

The History of... The Little Black Dress

An Exhibition in Celebration of Redding Fashion Week

“One is never over-dressed or under-dressed with a Little Black Dress.”

–Karl Lagerfeld

A good black dress is a must-have for any woman’s wardrobe: it is versatile, simple, and meets the needs of many different occasions. But not many people think about its history and how the “LBD” came to be such a necessary and useful part of a woman’s wardrobe and a cultural touchstone.

In 1926, French Haute Couture designer Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel (1883-1971) created the look which became known as the “Little Black Dress.” Illustrated in *Vogue* on January 10, 1926, it was called the “Chanel Ford” that “all the world will wear.” The dress was simple and short, with straight almost masculine lines and little decoration. Like a Ford car, it was streamlined, of the moment, and could potentially be mass produced. This silhouette was a bold change from the romantic nineteenth century aesthetic, which was over-stuffed, over the top, and extremely feminine. This little black dress fit nicely into the new boyish silhouette or “*garçonne*” look influenced by Victor Margueritte’s novel, *La Garçonne* (1922) about a young woman who leaves her family home in pursuit of an independent life.

Chanel’s model was made of black crepe de chine with two free floating panels, one at the shoulder and one at the hem. She loved the color black for its elegance and capacity to hide flaws and highlight strengths: it was flattering on almost any body type.

As the decade wore on, so did the women wearing “Chanel’s Ford.” Now being made by other designers and at all price points, it was a sort of blank canvas that could be dressed up or down with accessories. It could serve as a mourning dress, a dancing dress, daywear, or evening wear. It was made in crepe or wool for day wear and silk satins, silk charmeuse, lace, and velvets for evening. As the decades passed, the “Little Black Dress” has remained fashionable. While it was first seen as a revolutionary garment, it is now considered a classic.

Enjoy this selection of 24 LBDs and pre-LBDs from Turtle Bay Exploration Park’s Permanent Collection, curated by Heather Lee, Amanda Kramp, and Julia Cronin.

Do you have a little black dress? How does it make you feel when you wear it? What is the menswear equivalent of this garment?



From this 1910 pre-Little Black Dress
1977.32.6 - Gift of Mary Elizabeth Timmons



To this 1959 classic Little Black Dress
1975.28.3 - Gift of Noreen Braithwaite