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Fashion 101

True elegance and style comes from being confident and feeling comfortable in your own skin.

Tory Burch, Fashion Designer

*Y*ou may have been born naked, but minutes later a nurse wrapped you in swaddling (how chic an outfit is that!), and you've been wearing clothes ever since. While some women have mastered the art of fashion and look fabulous all the time, many still struggle to figure it all out. If you are one of the women still searching for what exactly to wear every day, you've come to the right place. Whether you're going to the grocery store or heading to a gala, I want you to feel your best at all times, no exceptions.

As children, most of us were dressed by our parents. As teenagers, you likely just followed the trend du jour. But as adults, the options are endless. Because the choices are so vast, how can you possibly arrive at your very own style? After all, while you may find your one true love after dating less than a dozen people, you can fall in love with a dozen pairs of shoes in one store alone. Now, the ideal solution for many people would be to hire a personal shopper and leave the decision-making to expert hands. Unfortunately, few people can afford that route. So the next best plan is to gain a better understanding of how to develop your personal style. This chapter gives you all the info you need to begin that journey.
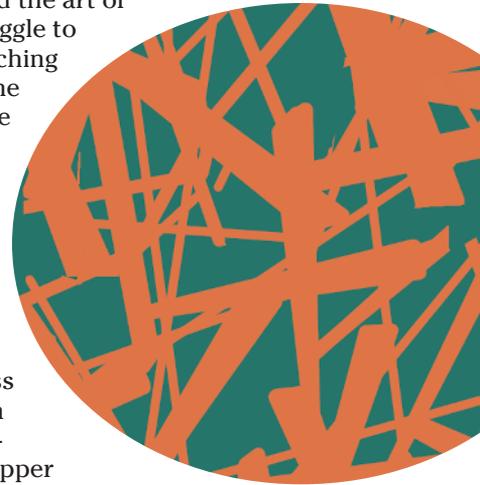
The Real Trendsetters

Literally thousands of fashion designers around the world are busily turning out mountains of clothing, and as the media continues to focus more and more attention on the fashion industry, hundreds of new designers are trying to make their way into the field every year. With so many working fashion designers, it's not surprising that you, the fashion consumer, have a flood of new clothing to choose from. If you feel like you're swimming upstream in this tide of satin, leather, and beading, try to take comfort in knowing you're not alone.

While each new fashion season brings out a variety of new styles that make you feel like everything in your closet is dated, not every designer has an impact on the latest trends. There's a filtering process between the designers' creations and the hottest trends that land in your closet. Figure 1-1 shows a designer outfit and a mass market outfit based on that design.

You may wonder how all those who make the cut seem to know that it's time to raise hemlines or douse the world in plum. You may also wonder what role, if any, the buying public has in this process. Getting the answers to these questions helps you figure out what you need to wear day and night.

Although fashion may seem like a one-way street, with all the clothes streaming out of Seventh Avenue and into the malls and boutiques nearest you, the truth is far different. Quite a number of people actually set the trends: designers, buyers, fashion houses, the fashion media, and, believe it or not, *you*. You have a much greater influence on what designs actually end up in the stores than you may think. The following sections outline the key players.

Designers

Designers are people with creative vision. They have an idea about the way clothing should look, and they take this idea all the way from an initial sketch to an actual sample to, hopefully, a store near you. Top designers display their latest creations at shows held in New York, Paris, and Milan (see Figure 1-2).
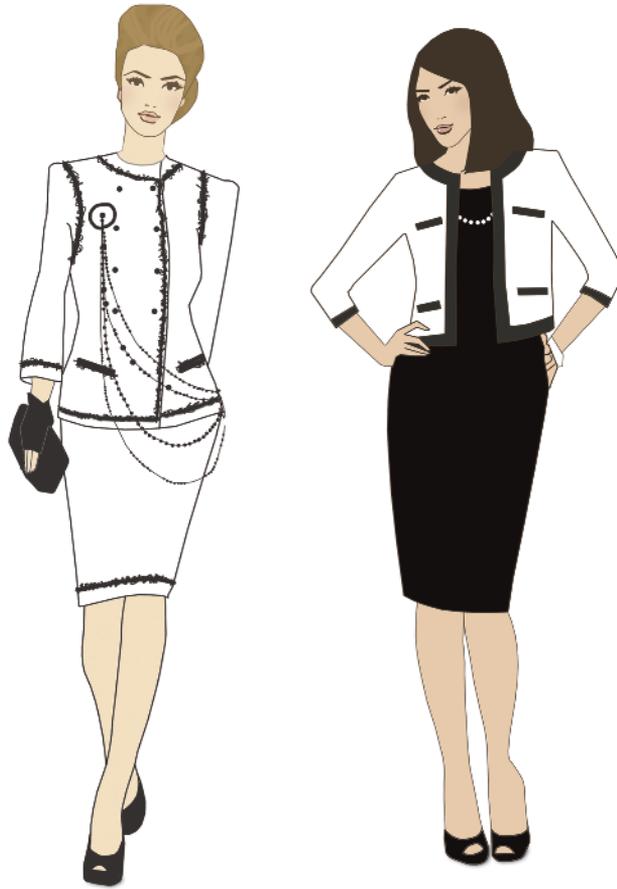
Figure 1-1: From the runway to real life.

Naturally the big name designers have more clout than those that are lesser known, but even they aren't operating in a vacuum. Everyone in the fashion industry has his or her finger in the wind, trying to decipher what the next trend may be. And the fashion designers aren't the only ones navigating public taste. The buyers (who pick and choose from the designers' collections, determining what makes it from the runway to you) also have a huge impact.
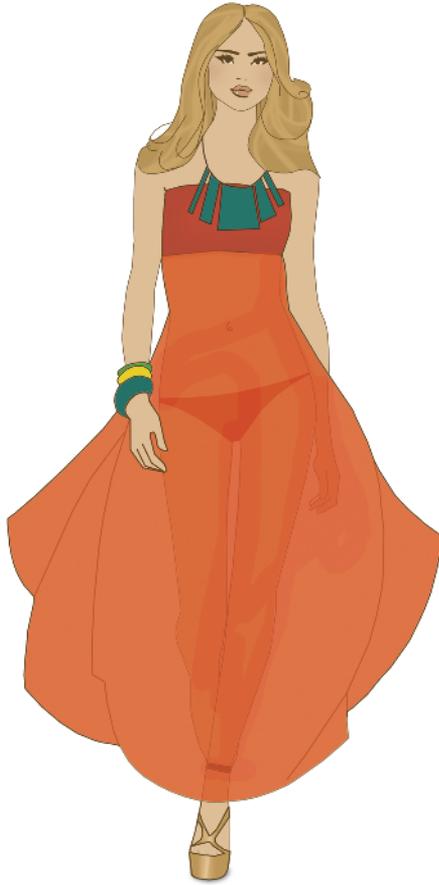
Figure 1-2: A design on a runway.

Buyers

Buyers are the people who decide, for every upcoming season, what will be hanging on the clothing racks in a store near you. Every store — from large department stores to small boutiques — has a buyer (or buyers). The buyers for the major retail outlets are one of the most important filters of the fashion trade. They have to be sure about what they're buying, because if the general consumer has different tastes, the stores end up with a ton of extra merchandise that will just end up on the sale rack.

TECHNICAL STUFF Back in 1919, an attempt was made to artificially change the course of fashion. Pressure was put on the fashion industry to stop raising hemlines because showing so much leg was thought to be damaging America's morals. Designers responded and agreed to send hemlines back downward. The only problem was that women weren't fans of the new fad, and so the longer skirts and dresses bombed, and American women roared into the 1920s wearing flapper dresses.

Fashion houses and their ads

Fashion houses are the companies behind the bigger name designers. They're considered *houses* because the company bears the designer's name, even after the designer has retired and someone else has taken over designing the label. The fashion houses influence trends and, consequently, sales through the use of advertising. If you look through a fashion magazine, you see that most of the pages are ads. These ads, which are just as visually interesting and informative as the editorial pages, can have quite an impact. For example, department stores didn't want to stock designer jeans back in the 1980s, but the ads placed by the jeans companies created the public demand, and it wasn't long before those jeans were in every store.

Fashion media

Another important set of players is the fashion media, which is led by the major fashion magazines such as *Vogue, Elle,* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The fashion media decode what's happening on the runways and download all the information to you. Anyone interested in fashion looks to these trend-setting publications (or their Web sites) to see what's in style and what is the next "must have."

Long before the designs hit the stores, the magazines' editors choose what to feature in their magazines from the hundreds of looks on the runway. Because the fashion shows are about six months ahead of the next fashion season, and the fashion magazines are sent to the printer two to three months ahead of when they hit the newsstand, the editors, who consult closely with the fashion designers, try to look ahead and anticipate what will be popular. Because of their position as a fashion authority, their decisions exert a considerable amount of influence.

The other players

Other prognosticators also have a role to play. One example is the *Color Marketing Group,* a non-profit organization made up of design professionals from all sorts of fields, from fashion to interior design, who get together every year and decide that, say, powder blue will be "the" color for the next year. That sets off the fabric and yarn manufacturers to stock up on material for the fashion designers in this color.

Trend forecasters also play a role. Most of the big design houses have either in-house staff whose job it is to know what trends are coming around the corner, or they hire firms (yes, there are firms that do this) that specialize in predicting trends. These people are well versed in what's cool in the celebrity world, with teenagers, and pretty much everything going on in pop culture. They also have to keep abreast of what all the other designers are doing. Not only do they know what's going on now, but they are also steps ahead. Remember, the designers are designing their collections way ahead of when the trends will be "in." They show their lines six months ahead of when they will be in stores and are designing even further ahead than that.

And stylists like Dana Ravich, who along with Pierre co-authored this book, dress stars for big red carpet events and for appearances on television shows or in print. If a celebrity is wearing a dress from an up-and-coming designer, that could be his or her ticket to fame, too.

You

The designers, buyers, and magazines can tell you what's in style and guide you toward what to buy, but at the end of the day, it's up to you. What makes the most sense for you, your lifestyle, and your body type determines what you purchase. After you develop your personal style, you can take cues from all these outside influences in order to navigate through all this information and make the choices that are right for you.

Getting Your Personal Style Started

Some of the factors that go into deciding what to wear include where you live, what your interests are, where you work, what you like to do when socializing, and what colors and styles suit your body type. By weaving all

these factors together (as Chapter 2 does), you can create your own personal style. To find out what belongs in your personal wardrobe, see Chapter 7.

Decide which trends can work for you

If you pick up a fashion magazine and look at the outfits the beautiful models are wearing, you may think, "What does this have to do with how I dress?" But even though you may not buy one of those designer outfits, it can give you clues on how to dress fashionably.

To begin with, when flipping the pages of a fashion magazine, stop and take a good look at those outfits that attract you. Decide what you find appealing about that particular look. You should even take notes. If you see a dress with an off-the-shoulder style showing off the model's collarbones and that's a body part you like, take note. If, while flipping the pages, you see that several other designers are also making off-the-shoulder styles, you've spotted a trend that you'll want to make yours.

Because magazines usually show photos of clothes for coming seasons, these designs may not yet be in stores. So tear out the pictures that you like. They can help when you're shopping because you'll know exactly what to look for. And if you're tempted to buy a random dress at the end of the current season just because it's on sale, the pictures you're carrying around will inspire you to wait for the style you're seeking. This is especially important if your budget only allows you to buy a few pieces.

Know your body

Of course clothing comes in all different sizes, but just because an outfit comes in your size doesn't mean that it suits you. Some designers know how to make creations that can be adapted to women who don't fit the runway mold. Other designers have a great eye for color and fabric, but when it comes to cut, they're more the one-size-better-fit-all types. Your job is to learn what your body shape is and find out what types of clothes flatter your figure. If you find a designer whose fit works for your body, check out the rest of his or her line. Chances are good that all the pieces will fit you well. (Go to Chapter 3 for help in identifying your body shape and developing a better understanding of what clothes can make you look your best. Go to Part IV for advice on how to dress fashionably for any occasion.)

REMEMBER

Many women buy clothes that don't fit, using the excuse that this gives them the incentive to get into shape or lose ten pounds. Some brides are able to meet such goals because they're aiming for one particular and very important day in their lives, but most women don't end up ever wearing those clothes. Of course, if you are aiming to lose weight (great!); I'm not trying to discourage you. But a more practical (and successful) strategy is to invest in pieces you can wear as the beautiful you that you are right now.

Make educated purchases

To make educated purchases, you have to understand a few fashion basics, like what styles look best on you, what fabrics are appropriate for certain seasons, and what colors are *you*. If you are not equipped with all the information you need, shopping efficiently can be challenging.

REMEMBER

When you shop, look at the short term ("I just love the way this looks on me") and the long term ("Is this something I must have in my closet?"). If you see a pair of trendy gladiator sandals, ask yourself, "Is this something I need, or should I use this money toward a great black cashmere cardigan?" Buying trendier, less expensive items is fine, but buying quality pieces that can last you many seasons is essential. The decision-making process isn't just about the way an article of clothing looks, but also how it was made. Head to Chapters 4 and 5 to pick up the required basics.

Determine where you want to fit in

A key to building your wardrobe is to decide what you want your overall personal style to be. If you're a mother of three and spend most of your days playing with your children and carpooling, a good portion of your wardrobe will be geared to that. But you are also a woman with a personality of your own, and your wardrobe should have pieces of clothing that work off the playground as well.

So what should determine your style? Would you prefer to look like you'd fit right in walking down the streets of a fashion capital like New York, Milan, or Paris? Or are you more comfortable adopting the style more popular to the area where you live? (Figure 1-3 shows two outfits, one that would look good in a fashion center and another that is more mainstream.) Or do you want to identify with a particular group? If you work in an office, you need to understand the dress code of that environment, and when socializing among your friends, you want to dress appropriately for the occasion, all the while being true to your personal sense of style.

Figure 1-3: Your personal style is defined by many different aspects of your life.

During the course of a week, or maybe even a very hectic day, you could change your outfit over and over again, depending on where you are and where you're going. But rather than consider playing clothes chameleon a chore, look at it as an endless series of opportunities to look gorgeous and express your personal style. To do that, you need to build up confidence in your ability to dress in the right attire no matter what the setting.

Figure out how you want the world to see you

What you choose to put on your body when you wake up in the morning says a lot about how you feel on any particular day. Even the most basic outfit can say so much. Take jeans and a T-shirt, for example — an ensemble most women can relate to. The number of combinations you can put together with these two items is endless, but each look sends out a very different message. If you're going for cute, you can pair a T-shirt with *boyfriend jeans* (a baggy jean that's often cuffed and distressed) and flip-flops (see Figure 1-4). If you're going for "hot and sexy," add jewelry and stilettos to your basic look, and you've gone from simple to sexy in a flash (see Figure 1-5). For a more sophisticated look, try a blazer over your T-shirt with a trouser jean and black pump (see Figure 1-6). And a cute sweatshirt with a pair of ripped jeans that you've had forever can show that even on a casual Sunday, you put effort into looking cozy yet adorable (see Figure 1-7).

Figure 1-4: A casual, cute look.

Figure 1-5: A great pair of jeans and high heels is a sexy look.

Now I understand that after a long work week, the last thing you want to do is try to look hot while running to get the newspapers. What I am saying is that, in the split-second of choosing what to wear for the day, make an effort to go the more flattering, put-together route. Doing so not only gives you more confidence to start the day, but it also prepares you for anything (or anyone) that comes your way! You may think of jeans and a T-shirt as only one kind of look, but even the most basic outfit can represent many different aspects of your personality, as Figures 1-4 through 1-7 show.

REMEMBER

Most of the time, you pay attention to what you're wearing because you're going out of the house. When you're home relaxing, you're likely to throw on any old thing or your favorite sweats. (And, of course, that's okay.) However, sexiness and personal style develop only with confidence. My point? You should feel your best at all times. If you're sitting at home, do it in your favorite sweats and your coziest T-shirt. If you're heading to the market in sweats, make them look casual but sexy (yes, there is a way to make sweats look cute!).

Figure 1-6: Jeans can be very sophisticated.

TIP

To motivate yourself to abandon the "it doesn't matter how I look" mentality, try this: Remind yourself that you *may* run into someone you haven't seen in years. Nine times out of ten you won't, but you may. I want you to look great and feel fabulous at all times because then you'll impress the person who is most important to you: *you.*

Go for diversity

A spice rack with 25 herbs lets you express yourself so much better than a spice rack with only salt and pepper. The same is true of your wardrobe. The more variety you have to choose from, the more you can express your personal style, which is only possible when your wardrobe has the depth to match all sorts of moods.

Figure 1-7: Even cozy can be stylish.

When shopping, look at each purchase to see whether it expands your repertoire or is just another item like most of the others in your closet. Sure, you may love wearing gray, but if you already have numerous tops in your favorite color, try grabbing a top that highlights a different part of your personality. But always remember to buy only items that you'll wear. Don't buy a green top just because you don't have one, if green isn't a good color for you. The goal is to expand your wardrobe and express your style, all while staying in your color palette and wearing clothes that suit your body type.

If you're not sure of the vibes you want to give off when you're getting dressed in the morning, pick an outfit that allows you to add some variations. If you choose a monochromatic blouse, for example, stick a scarf (or a pair of fabulous chandelier earrings) in your purse, so that you can jazz it up if you end up going out for a drink after work. Try to think ahead. If your outfit is one that can be livened up, you'll be able to say, "Let's go" when someone suggests doing something fun.

Build your wardrobe to include both basics and trendy stuff

For most photo shoots, the person being photographed hires a stylist who brings various outfits to choose from to achieve the perfect look. When Dana and I were choosing what to wear for the front and back covers of this book, we just went shopping in my closet. We were laughing, saying, "We really do practice what we preach!" I had every basic item we needed to convey to you exactly what we wanted to. My point? Having basics in your wardrobe is a must. (The black dress on the back of the book is one I've had for eight years.) Now, I am not saying I don't have trendy items in my closet — I do. But I'm careful when buying something that I know will be out next season, and I don't spend as much money on it as I do on something I know will be around for a while. Your closet, too, should include the basics and a few trendy things.

Fitting Your Style to Your Budget

In creating a style, you're going to run into a reality check, otherwise known as your clothing budget. If you happen to have an unlimited amount of money to spend on clothes, then you can skip this section. But because most people do have to watch what they spend, learning to shop within your budget is an important skill to develop.

Spend more on the basics, less on the trendier things

Some people approach clothes shopping as they do their grocery shopping. They make a list of what they need and go out searching for the cheapest price. While stretching your food dollars this way can be quite effective, it doesn't always work with clothing. I encourage you to spend more on certain staples, items that will take you from season to season and look rich with any outfit. Trendier items are the pieces to save on because they may only last you the season. (In Part III, I explain what to look for so that even your "save" items will look like splurges.)

Sales are great times to buy staples, seasonless items, and classic pieces. Although the store just needs to clear space for new shipments, that classic pair of black Calvin Klein pants marked down and down again may fit perfectly in your wardrobe. Sale racks often take time (and patience, for that matter) to look through, but don't walk by because you feel like sales mean something is of poor quality. Quite often, it's just the opposite. (To find out more about this topic, check out Chapter 7.)

Take stock of your wardrobe

The temptation for many women to go out and buy clothing is a strong one. If you think your wardrobe has a hole that needs filling, you could just take the first opportunity to hit your local stores or surf the Web. But at some point you'll likely run into the ceiling of your clothing budget, and you don't want that to happen at a time when you need the perfect dress for a special occasion.

So don't always be so quick to look for an opportunity to shop outside your closet. Shopping can give you a psychological boost, but if you're using it as a way to lift your spirits rather than as a way to create a look for yourself, then you're almost certain to miss both goals. Rather than reach for your credit card every time you feel like it, do what every clothing store does several times a year: Take inventory.

If you don't take stock of what you already have in your closet, you're likely to buy the same thing over and over again because that's what you're drawn to. Being organized and allowing yourself to really see what you have gives you the freedom to buy new pieces you may have otherwise overlooked.

I'm not suggesting you enter every item you own into an Excel spreadsheet. Still, you should take some time as a new season is about to arrive to go through all your clothes and give away whatever isn't perfect for you. (For more on how to pare the ordinary or unexceptional from your closet, see the next section for a brief introduction on my 10 System and Chapter 2 for additional details.) At the same time, make a list of what you need and put down as many details as possible. For example, "a white button-down shirt to wear under blazers" may top your list. That way the next time you're looking through the racks in your favorite store, you'll able to fill in the gaps in your closet.

REMEMBER

Some people give away items as soon as they buy a new one. While that method preserves closet space, it places unnecessary limits on you — especially if you're a good shopper. There's no reason to get rid of one pair of navy slacks just because you buy another pair, especially if you can wear the new pair in a different way. Maybe you wear one pair to work with ballet flats because they're too short to wear with heels. Another pair of navy slacks that you *can* wear with heels wouldn't be considered a repetitive item in your wardrobe. Although both slacks look similar, they serve different purposes.

Invest only in 10s

My main goal in this book is to help you concentrate on quality instead of quantity. I would rather you own one black blazer that fits you perfectly and is of the best quality than four that are "eh" — which leads me to my 10 System: Every item you have should be evaluated on a scale of 1 to 10, and only 10s should remain in your closet. Every blazer, sweater, or pair of jeans (shall I go on?) must fit this requirement to keep a place in your fabulous closet. As you go through the next chapters, keep this scale in mind. (To find out more about the 10 System, see Chapter 2.)

REMEMBER

Throughout this book, you'll find tips on how to shop for key items, especially in the chapters in Part IV. Because these important garments have to be close to perfect, they may require the extra expense of being altered by a professional tailor. Although I try to help you save money throughout this book, in some instances, I encourage you to spend a little extra because it'll pay off in the long run.

Prolong that new clothes feel

Putting on a new article of clothing is a great feeling. Even if no one notices, you know that your mood has been elevated. But after a while, that blouse (or pants or scarf) joins the ranks of all the other items in your closet. Even though it's no worse for wear, it loses the punch it once had on your emotions. It's no different than if you ate your favorite dish over and over. After a while, you'll yawn instead of salivate when you see it on the menu.

While you can't stop this process, you can slow it down. Learning how to reinvent pieces you have is key. For example, a white button-down shirt can take you many different places. It can be worn under a sweater, as in Figure 1-8. When you are on vacation in a tropical place, it can be tied over a bathing suit and paired with a long skirt (see Figure 1-9). If you're heading to work, it can be worn with a sweater-vest (see Figure 1-10). And finally, if you're off to a fancy event, you can dress it up by pairing it with a sequin skirt, as in Figure 1-11.

Figure 1-8: Look casual yet sophisticated with a white button-down under a sweater.

Figure 1-9: Your white button-down will have you looking beach-chic.

REMEMBER

Excessive buying is not the best way to establish personal style. Being smart and having key, versatile pieces in your closet will make you the fashion queen you want to be!

A Last Important Point

Throughout this book I talk a lot about personal style. My hope is that you'll use all the information here to figure out the overall image you want to project to the world. When all is said and done, no matter what you're wearing, you have to be yourself. If that means certain styles are not for you, so be it. But with so much to choose from, you can be sure to find pieces that are perfect for you. And by the time you've finished reading this book, you'll know just how to be the stylish woman you've always dreamed of being!

Figure 1-10: A vest can be a perfect complement to a white button-down shirt.

Figure 1-11: You can dress up your white button down if heading to a fancy affair.