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Style in the Sky: A Brief History of Airline Fashion

Air travel has come a long way since its invention in 1903 - and so have airline uniforms. From the simple, boxy styles of the '30s to the splashy colors and shortened hems of the '60s and '70s, we're glancing back at the evolution of airline fashion and how it mirrors cultural changes back on land.



We'll start our history lesson in 1930, when Boeing Air Transport brought us the world's first stewardesses.

Because the public at the time was (not surprisingly) terrified by their huge, metal flying machines, Boeing Air decided to add nurses to their onboard staff, creating an aura of safety. You guessed it - these nurses became what we now refer to as a stewardess.

The addition of nurses to the flying crew was a huge success. Their uniforms, not so much. Because their outfits were identical to those worn by nurses at the time, the new stewardesses wore mostly gray, boxy ensembles.

(Photo: United Air Lines, 1935-6)



Airline style didn't get its much-needed makeover until the '60s came along. Airlines began to try out a "sex sells" marketing approach, which lasted through the '70s. This meant a whole new genre of airline apparel, replete with brighter patterns, shorter hems, vibrant colors and hot pants.

Because flying at the time was still pretty expensive, those who could afford a ticket to the clouds were viewed as glamorous and elite. This wanderlustful culture and admiration toward fliers is reflected in the flamboyant uniforms of the era's airline crews, and it comes as no surprise that the young and trendy dreamed of becoming stewardesses.

(Photos: 1. American Airlines , 1970s 2. Southwest Airlines, 1971)



This was also around the time that airlines began tapping top fashion designers for their uniforms, like Pierre Balmain, who designed a deep-hued, mosaic-style uniform for Singapore Airlines (1964), and Emilio Pucci, whose tropical prints and bright colors were adopted by Qantas Airways (1974).

(Photo: Emilio Pucci for Qantas Airways, 1974-1985)



Ever since, fashion designers have continued to be hired by airlines. Take Banana Republic, a company which marked its second collaboration with Virgin America in 2012, complete with a "Mad Men"-inspired

Spring fashion show 35,000 ft above ground. And Vivienne Westwood recently partnered with Virgin Atlantic to bring a vintage-style uniform to crew members, which includes a bright red pencil skirt with darted seams for women and a deep burgundy, 3-piece suit for men.

(Photo: Vivienne Westwood for Virgin Atlantic)



Yet the one thing most airline uniforms today have in common is a simplified style with muted colors. In an article for Smithsonian, Sarah Rich explains that this low-key style may be a reflection of the stiffening of flight safety in recent years. In the modern transportation industry, airlines are more interested with maintaining trust than stirring up excitement. But despite the toning-down of airline styles, many modern airlines still add flair to their look by including subtle indicators of the aircraft's destination. Emirates Airlines is a huge proponent of this idea, dressing its crew in a sand-colored hue and signature white veil to communicate its Arab ownership – with impeccable style, of course. (Photo: Emirates Airlines current uniform)





Moral of the story? Inspiration can be found everywhere – even 30,000 feet up in the clouds. Once you’ve found a seat on your next flight, don’t forget to sit back, relax, and look down the aisle.

By [Tatiana Cirisano](#)

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