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Skirts

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Published in:

Fashion, Style and Popular Culture

DOI:

[10.1386/fspc_00184_5](https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc_00184_5)

Publication date:

2023

Citation for published version (APA):

Kipp, L. M. (2023). Skirts: Fashioning Modern Femininity in the Twentieth Century, Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell. *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, 10(3), 422-424. https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc_00184_5

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SKIRTS: FASHIONING MODERN FEMININITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY,
KIMBERLY CHRISMAN-CAMPBELL (1ST ED.) (2022)

New York: St. Martin's, 272 pages

ISBN: 9781250275790, hardback, \$28.99

Reviewed by Lara Maleen Kipp, lecturer in Theatre and Scenography at Aberystwyth University, ORCID: 0000-0001-6022-6720.

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell's *Skirts* offers a rich and compelling narrative of the eponymous item across the 20th and into the early 21st century. While readers may initially be a little confused by the title, given that chapters are named after certain kinds of dresses (Chapter 2: The Tennis Dress, Chapter 3: The Little Black Dress, and so on), the author offers a succinct and well-argued history of the semantic equivocation of dresses, gowns, slips, and skirts before the mid-20th century in the introduction. She further establishes the socio-cultural and political significance of skirts in broad terms, before turning to case studies of famous dresses that make up the individual chapters. The book's focus is on a Western cultural context, with particular emphasis on Northern American fashion, alongside its Western European counterparts and trends – while there is doubtlessly much to be gained by a complementary investigation into such trends in the global South, and East, the contextual limitations are acknowledged and ensure a suitable depth of analysis in what is an immensely rich field of study.

Chapter 1: The Delphos offers an in-depth exploration of the simplicity of form arising in counter-movement to late 19th century decorative excess. Chrisman-Campbell offers insightful and concise reference points to ancient Greek and ancient Egyptian fashions as well as pre-Raphaelite and neo-classical trends of the 18th and 19th century that served as inspiration for the Grecian gowns of Fortuny, Vionnet, and Grés. The chapter offers productive connections between neoclassicism, Romanticism, and the suffragist movement before tracing the continued influence of this aesthetic through the 20th century, with notes on Halston, McFadden, Miyake, and Wu.

Chapters 2 and 3, entitled The Tennis Dress and The Little Black Dress respectively, offer some of the most entertaining academic writing I have come across – this in no way diminishes the painstaking research and detail-oriented argument, in fact, it demonstrates the authors immense skill at weaving together fashion, history, politics, and culture in a smooth, informative, and convincing account. Not only does the book present tightly connected and well-researched narratives within each chapter, but also succeeds in tying these threads across its different parts. Examples that are introduced briefly at one point, find more in-depth discussion in other places, such as Edith Head's designs for Elizabeth Taylor in *A Place in the Sun*, which appears both in Chapter 5: The Strapless Dress and 6: The Bar Suit, or Diane von Furstenberg's wrap dress, which is at the heart of Chapter 4 and reappears in Chapter 9's discussion of the midi skirt. Consequently, the reader may dip in and out of the book depending on particular interests, yet remain suitably oriented to the overall argument throughout. The way the book pulls together popular culture, fashion, and costume, exposes the intricate ways in which these elements influence and feed off one another.

While earlier chapters already introduce the revolutionary potential and political significance of the garments discussed in each instance, these take centre stage in the final three chapters on the miniskirt, midi skirt, and bodycon dress. Deftly identifying the cultural and moral shifts of the post-World War 2 era, Chapters 8 and 9 identify the parallel strands of youth culture and women's liberation underpinning fashion trends in the 1960s and 1970s. These are explored alongside utopian visions inspired by the space race as exemplified by early Star Trek uniforms, and capitalist pressures of the fashion industry in the late 1960s and

early 1970s that tried to push longer hemlines. Chapter 9 concludes with a deft evaluation of the successful resurrection of the midi dress in the mid-2010s in terms of shifting demographics and values. As much of the book does, Chapter 10: The Bodycon Dress jumps back in time at its opening, for essential and informative scene setting, establishing the shifting meanings between loose and tight clothing between the 17th and early 20th century. The chapter tracks the post-war fitness boom and concurrent trends for ultra-tight clothing enabled by technological advancements in fabric composition. Chrisman-Campbell traces the parallel aesthetic developments of Alaïa, Léger, Mugler, Montana, and Gaultier. She compares the contrasting shapes of the bodycon dress and its contemporary, the power suit, arguing for the former as a manifestation of women's newfound socioeconomic power and accompanying status. Chapter 10 concludes with an evaluation of the shifting narratives of beauty in the age of social media and a – well written, if all-too-brief – comment on the entanglement of feminism, civil rights, and the body positivity movement.

This political dimension is deftly taken up again in the conclusion, which ties together inadvertently skirt-hostile architecture with the history – and recent proliferation of – upskirting in the wake of ubiquitous digital cameras and smartphones. As Chrisman-Campbell identifies, fashion presents a uniquely productive intersection of class, race, and gender. The conclusion offers a timely evaluation of the increasing prevalence of skirts on male celebrities and this trend's potential to echo women's adoption of trousers. It offers hope for a long overdue dissolution of the rigid Western binary of masculine and feminine clothing, with skirts still associated with the latter, even as contemporary fashions begin to challenge this.

Skirts offers the reader an informative, insightful, and thoroughly entertaining analysis of the titular garment by way of iconic examples. With over 40 images, half of them in colour, it presents a rich resource for scholars and enthusiasts of fashion history. Juxtaposing well-known and lesser-known examples, mass-market fashions and haute couture, Chrisman-Campbell's holistic view generates a compelling perspective that will be of interest to a range of audiences.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr. Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell is an award-winning fashion historian, curator, and journalist. She has worked internationally as a consultant and educator for museums and universities. She is the author of *Fashion Victims: Dress at the Court of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette*, *Worn on This Day: The Clothes That Made History*, *The Way We Wed: A Global History of Wedding Fashion*, and *Red, White, and Blue on the Runway*.

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