

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Dotted lines

The dashing, unifying pattern of polka dots in clothes and accessories blends modern and vintage, playful and chic.

The polka dot first came into fashion in the 1850s, coinciding with the popularity of the polka dance. Ivory/black and navy blue/white were favored combinations. They still are. A navy-blue-and-cream sleeveless polka-dot dress (Byron Lars' Beauty Mark, at B3 at Boyds, \$355) with patent-leather, sling-back shoes (Jimmy Choo, at Boyds, \$550) give a crisp, cool, chic presentation. "These dots were very feminine and fashion-forward," says a fashion-history expert, "without being too risky."

Polka dots are back this spring, assuming all of their past personalities.

They appear 1950s prim as uniform polka dots on full-skirted Byron Lars dresses and soft blouses by Nanette Lepore.

They seem unpredictable in graduated patterns - small dots that expand with each row - on strapless Ann Taylor dresses. And they are fun, fun, fun as splotchy mod dots on Diane von Furstenberg wrap dresses, both vintage and of-the-moment.

Just ask celebrities who have adopted the look: Sarah Jessica Parker, Gwen Stefani, Keira Knightley, and Ashley Olsen have all been spotted bopping through Hollywood in sheer dotted sheaths and shirts.

"It's a pattern that epitomizes spring fashion," explained Gregg Andrews, fashion director at Nordstrom.

Not only that, Andrews said, but today's dots are a part of a larger trend in which designers are focusing on graphic patterns.

"It is replacing embellishment," he said. "We are seeing dots in every size from pin-size, tight patterns to larger, more explosive dots that look like bubbles."

On this spring's fashion landscape, which spans both dressy and casual looks, dots seem to be the one unifying factor. Miniskirts are as popular as high-waisted pencil skirts. Flowing chiffon tank tops are as coveted as cap-sleeved, empire-waist blouses.

And look at all the dresses. Shirdresses. Wrap dresses. Strapless dresses. Sleeveless dresses with fitted bodices and full skirts with flowing crinolines. Empire-waist dresses, both long and short.

All hot with dots!

It's not just clothes. Dots in their various guises are all over girly accoutrements, from shimmery clutch bags to headbands and barrettes. Wedged espadrilles are dotted, as are patent-leather pumps and pocketbooks. Splashes of oversize, multicolored dots give raincoats and galoshes a whimsical feel.

The appeal of the dot comes from its ability to transcend time periods, said Karen Giberson, director of the New York-based Accessories Council.

"It's a playful and fun way to wear prints without being too floral or too girly," she said. "It's a wonderful marrying of modern and vintage."

The polka dot first came into fashion in the 1850s, coinciding with the popularity of the polka dance, said David Wolfe, creative director of the Doneger Group and author of a pamphlet that includes a time line of polka dots in fashion.

(The dance inspired marketers to add *polka* to many everyday items. Polka pies, for example, were so named to make them seem faddish and trendy. *Polka dot* was the only combination to stick.)

The early aspirin-size dots trimmed corseted dresses and covered entire frocks, Wolfe said. Ivory/black and navy blue/white were favored combinations.



In the 1870s, polka dots (and stripes) dominated men's shirting. The dotted tie-and-pocket-square combination was a sign of the dapper, well-dressed man.

Polka dots have been "in" every decade since, Wolfe said. Dots were popular on drop-waist dresses and flapper gear. In the 1930s, dots were knitted into sweaters in a graduated pattern.

The soft and tailored looks of Christian Dior and Claire McCardell dominated womenswear in the 1950s, and tiny dots classed up shirtwaist dresses and blouses. (Think Lucille Ball.)

"These dots were very feminine and fashion-forward without being too risky," said Sigrid Weltge, professor emerita of fashion history at Philadelphia University.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, tiny dots grew into big, giant, mod ones. The Finnish design firm Marimekko Fabrics played with the spacing and size of the circles, blowing them up on textiles that designers Betsey Johnson, Paul Smith and von Furstenberg fashioned into T-shirts, raincoats, and body-skimming dresses.

In 1989, polka dots served as the backdrop to rapper Kwame's videos *The Rhythm* and *The Man We All Know and Love*, turning the rapper into a style icon. (Yes, I had a red-and-white button-up polka-dot shirt.) And in 1990, Julia Roberts wore a chocolate-brown polka-dot dress for a memorable scene in *Pretty Woman*.

If dots assault *your* fashion senses, opt for a sheer dotted blouse with a pair of wide-legged pants and red flats. Grab a black-and-white-dotted purse to zing up a thin-pin-stripe suit.

Right now, I'm on the lookout for a candy-apple-red wrap dress covered in white dime-size polka dots. It's a look that's fun, yet grown-up, and that will never go out of style.

***Hair and makeup provided by Rosa Martinez for Studio Artur, Jenkintown; 215.884.0004**

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