Women’s fashions simultaneously define the ideal woman and respond to the realities of women’s lives. The images of the corseted figure of the 1860s and the miniskirted woman of the 1960s reveal cultural expectations as well as social and economic realities.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, fashion, promulgated by periodicals such as Godey’s Ladies Magazine or the Sears Roebuck mail catalogue, dictated that women’s clothing restrict their bodies just as customs and mores restricted their lives: sleeves and skirts were long, and corsets were tight. The new shirtwaists and bicycle suits of the 1890s and 1910s that are shown here were designed by Cleveland manufacturers for the growing number of women who held jobs or participated in athletics. By the 1920s, shorter skirts and bobbed hair symbolized the liberated lifestyle of the new flapper.

Magazines, newspapers, and television have continued to advise women what to buy, advertising the latest in tailored afternoon wear, simple house dresses, and elegant evening gowns. Nevertheless, Cleveland women have continued to wear what has been convenient and comfortable for play and work.
*Godey's Ladies Magazine*, April 1867, was one source of patterns so that Cleveland women could dress in style. Western Reserve Historical Society
Women’s outerwear in 1891 was shaped by what they wore underneath. Western Reserve Historical Society
1897

TAILOR MADE
WALKING & BICYCLE
SUITS

SUITs FOR HIGH SUMMER WEAR.

24980 Made of Washable Linen Crash, Blazer style with new-sleeves and cuffs, very finest skirt. Price..................................................... $3.15
24981 Very Stylish, made of high grade plaid washable linen crash, big sailor collar fancy front. Our price, only.................... $4.00
24982 This Beautiful Summer Suit, is made of fancy checked washable linen crash, sailor collar and fronts of white linen, newest sleeves and cuffs. Very chic. Price..................................................... $4.25
24983 $5.00 Would not be too much for this Elegant Suit, made of fancy washable linen crash, big sailor collar, front and cuffs of blue linen, making a very pretty combination. Price only..................................................... $5.00

BICYCLE SUITS.

24989 Consists of six pieces, Jacket, Skirt, Bloomers, Leggings and Cap, made of Austrian covert cloth in brown or gray mixtures. Blazer Jacket very nobby. Price..................................................... $3.75
24990 This Nobby Suit (illustrated) is made of six pieces in double brocaded liefce style, full skirt in either tan or gray mixed Austrian covert cloth. Would be cheap at $7.50. Only..................................................... $4.00
24991 Very Similar to 24993, made of very stylish novelty cloth, in five pieces consisting of cap, jacket, skirt, leggings and bloomers. Only ..................................................... $4.25
24992 Blazer Style made of Imported Tiger Cloth, consisting of five pieces. Material durable and will outwear any material. Others sell it for $10.00, we sell it for........................ $4.75
24993 This Handsome Suit (illustrated) is made of brown or blue Repellant cloth, bound in leather all around and consists of five pieces, jacket, half lined with silk. Can’t be beat..................................................... $9.75
An advertisement encourages women to be well dressed on the tennis court. Western Reserve Historical Society

Opposite: Stylish suits designed by one of Cleveland’s many garment manufacturers. Western Reserve Historical Society
The Cleveland working woman of 1913 might have worn this free-flowing suit. Western Reserve Historical Society

Flappers’ short skirts, short sleeves, and short hair represented the new freedoms of women in the 1920s. Cleveland State University Archives
Tailored outfits designed by the Higbee Company suited the no-nonsense mood of the 1930s.
Western Reserve Historical Society
Local manufacturer L.N. Gross used the lyrics from the popular musical *Oklahoma* to sell these everyday dresses in 1944. Western Reserve Historical Society
Opposite top: Hemlines went back up as miniskirts invaded Cleveland’s streets in the late 1960s. Cleveland State University Archives

Opposite bottom: This 1968 fashion show by local designers featured hats as well as shorter skirts. Cleveland State University Archives

By the mid-1950s, longer skirts and a more “feminine” look were “in.” Western Reserve Historical Society
Expensive elegance was the watchword of fashion in the 1980s. The Plain Dealer