



Sisters Lee Radziwill and Jackie Onassis in New York, 1970.

Bright lights, BIG CITY

THANKS to its SCREEN ICONS, trailblazing DESIGNERS and STREET-STYLE STARS, the CITY That NEVER Sleeps has SHAPED FASHION TRENDS globally for CENTURIES. So, what EXACTLY is it about NEW YORK GIRL chic that CONTINUES to captivate?

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Any mention of the much-revered ‘French girl’ conjures a very specific image. But the New Yorker aesthetic? It’s trickier to pin to the page. “[It’s] as much about confidence as one particular trend or overarching aesthetic,” says Colleen Hill, senior curator of costume at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). “New York women are comfortable in their own skin.”

Since 2017, Johnny Cirillo, photographer and author of this year’s *Watching New York: Street Style A to Z*, has documented the style of the city’s residents on his Instagram account @watchingnewyork, which now boasts 1.4 million followers. “I’ve seen fashion from all over the world and nobody goes as bold while staying chic [like] women in New York City,” he reflects. “[They’re] always a step ahead.”

The city’s status as a hotspot of sartorial influence is of long standing. “New York City has been the capital of [American] fashion since the 19th century, due to its large port, manufacturing and retailing,” says Valerie Steele, director and chief curator of The Museum at the FIT. The city was a key battleground for first-wave feminism, in which Amelia Bloomer, women’s rights activist and editor of newspaper *The Lily*, played a leading role. “The constraints imposed on women’s bodies through dress in the late 19th century mirrored social constraints,” explains Harriette Richards, lecturer at the School of Fashion and Textiles at Melbourne’s RMIT University. “Bloomer used [*The Lily*] to [encourage] women to forgo the corsets and dresses of the time and to instead wear pantaloons, a loose style of trousers that soon became known as ‘bloomers.’”

The city’s well-to-do copied European fashions until the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1940 made it necessary to develop local alternatives, explains Steele – notably, the ‘American Look’ of sportswear. Wartime designer Claire McCardell was an early proponent of the style, offering easy-to-wear matching separates with practical details like zips and pockets, championing functionality and form in equal measure. In the absence of inspiration arriving from Europe, famed fashion publicist Eleanor Lambert (who later instigated the Met Gala) launched New York Fashion Week in 1943 – then called ‘Press Week’ – to showcase homegrown talent.

All photography: Getty Images.



In 1964, Jackie Kennedy moved to a Fifth Avenue apartment in the wake of the assassination of her first husband, President John F. Kennedy. After her polite First Lady uniform of skirt suits and pillbox hats, the late '60s style of Kennedy Onassis – as she had now become – took on a more relaxed feel, favouring oversized sunglasses and capri pants. The '60s also saw Truman Capote's 'Swans' – a clutch of socialites and heiresses handpicked for their beauty, breeding and good taste that included Kennedy Onassis' younger sister, Lee Radziwill – hold sartorial sway over the city. Edie Sedgwick – model, 'poor little rich girl' *par excellence* and muse to Andy Warhol at his legendary New York studio, The Factory – embodied '60s Youthquake style with her pixie crop hair, dramatic earrings and penchant for leopard print.

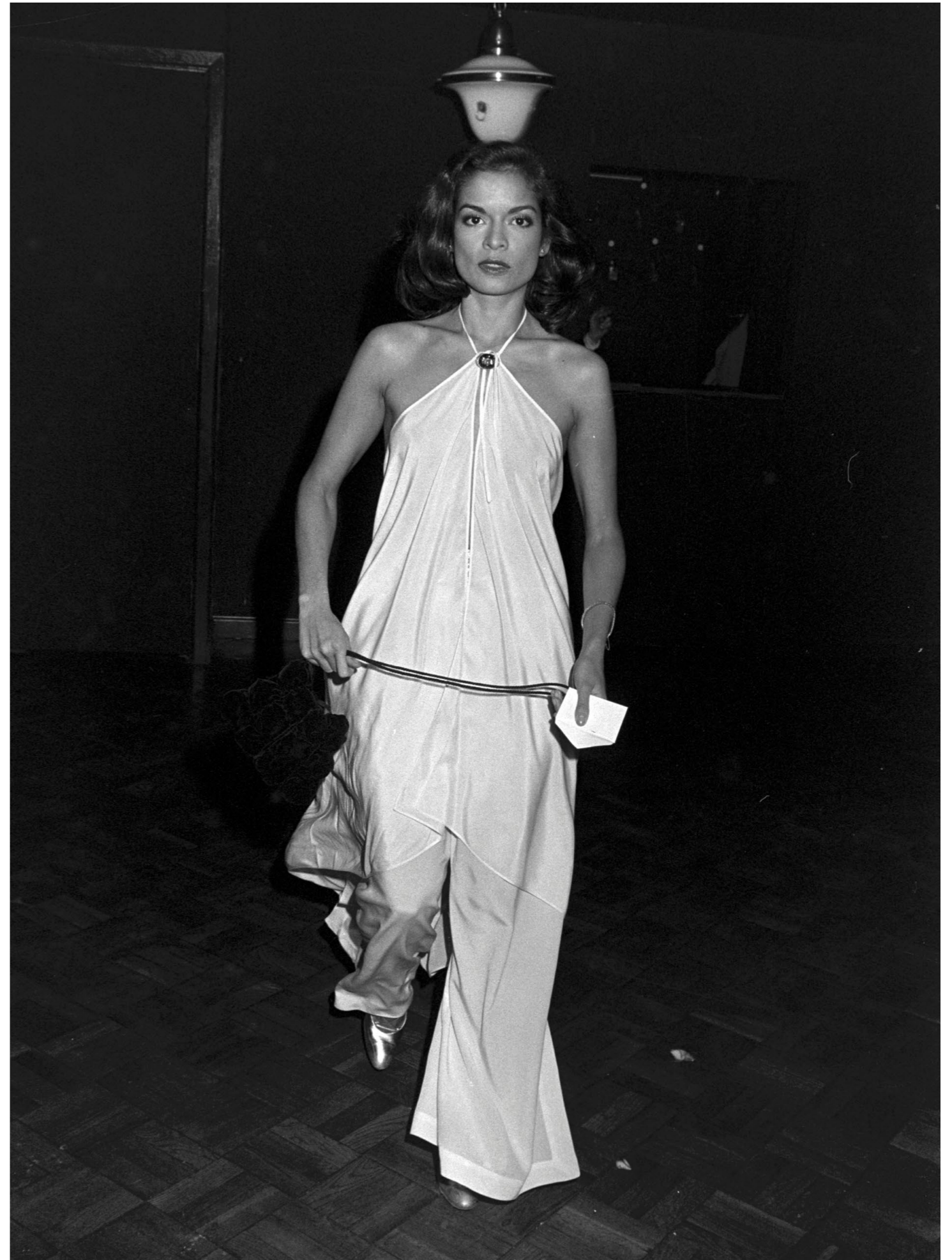
Leading second-wave feminist and *New York Magazine* columnist Gloria Steinem was both celebrated and criticised for how she dressed. "Her New York identity – one of fashionable glamour, characterised by her long hair, aviator glasses and silk shirts – was seen to be at odds with her political identity," reflects Richards. "Steinem showed that a woman can be a fashion icon *and* a political activist."

In 1974, Diane von Fürstenberg debuted her revolutionary wrap dress, a workhorse of the modern woman's wardrobe that combined comfort and elegance and was equally at home in a corporate environment as on the dance floors of Studio 54. In 1985, Donna Karan would double down on power dressing when she launched her eponymous brand with an 'Essentials' line composed of interchangeable 'Seven Easy Pieces'. Revolving around the fulcrum of the bodysuit, Karan's modular-wardrobe concept was an early iteration of the modern-day 'capsule wardrobe'.

Despite running for only three years (1977-80) as a nightclub, Studio 54's cultural afterglow remains strong to this day: it's a byword for late-'70s glamour and hedonism some five decades later. "[The iconic scene of] Bianca Jagger clad in a red chiffon Halston gown on a white horse cemented the club's reputation as the epicentre of style," says Matthew Yokobosky, senior curator of fashion and material culture at Brooklyn Museum and author of *Studio 54: Night Magic*. It was a fabled place where, as Yokobosky puts it, the dance floor doubled as a runway.

Disco gave way to the burgeoning New York punk rock scene of the late '70s and early '80s – and fashion followed suit. The edgy creations of pioneering punk designer Stephen Sprouse were frequently worn by Debbie Harry, like the asymmetric dress printed with television static she dons for the 1979 'Heart of Glass' music video. Patti Smith perfected the art of androgynous, borrowed-from-the-boys style via her signature uniform of ripped denim and Chuck Taylors.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Journalist and activist Gloria Steinem, in 1986; singer-songwriter Patti Smith, in 1976; fashion designer Diane von Fürstenberg arriving at a Halston party, in 1975; Andy Warhol with ill-fated model, actress and Warhol muse Edie Sedgwick. OPPOSITE PAGE Bianca Jagger, in 1977.



At a fabled Bronx block party in 1973 thrown by DJ Kool Herc and his sister, Cindy, hip hop was born. “Hip hop expanded the definition of traditional streetwear [to focus] on what Black and Brown teens wore – [something previously] neglected by the fashion status quo,” says Elena Romero, chair of marketing communications at the FIT and author of *Free Stylin’: How Hip Hop Changed the Fashion Industry*. According to Romero, it transformed New York – and global – fashion forever: the ubiquity, for example, of athleisure owes a great deal to the movement.

In the '90s, it seemed that Camelot had returned when chic Calvin Klein publicist Carolyn Bessette joined the Kennedy clan via her marriage to John F. Kennedy Jr. She and her husband perished in a 1999 plane crash, but Bessette-Kennedy’s style, snapped on the streets of New York – crisp white shirts, oval sunglasses and slip dresses – remains in vogue 25 years later. More recently, the late, great Iris Apfel became, in her words, a “geriatric starlet” (she signed as a model with IMG aged 97 in 2019) thanks to her refreshingly eccentric, maximalist style.

Today, Moda Operandi co-founder Lauren Santo Domingo is carrying on the time-honoured tradition of manicured Manhattanites never being seen with a hair out of place. Eva Chen, Instagram’s director of fashion partnerships, has attracted 2.5 million followers on the platform who can’t get enough of her mix of corporate cool, mum-off-duty and red-carpet style. Designer Aurora James is spotlighting traditional African craftsmanship through her accessories brand Brother Vellies, while encouraging retailers to dedicate 15 per cent of shelf space to Black businesses via her award-winning Fifteen Percent Pledge initiative. “Anything can happen here,” says James of New York. “Dressing for that endless possibility is the chicest way to embrace the magic of this wonderful city.”

It’s remarkable how many style luminaries associated with New York hail from elsewhere. Take Florence-born Elsa Peretti, first a model for designer Halston and then creator of groundbreaking jewellery for Tiffany & Co. The iconic Grace Jones, who performed regularly at Studio 54 when disco fever was at its zenith, moved to the Big Apple from her native Jamaica as a teenager. As with *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* Holly Golightly, who was Texas-born, New York has long drawn wide-eyed dreamers like moths to a flame.

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—Aurora James, fashion designer

Also notable is how richly populated the New York of our collective imaginations is by fashionable figures of fiction: Golightly, *Friends*’ Rachel Green and the privileged Upper East Siders of noughties series *Gossip Girl*, to cite but a few. The vision of Audrey Hepburn’s Holly Golightly window-shopping – with that Hubert de Givenchy little black dress, updo and pearl necklace – is culturally ubiquitous. The late '90s introduced to our screens *Sex and The City*’s Carrie Bradshaw, whose joyous outfits by legendary designer Patricia Field are too numerous to describe individually (well, perhaps just *that* tutu in the opening sequence). “New York is full of real style icons,” says Richards. “It’s no wonder that so many fictional ones have emerged in their stead.” HB

OPPOSITE PAGE Entrepreneur Lauren Santo Domingo during New York Fashion Week, 2024. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy, in 1996; Instagram’s director of fashion partnerships, Eva Chen; fashion designer Aurora James.

