

An Introduction to Queer Women's Fashion History

(Part One)

By Stella Crouch

LGBTQ+ women have been impacting the fashion world and the world at large forever however we rarely get to hear about the history of queer women at all yet alone their fashion. This doesn't mean that there haven't been people advocating for and teaching these histories. Hopefully reading this article will inspire you to learn more about the history and the resources list will give you at least a few places to start.

First of all there is no one way to be a queer woman. There is no "right way or look" to be a bi, pan, lesbian, ace or trans women. All ways of presenting and expressing gender identity and sexuality are valid. Just as in any group, queer women are stereotyped and therefore there are certain styles and trends associated with queer women and how they dress. There have also been many ways in which queer women have used fashion to survive and communicate with one another. From scarves to monocles and thumb rings to umbrellas queer women have used and invented many functions of fashion.

The earliest accounts of queer fashion for any gender are from Ancient Greece. The clothes that women wore during Ancient Greece were not just practical but a statement of who they were. Clothing styles showed their societal rank, and colours could indicate wealth. In Ancient Greek society the act of sex as they understood it required penetration. They saw sex as something that required at least one man. This resulted in the inability to comprehend women's sexuality, especially queer women's.

Sappho is the most known and used source when referring to ancient women's sexuality especially queer women. As a testament to how invisible women's sexuality is, Sappho's work was and continues to be debated and questioned. There is some clarification needed when referring to Sappho's work. Sappho wrote regarding the island Lesbos and the lesbians that inhabited it. However, Lesbian at this time did not refer to homosexual women, instead, it meant someone who was from the island of Lesbos. In ancient Greece LGBTQ+ women would wear thumb and/or pinky rings as a symbol of their queerness. This practice is thought to have begun as a subtle way of subverting fashion standards and what was seen as normal. It was seen as unconventional to wear rings on your pinky or thumb. At times though a lack of any rings could also signal queerness.

Feminists have gone through many different eras and the level to which queer women and women of colour have been accepted has varied greatly. Suffragettes was the name given by the press to the women's suffrage movement in the UK. Though intended to be demeaning and insulting, the word was claimed and used by the movement itself and organisations such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The Suffragettes have, rightly, gone down in history for the good they did however there were significant flaws of the movement. Mainstream

feminism and suffrage was founded to uplift and fight for cishet, white, able bodied and neurotypical women. That is unfortunately still the case today. We often remember their signature colours of purple, green and white; purple stood for loyalty and dignity, green for hope and white for purity but we often forget the queer women behind popularising those colours, the slogans and the fashion. The reality of the Suffragettes in the early 20th century was much more complex than we often learn and much queerer as well.

Many suffragettes were partners and lovers although they couldn't outright present as a couple. Fashion historian Cally Blackman narrates this idea in her 2018 article 'How the suffragettes used fashion to further their cause,' saying that "Dress is a powerful form of communication. No-one knew this better than the media-savvy leadership of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The suffragettes wanted to avoid accusations of eccentricity or spinsterish masculinity." Many queer suffragettes during this time decided to rebel against this notion of the "ideal feminine respectable" women by dressing more traditionally masculine, even having themselves thrown into jail for "indecent" for wearing trousers or suits. The tie and bow tie were also used as ways of resisting the cishet world as well as the patriarchy. Suffragettes would use buttons and badges to promote their cause. Queer suffragettes would often wear their badges on or with their ties and suits.

PHOTOS:

Dressing Dykes



<https://ceciliachorusny.org/dame-ethel-smyth-still-fighting-for-equality-100-years-later>



Image from The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/08/gayrights_gender
Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*, with Lady Una Trowbridge. Photograph: Fox
Photos/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



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Reading List:

-The Life and Times of Butch Dykes: Portraits of Artists, Leaders and Dreamers Who Changed the World by Eloisa Aquino

-Butch Heroes by Ria Brodell

-One-Dimensional Queer by Roderick A. Ferguson

-Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity by C. Riley Snorton -Dressing Dykes
by Ellie Medhurst

[Rebecca Jane Morgan: The Lesbian Paradox](#)

[New York Times: How Queer Women Powered the Suffrage Movement](#)

[Cecilia Chorus NY: Dame Ethyl Smyth](#)

[Vice: How the Thumb Ring Became So Gay](#)

[Suffragette History](#)

[Metro.co.uk: Amazing Intimate Portraits Illustrate Lesbianism Through The Ages](#)