



By Fiona Ellis

When a fashion trend debuts it can be shocking or at least unsettling to the common view of what constitutes appropriate attire. If however, the look in question resonates with the contemporary thinking, the trend becomes acceptable and widely adopted. Take tights for example. A glimpse of stocking was once, as Cole Porter so aptly put it, “simply shocking” but now we take the sight of Lycra-sheathed leg in stride.

Some may view fashion as frivolous, but clothes are an interesting reflection of what is happening within a culture. Studying what was fashionable can provide insight into the social norms of a particular era and tell us a lot about how women were viewed (and how they viewed themselves) in society. Throughout its history, hosiery responded both to the rise and fall of hemlines, sociological changes, and technological advances in both fiber and manufacturing. In many cases because these aspects are at play at the same time it’s not always clear which was the strongest influence precipitating the changes.



Boot hose believed to have belonged to George Orwell
Toronto, Canada.

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First Steps

In the early years the lower limbs (both male and female) were kept under cover by strips of cloth wound around the leg and held in place with narrower strips. While this method served its purpose for warmth and protection, it did have its downside. The fit was poor and required constant adjustment. By the 14th century things had improved slightly. Men wore stockings cut from woven cloth and stitched together to form a leg-shaped piece. Knitted socks and stockings as we recognize them today, didn't appear until the 16th century. During this time knitting guilds flourished throughout Europe. There are references to a Paris guild founded in 1527, and Henry VIII was said to be quite fond of knit silk hose imported from Venice and Milan. Stocking manufacture was a thriving industry and was further revolutionized by the invention of the mechanized knitting frame during the reign of Elizabeth I. (For a more detailed history of framework knitting see [Fancying Framework Knitting](#) in the Winter 2013 issue.) Ladies kept their stockings hidden under voluminous skirts, but that didn't keep them from having a bit of fun with them. Fabric tended toward the colorful, and the hose that adorned the legs of the wealthy were often patterned with embroidery and silver and gold threads.



Blue silk lisle stockings embroidered with silver thread, circa 1710-1740. Image copyright © 2014 [Bata Shoe Museum](#), Toronto, Canada.

Stockings made on the early framework machines were knit flat, and then seamed to fit the leg. This basic construction method continued in much the same way for a good 200 years. The invention of handcranked circular machines in the 1800s introduced stockings without seams, but they didn't allow for any shaping. Essentially you ended up with a perfectly cylindrical tube—not exactly well fitting or flattering. The production of a more fitted seamless stocking was also hampered by the framework knitters' resistance to the steam- and water-powered machinery that had taken over other clothing production. Eventually this resistance gave way and knitting was pulled full force into the factory.

Making Strides

A proper Victorian woman generally wore black, white, or pastel-colored hose. But even though legs—and the stockings covering them—were hidden under heavy skirts, a fashion for decorative details developed. Imagine a modest Victorian lady lifting her skirt a few inches too high to reveal a bit of decorative embroidery about the ankle. A man lucky enough to catch a glimpse of this pattern would have thought it quite racey. But patterned stockings weren't the sole provenance of those of questionable morals. It was a trend that most well to-do ladies soon adopted—even Queen Victoria wore embroidered stockings. As in the Elizabethan age women of lower classes, if they wore stockings at all, wore plain, practical hose simply to keep their legs warm. Victorian stockings were made from silk (only for the wealthy), wool, linen, or polished cotton (called lisle) and were held up by knit garters that attached to corsets, often with a lacy “welt” at the top of the stocking to help keep it in place.



Black silk stockings, circa 1870-1889. Image copyright © 2014 [Bata Shoe Museum](#), Toronto,

Canada.

The turn of the century brought the women's suffrage movement to the forefront, slowly changing women's lives—and their hosiery. Newfound freedoms spurred an interest being active—tennis and cycling were particularly popular. To facilitate these activities skirt design had to change considerably—imagine trying to ride a bike while wearing a crinoline or bustle dress. Skirts were shortened, bloomers made their debut, and it became socially acceptable for women to “expose” their legs while engaged in these pursuits. To maintain modesty when dressed this way, women wore thick wool hose and calf-height boots.



Embellished stockings, circa 1880-1910. Image copyright © 2014 [Bata Shoe Museum](#), Toronto, Canada.

As the 1920s roared in, hemlines and stockings changed dramatically. Gone was the restrictive

corsetry of previous decades, replaced by softer, much less structured undergarments. With hemlines rising to hitherto unseen heights the leg became a major focus. Shoes and stockings became highly decorative and knees were much on show as Flappers danced the Charleston. Empowered by the excesses of the era, young women began rolling their stockings over their garters to create a padded look. Worn just above the knee so as to give a glimpse as the skirt moved, the fashion reflected the daring natures of the girls who wore them.



Rolled stockings became a little less shocking. Photo courtesy of Cynthia Gilbert.

Although ladies were now permitted to enjoy a dip in the ocean in mixed company, they were required to wear woolen hose when doing so. The concession to comfort was that stockings could be rolled down to just below the knee. But it still wasn't considered proper for those knees to be uncovered with no sand or sea in sight. Only brazen women would bare their knees, as the lyrics from the musical *Chicago* relate:

“Come on babe, why don't we paint the town? And all that jazz. I'm gonna rouge my

knees and roll my stockings down. And all that jazz”

Stocking sales rose along with hemlines. With the introduction of rayon (then known as Art Silk) in 1910, man-made fibers began to replace costly cotton and silk. Less well-heeled ladies could now afford the fashionable, shimmering stockings previously only available to the well-to-do. .

Synthetic Chic

In the 1930s the industrial materials company DuPont de Nemours (better know as DuPont) launched the first fully synthetic fiber (rayon, derived from wood pulp is man-made). Debuting in 1939, first in San Francisco and later at the New York World’s Fair, nylon took the world by storm.

DuPont’s vice president, Charles Stine, described the company’s wonder fiber this way: “strong as steel, yet fine as a spider’s web,” going on to promise that DuPont would make “indestructible” stockings in the near future. He didn’t exactly follow through (as anyone who’s had to toss a pair of tights thanks to a run knows), but in all fairness he was speaking of the fiber and not the stocking construction process. And nylon was a wonder fiber.

DuPont’s foray into polymer research that produced nylon was an attempt to rebrand the company. Originally a manufacturer of gunpowder and explosives (the company supplied the allies with 40 percent of their explosives during World War I), DuPont was eager to embrace the “new age” of chemistry. It took 11 years, 230 scientists and \$27 million dollars to create the fiber, which was originally named “nuron” (the name was changed to avoid the rhyme with “moron.”)

Nylon’s arrival played into a number of social political trends. It was an era of excitement as items that had once seemed possible only in in the science fiction worlds of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells became reality. Nylon also appealed to patriotism. The silk used for stockings was imported from Japan and not supporting that economy seemed a righteous thing to do as the West moved into conflict with that nation.



Nylon stockings circa 1933. Image copyright © 2014 [Bata Shoe Museum](#), Toronto, Canada.

During World War II DuPont switched its manufacturing to the war effort making nylons hard to come by and consequently even more sought after. With stockings in short supply (and bare legs still a sign of questionable taste) ladies went to great effort to give the appearance of wearing stockings, putting makeup on their legs. Some used a Helena Rubenstein product called "liquid stockings"; those with less cash to spare resorted to staining their legs with gravy browning and penciling in a seam with an eyebrow pencil. So intense was the longing for stocking that DuPont launched an ad campaign in August of 1945 promising ladies that the war was coming to an end, and they would have "nylons by Christmas." I'm assuming those same ladies were also looking forward to the safe return of their menfolk.

Modern Marvels

Nylon was revolutionary not just because it was synthesized, but also because of its ability to be “heat set.” In terms of stockings this meant that the hose could be placed around a leg-shaped form, heated to high temperatures, and then shaped to follow the contours of the leg—a far cry from those cloth wraps of the 14th century. Seams still prevailed though—without them the leg looked bare and this was deemed undignified.



Miniskirts put more leg (and more stocking) on display. Photo courtesy of Fiona Ellis

Women finally had a garment that fit well, but the means to hold it up remained less than perfect. Things improved a bit when the garter belt appeared in the 1950s. Now rather than straps being secured to a corset, stockings could be attached to a less cumbersome item of undergarment.

The 1960s ushered in a revolution in both fashion and feminism. As a result, hose took a whole new turn. A sleeker solution for holding up hose was created when Ethel Gant, wife of Allen Gant, the owner of the fabric manufacturing company Glen Raven Inc., suggested that he manufacture an item that combined panties and hose in a one-piece garment. Pantyhose, first know as “panti-

legs,” debuted in 1959, just as hemlines began to rise. It really isn't totally clear which was the strongest force at play. Was it the manufacturing/technological push (being able to make them) or the consumer/designer pull (the advent of the miniskirt)? I tend to think the latter; Mary Quant's microskirt of 1966 would not have caught on if women were still having to figure out how to keep their stocking tops and garters from showing.

By the 1970s pantyhose (or tights as they are known in Britain) were outselling stockings — a trend that's yet to be reversed. Some manufacturing changes have been seen, such as “micromesh” (combining knit and tuck stitches that prevent runs) and “hold-ups” (stockings that require no garters), but most changes since then have been limited to those of fashionable colors and patterns.

As the years roll on more and more of the leg is fashionably on display. These days however, we're more likely to leave the textured tights and silk stockings in the dresser drawer. First Lady Michelle Obama has a penchant for stepping out barelegged, making it acceptable for almost all of us to do the same--even for formal occasions. That's not to say hosiery is history; stockings after all, protect from cold winters and blistering boots and shoes. Long may they run!

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Editors' Note: Special thanks to the [Bata Shoe Museum](#) for the use of several of the images that accompany this article. If you'd like to step further into the history of hosiery and footwear, we encourage you to pay the museum a visit at 327 Bloor Street West in downtown Toronto.