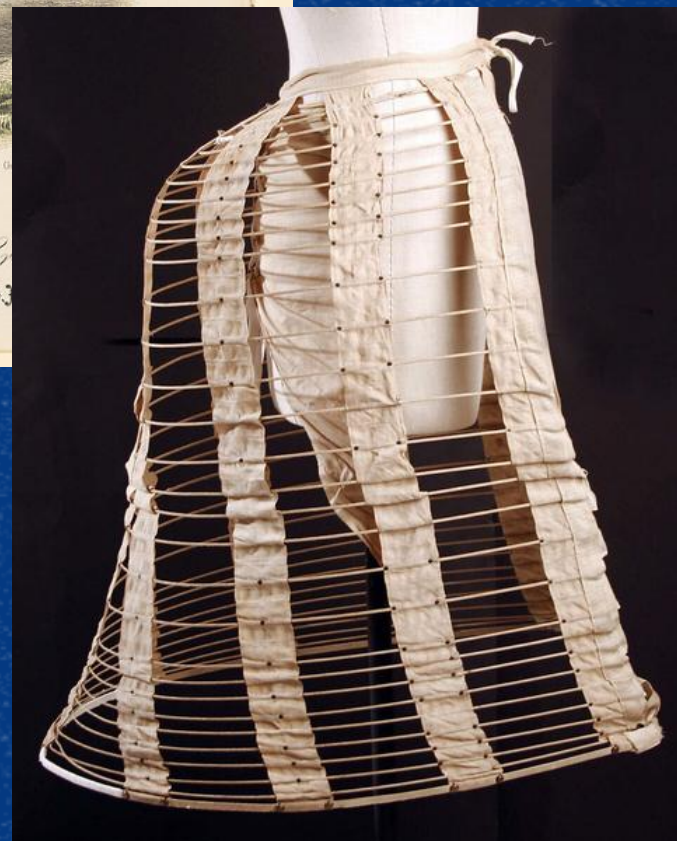
Note that during this period, many gowns consisted of a skirt with matching, interchangeable bodice top. This offers “day to night” versatility in a time when fabric was very expensive.

In times with heavy skirts, corsets were required. Corsetry allows the wearer to distribute the weight of a skirt/skirt support so they don't dig in at the waist. These styles would be painful without corsetry. Most women did not tightlace, though some Gilded Era socialites did.



Top: *The Latest Fashions, Expressly Designed and Prepared for Le Moniteur de la Mode* (1887), Met Museum

Right: *Bustle*, 1870s, Met Museum



DRESS REFORM

Two movements influenced fashion in the 1880s.

Aesthetic/Artistic Dress

The Arts and Crafts movement despised industrialization and advocated for a return to traditional, humanmade craftsmanship. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood influenced an Aesthetic movement focused on “less-ornamented, softer, more comfortable clothing inspired by historic examples.”

Rational Dress

The Rational Dress Society worried that the current fashions, especially corsets, were unhealthy and held women back. Thus, some doctors began to design and fit women for less restrictive corsets.

While neither movement became mainstream, loose Tea Gowns became fashionable and the Arts and Crafts movement influenced the Art Nouveau’s love for styled nature.

“The Arts and Crafts Movement and the Environment,” Artsper 2023

“1880-1889” and “1890-1899,” *The Fashion History Timeline*, a project of the Fashion Institute of Technology

“ARTS AND CRAFTS (RE)FORMS: Reform and Aesthetic Dress,” Missouri Historic Costume and Textile Collection



“Who Is Sylvia? What Is She, That All the Swains Commend Her?” (1896-1900), by Edwin Austin Abbey, *The National Gallery of Art*



Tea Gown circa 1885, attributed to Liberty & Co., The Costume Institute at the Met



Tea Gown circa 1894, attributed to Liberty & Co., The Victoria and Albert Museum

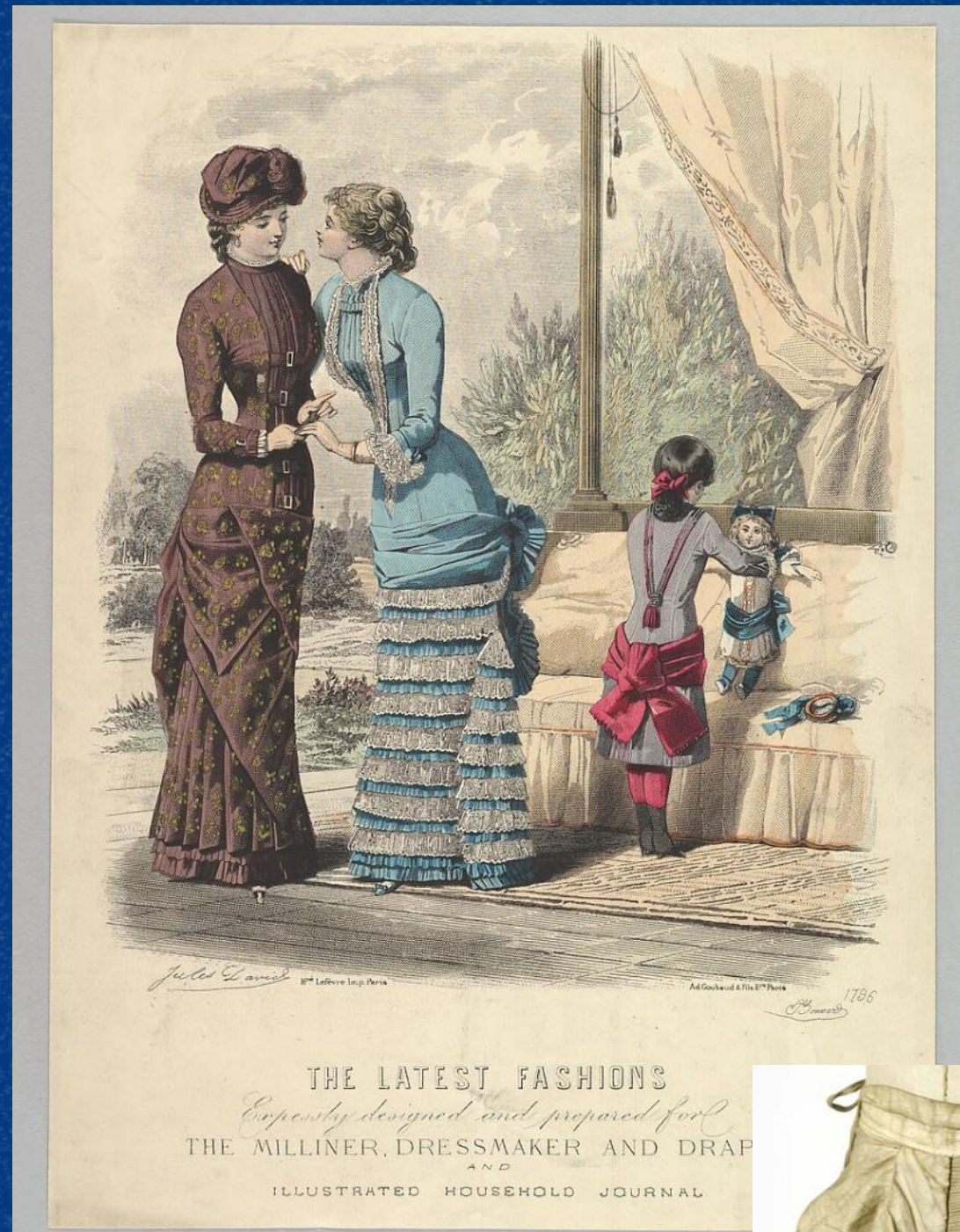
NATURAL FORM ERA

For a few years (1875–1882) between bustle eras, fashion embraced the “natural form” in fashion.

Skirts became smaller and more straight, either using only a small bustle pad or going without entirely. For some time, “the thighs were outlined and the hips returned to prominence, gradually growing to become the focal point and presaging the return of the bustle in the middle of the 1880s.”

While the Natural Form Era overlaps with Dress Reform, the trend was to mold the body rather than embrace natural curve.

“Largely ignoring the petition for sanity in dress, the fashion plates continued to show ladies encased in stoutly-boned, long-waisted ‘cuirasses’ and slender, princesse lined gowns ending in heavy trains laden with trimming. Added to the new preference for heavier fabrics and darker colors, this gave the ladies the appearance of slowly gliding tree trunks.”



Top: *The Latest Fashions Expressly Designed and Prepared for the Milliner, Dressmaker and Draper and Illustrated Household Journal*, from *Le Moniteur de la Mode* (1880–82), Met Museum



Right: *Bustle*, 1880s, Met Museum



Ball Gown circa 1872, attributed to Charles Frederick Worth, *The Costume Institute at the Met*



Mourning Dress, 1872-74, *The Costume Institute at the Met*



Ball Gown circa 1875, attributed to Madame Elise, *The Costume Institute at the Met*



THE 1870 S



Dinner Dress, 1884-86, attributed to Mme. Grapanche, The Costume Institute at the Met



Evening Dress, circa 1880, attributed to Wechsler & Abraham department store, The Costume Institute at the Met



Evening Ensemble, 1887, attributed to Charles Frederick Worth, The Costume Institute at the Met

THE 1880s



Ball Gown, 1895-1900, attributed to the House of Worth, *The Costume Institute at the Met*



Evening Suit, late 1890s, attributed to House of Paquin, *The Costume Institute at the Met*

THE 1890s



Dinner Dress, 1894-96, attributed to Mrs. Arnold, *The Costume Institute at the Met*



*Ball Gown, circa 1900, attributed to Driscoll,
The Costume Institute at the Met*



*Evening Dress, circa 1903, attributed to Henriette
Favre, The Costume Institute at the Met*



*Ball Gown, 1900, attributed to House of Worth,
The Costume Institute at the Met*



THE 1900s

GOWNS ON A BUDGET

Gilded Age is Victorian/Edwardian, so a fancy dress of the 1870s–1910 is period. Skirts should be flat in the front with volume in the back, a more “natural form” hourglass, or even trumpet silhouette (no hoop skirts). Open necklines were usually worn in the evening. Many “goth” styles are Victorian-inspired. Any color works. Have fun!



<https://a.co/d/0699zGt>



<https://a.co/d/0dwcR5Xt>



<https://a.co/d/0dayao5M>



<https://a.co/d/0ipGqKhU>



<https://www.macys.com/shop/product/alfred-sung-womens-off-the-shoulder-bow-back-satin-trumpet-gown>



<https://a.co/d/0eqwNokO>



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/1076328829/black-satin-corseted-top-with-off-the>



<https://www.macys.com/shop/product/muse-plus-size-embellished-sweetheart-neck-top>



<https://a.co/d/008QLWf>



<https://www.macys.com/shop/product/alex-evenings-pocketed-ballgown-skirt-ps-xl>

WOMEN'S ACCESSORIES

...ON A BUDGET



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/4384009698/victorian-pearl-multi-strand-necklace>



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/1574007161/bronze-or-silver-medieval-themed>



<https://a.co/d/03VJC4Z7>



<https://a.co/d/0inpJJ2d>



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/664488137/victorian-mourning-earrings>



<https://a.co/d/03PKgdRW>



<https://a.co/d/0dA6vJ6l>



<https://a.co/d/01lwKuh8>



<https://a.co/d/09dh3aID>

Tip: Use shoe clips to make your favorite pair of pumps look more historical.

MEN'S ACCESSORIES

...ON A BUDGET



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/4536075708/36-adjustable-walking-stick-with-non>



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/4531713933/black-silk-top-hat-victorian-top-hat-men>



<https://a.co/d/04Or2rye>



<https://a.co/d/02dhn17g>



<https://a.co/d/0aQhXyDD>



<https://a.co/d/07HFq1iK>



<https://a.co/d/0dixZFHx>



<https://www.etsy.com/listing/446896855/0/personalized-engraved-pocket-watch>

FURTHER READING

- **Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar 1867–1898**, edited by Stella Blum (Dover Publications)
- **The Smithsonian First Ladies Collection** by Lisa Kathleen Graddy and Amy Pastan
- [Fashion History Timeline](#), a project of FIT's History of Art Department
- [Vintage Dancer](#), an 1860–1980s fashion history blog
- Museum collections:
 - [The Costume Institute](#) at the Met Museum
 - [First Ladies Collection](#) at the National Museum of American History
 - [Victoria and Albert Museum](#)
 - [Los Angeles County Museum of Art \(LACMA\)](#)
 - [The Museum at FIT](#) (Fashion Institute of Technology)
 - [Kyoto Costume Institute](#)
 - ASU's [FIDM Museum](#) collection
- [“Vanderbilt Ball: How a costume ball changed New York elite society,”](#) Museum of the City of New York



Frances Cleveland's Floral chine skirt and two bodices (circa 1895)
First Ladies Collection, [National Museum of American History](#)

THANK
YOU