# An Introduction To Queer Women's Fashion History (Part Two)
By Stella Crouch

The Roaring Twenties was a time of great change in the fashion world and society at large. At the dawn of the 1920s, the world was still reeling from the First World War. The conflict, which ended just over a year before the new decade began, had a fundamental and irreversible effect on society, culture, and fashion. Utility and practicality in fashion became more normalized especially for women. With suffrage and a greater move towards gender equality women demanded functional clothing, ones that didn't limit their mobility. Hairstyles kept getting shorter. First with the Shingle and then with the Eton crop. But, like hemlines, as the decade drew to a close, women were starting to grow their hair longer again. The cloche hat became an extremely popular accessory that looked best with these short hairstyles. Certain colours were said to mean if a woman was straight or queer. Different cities had different colour codes for hats. This concept of the color of clothes being a queer code has and continues to exist around the world.



The Monocle has a long and very queer history. The invention of the monocle is normally credited to a German baron, Philipp von Stosch, who supposedly used it to study antiques in the early eighteenth century. He died in 1757, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century it had traveled across Europe and was starting to make its way to other continents. Monocles were invented with a distinctly male style in mind. Fashions obviously evolve and change meaning and by the end of the nineteenth century the monocle was beginning its second wave of interest and this time, it was worn by women as well. In 1898, a London newspaper, The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times, declared that "the single eye-glass is the latest fashion among pretty girls in London." A Madrid article from 1901 stated that "an eye-glass with a single lens is a sign of both a sophisticated and risque woman." These examples of writings

about the monocle from the turn of the century demonstrate how it had evolved from Stosch's time.

Monocles were a sign of rebellion for young women in the early twentieth century. Many queer women used the monocle as a way of playing with their gender and sexuality considering it had been a traditionally male accessory. The monocle offered a subtle form of protest against contemporary fashion and it's binary when worn with traditionally feminine and "proper" clothing and a more obvious resistance when worn with traditionally masculine clothing. People feared the monocle being worn by women because it was becoming increasingly popular in circles of young progressive women especially in universities and in intellectual settings. Some feared that women who wore them were trying to be men and "uproot the family and society". Many tried to ban monocles for women in schools and universities as a part of a greater effort to push women out of education.

There was also a queerphobic or "moral" aspect, as society called it at the time, for wanting to ban monocles in schools because the monocle was becoming to be known for its connection to queer people. Some even went as far as to claim that women wearing monocles was a sin. Lots of places band women from wearing monocles, bow ties and ties (also prominent in queer women's fashion which you can read more about in part one) in places of business such as resturants, banks and department stores.

Butch fashion evolved a lot in the early 20th century. Gladys Bentley was a queer icon of her time being a blues singer, tuxedo wearer and lady lover. In the words of Saidiya Hartman in her book Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, "Bentley was abundant flesh, art in motion." In the words of Bentley herself, from 1952 when she had left the stage "I'm a big, successful star and sad, lonely person." (Read more about Gladys Bentley in our third article of June 2021)
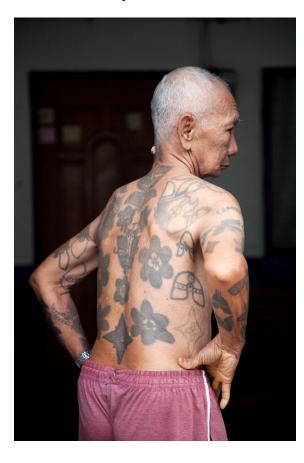


During the two world wars and in the early postwar period, women used the energy of butch to create all sorts of art, literature, music, and characters in film. Those who were recognizably lesbian and those with less clearly defined sexualities challenged the idea that strength, authority, and independence are qualities "naturally" bound to the cishet man's body.

Films of actresses such as Clara Bow, Lauren Bacall, Marlene Dietrich and Hope Emerson show how representations of butch style gradually shifted as butch became an identity and a diverse community. All four performers honed an uncanny ability to hijack the plot of the film by throwing a punch, lighting a match, or eating a giant stack of pancakes. However, silent film star and "It" girl Clara Bow had more license to bend gender and sexuality in the pre-code era. She still received backlash for pushing what the film industry saw as "descent". She often suggested her own changes to costume, character and plot in a way that seem obviously queer now. By the '40's and '50's, butch women were maligned, often used as minor characters and foils for the heterosexual love plot. Lauren Bacall expresses butch toughness through clipped

language, precise physical movements (such as catching a matchbook in midair), and stone butch impenetrability.

Writers such as Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Marianne Moore developed a stone butch style of writing in response to the First World War. These writers used blockage and absence of emotion to convey the loss and tragedy of the war; simultaneously, they rejected the nineteenth-century cult of "true womanhood" that bound women to the domestic sphere.

During WWII many queer women's pacifist organizations were formed. Many lesbians found solace in the all-female environment of the United States Women's Army Corps (WAC), but this demanded secrecy, as lesbians or any LGBTQ+ people were not allowed to serve openly in the U.S. military.

Some tribes in Southeast Asia have tattoos that communicate individuals gender expression, identity and sexuality. Many of these tattoo artists are very old and fewer young tribe members are learning tattoo art. During WWII indigenous women were disproportionately affected by forced removals from their homes usually to work as "comfort women" (sex slaves) or in extremely low paying labor for the military. This led to the disruption of many ancient traditions such as tattooing. In many tribes being a queer women meant you were held in high regard. Queer women were expected to not have children and therefore become everyone's "mother" and leader. This meant that a lot of the time the people with the most leadership and influence were queer women. Tattoos have long been a part of queer culture.

Resources and further readings:

-A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk by Jonathan D. Katz and Valerie Steele

-A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk (FIT)
https://www.fitnyc.edu/museum/exhibitions/queer-history.php

-I'm Super Into These 12 Queer Female and Nonbinary Designers
https://www.whowhatwear.com/female-and-non-binary-lgbtq-designers

-A short history of queer fashion
https://mindlessmag.com/2020/02/24/a-short-history-of-queer-fashion/

-IT'S TIME TO REWRITE A QUEER HISTORY OF FASHION
https://fashionista.com/2013/09/its-time-to-rewrite-a-queer-history-of-fashion

-Illegal Looks: Queer Women and Fashion History.
https://theeverydaymagazine.co.uk/fashion/illegal-looks-queer-women-and-fashion-history

-Queer Women Are Still Fighting for a Seat at High Fashion's Table
https://www.them.us/story/queer-women-high-fashion

-That's So Vogue: The Silent Influence of Queer Culture on, well, Everything
https://medium.com/@laurensarahjane/thats-so-vogue-the-silent-influence-of-queer-culture-on-well-everything-17a19dd3a1a9

-A queer history of fashion
https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/17191/1/a-queer-history-of-fashion

-Lesbian Chic in the '20s
https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/collections/inthelife/history/lesbian-chic-20s

-A short history of queer fashion
https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/queer-fashion-and-india-1561087456280.html