



Silhouettes: activities for teachers and students

The following resources may be helpful to consult prior to completing the activity:

- *The Secret Life of Costumes* Glossary of Terms
 - <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/collections/costumes/glossary.php?lang=en>
- *The Secret Life of Costumes* Creative, Low-Cost Costuming Ideas
 - <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/collections/costumes/ideas.php?lang=en>

A silhouette provides an uncluttered outline of the basic shape of a person from a particular period in history as dictated by the clothing worn. Each shape is different from any in the century either before or after. The outline of your body wearing today's styles would be very different from your great grandmother's or grandfather's shape at the same age.

The trained eye of a costume designer can accurately differentiate among historical eras by looking at the shape of bodies in clothing. Costume designers can “read” a piece of clothing in the same way that an architect reads a building, by looking at details of design and construction to figure out age, history, and something about the way that the people in the clothing lived. You might compare the process to the way a detective reads a crime scene to piece together what has happened, and possibly why.

Below you'll see ten silhouettes of women from different periods in history. Look at them to determine the details that carry information. What can you, the detective, deduce? You will note that we have chosen female silhouettes because the changes are generally more marked for them than for males, although if you look at what a nobleman was wearing during Shakespeare's time you might want to argue this point.



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1. Observation

Check out the figures below, noticing differences in the following areas.

- Skirt size: full, narrow, flowing, rigid
- Waist delineation: tightly corseted or natural, lower or higher than natural waistline
- Length of hem: to the ground, trailing on the ground, showing the ankles, mid-calf-length, knee-length
- Exaggeration of some aspect of the natural body: heavy padding over the buttocks, unnaturally small waist, flattened torso, exaggerated bustline
- Volume of material used to make the costume
- Shape of head as a result of hat or hairstyle

2. Discussion

- Do any of the dresses point to particular historical periods? Which period? Why?
- What can you tell about the role of women in society from looking at these silhouettes?
- What can you tell about society by looking at these silhouettes?
- Do any of the figures seem more “liberated” by their clothing, or more confined?
- If you were looking at the silhouette of today’s teen, what would you notice? Other than basic body size and shape, what clothing details distinguish males from females?
- What do you think we will be wearing in fifty years’ time?
- Which period silhouette most appeals to you? Why? Do you ever think that you really belong in another time?

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3. Challenge

Match each of the ten ladies below with her period in history. There is a list of the possible periods beneath the silhouettes, and research into clothing history that may help. (You may be familiar with some of the shapes if you sew or draw, enjoy figurative paintings, sculpture, watching historical films and plays, or read illustrated novels and mythology.)



1. Ancient Greek/Classical Period
2. Medieval Period (476 CE to 1350 approx)
3. Late Medieval Period/Perpendicular Gothic (approximately 1350 – 1450)
4. Elizabethan/English Renaissance (16th century)
5. Late Seventeenth Century
6. Early 18th Century
7. Late 18th Century
8. Victorian Period (Late 19th Century)
9. Early 20th Century
10. 1920s



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Quick Clothing History

- In classical **Greek** and Roman times, women's costumes were basically variations on a simple rectangle of fabric, usually seamed at the sides, and joined at the shoulders and along the arms. There was often a sort of shawl or drape, which could cover the head.
- The very simple garments originating in classical times, lacking structure or shape, didn't change dramatically through the early **medieval period**.
- As trade among European countries developed in the **late medieval period**, so did crafts like weaving and dyeing. Clothing became more colourful and more ornate with high headdresses for the women, and shoes with exaggerated points for the men.
- As trade increased and individual craftsmen moved from job to job, techniques for creating shape in clothing using more elaborate patterns, lacing and buttons passed from one country to another.
- The "**Renaissance**" was a cultural movement that began in mid 14th Century Italy and spread to the rest of Europe over the next several hundred years. The Renaissance was marked by an explosion in the arts and sciences, and an emphasis on the human being and his or her place in the world. While Medieval (Gothic) artists depicted humans in a stylized, one-dimensional way, Renaissance artists drew, painted and sculpted the human body in a realistic and sensuous



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manner. Clothing became more decorative, more elegant and a greater indicator of power and status.

- During the **Renaissance**, two trade-related innovations allowed for the creation of the stiff neck-ruff characteristic of **Elizabethan** court costume: the production of hand-made lace in Italy, and the introduction of liquid “rice starch” from Asia.
- Up to the 1700s, tailors dominated the clothing industry and tended to dictate fairly rigid shapes for female clothing. During the **18th century** (The Age of Enlightenment) women began to design and construct clothing for other women, and the silhouette of that period was softer and rounder. Dresses were widened by hip extensions called *panniers* and curves were accentuated.
- During the late 1800s (**Victorian period, 19th Century**), women’s fashions looked a bit like military uniforms, with very high collars and moulded bodices like tunics. The bottom half featured a bustle, which concentrated a lot of material and padding over the woman’s rear, creating an exaggerated profile.
- Women’s dress changed radically during and after world War I (**early 20th Century**). Women’s contributions to the war (nursing, industrial work, volunteerism) gave them more freedom and civil and economic rights. At the same time, dress fabrics were scarce and more costly, as manufacturers had shifted focus to producing war-related products. The newly active woman was not inclined, nor could afford, to wear the voluminous pre-war style of clothing. Skirts became shorter and dresses simpler.



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- The zipper was invented and improved over the mid-teens and early half of the 20th Century, **the 1920s**, (with some Canadian know-how) and facilitated the sleek look of a lot of what we have been wearing over the past few decades. Think about the fit of your blue jeans and you'll appreciate this hard-working invention.
- Technology allows today's fabrics to become increasingly flexible, with more give and stretch; features which will surely change the silhouette of tomorrow.