

Women's Household Aprons in the Model A Era: A Look at the Common and Uncommon

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To me it appears that women during the years of 1928-1931 were divided into two groups: those who had servants, and those who had aprons. Most belonged in the second group.

The MAFCA Model A Era Fashion Guidelines, 2010, Coordinated Apparel, page 3C-26 shows samples of era aprons and a paragraph that describes them. It starts, "Both utilitarian and fancy aprons were seen in magazines and catalogs of all four years," and goes on to describe the fabric types, colors and methods of construction of a variety of household aprons. But when I opened my original era catalogs and magazines, I found a lot more than MAFCA's accurate, but succinct description.



There were dresses that looked like aprons, and aprons that looked like dresses. There were half and full smocks, and cover-all dresses and work dresses. Now really, what kind of *job* can you perform in an all-white, long sleeved dress and still look presentable when finished? So I consulted my 1975 New Webster's Dictionary (I know, hardly new) which defines an apron as "a piece of cloth or leather worn to keep the clothes clean or protect them from injury: a covering for the front part of the body..."

So that's the difference; an apron is a covering for clothing and a work dress, utility dress or uniform *is* the clothing. That narrowed things down a bit, but some of those utility dresses and uniforms didn't completely fasten all the way up or down. Which lead to:

Laurie's Rule of Thumb #1. If you can walk down a windy street in front of a member of the clergy and not reveal so much that you embarrass yourself, you're wearing clothing.

So for the purpose of this article, we shall apply my rule. If you want a further description of women's uniforms and work dresses, see MAFCA Fashion Guidelines, Major Garments, pages 3A-69 and 70. But I cannot guarantee you wouldn't be embarrassed on a windy street. Item #1093 is advertised as a "dress" and #1097 is advertised as an "apron."

The MAFCA Guidelines state that, "Early aprons usually had no discernable waist, with the front of the apron being all one-piece and the ties attached low and tied loosely behind." These 1928-ish one-piece cotton aprons could be bought from mail order catalogues such as M.W. Savage Co. for three for \$1 postpaid. Finished and semi-finished aprons, printed with designs to be embroidered at home could be bought for 40 cents to around \$1 each depending on the quality of fabric. To put this price into perspective, Montgomery Wards advertised all silk or all wool tweed dresses for \$6.98, and long-sleeved cotton dresses for

\$1.98 postpaid. Designs run from simple to ornate, but usually only required simple stitches such as running or outline stitch, lazy daisy and French knots to complete.

Hostess, tea, or bridge aprons usually fall into the one-piece category. Usually constructed of organdy, batiste, sateen, or other lightweight fabric, these bib-less, dressy aprons were worn by the hostess while serving and were very often trimmed in lace. (Remember this, it's important.) This bridge apron from the Art Needlework from Frederick Herrschner Inc. Fall/Winter 1927 catalogue was sold for 59 cents each or \$1 for a set of four in your choice of peach or green. The description does not include instructions for how to keep that tiny little bib portion up so I'll guess the wearer pinned it.



Remember what I wrote in the above paragraph about hostess aprons being fancy and trimmed with lace? Here's an offering by the Walter Field Co. Fall/Winter 1928-29 catalog described as being of "easy to clean" "full gum rubber with rubber ruffles and flowers."



Now just how sloppy does a hostess have to be to need a full rubber apron with rubber decorations? One can imagine gum rubber aprons being used for wet or sloppy situations such as doing laundry, bathing rambunctious children or dairy barn duties, but serving tea? Who was being served tea, circus animals? Anyway, they were a bargain at 89 cents for three.

Another unusual apron is referred to as a "double front" or "Hooverette," which has a double-breasted wrap front, which can be reversed left over right and right over left. Essentially a loose dress, it wouldn't pass my Rule of Thumb #1.



Many aprons had whimsical, poems and decorations. This seems to be especially true of half aprons with laundry or mending themes. Art Needlework offered a "Darning Apron" with this saying to embroider,

"I've darned and darned
until my Fingers are sore
I'll be darned if I darn anymore"

A commonly felt sentiment I'm sure. You might ask yourself, why would a grown woman want to wear an apron decorated with dancing flowers or clothespins and some silly verse? Why not? The same reason we watch videos of cats playing pianos on our video screens I suppose. A little bit of whimsy to cheer us and encourage us to get on with the unavoidable chores of the day.

Themed aprons seem to have been a marketing trend. Labeling aprons as “Hooverette,” “Kitchenette,” “Fudge,” and “Darning” were ways to make products stand out in a field of numerous choices, especially in publications aimed towards women specifically. In magazines such as Women’s World, consumers could order stamped, ready to finish aprons for \$1 each, including embroidery floss and trimming materials, in a variety of ways to personalize them. Often these were suggested as gifts for Christmas or other occasions. Authored by Constance Vivien Frazier, The December 1931 edition of Needlecraft Magazine offered this poem:

*I always like the Christmas gifts
My thoughtful friends provide.
They send me interesting things,
And lovely things besides;
For some are silk, and others come
From places far away,
And some are thoughtful, simple gifts
To gladden me each day.
But do you know, however fine
My presents are, and rare,
It’s not a perfect Christmas, if
There is no apron there!*

Women’s household aprons were the workhorses of most women’s wardrobes and served their purposes well. Perhaps because they were used until they fell apart, (my opinion) there aren’t a lot of original aprons on the current market, but you just might find one. The Model A Era Fashion Pattern Catalog, offered by MAFCA, features an undated apron pattern that looks similar to the 1930 -31 aprons found in the magazines and catalogs listed. You could also try to reproduce one of the more simple aprons referred to in this article.

And don’t forget that dress you’d need to wear underneath! The Fashion Pattern Catalog is chock full of simple daytime dresses in a variety of sizes. For an easy option in a modern, standard size, look for a pattern for medical scrubs. I used Simplicity #4644 and needed only a couple of minor alterations to turn the round-necked scrub top into an Era looking pull over dress.

Good luck and knock ‘em dead!



Reference Material:

- ❖ Art Needlework and Fancy Wear for Women and Children, Fall/Winter 1927- 1928, and Fall/Winter 1930-1931, Frederick Herrschner, Inc.
- ❖ Montgomery Ward & Co. Fall Winter 1929-30.
- ❖ M.W. Savage Co., Spring/Summer 1931
- ❖ Needlecraft Magazine of Home Arts, December 1931.
- ❖ Woman's World Magazine, December 1930

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