

COSTUME IN DETAIL

The MHS has an astounding collection of historic costumes ranging from the early 1700s to the 1960s. This online publication explores pieces from the Society's collection. Each issue spotlights a different garment.

Issue 13 | Ensemble Suit from Burkett Gowns | 1924 – 1926

About:

The MHS

The Madison Historical Society, a nonprofit organization founded in 1917, preserves, collects, interprets, and promotes the history and heritage of Madison for present and future generations.

About:

The author

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*Ensemble, silk and beads. 1924 – 26.
Accession # 81.95 a b
Left: front detail. Above right: back detail. Below right: skirt detail.
Photos by Bob Gundersen.*



Bright Lights, Big City

Picture a city of the 1920s: blazing billboards, sleek cars, glittering skyscrapers, and the fashionable urban woman. Glimmering along in beaded suits and clacking heels, the rouged and bobbed feminine city-dwellers found themselves in a stylish metropolitan location and a new American culture.

Expectations for women had been changing for decades, and the young and fashionable had shed Victorian social mores to a wider extent than before. This evolution reflected clearly in their clothing.



Getting to Know the Flapper

When the 1920s are evoked, the word that most frequently comes to mind is “flapper.” Immortalized to the point of stereotype, the flapper as a cultural figure captures the imagination. But who exactly was a flapper--and from where did she hail?

The New Woman, discussed since around 1890, finally came into being as American women, empowered with the vote in 1920 ... One iteration of this New Woman was the flapper, who embodied the collective anxieties about women's morality during this period (Bland 4–6).¹

The flapper emerged from the evolution of women's rights over decades. Her obvious makeup and straight silhouette were a product of the late 1910s. Transitioning ideas about women in general also evoked changes in descriptions of the ideal woman. Prior to the 1920s, American values required women to be chaste and modest. By the 1920s, though, the ideal of reserved innocence was replaced by an expectation for exuberance and vigor (Pike, 134).

This idealized vibrance was expressed through clothing that reflected the energy of the social milieu of the era. The ensemble discussed below reflects vitality in its vivid orange color and striking art-deco decorative plan. However, the bright colors and personality of the flapper are laden with complexity:

“...They [early flappers] did what they wanted to, were unconventional, perhaps, just because they wanted to for self-expression. Now they do it because it's the thing everyone does (Brucoli and Baughman, 47).” (Pike, 135)



The September Stylechart: Paris
Suits Have Short Dresses and Long Coats

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, the flapper was distinctly liberated and unorthodox. By 1922, the flapper image had become commercialized and watered down. She became a trend, without the self-expressive radicalism of the pre-1922 flapper.

To the left are ensemble suits from September 1924. The colors, decoration, lines, makeup, hats, and hemlines are all products of the long-evolving social climate.

The Crowell Publishing Company, Woman's Home Companion, Vol. 51, No. 9 (p. 94), September 1924. The rightmost illustration is similar to the MHS's featured ensemble.

¹ Pike, Deborah. ““Masquerading as Herself”: The Flapper and the Modern Girl in the Journalism and Short Fiction of Zelda Fitzgerald.” *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 130–48. JSTOR.

A Stylish Suit

The term "ensemble suit" came into its own in the fall of 1924 and spring of 1925, although the practice of pairing a matching dress and coat was not new. The ensemble suit took matched sets to a newly definite and exuberant level. As defined below, the term persisted for a long period afterward.

"The three-piece suit, or ensemble suit as it is called this year, is both fashionable and practical. It makes a lovely afternoon dress and it is not too dressy for street wear." - American Agriculturalist (p. 382), Nov. 1924

The ensemble was and is extolled for its practicality. This set's thin coat and crêpe sleeves limit its practicality to spring and fall. The dress's lower sleeves, of matching orange crêpe, are a nice modish detail.

The dress is made with a striking bright orange faille, which is a flat-ribbed silk fabric². The coat is made of black bengaline, with thinner ribs or "repos" than the faille. The two cloths are exchanged for decorative elements on the opposite garment. The dress and coat together make a fashionable ensemble suit indeed.



*Burkett Gowns, Ensemble Suit, silk and beads, 1924 – 1926.
Madison Historical Society, Accession # 81.95 a b. Photos by Bob Gundersen.*

Was the person who wore this dress a flapper? It is difficult to tell from one item of clothing, but the flapper's lifestyle certainly influenced this ensemble. Its bright colors, bold designs, sparkling beadwork, and bespoke label – a small dressmaker by name of Burkett Gowns – all evoke the glamor and decadence of the flapper archetype. This set's influences in culture and design make it a very contemporary choice.

² Charlotte Mankey Calasibetta, Phyllis Tortora, *The Fairchild Dictionary of Fashion*, Third Edition (p. 132), 2003