# THE PANTSUIT AS A SYMBOL OF ADVANCEMENT FOR WOMEN IN ENTERTAINMENT, BUSINESS, AND POLITICS

Since the Middle Ages, pants had become a Western symbol for masculinity and work that was gendered male like politics, war, and manual labor. Skirts became a symbol of femininity and for domestic work. Wearing male clothes was scandalous for two seemingly opposite reasons. The first being that imitating men, by wearing traditionally male clothes, subverted the gender roles and expectations for being a woman, which reduced femininity. The second being that the different fit of pants on a female's lower half was sensational and increased sex appeal. Both reactions, as contradictory as they may be, are present throughout the history of the pantsuit and women wearing pants in general. The adoption of suits, a traditionally male garment, into women's fashion has made it possible for women to advance in career fields traditionally dominated by men. The pantsuit has been controversial since it simultaneously imitates the male silhouette to gain women access to male spaces while representing female power as women claim the pantsuit as a symbol of femininity.

FASHION HISTORY
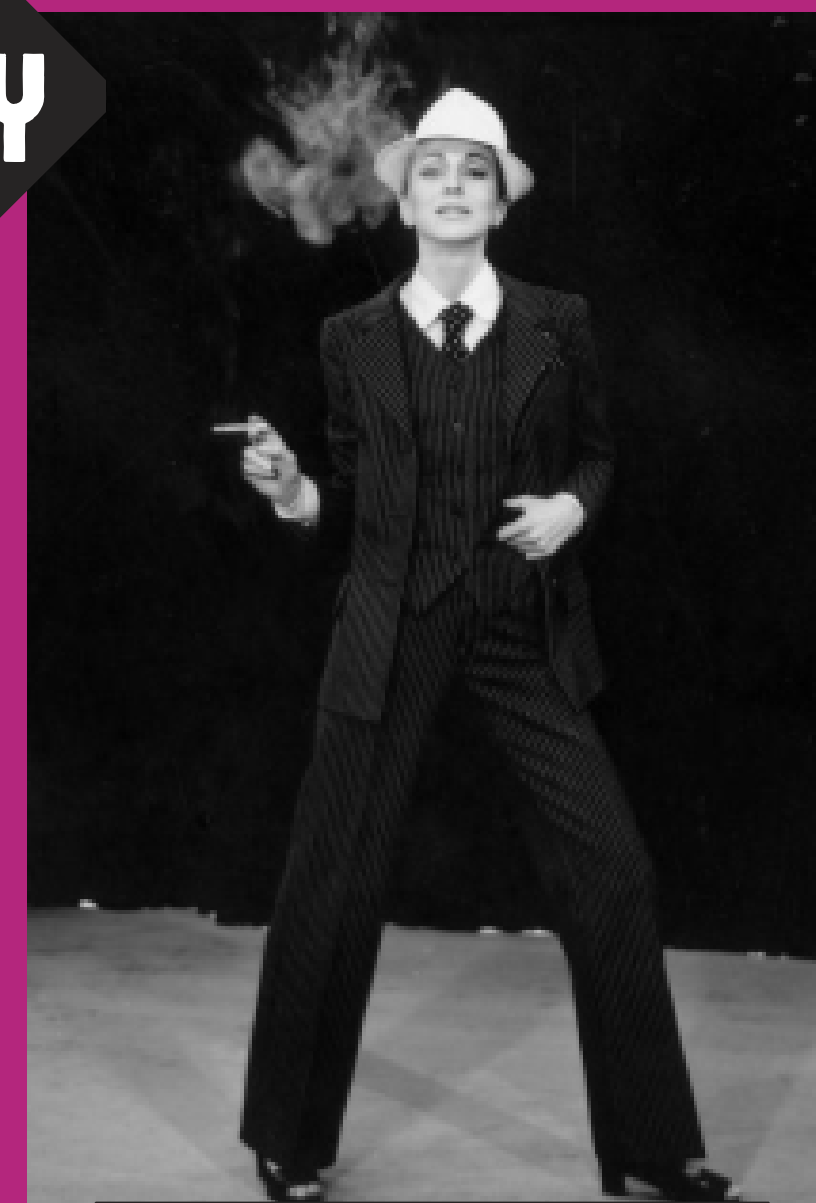
Amelia Bloomer, a feminist, suffragette, and editor presented her new invention. The Bloomers, ankle-length trousers to be worn under the dress, inspired by the pants women in the Ottoman Empire wore. Women could still have a feminine silhouette in society but the bloomers underneath enabled them to have greater physical mobility and to work outside the home, mostly in factories. Amelia Bloomer wore her invention from 1851 to 1859, when she stopped due to ridicule from men and conservative women.

In 1923, Coco Chanel created her signature skirt suit, inspired by a menswear silhouette with a knee length skirt and coordinating wool button down jacket. Chanel's suit is a lasting icon in American fashion, particularly the pink Chanel suit worn by Jackie Kennedy when President Kennedy was assassinated. The skirt suit remained a women's fashion staple until the 1990s, even as the pantsuit grew in popularity simultaneously.

By 1930, 24.3% of American women were employed, mostly in domestic service or lower paying clerical work. Fashion began to respond by developing womenswear for the working woman. Italian designer and Chanel rival, Elsa Schiaparelli was inspired by the surrealist art movement and exaggerated the silhouette. As part of her 1939 fall/winter collection, she designed a menswear inspired wool pantsuit which included single pleat cuffed slacks and a speckled brown wool jacket with large buttons. During the time of its debut 'only the most unconventional designer would offer a straightforward pantsuit, and only a fearless woman would wear it.'" Pantsuits were still a taboo in mainstream society, and in some areas still a punishable offense.

The 1950s represented a return to traditional gender roles, A-Line silhouettes and sweeping skirts. The 1960s were ready to change all of that. Second-wave feminism fought for women's rights. Hippie counterculture also influenced gender roles by advocating for pacifism and sexual freedom. In 1966, Yves Saint Laurent introduced Le Smoking Suit, considered to be the first tuxedo designed for women. The suit consisted of "a dinner jacket, trousers with satin stripes down the side, a white shirt, a black bowtie, and a cummerbund. The powerful look pioneered what the fashion world thought of women in pantsuits and the idea of androgynous dress." Finally women wearing pants was accepted in the mainstream.

The 1980s signaled a boom in the popularity of the pantsuit. From 1980 to 1987, annual sales of the women's pantsuit rose by almost 6 million units. Designers like Saint Laurent and Giorgio Armani presented the new wardrobe for the business woman, power dressing. "Power suits updated pantsuits with broad shoulder pads, bigger lapels, and sharper cuts that emulated a man's silhouette. These big shouldered jackets and pants disguised a woman's figure and took the focus off her gender, creating a feeling of authority.

ENTERTAINMENT

Women in entertainment wearing pantsuits are some of the earliest and most influential examples in pop culture. Marlene Dietrich, a German actress, starred in her first American film, Morocco, in 1930 as Amy Jolly, a cabaret singer, and was costumed in a tuxedo, top hat and bow tie. In the film she kisses a woman on the mouth, which was the first homosexual kiss in the history of cinema. This marked the beginning of sexualizing menswear and its association with perceived transgressive sexuality.

Katharine Hepburn defiantly dressed in menswear for her film roles as well as in her daily life. When working at RKO Pictures, Hepburn would wear jeans to set and they would be confiscated from her dressing room while she was filming. Instead of changing into a skirt, Katherine would return to set in her underwear and refuse to dress in protest until her jeans were returned. Diane Keaton starred as the title role in Woody Allen's Annie Hall in 1977. At the dawn of the power dressing era, women were inspired to wear high waisted pants, hats, neckties, and button downs like Keaton donned in her roles and on red carpets. The early exposure of the pantsuit by Dietrich, Hepburn and Keaton paved the way for normalizing menswear for women and made it possible for regular women to advance in male-dominated career fields.

BUSINESS

The pantsuit provided women with a way to integrate into business, finance, and academia by simultaneously using the male silhouette as a camouflage and a bold feminine statement to advance in their fields. Since women were permitted to work in professional environments, they have been subjected to corporate dress codes that highly regulate the pant suit. John T. Malloy's The Woman's Dress for Success Book, published in 1977 states, "In most business offices, the pantsuit is often a failure outfit… If you have to deal with men, even as subordinates, you are putting on trouble."Malloy is also notable for coining the term "power dressing" in the 1975 handbook, Dress for Success. The book concedes the pantsuit's corporate appropriateness. His dress code states that "a dark suit, consisting of trousers, and a jacket over a white shirt—representing a safe option for both men and women. For women, any reference to the erotic dimension— necklines, spiked heels, slits, but also light fabrics— should be eliminated." The female dress code, defined by men like Malloy, set the standard for corporate dress even today.

World War II further increased women's opportunities for employment and advancement in society. Men were going off to war and the workforce back home needed women to fill the void for the war effort. From 1940-1945 women in the workforce increased from 27% to 47%. Many women abandoned their skirts to become blue-collar workers in factories. Women's Levis jeans had been introduced in 1935 and many found it easier to wear pants on the job. Working and wearing pants became an act of patriotism as one company offered a "woman-all" jumpsuit for "the patriotic woman eager to do her bit in the kitchen or garden."

POLITICS

Politics is another sphere where the pantsuit has been controversial but undoubtedly helped women advance and make a statement. Thanks to Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), 1993 would be the first year a woman would wear pants in Congress. Bill Clinton was also inaugurated in 1993 which began his first lady, Hillary Clinton's reign as the queen of the pantsuit and the first First Lady to wear a pantsuit in an official White House Portrait. Clinton uses the pantsuit to symbolize that she is an equal player who occupies her own space within the male-dominated political world.

Recent political statements made with the pantsuit also call into question the politics of the pantsuit itself. For Donald Trump's first State of the Union speech, Democratic members of Congress wore "suffragette white" pantsuits to protest the Trump Administration reversing women's rights and progress. On the one year anniversary of that State of the Union address, Melania Trump also wore a white pantsuit.

The first female Prime Minister of the U.K., Margaret Thatcher, happened to oppose pants for women but took part in power dressing by imitating the broad shoulders of a male silhouette in a shoulder padded skirt suit. The pantsuit grants women access to male spaces and it unapologetically puts women visually on the same plane as men.